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Lesbian parents: Redefining the family

Benkov, Laura Elizabeth, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1990

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**LESBIAN PARENTS:
REDEFINING THE FAMILY**

by

LAURA ELIZABETH BENKOV

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1990

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

LESBIAN PARENTS: REDEFINING THE FAMILY

by

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This study focuses on the family formation process of lesbians choosing to have children. In the past decade, an increasing number of lesbians have chosen to form families including children, prompting the popular media to coin the term, "lesbian baby boom." At this time, relatively little research has focused on these families. This study addresses gaps in the literature by providing descriptive material on a range of issues including family structure decisions, coparenting roles, naming within families, and responses to homophobia.

Twenty lesbians who have chosen to raise children were interviewed in a semi-structured format. The sample includes women who adopted children, women who conceived biologically, and women who are non-biological coparents. The methodology for data collection and analysis is based on social constructionist and feminist theories. Interpretive

social sciences (such as symbolic anthropology), are used as a model for the research. The analytic emphases are the changing definition of "family" in American culture at this time, and the mutual embeddedness of individuals and cultural contexts.

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Thus, expression involves nothing more than replacing a perception or an idea with a conventional sign that announces, evokes, or abridges it. Of course, language contains more than just ready-made phrases, and can refer to what has never yet been seen. But how could language achieve this if what is new were not composed of old elements already experienced--that is, if new relations were not entirely definable through the vocabulary and syntactical relations of the conventional language?

M. Merleau Ponty
The Prose of the World(1)

Family 1. all the people living in the same house; household 2. a) a social unit consisting of parents and the children that they rear; b) the children of the same parents; c) one's husband (or wife) and children 3. a group of people related by ancestry or marriage; relatives

Husband 1. a man with reference to the woman to whom he is married

Wife 1. a married woman, specifically a woman in her relationship to her husband

Parent 1. a father or mother 2. a progenitor or ancestor

Father 1. a man who has engendered a child; especially a man as he is related to his child or children

Mother 1. a woman who has borne a child; especially a woman as she is related to her child or children. . . . 4. that which gives birth to something, is the origin or source of something; or nurtures in the manner of a mother

Daughter 1. a girl or woman as she is related to either or both parents, sometimes also used of animals

Son 1. a boy or man as he is related to either or both parents, sometimes also used of animals

Sibling 1. one of two or more persons born of the same parents, or sometimes, having one parent in common; brother or sister

Brother 1. a man or boy as he is related to the other children of his parents, sometimes also used of animals

Sister 1. a woman or girl as she is related to the other children of her parents, sometimes also used of animals

Webster's New World Dictionary
of the American Language(2)

Hey, who's the real mommy around here?

Maggie, age 5
(to her lesbian parents,
Pam and Lee)

Real 1. existing or happening as or in fact; actual; true, objectively so, etc.; not merely seeming, pretended, imagined, fictitious, nominal, or ostensible

Webster's New World Dictionary
of the American Language(3)

Pass the orange juice to Nina.

You mean my mommy?

No, dear, pass the juice to Nina.

You mean pass the juice to my mommy.

No dear, pass the juice to Nina.

You mean, pass the juice to my MOMMY, Nina!

Conversation between Julie,
age 3, and her grandmother,
referring to her
non-biological mother, Nina

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images,
whatever is omitted from biography, censored in
collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as
something else, made difficult to come by,
whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse
of meaning under an inadequate or lying language--
this will become not merely unspoken, but
unspeakable. . . .

All silence has meaning.

Adrienne Rich
On Lies, Secrets, and Silences(4)

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the past decade, an increasing number of women have chosen to become parents outside of traditional marriages. Many factors have contributed to the rise in the number of women choosing to parent in non-traditional families. Since the inception of the women's movement, the range of choices women have made about their lifestyles has widened. Many more women have pursued careers and relationships other than marriage. The increasing diversity of roles available to women has laid the groundwork for a conceptual distinction between the choice to raise children and the choice to marry. This distinction is a necessary underpinning of any particular woman's decision to parent outside of marriage.

Family structures which do not conform to the typical nuclear family model were certainly prevalent in this country before the shift described above. This is particularly evident when one looks beyond the white middle-class segment of the population, and when one takes into account the statistics regarding divorce, even within that population. According to a recent newspaper article, "the average American marriage lasts 9.4 years; nearly 20 percent of all children are born to unwed mothers; four out of ten

children born in the '70s will spend some time in single-parent households."(1)

Despite evidence to the contrary, the nuclear family model consisting of a married heterosexual couple and their children, continues to be considered the "norm" against which all "other" family forms are measured. This has been especially pervasive in psychological literature. The result is two-fold. On the one hand, non-traditional families are largely invisible in predominant theories of child development, parenting, and family interactions. Insofar as the generic subjects of such literature are assumed to be white, middle-class, nuclear families, the details of experiences in other families are simply left out of theories of "normal" development. On the other hand, when non-traditional families are the subjects of psychological research and theory, the parameter within which their existence is described and presented is predominantly limited to presence or absence of "pathology." The implicit comparison of non-traditional families with a nuclear family model precludes describing these families in their own terms, whether the author argues a case for or against the existence of pathology.

An ever increasing number of families are thus represented in psychological theories in severely limited

terms. The most benign end of the spectrum of consequences of this fact could be characterized as an absence of information available to these families, clinicians, and the general public. Thus, the families themselves may experience a void with respect to both guidance and validation, clinicians are less likely to be optimally helpful with respect to issues unique to this population, and the general public fails to learn about a significant portion of the world in which it lives. At the more destructive end of the spectrum of consequences is the tendency of experts, the legal system, and the general public to view difference as deviance (in the negative sense), and thus to perpetuate both institutional and individual forms of discrimination.

In recent years, biases based on ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation have been the objects of critique throughout the social sciences, although these biases continue to pervade most inquiry. The presence or absence of such biases is particularly critical with respect to explorations of family form. For example, as Carol Stack demonstrated in All Our Kin(2), the tendency to view black, working class, female-headed households, from an implicitly white, middle-class, male bias, resulted in social policy based on the "culture of poverty" theory, which failed to grasp the strengths and adaptive capacities of the families

to which it was applied. Research like Stack's attempts to retell the stories of families that have typically been portrayed as pathological, and thus to redress the biases inherent in mainstream social science. Usually, such endeavors go beyond the questioning of mainstream portrayals of "minorities," and call into question many basic methodological and theoretical postulates.

While the present study is located generally within the body of work which, like Stack's, attempts to investigate and describe non-traditional family forms from an "inside" or phenomenological perspective, it is specifically focused primarily on white, middle-class lesbians currently choosing to rear children. Thus, biases based on gender and sexual orientation are more relevant to this work than those based on class or ethnicity; and conversely, this study attempts to directly redress the former, while not directly dealing with the latter. I wish to underscore this point because I believe that one of the most insidious forms of bias is the failure to acknowledge both what is present and what is absent in one's perspective. Thus, when I speak of changes in conceptions of family form, "point A" is likely to be a white, middle-class, nuclear family, while "point B" is likely to be a white, middle-class, lesbian-headed family. I strongly believe that a study of this type which focused primarily on black lesbians, for example, would most likely

yield significantly different descriptions. While my work underscores diversity, it is important to note that it is diversity within the parameters of a specific, and rather narrowly defined group.

According to a recent national survey of ten million lesbians(3), one in three wishes to raise children, with approximately half of these considering adoption, and half pregnancy. According to the study, one out of six lesbians is already a mother, one-third have been pregnant, and when black lesbians are considered separately, one-third have at least one child. The recent trend towards lesbians choosing to raise children (as opposed to lesbians raising children from previous marriages), has been referred to in the media as the "lesbian baby boom."

Clearly, lesbian-headed families are a growing and increasingly visible group. However, very little has been written about these families, and they are therefore inadequately understood both within the social sciences and within more general discourses. For example, prior to 1967 there were no lesbian mother cases reported by the courts. In 1974, R. A. Basile stated in an article in the Women's Rights Law Reporter, "Lesbian mothers have always raised children in our society, but this fact has only recently come to the attention of the courts."(4) Most of the

psychological studies of lesbian-headed families were conducted subsequent to 1979, and virtually none of them focus on families in which the children are not from previous marriages. Child custody disputes have been the center of both legal and psychological discourse on lesbian-headed families. Recently, the availability of artificial insemination has yielded a host of new legal, social and psychological questions which are barely beginning to be articulated. Adoption is another thorny issue, insofar as several states prohibit gay adoption, and in cases where gay people are allowed to adopt, they can only do so as "single" parents. The controversies surrounding gay parenting in this country reflect a deeply embedded and pervasive homophobia, which must be recognized as a major component of the context within which all discourse on lesbian parenting occurs. Currently, simply the existence of lesbian-headed families is an object of debate, as for example, the prohibition against gays becoming foster parents in Massachusetts demonstrates. Hence, most literature focuses on a fundamental "for" or "against" argument, with a resulting paucity of more complex or rich descriptive material.

This study attempts to respond to the absence noted above by developing a description of lesbian parenting based on in-depth interviews with twenty lesbian mothers. My aim

is to pose these basic questions: What do the words, "lesbian," "mother" and "family" mean to this group of women at this point in time?; and how are these meanings shaped by and shaping of these women's experiences?

I write from at least five perspectives that I am able to name as such. On a personal level, I come to this material as an adult who was raised primarily by my mother in a lower middle-class, white neighborhood, at a time when divorce was considered an exceptional circumstance. Thus, the issue of "difference" as a defining feature of family life has been in my consciousness from approximately age six. I also approach this subject as a lesbian who plans to have children. Thus, many of the questions I have asked my subjects stem from my own experience of trying to sort out the very issues they had grappled with. This is a particularly salient feature of my work, insofar as the women I interviewed knew this fact about me, and thus it explicitly informed the research process. On a theoretical (but no less personal) level, I approach this topic as I do all others--namely, from a philosophical perspective grounded in social constructionist theory and feminism. Thus, I am interested in the ways in which experiences constitute and are constituted by multiple discourses which occur in social contexts. I am more specifically interested in the absences of female (and particularly lesbian) voices

in construction of mainstream theory and discourse. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, I write as a psychologist informed by the four viewpoints named above. I refer to this perspective as "problematic" because I am both entering into psychological discourse, and placing myself meta to it, thereby arguing with its basic assumptions throughout much of this work. Each of the perspectives named informs every aspect of this project. Though I have, in naming them, delineated them as separate and distinct categories, in reality they occur simultaneously and interact with each other continuously. The structure of this writing reflects my attempt to integrate these frameworks.

Chapter two outlines the basic tenets of social constructionist thought, focusing particularly on the work of Kenneth Gergen in psychology, and Clifford Geertz and Michelle Rosaldo in anthropology. I then turn to the specific form social constructionism takes in feminist theory, focusing on Adrienne Rich's conceptualization of the "institution of motherhood," and Carol Gilligan's critique of male bias in psychological theories of development. This chapter sets the frame for subsequent chapters insofar as it establishes my intention to view psychological research, my interview material, and my own writing as constructs which

reflect and inform multiple aspects of lesbian parenting at this moment in history.

Chapter three focuses on the psychological studies of lesbian-headed families and the legal discourse surrounding these studies. It is an attempt to both present and deconstruct the current portrait of lesbian parents in psychology.

Chapter four delineates the technical aspects of my methodology (insofar as the theoretical aspects are explicated in chapter two). Subject demographics and procedures for data collection and analysis are outlined.

Subsequent chapters will present my findings within the framework of four general categories. These include: subjects' definitions of "lesbianism" and "family," family structure decisions, naming within the family and in relation to the larger world, and dealing with homophobia both within the family and in the environment. Within these four basic categories, attention will be paid to issues including: conception versus adoption, known versus unknown donors, role of fathers or men in children's lives, negotiation of parenting roles within couples, definitions of roles (parenting and sibling) within families, naming of children, naming of parents (e.g., both called "Mommy?"),

and decisions regarding disclosure of lesbianism to the world.

The concluding chapter will attempt a synthesis of the theoretical tenets laid out in chapters one and two and the data analysis. Directions for future work will be suggested.

Chapter 2

Social Constructionist Theory: Symbolic Anthropology and Feminism

Kenneth Gergen: Social Constructionist Theory

Kenneth Gergen defines social constructionist inquiry as that which is:

. . . principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live. It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be so directed.(1)

Insofar as its focus is "forms of understanding" as linked to social contexts, social constructionist thought rests largely on the foundations of linguistic philosophy. For example, Wittgenstein's(2) analysis of language as constitutive of experience provided a crucial basis from which many have explored questions such as: "What constitutes social realities?", and "In what ways are we able to apprehend the world around us?"

Although debates about the nature of reality and human apprehension of the world are clearly beyond the scope of my work, some attention to these issues is necessary in order

to establish the epistemological basis of this project, and to place this study in relation to psychological theory based on different epistemological foundations.

As Gergen points out, a bird's-eye view of the history of knowledge reveals two particularly influential and opposing conceptualizations of human understanding. These central trends of thought appear in many guises, and are connoted by dyads such as objective/subjective, material/ideal and empirical/phenomenological, to name just a few. Gergen characterizes the epistemologies which emphasize one pole of such a dyad over its opposite pole, as exogenic and endogenic. Exogenic epistemologies embody the view that knowledge is mental representation which "maps or mirrors the actualities of the real world."⁽³⁾ Inquiries based on an exogenic epistemology emphasize objective, material and empirical "realities." Endogenic epistemologies also cast knowledge as mental representation, but it is seen as dependent on "processes endemic to the organism." Inquiries which focus on subjective, ideal or phenomenological accounts of the world are endogenic. Western science is based on the exogenic orientation, and insofar as American psychology has been framed as a science, the exogenic perspective is dominant. It is reflected in behaviorism and all empirical research which incorporates a positivistic perspective. On the other hand, cognitive and

phenomenological psychology reflect the endogenic perspective. Psychoanalytic theory in this country teeters precariously between the two perspectives--on the one hand emphasizing subjective meaning as paramount, while on the other hand holding its own concepts as though they were representations of objective reality.

The social constructionist model is not simply a middle ground between the poles delineated above. It represents a fundamental shift of the terms in which epistemology is cast, although in many respects it is an elaboration of the endogenic perspective. Rather than conceiving of knowledge as "mental representation" which either reflects a direct mapping of external reality on the mind (exogenic), or is solipsistically determined by the properties of the organism (endogenic), it is conceived of as "linguistic rendering."(4) As such, it is therefore located between people, in processes of communication, rather than inside anyone.

As Gergen says, from this standpoint, "knowledge is not something people possess in their heads, but rather something people do together."(5) Two aspects of this conceptualization are central. First, "knowledge is not something people possess." Insofar as knowledge is not an entity which resides inside or outside individuals, the

terms "subjective" and "objective" are no longer crucial. They are replaced by the notion of intersubjective space or mutual construction of meaning. Second, a temporal dimension is introduced insofar as the construction of knowledge is seen as an ongoing, ever shifting process which "people do together." From this vantage point, what becomes paramount in any endeavor to apprehend a specific social reality is the elucidation of particular meaning systems, contexts and discourses at specified moments in time.

The view of knowledge as rooted in social practices forms the basis of inquiry across several disciplines, which Gergen refers to as interpretive disciplines, or "disciplines chiefly concerned with rendering accounts of human meaning systems." (6) As Gergen highlights, the interpretive approach to social phenomena does not readily lend itself to the traditional compartmentalization of academic disciplines. but rather lays the groundwork for fruitful interdisciplinary dialogues.

In addition to deliberate efforts at cross-disciplinary conversations, it is interesting to note the extent to which the interpretive approach appears to have arisen spontaneously and independently across a wide range of disparate fields.

On the most immediate level, social constructionist inquiry is conjoined with ethnomethodological work, with its emphasis on the methods employed by persons to render the world sensible, and with much dramaturgical analysis and its focus on the strategic deployment of social conduct. Similarly, treatments of the social basis of scientific knowledge, including the history and sociology of knowledge, become relevant. Anthropological inquiry acquires renewed interest for psychology. Of special interest is the work of symbolic anthropologists concerned with the construction of the world, including persons, developed in non-Western cultures. Similarly, psychology gains a temporal dimension as its analyses become articulated with historical research in the constructionist mode. And psychology stands to gain much by opening consideration on literary theory, including accounts of metaphor, narratology, and the deconstruction of meaning. Such work informs as to the means by which various linguistic figures or tropes serve to organize or guide the attempt to "describe" reality.(7)

Currently in the field of psychology, new theory is emerging from the type of cross-disciplinary conversations described. Jerome Bruner draws on literary theory and symbolic anthropology to reconceptualize cognitive psychology, in Actual Minds, Possible Worlds.(8) A number of systemic theorists are developing therapeutic stances and techniques informed by various combinations of the disciplines named above.(9)

Symbolic Anthropology

Clifford Geertz: The Concept of Culture

My work is strongly influenced by symbolic anthropology, especially the theories of Clifford Geertz and Michelle Rosaldo. Their conceptions of culture, and of the processes through which anthropologists come to encounter and describe foreign worlds, are critical to both my theory and methodology. They represent particular examples of the kind of inquiry Gergen labels as social constructionist.

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be, therefore, not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (10)

By viewing culture as "webs of significance," Geertz highlights the interplay between individual experience and social life. In Geertz's paradigm, human beings are primarily social beings, and meaning is constructed through interactions. A further elaboration of the notion of "webs of significance" is illustrative of how he envisions the process.

Thinking consists not of "happenings in the head" (though happenings in the head and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur), but of a traffic in what have been called by G. H. Mead and others,

significant symbols--words for the most part, but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels--anything, in fact, that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience. From the point of view of any particular individual, such symbols are largely given. He finds them already current in the community when he is born, and they remain with some additions, subtractions, and partial alterations he may or may not have had a hand in, in circulation after he dies. While he lives he uses them, sometimes deliberately and with care, most often spontaneously and with ease, but always with the same end in view: to put a construction upon the events through which he lives, to orient himself within "the ongoing course of experienced things," to adopt a vivid phrase of John Dewey's.(11)

Several points are critical. First, it is important to note that while Geertz's perspective focuses on language as the domain in which meaning is created, language is very broadly defined and includes "significant symbols" beyond the domain of verbal communication. In fact, the "traffic in symbols" incorporates "anything . . . that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience." This is crucial because it leads one to apply an interpretive approach to all aspects of context rather than looking for meaning only in the verbal realm. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Geertz's work, as well as my own, places great emphasis on words.

Another critical feature of Geertz's model is the idea that people become individuals in specific worlds--worlds

that precede their births. Thus, symbols are established prior to the development of any particular person's use of them. Here, the individual's embeddedness in a social context is highlighted. Geertz postulates that "such symbols are not mere expressions, instrumentalities, or correlates of our biological, psychological and social existence; they are prerequisites of it. Without men, no culture, certainly; but equally, and more significantly, without culture, no men."(12) Geertz's emphasis on the notion that we become human in specific cultural contexts leads him to be concerned with the particularity of given contexts, and therefore to highlight diversity when he explores the variety of ways that people live.

The idea that from any particular individual's vantage point, the symbols through which s/he will organize her life are "largely given," suggests a cultural determinism which in fact does not accurately reflect Geertz's model. The tendency toward such a determinism is mitigated by the notion that the relationship between the formation of individual consciousness and available symbols is a reciprocal one. Though a person's individual experience is constituted by the meaning frames derived from the use of given symbols, it is also true that in the process of living, individuals alter given symbols and create new ones, thus constituting culture. Again, it is critical to keep in

mind the idea that symbols are not static things, but rather processes through which meaning emerges. Thus, despite continuity of pattern, culture is also marked by fluidity insofar as meanings shift. Geertz's model thus incorporates a temporal dimension and a description of change.

Taken together, the points elaborated above highlight the extent to which Geertz's theory describes human life as characterized by a profound interdependency. Even the most apparently idiosyncratic and personal experiences are shaped through social interaction and shared meaning systems. Above all, Geertz's perspective suggests a particular view of relationships, one that repeatedly explores the question he, quoting Trilling, refers to as "one of the significant mysteries of man's life in culture: how it is that other people's creations can be so utterly their own and so deeply part of us."(13)

Utilization of Geertz's theory necessitates transcendence of conceptual categories typically framed as discrete and opposing. For example, there is no sharp distinction to be drawn between individual consciousness and culture. Culture is not an entity which resides outside individuals, but rather a process which occurs within and between them. Conversely, insofar as humans become

individuals within culture, people are, as Geertz says, "cultural artifacts."(14)

There is also no absolute delineation to be made in the consideration of material reality and consciousness, not only because material reality can only be apprehended within meaningful frameworks, but more importantly because it is both constituted by those frameworks (as in the creation of clocks), and constitutive of them (as in the effects of clocks on experience). The critical point here is not that one cannot speak about material reality or consciousness in any given instance, but rather that considering one always implicitly involves consideration of the other, and in fact, specifying the boundary between the two is virtually impossible.

Michelle Rosaldo: Affect and Cognition

As Michelle Rosaldo points out, a Geertzian perspective also propels one toward the dissolution of the commonly held view of affect and cognition as separate categories. Her work is pivotal insofar as she elaborates Geertzian concepts in a way that begins to bridge psychology and anthropology.

Rosaldo maintains that:

Affects . . . are no less cultural and no more private than beliefs. They are instead cognitions--or more aptly perhaps, interpretations--always culturally informed, in which the actor finds that body, self and identity are immediately involved.(15)

While Rosaldo acknowledges the common sense perception of thought and affect as distinct entities, she suggests that:

. . . what distinguishes thought and affect, differentiating a "cold" cognition from a "hot," is fundamentally a sense of the engagement of the actor's self. Emotions are thoughts somehow "felt" in flushes, pulses, "movements" of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are embodied thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that "I am involved." Thought/affect thus bespeaks the difference between a mere hearing of a child's cry and a hearing felt--as when one realizes danger is involved or that the child is one's own.(16)

Alternatively, but in a similar vein, Rosaldo describes emotions as being:

. . . about the ways in which the social world is one in which we are involved. Feelings are not substances to be discovered in our blood, but social practices organized by the stories we both enact and tell. They are structured by our forms of understanding.(17)

Rosaldo uses her construction of affect as "structured by forms of understanding" to argue, much as Geertz does, that the recognition of cultural specificity and diversity is paramount in any endeavor to understand human experience. She is critical of the tendency in Western psychology towards universalization of concepts of emotion. She suggests that insofar as affective life is rooted in particular social contexts, emotional experience varies along with context. Since Rosaldo sees cultural form (rather than biology), as centrally shaping of emotional life, she emphasizes particularity rather than universality.

What is most deeply felt or known, what is felt first, perceived most clearly, or experienced as a standard base or core need not be the "common denominator" Western analysts perceive among such diverse things as Ilongot and American styles of anger. And I would argue that we are most likely to understand the force of "anger, passion" in Ilongot hearts by starting not with isolated experiences we share, but with those Ilongot lives and stories in which their "anger" is described. (18)

Rosaldo thus points toward an alternative vision of psychology. Her work suggests that psychological inquiry should begin with attention to the elucidation of symbol systems in specified social contexts.

A grasp of individuality requires a grasp of cultural form: Analyses of thought must figure centrally in analyses of feeling. Or stated otherwise, I would insist that we will never learn

why people feel or act the way they do until, suspending everyday assumptions about the human psyche, we fix our analytic gaze upon the symbols actors use in understanding human life--symbols that make our minds the minds of social beings. (19)

Rosaldo's reframing of psychology's task as the elucidation of particular meaning systems, rather than the identification of universal truths about "human nature," is central to my work. For example, whereas in traditional psychological theories the nuclear family form is taken to be a universal, and biological or "natural" phenomenon, symbolic anthropologists view it as a particular type of kinship system--one among many. Rosaldo suggests that furthermore, emotional life is apt to vary along with variation in family form, and that attention to particular people's definitions of their own families is essential to psychological inquiry. In addition, Rosaldo's work suggests that the interplay between diverse symbol systems is a critical area for exploration in cases where individual experiences diverge from cultural norms.

Methodological Issues in the Social Sciences

Geertz's model of culture has profound implications for methodology throughout the social sciences. How does one study "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun"? The complexity of the question lies in

two facts: The researcher is also just such an animal, and the research is a strand in her "webs of significance."

Geertz begins by clearly stating that the analysis of culture is an "interpretive" activity "in search of meaning," rather than an "experimental science in search of law." In his description of field work and ethnographic writing, he explores the question of how one human being can come to understand the ways that other human beings see the world. His exploration of that question leads to a more fundamental one--namely, what does the word "understand" mean? The nature of communication within the anthropological enterprise itself is of central concern to Geertz because that communication is the heart of the anthropological endeavor. He writes:

The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said.(20)

Geertz maintains that the anthropologist observes and "inscribes social discourse."(21) In the field, participant observation, extensive interviewing, and intensive writing (recording of minute details), lay the groundwork for the anthropologist's "product": ethnography. Upon entering the

field, anthropologists (particularly those working from a symbolic "Geertzian" perspective), attempt to suspend their preconceived notions and to focus intensively on the perspectives of their informants. Although the effort to suspend one's own frameworks can never be fully successful, it sets in motion a process of communication that is markedly different from what occurs in the absence of such a deliberate attempt to focus on the "other." The point of this approach is to enhance the possibility that meaning will emerge through the encounter. This way of working is directly opposed to the empirical research method in which an a priori hypothesis is tested and thereby proven true or false. From a Geertzian perspective, the imposition of such a narrow frame of reference would obscure the meaning system of one's "subjects," and would therefore minimize the researcher's chances of learning about them. It is critical to keep in mind that Geertz's perspective is not only applicable to anthropology, but rather, by definition, to any social science endeavor, insofar as Geertz sees human life as centrally defined by the "traffic in symbols."

The anthropologist's effort to grasp and convey the symbol system of her informants is reflected in the construction of "actor-oriented" descriptions. However, from a Geertzian perspective, there is no illusion that the anthropologist transcends her subjectivity in fashioning

these descriptions. In fact, Geertz considers ethnographic writings to be fictions. The interesting question then, is not whether ethnographies represent "reality" or the anthropologist's "imagination," but rather, "What sort of reality do they reflect?", or in other words, "What kind of imaginative act do they embody?" Geertz writes:

Nothing is more necessary to comprehending what anthropological interpretation is, and the degree to which it is interpretation, than an exact understanding of what it means--and what it does not mean--to say that our formulations of other people's symbol systems must be actor-oriented. What it means is that descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through. What it does not mean is that such descriptions are themselves Berber, Jewish or French--that is part of the reality they are ostensibly describing; they are anthropological. . . . They must be cast in terms of the interpretations to which persons of a particular denomination subject their experience because that is what they profess to be descriptions of; they are anthropological because it is, in fact, anthropologists who profess them.(22)

By framing ethnography as "descriptions cast in terms of the constructions we imagine our subjects to place upon what they live through," Geertz underscores the necessity for self-consciousness in the anthropological endeavor. In essence, he says the author must acknowledge her presence as a critical determinant of the shape of the work. However, Geertz also deeply believes in communication. That is to

say, he does not hold the idea that the anthropologist's imagination is more central to ethnography than the subjects' perceptions. This aspect of Geertz's work reflects the power of moving out of the subjective/objective parameter and into the realm of intersubjective space. Geertz believes that the anthropologist can grasp and convey something about how her informants see the world. Thus he writes:

The truth of the doctrine of cultural . . . relativism is that we can never apprehend another people's or another period's imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can therefore never genuinely apprehend it at all. We can apprehend it well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours; but we do so not by looking behind the interfering glosses that connect us to it, but through them. (23)

Here again, the distinction between Geertzian methodology and empirical research is evident. Geertz emphasizes self-conscious attention to the "interfering glosses that connect us to our subjects," in his statement that we gain more understanding in the effort to look through, rather than behind them. The effort in empirical work is to minimize the presence of "interfering glosses" by controlling variables. From a Geertzian perspective, that effort does not eradicate "interfering glosses," but merely structures their content. Furthermore, such an effort

creates the deception that one is able to step outside oneself and comprehend one's subjects "neatly." For Geertz, the most critical feature of any research endeavor is lost through that process, because the interface between researcher and subject is left unexamined. The center of ethnography, in Geertz's eyes, is the interface between anthropologist and informants. Ethnography is therefore a form of communication about forms of communication. The anthropologist attends to at least three levels of communication simultaneously: communication between informants, between anthropologist and informants, and between anthropologist and readers.

A key question then, is "What exactly does Geertz believe can be communicated?" Geertz writes:

The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be too keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to. . . . The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive "with"-- or "by means of," or "through". . . .(24)

Hence, the anthropologist proceeds on the hope that she will be able to understand the frameworks (symbol systems) through which her informants apprehend their worlds. If she

is "successful," she grasps their frameworks through the lens of her own. She then self-consciously reflects on the relationships between the two. In this way, ethnographies describe the meeting of two cultures, and are located on the boundaries of two worlds.

Through his attention to intersubjective space, Geertz constructs anthropology as a particular kind of interpretive activity, which he likens to "translation":

[W]hat the anthropologist has to do . . . is tack between . . . two sorts of descriptions--between increasingly fine comb observations (of how Javanese distinguish feelings, Balinese name children, Moroccans refer to acquaintances), and increasingly synoptic characterizations ("quietism," "dramatism," "contextualism")--in such a way that, held in the mind together, they present a credible fleshed out picture of a human form of life. "Translation" here, is not a simple recasting of others' ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting them (that is the kind in which things get lost), but displaying the logic of their ways of putting them in the locution of ours; a conception which again brings it rather closer to what a critic does to illumine a poem than what an astronomer does to account for a star.(25)

Although the descriptions of anthropological method quoted above focus on anthropologists' encounters with "exotic" worlds, Geertz maintains (as do many anthropologists), that anthropology is more centrally defined by the type of activity it embodies than by the

place in which it occurs. Hence, anthropologists can certainly study their own cultural milieus. Furthermore, Geertz underscores the notion that any aspect of the "traffic in symbols" can be the object of the anthropologist's inquiry. One can attend closely to art forms, family forms, schools, a legal system, etc. Usually, anthropological studies involve attention to multiple aspects of social life, and therefore to the interface between various systems of communication. A key point, with respect to social constructionist inquiry in general, and my work in particular, is that disciplines can themselves be the object of anthropological analysis. That is to say, insofar as they reflect particular kinds of discourse, they too are forms of socially embedded "traffic in symbols." Geertz draws the following analogy:

In the same way the Papuans or Amazonians inhabit the world they imagine, so do high energy physicists or historians of the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II--or so at least, an anthropologist imagines. It is when we begin to see this, to see that to set out to deconstruct Yeats' imagery, absorb oneself in black holes, or measure the effect of schooling on economic achievement is not just to take up a technical task but to take on a cultural frame that defines a great part of one's life, that an ethnography of modern thought begins to seem an imperative project. Those roles we think to occupy turn out to be minds we find ourselves to have. (26)

Insofar as my work focuses on the symbol systems through which lesbian mothers in this country are currently constructing their experiences, a critical feature of this project is an exploration of the symbol systems through which psychological and legal discourses construct lesbian mothers. As with any endeavor based on the ideas set forth in the previous pages, such an exploration entails close attention to language. Geertz writes:

[T]he vocabularies in which the various disciplines talk about themselves to themselves fascinates me as a way of gaining access to the sorts of mentalities at work in them. Whether it be mathematicians, discoursing like so many wine tasters, on the differences, apparently extremely real to them and invisible to everybody else, between "deep," "elegant," "beautiful," "powerful" and "subtle" proofs; physicists invoking such peculiar words of praise and blame as "tact" or "skimming"; or literary critics invoking the relative presence of a mysterious property, to outsiders anyway, called "realization," the terms through which the devotees of a scholarly pursuit represent their aims, judgments, justifications, and so on seems to me to take one a long way . . . toward grasping what that pursuit is all about. (27)

In the next chapter, I will explore psychological discourse about lesbian mothers, in an attempt to elucidate one aspect of the cultural milieu within which the subjects of this study are creating families. I also view that "deconstruction" of psychological discourse as central to my work in another respect--namely, that I am writing about

lesbian mothers as seen through the lens of social constructionist and feminist theory. Part of my task, as I see it, is to contrast the resulting vision with the perspective on lesbian mothers that traditional psychological theory has engendered. Ultimately, I am as interested in demonstrating the significance of different ways of looking, as I am in elucidating the phenomenon of lesbian-headed families.

Feminist Theory as a Specific
Example of Social Constructionism

Prior to examining the "vocabulary" of traditional psychological discourse, I wish to set forth key aspects of the "vocabulary" of social constructionist and feminist inquiry, and to highlight the implications for my methodology.

Geertz's work is representative of a particular form of social constructionist inquiry. As such, it embodies certain premises that have been alternatively conveyed in a multitude of other "languages." As Gergen sets forth, the central tenets of social constructionist thought are:

1. radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world--whether in the sciences or daily life . . . (an invitation) to challenge the objective basis of conventional knowledge . . .
2. The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. . . .
3. The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g., communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric). . . .
4. Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage. . . . Descriptions and explanations of the world themselves constitute forms of social action. . . . They . . . serve to sustain and support certain patterns to the exclusion of others. To alter description and explanation is thus to threaten certain actions and invite others.(28)

Geertz's work can be seen as outlining a methodology which stems from these basic premises. The key components of that methodology are: an interpretive focus on the "traffic in symbols," the construction of "actor-oriented" descriptions, attention to the interface between researcher's and informants' frameworks, presentation of one's work as a "construction." My approach is extrapolated directly from Geertz's model, but my work is also significantly influenced by feminist theory and methodology.

As Gergen highlights, social constructionist thought is a form of "social criticism." It has been a cornerstone of feminist theory insofar as feminism explores the ways in which gender relations are constructed through discourse. Geertz's version of social constructionism focuses on a broad outline of the nature of human communication and culture. It might best be characterized as an attempt to explore ontological questions. Feminist theorists, on the other hand, have developed social constructionist thought which contains a much more explicit focus on specific historical and cultural circumstances. That is to say, they not only maintain, along with Geertz, the notion that meaning is constructed through interaction (or discourse), but also the idea that we live in a world in which various groups of people have unequal access to discourse. Thus, a fundamental tenet of feminist theory is the recognition of absence of women's voices in the construction of dominant theory. Feminists therefore attempt to redescribe social phenomena in a way that is inclusive of women's perspectives.

In feminist theory, the notion of intersubjectivity combined with the recognition of absence of particular voices, has led to a focus on questions such as: Who is speaking?; To whom?; About whom?; In what context?; For what purpose?; With what effects?

A central feature of feminist thought is the elaboration of a critique of the disjuncture between experience and "theory" throughout mainstream discourses. Feminists have argued that the presentation of ideas as "objective facts" obscures the power relations inherent in construction of theory. The tendency in Western thought to present disembodied and decontextualized voices results in the "universalization" of the experience of a small segment of the population, and a simultaneous discounting of the experiences of many. Power is constituted in part by the degree to which one has access to discourse. A few people "name" the world, while many are unable to name their experience or see themselves reflected in dominant images. Thus, feminists argue that not only is an exogenic approach based on an epistemological fallacy, but that it also constitutes a form of oppression.

Therefore, feminists frequently approach theory construction as an activity which is necessarily grounded in direct exploration of experience. This is generally an explicit aspect of the work, which is thereby presented as a "construction" whose roots are available for scrutiny. (This aspect of feminist methodology parallels the self-consciousness of the anthropologist in Geertz's framework.)

This epistemology and methodology is at the core of feminist attempts to redescribe a multitude of social phenomena. Its application to an analysis of motherhood in this culture is central to my work. In particular, Adrienne Rich's work poses a critical question: namely, what meaning emerges when theories of mothering are written by mothers? Rich's work is a classic example of feminist social constructionist thought, insofar as she weaves together reflections on her own experience and historical and cultural perspectives on the construction of motherhood.

Adrienne Rich: Motherhood as Experience and Institution

Rich makes a critical distinction "between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution,"(29) which is reflected in social processes such as the devaluation of everyday tasks of mothering, the isolation from which women mother, and the prevalence of theories which attribute psychological distress to "bad mothering." The vicissitudes of the actual mothering relationship occur both within and beyond this context. Rich captures this notion in her description of a vacation she spent alone with her three young sons:

I remember one summer, living in a friend's house in Vermont. My husband was working abroad for several weeks and my three sons--nine, seven, and

five years old--and I dwelt for most of that time by ourselves. Without a male adult in the house, without any reason for schedules, naps, regular mealtimes or early bedtimes so the two parents could talk, we fell into what I felt to be a delicious and sinful rhythm. It was a spell of unusually hot, clear weather, and we ate nearly all our meals outdoors, hand to mouth; we lived half naked, stayed up to watch bats and stars and fireflies, read and told stories, slept late. I watched their slender, little boys' bodies grow brown, we washed in water warm from the garden hose lying in the sun, we lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children. At night they fell asleep without murmur and I stayed up reading and writing as I had when a student, till the early morning hours. I remember thinking: This is what living with children could be--without school hours, fixed routines, naps, the conflict of being both mother and wife with no room for being simply myself. Driving home once after midnight from a late drive-in movie, through the foxfire and stillness of a winding Vermont road, with three sleeping children in the back of the car, I felt wide awake, elated; we had broken together all the rules of bedtime, the night rules, rules I myself thought I had to observe in the city or become a "bad mother." We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood; I felt enormously in charge of my life. Of course, the institution closed down on us again, and my own mistrust of myself as a "good mother" returned, along with my resentment of the archetype. But I knew even then that I did not want my sons to act for me in the world, any more than I wished for them to kill or die for their country. I wanted to act, to live, in myself and to love them for their separate selves.(30)

As an "outlaw from the institution of motherhood," Rich discovers the pleasure of being in charge of her own life. She describes the joy of being able to be herself along with her children, who are also able to be themselves. She recognizes these feelings as extraordinary, and in so doing

begins to reflect about the extent to which her experience of mothering has entailed a sense of loss of control over her own life.

Rich's work is relevant to my study in three respects. First, her mode of analysis is similar to the type of thinking I see as central to this project. Rich identifies the "good mother" archetype as centrally shaping the experience of mothering. She examines her feelings in a situation in which she was momentarily freed from the archetype. Thus, she begins to sort out the aspects of her experience which seem culturally over-determined, from the aspects which might be intrinsic to the mothering relationship. In so doing, she poses pivotal questions: What ideas about mothering do women bring to the experience of mothering?; How do these ideas affect family relationships?; Where do these ideas come from?, and perhaps most importantly; What other possible ways of constructing motherhood are available? Rich's respite from her usual cultural milieu highlights for her the recognition that mothering occurs in a context of shared meanings about men, women, children, families and society. Her distinction between the institution of mothering and the "potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction," is a classic example of social constructionist thought insofar as it lays the groundwork for both examining the specific

symbol systems surrounding motherhood in this culture, and for imagining other possibilities. Like Rich, lesbians choosing to create families are "outlaws from the institution of motherhood." From the moment they begin to think about the possibility of raising children, they are breaking fundamental rules of the culture. Hence, their experiences, like Rich's vacation, provide an opportunity to examine cultural notions in relief, and to imagine the development of new symbol systems.

A second important feature of Rich's work is that she highlights a specific cultural construction, namely the idea that a good mother is self-sacrificing. In this construction, the needs of the mother are seen as in opposition to the needs of children. Rich turns the idea on its head by suggesting that it is beneficial for both mother and child when a mother extricates herself from the experience of oppression, or in other words, begins to value her capacity to act in her own self-interest. Rich's argument is that frequently what appears to a mother as the interests of the child might be better understood as the interests of the larger culture. Although the issue of need fulfillment in the mother/child relationship is too complex to adequately grapple with here, I wish to underscore the extent to which cultural values are played out between individuals in families. For example, one of the

stereotypical objections to lesbians becoming mothers is the idea that a lesbian cannot be a mother because through her lesbianism she asserts her selfishness. One version of that idea is evident in the following common argument: Lesbians should not have children because the children will be the object of homophobic discrimination and will therefore be damaged. Given this, it is selfish, in the worst sense of the word, for a lesbian to choose to become a mother. Here, an individual mother is seen as ultimately responsible for the consequences (presumed to be detrimental), of society's flaws. This argument has been used as a basis for denying custody to lesbians, and is also frequently voiced by lesbians in the process of deciding whether or not to have children.

The underlying notion in the argument is that a woman will irreparably damage her child by acting in her own self-interest, particularly when that leads her to make a choice which does not align with cultural expectations. The interests of the child are fused with the interests of the culture at large, and both are counterposed to the interests of the mother. Rich's work is central insofar as she begins to tease apart the interests of the child and the interests of the dominant culture, thereby suggesting that the interests of the mother and child need not be in opposition.

The third sense in which Rich's work is central to this study is as a part of the context within which lesbians are currently choosing to create families. Rich's work has provided a ground from which many women have reconceptualized their own relations to both lesbianism and motherhood. I underscore this aspect because one of the central tenets of my work is that theories about any particular phenomenon should be recognized as critical parts of the realities they describe. This is particularly salient with respect to social realities which are in flux. Foucault underscores the extent to which critical thought is an essential aspect of social change:

Thought . . . is something that is often hidden, but which always animates everyday behavior. . . . There is always thought even in silent habits. Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed. . . . Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. . . . [A]s soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible.(31)

Sara Ruddick: Maternal Thinking

One way of naming the subject of my study is to say that I am looking at the thinking process of lesbians choosing motherhood. I am especially interested in the reasoning behind particular choices made in the process of

structuring a non-traditional family. Although mothers are central characters in psychological theories, they are frequently looked at as background, while the developing child is in the foreground. I have found it useful to look outside the discipline of psychology in order to find a grounding from which to speak about mothers as thinkers. Sara Ruddick's work has provided such a framework.

I speak about a mother's thought--the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms. A mother engages in a discipline. That is, she asks certain questions rather than others; establishes criteria for the truth, adequacy and relevance of the proposed answers; and cares about the findings she makes and can act upon. (32)

Ruddick maintains that there are three interests which guide a mother's thought, delineated as follows: interest in preservation of the child, interest in growth of the child, and interest in shaping a child to be someone she "can appreciate and others can accept." These interests often collide and conflict. Ruddick gives the example of a mother watching a child push a friend aside as s/he climbs a tree. This mother may be "torn between preserving the child from danger, encouraging the child's physical skill and courage, and shaping a child according to moral restraints--which might, for example, inhibit the child's joy in competitive climbing."

Ruddick postulates that the interest in the acceptability of the child imposes the most problematic demands on maternal practices. Here, the clash between any particular mother and the dominant ideology of the culture is most apparent. On the one hand, this interest "provides special opportunities for mothers to explore, create and insist upon their own values, to train their children for strength and moral sensitivity." On the other hand, this interest can lead to inauthenticity, or a "willingness to travailler pour l'armee, to accept the uses to which others will put one's children," and "to remain blind to the implications of those uses for the actual lives of women and children." (33) Ruddick suggests that the potential for inauthenticity stems from each mother's relative powerlessness in the world. A child whom "she can appreciate" is not necessarily one whom "others can accept." One clear example of this dynamic is the dilemma feminist women face in raising sons. Do they, in fostering characteristics they can appreciate, thereby deprive their male children of the ability to easily define themselves as men in this culture? Or, conversely, do they acquiesce in the culture's limited definitions of masculinity, and thereby miss the opportunity to create new values for themselves and their children?

Ruddick's framework highlights the magnitude and multiplicity of moral dilemmas endemic to the activity of mothering in this culture. However, there are unique ways in which these issues play out for lesbians choosing motherhood. Questions surrounding the growth, preservation and acceptability of children, come into focus for lesbians prior to conception or adoption. Lesbians need to decide how they will structure their families. Their beliefs about children's needs contribute to the specific family forms they create, as well as to their particular ways of mothering.

Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan:
Feminist Theory in Psychological Discourse

I turn now to feminist approaches in psychological theory. Nancy Chodorow's work exemplifies a social constructionist perspective, insofar as she is concerned with the question of how women come to be the primary caretakers of children in our culture. She begins with the idea that although the phenomenon of women bearing children is a biologically determined one, the phenomenon of women raising them is socially constructed. Chodorow's analysis rests on object relations theory, particularly as it describes processes of identification and separation/individuation in the young child. Chodorow distinguishes her approach from traditional object relations

theory insofar as she suggests that the model does not describe a universal or biological phenomenon, but does describe a social process, which she labels the "reproduction of mothering." (34) Chodorow's shift from an emphasis on the nuclear family as a taken-for-granted universal fact, to a view of it as a socially produced phenomenon, is central to my own work. However, insofar as Chodorow's project is the historical contextualization of object relations theory, she stays largely within the boundaries of the theory's language and constructs. In contrast, Carol Gilligan's (35) work provides a model for a social constructionist approach which is closer to my endeavor here. Gilligan begins by emphasizing the phenomenon of unheard voices in mainstream theory. She therefore attends closely to the voices she recognizes as absent, namely women's articulation of their perspectives on morality. While Chodorow focuses on the language of theory, Gilligan focuses on the language of her subjects. She then juxtaposes their words about themselves with developmental theory about them. In so doing, Gilligan contextualizes and deconstructs traditional theory. She also constructs a new theory, one that is inclusive of women's voices.

Like Gilligan, my starting point is the recognition of absence of a particular set of voices, namely lesbian mothers. I wish to focus on their definitions of their

lives, including the meanings they attach to the words "lesbian," "mother" and "family." Through attending to the voices of these women, I hope to deconstruct prevailing theories.

In addition, I am interested in rendering an account of lesbian-headed families that reflects the multiplicity of voices heretofore absent. To paraphrase Geertz, I hope to provide descriptions that "others guarding other sheep in other valleys have given."

Chapter 3

Lesbian Mothers in Psychological Studies

In this chapter I will review the psychological literature on lesbian-headed families. Most studies focus on lesbians who had children in heterosexual marriages prior to their decision to identify as lesbian. At present, the phenomenon of lesbians choosing to create families including children is relatively new, and as yet unexplored within the field of psychology. Reflections on this population stem largely from clinical observations rather than research. There are several difficulties in comparing families in which lesbians are raising children from heterosexual marriages, with families in which lesbians are choosing to have children. Two particularly salient differences are that families in the first group have, by definition, experienced loss of a member through divorce or death, and families in the second group have undergone a conscious decision-making process regarding the structuring of an alternative family form. Despite these differences, it is useful to examine the available literature, insofar as it embodies the clearest articulation of a psychological perspective on lesbian-headed families.

Through reviewing this body of literature, I hope to demonstrate the centrality particular frameworks have as

lenses through which lesbian parenting has been viewed in this culture. I focus on psychological and legal discourses because they constitute two major social forces which impact on family life. Cultural definitions are both reflected in and shaped by these discourses. In addition, the links between psychology and law are especially evident with respect to lesbian mothers, since much research has been carried out in response to the increasing prevalence of legal questions.

The following overview will cover four general areas:

1. reviews of psychological research and theory about lesbian- and gay-headed families;
2. articles exploring the legal context of lesbian parenting and the links between that context and psychological research;
3. comparative studies primarily involving lesbians who had children in heterosexual marriages;
4. clinical observations of lesbian-headed families.

Review Articles and Legal Context

In his review of homosexual family forms and psychology, Stein (1988) (1) identifies two trends in psychological theories of homosexuality. The early history of psychological theory is characterized by a singular focus on homosexuality as pathology. This is most clearly

reflected in the preoccupation with the question of etiology, a concept which embodies the view that homosexuality is a deviation from normal development that must be explained. Usually, as in Bieber's well-known study, the explanations highlight pathology in the family of origin. One important critique of this body of research is that it is based on clinical rather than general populations. More recently, a trend towards "normalizing" homosexuality in psychological theory has developed, although the pathology model remains a significant force. Over the past two decades, the increasing visibility and political activism of gay people, as well as the expansion of gender role categories within the culture, has enabled a wider variety of perspectives to emerge. In 1973, the A.P.A. removed homosexuality from its list of diagnoses, but the category of ego dystonic homosexuality was substituted. This belies a continuing tendency to pathologize homosexuality and to view difficulties homosexual people experience in the culture as located in individuals. Thus, at present the pathology model and the tendency toward normalization exist concurrently. This is reflected, on the one hand, by stereotypes that prevent careful consideration of the realities of gay people's lives. For example, the notions that gay men are unable to sustain long-term relationships, or that homosexual couples mimic heterosexual role arrangements, are stereotypes which contribute to

psychology's lack of exploration of gay family forms. Furthermore, consideration of lesbians in psychology has often consisted of extrapolation from theories about gay men. On the other hand, recently research based on non-clinical populations has explored issues such as stages of gay male relationships, the effects of gender role socialization on same-sex relationships, the impact of homophobia, and gay parenting. Stein identifies a lack of attention to gay fathers. In addition to factors cited above, this most likely reflects the extent to which parenting issues have been considered in the context of custody disputes, which predominantly involve lesbian mothers. Overall, Stein identifies an incipient trend in psychology away from the pathology model and toward fuller descriptions of gay people as members of families.

In her review of the literature on lesbian parenting, Pollack (1987)(2) identifies three stages of psychology's perspectives on lesbian-headed families: initial invisibility, attempts to demonstrate similarities to families headed by heterosexual women, and most recently, efforts to explore distinctive aspects of lesbian parenting. Pollack places each of these paradigms in legal and social contexts. Between 1968 and 1978, ninety-eight percent of lesbian mothers who were sued for custody lost. Although there has been some improvement since that time, lesbian

mothers still have greater than a fifty percent chance of losing custody battles. The legal climate varies from state to state, as well as according to political fluctuations. Although gay rights activism has increased, one cannot discern a picture of steady gains in the area of legal recognition of gay people as parents. The current denial of foster parent status to gay people in Massachusetts exemplifies a major setback in the gay rights movement. Similarly, several states do not allow gay people to adopt. Furthermore, as new family forms develop, the lack of legal recognition creates tremendous vulnerability and fragility. For example, there is no legal recognition of non-biological lesbian mothers: In the absence of a biological father, a non-biological father could adopt a child without the mother having to terminate her parental rights, but this option does not exist for lesbian couples. Legally, there can only be one mother (or female parent).

The legal context is critical in three general ways. Firstly, it creates a sense of illegitimacy even in instances where the legal vulnerability is not a primary defining feature (as when there is no possibility of custody disputes). In this regard, many gay rights activists have accurately suggested that the Massachusetts foster care policy is not only relevant to gay people who wish to become foster parents, but rather to all gay people, insofar as it

legitimizes a cultural stance which defines gay people as unfit parents. Secondly, as has been mentioned, the legal issues have framed the major research questions. Research on lesbian parenting is, by definition, research about a group that is besieged and threatened. Thirdly, legal discourse about lesbian parenting is illuminating, insofar as the particular language it embodies reflects societal assumptions. Thus, in exploring the legal context it is important to note not only that lesbian mothers are vulnerable, but also more specifically, the ways in which the rationales for their vulnerability are articulated.

In the United States, two basic guidelines apply in custody disputes: namely, the best interests of the child and fitness of the parent. Legally, these categories are broadly defined and leave a great deal of room for particular biases to prevail. In addition to outright denial of custody, custody arrangements contingent on mothers' agreements not to live with their lovers or publicly identify themselves as lesbians, are common. These decisions have prompted legal disputes about whether they entail infringements upon basic constitutional rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and right to privacy. These issues remain largely unresolved, and for any given family, a custody dispute renders one vulnerable to the opinions of the presiding judge.

Hitchens and Price (1978)(3) examined transcripts from lesbian mother custody disputes, and identified three main assumptions underlying judges' decisions and mental health professionals' testimonies. First, the sexuality of the mother was frequently defined as undesirable in some way (common myths associate lesbianism with promiscuity and child molestation). Second, the idea that children would grow up to be homosexual or have confused sex role identifications prevailed. Third, the notion that social stigma would inevitably damage children was common. These three areas of concern set the stage for much of the psychological research reviewed here.

Lewin (1981)(4) suggests that in addition to these three considerations, custody decisions are often based on judgments about the "moral character" of lesbian mothers, and a belief that lesbianism cannot be "combined successfully with the ongoing process of motherhood." As an example of the latter, she cites a 1975 Ohio case in which the judge stated:

I don't say that a mother cannot be fit to rear her children if she is a lesbian, but I wonder if she is fit when she boldly and brazenly sets up in the home where the children are to be reared, the lesbian practices which have been current there, clearly to the neglect of the supervision of the children.(5)

Lewin suggests that a similar set of assumptions underlay the following exchange in a jury-tried lesbian mother custody dispute:

Attorney: If . . . it came to the choice of the son you've got left and being a homosexual, which would you choose, ma'am?

Mother: You know, as an individual I should not have to answer a question like that...

Attorney: No ma'am, but as a mother you should.(6)

Since the legal vulnerability of lesbian mothers engendered a need for expert testimony regarding their fitness as parents, a great deal of psychological research has centered on comparisons of lesbian and heterosexual mothers, with an emphasis on similarities, particularly with respect to the three areas of concern described above. Insofar as courts admitted evidence that children in lesbian-headed families are no more likely to become homosexual or exhibit signs of emotional disturbance, such studies have impacted on custody disputes. However, it is also important to note what is lost when lesbian-headed families have the onus of proving themselves to be like typical nuclear families. Pollack highlights this aspect of comparison studies:

The problem has been that until recently there had been little research on lesbian parents. Rather

than now having the luxury to define for ourselves what direction this research should take, it has largely focused on the issues that get raised in the courts. It has been a reaction to--an attempt to answer the fears and myths perpetuated by the very homophobic society we must now try to convince. It is an unfortunate situation, as we are forced to deal on their terms and respond to their questions. [In contrast,] at lesbian parent workshops, women say that they want a stop to the "neutralizing" of our lives. They want to portray the positive aspects and specialness of our lives.(7)

While Pollack's statement critiques the content of research questions framed on the basis of legal disputes, Lewin points out the inherent difficulties in the form of legal discourse.

As the frequency of child custody disputes and other divorce-related litigation continues to grow, the courts will doubtless be increasingly called on to resolve the difficult legal questions these cases raise. In addition, however, these same courts are often called on to go beyond resolution of the legal problems, and to address the underlying social issues as well. Conflicts of interest become conflicts of values in a forum ill-equipped to deal with the latter. Neither the adversarial model that rules custody proceedings, pitting parent against parent, nor the rules of evidence which restrict the exploration of the context in which particular patterns of behavior occur, can provide adequate protection from judicial bias for parents whose lifestyles are unconventional and poorly understood.(8)

Lewin's work centers on lesbian mothers' responses to a social context in which they are extremely vulnerable and stigmatized. She emphasizes diversity, and suggests that

many of the women she interviewed define themselves through variables other than their lesbianism (e.g., their status as mothers, religion, ethnicity, or class). However, she found that fear of custody disputes leads many lesbian mothers not to pursue child support. Lewin suggests, therefore, that lesbianism is salient with respect to family life insofar as it is negatively defined by the culture. Her work provides an example of a study which does not take the questions framed by legal discourse as its starting point.

If Pollack offers a critique of content, and Lewin offers a critique of form with respect to legal discourse, Rand (1982) (9) offers a critique of the practical outcome of current legal practices. Her study explores the psychological effects of secrecy versus openness in lesbian experience. A negative correlation was found between psychological health and secrecy. Thus, she suggests that when courts specify that lesbians should refrain from openly identifying as gay, family stress is likely to increase.

Comparison Studies

I turn now to comparison studies, which constitute the most substantial body of psychological research on lesbian-headed families thus far. These studies tend to be primarily focused on gender identity and sexual orientation

of children, and secondarily on assessment of home environment and psychological health.

Kweskin and Cook (1982)(10) compared lesbian and heterosexual mothers with respect to their attitudes toward their children's sex role behavior, and their own self-described sex role behavior. Using the Bem Sex Role Inventory, they found that there were no significant differences between the two groups. However, their findings did suggest that mothers' self-described sex role behavior is a better indicator of their sense of ideal sex role behavior in children than sexual orientation.

Mandel, Hotvedt, Green and Smith (1979)(11) compared children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers with respect to gender identity development and social relationships. They found no significant differences between the groups, both of which tended to be traditionally oriented. Kirkpatrick, Smith and Roy (1981)(12) also compared gender role development and psychological well-being among groups of children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers. They were unable to blindly differentiate between the groups with respect to either parameter. Hoeffler (1981)(13) compared children's sex role behavior as indicated by play activities, and found no significant difference between children of lesbians and children of heterosexuals. She

also compared mothers' encouragement of sex role behavior in children, and found no differences. She concluded that children of the ages she considered (six through nine years), are more influenced by models other than their mothers with respect to acquisition of sex role behavior.

While the studies mentioned above focus primarily on sex role and gender identity issues, the studies below compare families with respect to other parameters, such as psychological and economic factors affecting home environment, stigmatization among peers, and concerns about child custody. Some studies combine exploration of these issues with continuing focus on gender identity and sex role behavior.

Miller, Jacobsen and Bigner (1982)(14) compared the home environments of children in lesbian-headed families and children of heterosexual parents. They found that the lesbian-headed families were generally less affluent in socioeconomic terms, and slightly more "child-oriented" in their parenting stance.

Golombok, Spencer and Rutter (1983)(15) compared families headed by lesbians and those headed by single heterosexual mothers, using child and parent interviews as well as teacher questionnaires. They found no significant

differences with respect to gender identity, sex role behavior or sexual orientation of children, and no significant differences in psychological adjustment of children as measured by parent and teacher reports, although there were slightly more difficulties reported in the single heterosexual sample.

In contrast to the studies discussed above, the following studies underscore distinctions between the groups compared. Pagelow (1980) (16) compared single heterosexual mothers and lesbian mothers with respect to issues surrounding child custody, housing and employment opportunities. She found that lesbians reported more severe oppression in all three areas. Coping styles were also noted to distinguish the two groups, insofar as the lesbians tended to have developed more support networks. On the other hand, they were described as more economically independent, as indicated by the comparatively high percentage who owned their own homes or businesses.

Hill (1984) (17) compared the child-rearing attitudes of black lesbian and heterosexual mothers. She found that the lesbian mothers in her sample tended to be more tolerant and flexible regarding adherence to rules. They also demonstrated more tolerance of children's sexuality, employed less sex role stereotyping in their perceptions of

their children, and expressed more traditionally masculine role expectations of their daughters. Hill opens her study with the question, "Who is a lesbian mother and what is unique about her?" She initially hypothesized that lesbian mothers would place a higher value on independence, but this hypothesis was not confirmed. In analyzing her findings, Hill suggests that "these results do not mean that independence is not stressed by gay or straight subjects, but rather that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups. One interpretation is that independence is quite important to black women regardless of sexual preference." Hill's work is the only study of lesbian mothers to consider ethnicity as a critical factor.

The studies cited above share several characteristics. First, they are empirical--hence, specific questions or "hypotheses" are framed and "tested," the results are viewed as reflecting a reality independent of the hypotheses or researchers, and data is analyzed along singular lines shaped by the original questions. From the perspective of my current work, the form of these studies is essentially shaping of the information they yield. These studies exemplify Pollack's observation of the dilemma posed to researchers in this area by the hostile legal and cultural environment: namely, the necessity of "normalizing"

lesbian-headed families, juxtaposed with the loss of an opportunity to explore the richness of people's actual lives, which that endeavor entails.

A second important feature of the studies is that they are comparative. It is interesting to consider this along three parameters: 1) What is being compared; 2) Who is being compared, and; 3) Is sameness or difference emphasized? As previously mentioned, the content of comparison is often sex role or sexual preference of children. The implicit message is two-fold. The emphasis on these questions implies, firstly, that children in gay households may be likely to develop sex roles or sexual preferences outside of the "norm," and secondly, that should this be the case, it is undesirable. Thus, even studies which demonstrate that children in lesbian-headed households are indistinguishable from children in heterosexual households, suggest that lesbianism is problematic. The underlying notion is that it is undesirable for these children to become gay like their parents, or in other words, their parents are potentially negative role models. A twist on this idea can be seen in Hill's work, which emphasizes lesbian mothers' "flexibility" regarding sex role stereotypes. Hence, Hill's valuing of less rigid sex roles leads her to emphasize the uniqueness of lesbian households along this parameter. In general, the shift from an

emphasis on sameness to an emphasis on difference reflects researchers' differential valuing of the attributes being compared.

The area in which cultural assumptions and language can be seen most clearly as determining the shape of psychological research, is the question of who is being compared. In all of the studies, lesbian mothers were compared with heterosexual mothers. Generally, researchers identified the comparison groups as "single." There was a great deal of variation in how this term was defined, and in several instances critical questions were left unanswered. The difficulty in determining appropriate comparison groups stems directly from the fact that in our culture gay couples have no legal status as couples, and our language does not include words to denote gay relationships that would be comparable to words denoting legally acknowledged heterosexual arrangements (e.g., marriage, husband, wife). Thus, in some instances, "single" indicated that both the lesbian and heterosexual mothers being compared had been married and subsequently divorced. This left ambiguous the issue of whether women in either group lived with a partner, male or female. In other instances, "single" was used specifically to specify that there was no male parent on the premises, hence begging the question of whether there were two female parents on the premises. Is a lesbian couple

raising a child comparable to a single heterosexual mother raising a child without a partner? Is an unmarried heterosexual couple comparable to a lesbian couple? Single meaning "not in a couple," or "no legal marital status," or "not in a heterosexual relationship," has vastly different implications for gay people in this culture. The lack of attention to this issue in the studies cited above reflects the ubiquitous and insidious nature of heterosexist assumptions in our culture, and highlights the extent to which those assumptions are contained in our everyday language.

Clinical Observations

While comparison studies emphasize the relation between parenting in a heterosexual context and parenting in a lesbian context, several clinically-based articles emphasize the unique aspects of lesbian parenting from the perspective of mental health care providers. Steinhorn (1983)(18) does not distinguish between lesbian mothers who have children from marriages and those who are choosing to create families as lesbians. Her clinical observations emphasize the vulnerability of lesbian mothers and the potential negative consequences of homophobia, including mothers' low self-esteem and dilemmas regarding disclosure of lesbianism to children, friends and employers. She also suggests that

clinicians need to carefully assess their own attitudes regarding this population, since bias on the part of mental health practitioners is likely to be a further burden to this population. Crawford (1987)(19) also focuses on the stressors specific to lesbian mothers. She highlights the complexity involved in decision-making regarding the structuring of families, as exemplified by cross-cultural adoption and its implications with respect to racial issues, on the one hand, and artificial insemination and the questions of known or unknown donors, on the other hand. She suggests that clinicians need to attend closely to the emotional ramifications of the decision-making process surrounding lesbians' construction of families. In addition, she highlights the need to attend to the nature of the family of origin's responses to lesbians establishing their own families.

In The Social Construction of Lesbianism, Kitzinger (1987)(20) suggests that research such as that described in this chapter be viewed as part of the process of socially constructing the phenomenon of lesbianism. She suggests that a major trend in the social sciences has been from the construction of lesbianism as pathology, to the construction of lesbianism as a personal choice. In Kitzinger's view, both constructions disregard the political implications of lesbianism, which she sees as central.

Kitzinger's work is crucial with respect to my own, insofar as she too links the form of research (namely, positivistic empiricism), with specific content. In deconstructing the psychological literature on lesbian mothers and placing that research in a specific social context, I hope I have opened up the questions: What is a lesbian?; What is a family?; What is a mother?, and; What is a lesbian mother? As we each attempt to answer these questions for ourselves, it is important to recognize the extent to which we do so in the context of shared meaning systems that are deeply embedded in our language. By the same token, lesbians currently choosing to create families are also working out of this cultural context, even as they transform it.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Subjects:

Twenty women were interviewed. Subjects were recruited within an urban center. They are middle-class, and range in age from mid-twenties to early-forties. All have chosen to become parents subsequent to establishing their lesbian identities. Biological parents, non-biological coparents, and adoptive parents are all included in the sample. Subjects were recruited through an informal networking process including lesbian parent conferences, and contacts such as therapists and obstetricians.

Materials and Procedures:

Each woman was interviewed for two sessions in her home, with total interview time ranging between two and four hours. Interviews were semi-structured. The initial interview provided an opportunity for women to tell their stories as they saw fit. In the subsequent interview, I asked questions about topics of interest which may not have emerged spontaneously. All interviews were audiotaped. The following list includes topics covered.

1. Subject's identity as a lesbian: Which identity (lesbian/mother) emerged first? What was the process of identification like? How does the woman feel about being a lesbian? What is the degree of internalized homophobia? How do feelings about being lesbian connect to the decisions surrounding parenting?
2. Role models: Parenting in general, parenting as lesbians; Who constitutes the reference group against which these women think about their own experiences?
3. Conditions preceding becoming a mother: What needed to be in place?
4. Relation to family of origin (both in terms of the subjects' childhood experiences, and in terms of current family relationships).
5. Support networks: In what communities do subjects function (family, work, neighborhoods, friendship networks)?
6. How is the issue of being out versus being closeted handled or framed? In general, what is the interface between these families and the world (work, school, health care, etc.)?
7. Choice of particular structure: How did it emerge? What are the consequences? What explanations are given to children and others? (In this category, adoption versus conception, mode of conception, and absence or presence of fathers are considered.)
8. Feelings and actions regarding the role of men in children's lives (both generally and specifically in relation to fathers).
9. Feelings about the gender of the children.
10. Parenting Styles: How do children influence parenting styles? How do couples negotiate around differences in parenting styles? Do subjects see links or differences between their parenting styles and the ways in which they were raised?
11. Bonding: Is it differential within families; and what explanations are given for differences (e.g., biology, child's temperament, etc.)?
12. Naming: Who is called "Mother"? What does "mother" mean? What are the children's last names?

13. Values regarding what children need: Why have children? What hopes and expectations do people have for their children? What is a good parent, etc.?

Data Analysis

My approach to data collection and analysis is qualitative and based on interpretive social science methodology, as discussed in chapter two. Interviews were be transcribed, and responses grouped according to categories which emerge as central in my subjects' frameworks. I bring to the categorization process a special interest in the four topics delineated in chapter one: namely, definitions of "lesbian" and "family," family structure decisions, naming, and homophobia. My mode of analysis includes attention to the relationships between individual subjects' linguistic constructions, their immediate environments and the larger culture.

The data was considered from two general points of view. Firstly, each woman's responses were considered separately, in an effort to identify the particular thinking process of each individual. Secondly, women's responses were compared and contrasted, in an effort to delineate the range within the group. By approaching the data from both of these perspectives, I hope to articulate the relationship between particular people's experiences and larger cultural

frameworks. This work is largely descriptive and hypothesis-generating, insofar as issues which emerge as central in this study suggest future areas of inquiry.

Although it is possible to consider this interview material in comparison to experiences in traditional heterosexual families, I have not focused on such comparisons, but rather, have emphasized analyses of lesbian parenting experiences on their own terms.

Chapter 5

Listening

In preparing the section which follows, I spent many hours listening and relistening, and listening yet again to the voices of the lesbian mothers I had interviewed. I hoped, somewhat naively, that in the process of attending so closely to each of their voices individually, and to all of them as a kind of Greek chorus, a form through which to present them to readers would naturally emerge. Though to a certain extent that approach proved useful, what I had not counted on was the replication of a frustrating experience familiar to me from my childhood. That is to say, I felt for a long time that I had taken in far more than I could ever hope to find words or symbols to express. In order to move beyond that state of mutism, I needed to expand the focus of my listening in ways that would eventually enable me to speak. Reflecting on my childhood provided me with a model for doing that.

As an adult looking back on my childhood, I find that I am now able to describe through words or visual images, impressions which have lain silent within me for many years. I believe certain perceptions and experiences were stored internally until future experiences accumulated and yielded

a capacity to reflect on and express those early feelings and inchoate thoughts.

I liken the process through which my voice emerged to the various stages of constructing a movie. As a child, I was very much like a camera recording events on film. A camera is positioned in a particular place at a particular moment in time, and what it captures of that time and place varies according to a multitude of factors: for example, the camera's capacities, the type of film used, lens filters and the quality of light. Until the film is removed from the camera and processed in a laboratory, no one knows exactly what was recorded on it. The development process provides another opportunity for influencing and varying the quality of the image. Finally, in order to make a movie that can be appreciated by an audience, the developed film must be edited; that is to say, carefully and deliberately constructed so that it tells a story. In the process of constructing a film, the editor attends partly to the footage itself and partly to her internal voices. The combination engenders choices to cut in particular places rather than others. In this process, many moments in time are pivotal (e.g., the time the footage was shot, the time the editor learned particular skills, the time the work is intended to be shown). Thus, the finished film is the

result of attention to many voices, and its roots are in the past, present, and imagined future.

My relation to this section closely parallels the process described above. The construction of the following chapters is rooted first in the "filming" of twenty women's stories as told to me. In listening repeatedly to the interviews, I acted in some respects as a processing lab, developing the film only to find at the end of the procedure that there was, of course, far more raw footage than any viewer or reader could make sense of. Hence, I needed to act as an editor, finding my own structure through which to make choices about inclusion, exclusion and ordering of a vast amount of material. In so doing, I found it necessary to shift my focus back and forth between the voices of my subjects and my internal voices (including the voices of others I have encountered). As I expanded my focus in this way, I began to traverse many paths between past, present and future. This section, therefore, reflects several stages and kinds of listening.

Chapter 6

Silence and Invention

In my struggle to find a form for this section, the first shift back to my internal voices was marked by a memory of Adrienne Rich's words. As a young feminist, like many of my peers, I avidly read Adrienne Rich's poetry. I was thrilled to find my own concerns reflected time and time again in her eloquent efforts to speak the "unspeakable." In writing about women's lives, Rich repeatedly evokes two themes: silence and invention. Her descriptions of these phenomena form the essential framework I have chosen to use in organizing the story I will tell in the following pages.

Rich writes of silence:

A conversation begins
with a lie. And each

speaker of the so-called common language feels
the ice-floe split, the drift apart

as if powerless, as if up against
a force of nature

A poem can begin
with a lie. And be torn up.

A conversation has other laws
recharges itself with its own

false energy. Cannot be torn
up. Infiltrates our blood. Repeats itself.

Inscribes with its unreturning stylus
the isolation it denies...

...The technology of silence
The rituals, etiquette

the blurring of terms
silence not absence

of words or music or even
raw sounds

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence...

...The scream
of an illegitimate voice

It has ceased to hear itself, therefore
it asks itself

How do I exist?(1)

Rich writes of invention:

The rules break like a thermometer,
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
we're out in a country that has no language
no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren
through gorges unexplored since dawn
whatever we do together is pure invention
the maps they gave us were out of date
by years... we're driving through the desert
wondering if the water will hold out
the hallucinations turn to simple villages
the music on the radio comes clear--
neither Rosenkavalier nor Gotterdammerung,
but a woman's voice singing old songs
with new words, with a quiet bass, a flute
plucked and fingered by women outside the law.(2)

Silence is a central feature of lesbianism in our culture. Homophobia and sexism yield a denial of the very existence of lesbianism, and a tendency to turn away from descriptions of lesbian lives. Lacking language with which to speak about their experiences, or fearing consequences of such attempts, lesbians may participate in perpetuating the silence surrounding their lives. They may also actively attempt to break through it.

Silence cannot be understood as an entity apart from its relation to language (in its broadest sense, expression). Therefore, when describing silence or attending to it, one begins to attend to conversations on many levels. I believe that individuals are in constant reciprocal dialogues with themselves (their past experiences and multiple internal voices), with those in their immediate environment (family, friends, colleagues, etc.), and with the larger culture (media, institutional structures, etc.). Taking Rich's characterization of silence as a "presence" which has "a history" and a "form," I look at as many of these dialogues as possible in order to map out the vicissitudes of silence. This work is an attempt to break silence by presenting descriptions previously left out of existing literature. A central facet of that process is the effort to behold silence, to explore its relation to our lives. Silence is woven into the social fabric such that it

is both the result of particular cultural contexts (institutions and conventions), and a context in and of itself.

Invention is a process involving movement. Derived from the Latin "in venire," it means literally "to come upon, to find." Interestingly, this notion has expanded in common usage to refer to the activity of coming upon something in the mind and bringing it forth into the world, thereby creating something which previously did not exist. This is a fundamental way in which individuals affect culture. Like silence, invention can also be understood as an entity in relation to language. As Rich points out, it may flourish out of necessity "in a country that has no language," a place where rules and conventions have broken down, leaving spaces to be filled.

Silence and invention may exist in multiple, complex interrelationships. The silence Rich describes is primarily stultifying and oppressive, "inscribing with its unreturning stylus the isolation it denies." The stuckness of silence may thus curtail and stifle the movement of invention. However, the effort to live an authentic life may begin in silence and yield an attempt to break through it. In this way, silence can be the partial source or grounding of invention. Invention occurs both within and beyond the

boundaries of silence. If begun in silence, it may sometimes expand and, in doing so, alter the boundaries around it. Silence may obscure the invention it inadvertently yields, or conversely, it may be obliterated by the powerful process of invention itself.

As I reviewed the interview tapes, a variety of intricate relationships between silence and invention in the lives of lesbian parents became increasingly apparent to me. I therefore direct the reader toward a particular mode of attending to the words on the following pages: namely, to read for silence and invention, and especially to notice the multiple, ever shifting relationships between the two.

This section is divided into chapters, each of which presents particular angles on specific moments in conversation, much like snapshots or single frames on a reel of film.

In Setting the Stage, I continue the project begun in chapter two, of laying out the basic legal, biotechnological and social contexts within which lesbians are currently forming families. My purpose here is dual: first, simply to succinctly present the parameters which inform lesbians' thinking about how they will construct their families, and second, in the spirit of noting silence and invention, to

explicitly name the notions about lesbians and families which are inherent in these parameters.

Dictionary focuses, in contrast, on my subjects' explicit articulations of their notions about lesbians and families. In comparing this chapter with the one preceding, one can discern places of convergence and disjuncture between my subjects and the dominant culture. This is variable insofar as individual women use and reject different aspects of dominant cultural values and ideas, and they do so in a variety of idiosyncratic combinations. By exploring disjunctures between individual women's ideas and ideas which are institutionally enacted on a large social scale (e.g., through the legal system, medical establishment, or adoption agency networks), the question of legitimacy comes more clearly into focus. One might look at these two chapters as differing angles on the question of what counts as a family.

Family Structure explores the reasoning behind the decisions individual women have made regarding biological conception versus adoption, known versus unknown donors, coparenting relationships, sibships, and men in children's lives. Whereas Dictionary contains women's responses to the general question of what counts as "family," this chapter embodies subjects' more specific thoughts, feelings and

values about the particular families they have created. Here, women's struggles to integrate their own values with the cultural parameters they operate within are reflected in practical decisions.

A Rose by Any Other Name moves more explicitly into the realm of language by exploring the relationships between the creation of particular family structures, and women's choices and thinking about how to name those structures both within the family and to the rest of the world. Children's names, as well as their names for parents and other relatives, are discussed. In examining the thinking processes of parents on the naming issue, one can see that women vary not only in regard to how they define their families to themselves, but also on questions such as the relative importance of names altogether, the meaning of and response to lack of fit between family definitions and larger cultural definitions (e.g., Do children need to be able to identify themselves in language common to the culture, or conversely, does the world need to be educated about the specific language of the family?), and the extent to which they see naming and language as a matter of parent/child negotiation, or a matter that is more influenced by either the child, the external world or the parents, as individual entities.

Dealing with Difference: The Family in the World/The World in the Family, focuses on women's thinking regarding presentation of the family to the world. Homophobia and racism are particularly central in this chapter. Women's responses to these issues reflect the enormously complex mutual embeddedness of families and culture. Here, women grapple with the presence and consequences of homophobia and racism in the world, themselves and their children. As they attempt to respond to their perspectives on these issues, their ideas about what constitutes good mothering, and what values they wish to encourage in their children, as well as hopes and fears for their children, come into play. In addition, the voices in this chapter highlight the strikingly negative valuation this culture tends to place on differences of many kinds, and the enormous pain and destruction this kind of prejudice potentially yields. Lesbian mothers are particularly challenged to respond creatively in their efforts to both maintain integrity and protect their children.

Good Mothers presents subjects' responses to the question, "What is a good mother?" Here, the relationships women aspire to develop with their children, and the values they hold about parenting, are directly named.

In the concluding section I comment on the results this methodology has yielded, and suggest directions for future work.

Chapter 7

Setting the Stage

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "who is to be master--that's all."

Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking Glass(1)

Due to medical/technological advances, alternative insemination is an option for women wishing to become pregnant. However, the technology exists within a social system, and its availability to any particular woman is mediated by that system. Generally, within the medical establishment, alternative insemination is most readily available to married women whose husbands are infertile. Many private doctors and HMO's will not inseminate single women. Currently, there are three sperm banks in the United States that provide services for single women (regardless of sexual preference). In most cases the donor maintains total anonymity. One sperm bank currently has a program through which donors agree to become known to their offspring at the time the child reaches the age of eighteen. Sperm may be

fresh or frozen. Fresh sperm yields a higher rate of pregnancy, but frozen sperm has the advantage of being quarantined so that screenings for STD's (and particularly AIDS), can be more thoroughly conducted. Women wishing to become pregnant do not have to rely on the medical establishment. Some women find their own donors, or in cases where they prefer the donor to remain anonymous, "go-betweens" mediate the process. AIDS has had a great impact on the process of family formation in the gay community, since many women who would have chosen to coparent with gay male friends, or who would have felt legally safer with a gay male donor, are choosing other options at this time. Economic circumstances also affect any particular woman's decision to form a family. Alternative insemination can be an expensive process, depending on the length of time it takes a woman to get pregnant. However, in general it is less expensive than adoption.

Lesbians choosing to have children are legally vulnerable in two general ways. Firstly, the legal climate is basically unfavorable for lesbians, as exemplified by the high percentage of lesbian mothers who lose custody battles. Thus, whether a lesbian is single or in a couple, her lesbianism in and of itself may render her vulnerable in custody disputes. In considering the legal climate, the letter of the law is not the only relevant factor, but must

be thought of in the context of factors including the political climate and personal preferences of presiding judges. Secondly, since lesbian couples have no legal status, a coparent (of either a child conceived biologically by her partner or a child adopted by her partner), has no legally acknowledged relationship to the child, and thus has no legal rights regarding custody or visitation.

A lesbian choosing to conceive a child biologically will be more at risk of custody disputes if she uses a known donor because both he and his family will have rights where the child is concerned. Many women cite their fears concerning potential legal battles as a primary reason for choosing to conceive through an unknown donor. Contractual arrangements with known donors are controversial. Some argue that they are useful insofar as the intentions of all parties are legally documented. Others argue that they will not be seriously considered in a court battle, and will serve as evidence of parentage.

A lesbian choosing to adopt must do so as a single parent regardless of whether she is in a couple relationship or not. Currently, some states prohibit gay adoptions altogether. Even in states where that is not the case, the advisability of adopting as an openly gay person is questionable, since agencies may choose not to place

children in gay households. Adoption in and of itself renders one open to the scrutiny of outside institutions (adoption agencies as well as the state). Thus the choice to adopt, like the choice to conceive a child through a known donor, presents more legal risks than conception through an unknown donor.

While the parameters above describe the legal issues an individual lesbian confronts if she is choosing between adoption, conception with a known donor, or conception with an unknown donor, there are several ways these parameters pose further risks specific to lesbian couples. If a known donor is used, both he and his family have rights which a lesbian coparent does not have. Thus, in the event of death or incapacitation of the biological mother, the coparent is without legal recourse in the event of a custody dispute. In addition, whether a woman conceives through a known or unknown donor, or whether she adopts, in the event of her death or incapacitation, her family has legal rights which the coparent does not have.

In addition to the risks a coparent faces in the event of incapacitation or death of her partner, she is at risk in the event of separation, since here also she does not have any legal rights with respect to the child, and is thus

subject to her partner's decisions vis a vis custody and visitation.

Although the parameters outlined above accurately describe the mainstream legal context in this country, at the time of this writing, several landmark decisions suggest an incipient change in our legal definition of family. These decisions are partially reflective of the challenge gay relationships present to current legal discourse, and have primarily (though not exclusively), occurred in areas with substantial gay populations. The central changes involve the institution of "domestic partnership" laws, with domestic partners defined in one referendum as: "two people who have chosen to share one another's lives in an intimate and committed relationship of mutual caring." Domestic partnership laws are intended to provide benefits that married heterosexual couples have, such as health, property and life insurance, bereavement leave, and annuity and pension rights. In 1985, West Hollywood passed an ordinance permitting registration of domestic partners and allowing them hospital and prison visitation rights. In December 1988, when the city became "self-insured," domestic partners were offered medical benefits. In August 1988, Madison passed laws granting housing in single family zones to domestic partners, and sick and bereavement leave to domestic partners of city employees. In June 1989, San

Francisco passed legislation recognizing homosexual and unmarried heterosexual couples as families and allowing for registration of domestic partners. In July 1989, the New York City Court of Appeals held that a gay couple could be considered family with respect to the state's rent control regulations.(2)

It should be noted that domestic partnership laws are not equivalent to recognition of entities as families. For the most part, the rights delineated above are specific and circumscribed. They have generally not been applied to the issues surrounding child-rearing. Indeed, overall the legal system has not caught up with the complexity of alternative family arrangements and reproductive technology developments. An exceptional ruling recently occurred in a conservative county just outside of Seattle, Washington. Two lesbians were legally recognized as parents of a child conceived through artificial insemination by one of them.(3) To my knowledge, this is the only case in the country thus far where there has been legal recognition of a lesbian couple as coparents.

It is difficult to tell how far these legal changes will develop. On the one hand, their geographical specificity, in combination with a basically conservative national trend, suggest that such legislation will be

circumscribed. However, alternative family arrangements represent an increasing, statistically significant segment of the population, and these legal developments may foreshadow more sweeping changes. In any case, these few instances of partial recognition of alternative family forms underscore the extent to which the vast majority of people living in such arrangements do not have cultural recognition in both practical and symbolic terms. The women in my study, for example, have not had access to any of the rights delineated above.

Along with legal considerations, it is important to note the social context of adoption. Single parent adoption generally occurs in a greatly narrowed spectrum of the total adoption community. Few agencies will facilitate single parent adoptions. Private adoptions may occur without agency involvement, and in those cases placement is up to the discretion of the individual parties involved. By and large, agencies which do place children in "single parent" homes deal with children from third world countries, children of color, physically challenged children, and older children. There is a sense in which these children are deemed "less desirable" in our culture, and they get paired up with parents deemed "less desirable." In practical terms, white lesbians considering adoption (as in the case of my subjects), must address the issues surrounding cross-

racial and cross-cultural matches, questions which frequently pose them with personal and political dilemmas.

Several underlying notions and values inform the social and legal contexts delineated above. Most strikingly in the legal context, lesbians do not exist as heads of families. Here is an instance in which "silence" is, as Rich says, a "plan rigorously executed . . . a blueprint to a life." It is as if "lesbian" and "family" are mutually exclusive terms. This is most clearly exemplified by the lack of legally sanctioned lesbian unions and the concomitant lack of legally acknowledged coparent/child relationships. In the case of biological conceptions, one can see the legal bias towards biological connection as defining of family relationships (and conversely of the coparent's "non-relationship"). A marked tendency to weight biological connections more heavily than the intentions or relationships of the parties involved can also be seen clearly with respect to the rights of known donors, known donors' families, birth mothers and birth mothers' families, in contrast to the lack of coparents' rights. In the case of adoption, heterosexism is more clearly pronounced, since here legal sanction stands in for biological connection, and it is the legal context which determines that two women cannot both have a legally sanctioned relationship to a child.

The legal context in this country is characterized by heterosexism, a bias toward biological connections, and a minimal valuing of relational issues. The degree to which the system "constructs" family based on these biases can best be appreciated through contrast. In Denmark, for example, two people of any gender who have cohabited for a certain period of time and who wish to name their relationship to each other as "family," may be legally sanctioned as such, and thereby receive the societal benefits that only legally married heterosexual couples may receive in our country. Denmark's system thereby weights relational issues more heavily and does not contain such marked heterosexism.

Aspects of the social context beyond the legal system also reflect heterosexism (as in the reduced availability of A.I., and the more limited adoption options for lesbians and "single" women). In addition, the adoption context highlights our culture's ethnocentrism, racism and negativity towards the physically challenged. The notions that there are more and less "desirable" children, and more and less "desirable" parents (based on factors like sexual preference and marital status), are not givens, but rather deeply embedded cultural responses to differences.

Having laid out the basic legal and social parameters within which lesbian-headed families are formed, in chapters nine through eleven I will highlight the myriad ways in which particular women's perceptions of and reactions to these basic facts inform their choices and feelings regarding family structure, naming, and living in the larger culture as lesbian parents. Prior to that, in the chapter that follows I present women's explicit articulations of the personal beliefs which also inform (and are informed by), their experiences of establishing families. Once one steps outside of the legal and social biases toward heterosexual and biological definitions of "family," the term itself is up for grabs. Lesbians, by necessity, are in the position of considering the gap thus created. This is one of the junctures at which silence and invention meet.

Chapter 8

Dictionary

I am thinking this in a country
where words are stolen out of mouths
as bread is stolen out of mouths

Adrienne Rich
"North American Time"(1)

In the preceding chapter, the mutually exclusive nature of the terms "family and "lesbian," as they appear in dominant cultural contexts, was highlighted. My observation of this disjuncture guided my research from the outset. I believe that as lesbians form families they operate out of a set of assumptions and definitions which do not match those of the dominant culture. However, they also live within the dominant culture, and dominant cultural values therefore live within each of them. Hence, as I began to interview women, I was extremely curious about the nature of their internal dialogues with regard to definitions of "family" and "lesbian." I was particularly interested in the process through which women had managed to integrate the two terms, and thereby integrate the identities of lesbian and mother on a personal level. I approached these issues with several basic goals.

First of all, I wanted to elicit, and then state in writing, my subjects' responses to the questions: "What is a family?", and "What is a lesbian?" This wish stems from my desire to join with them in reclaiming the power to name these realms of experience for ourselves. In addition, I wanted to be able to compare and contrast the definitions thus elicited with those contained in legal and psychological discourses (as explored in previous chapters), and thereby to begin to explore the complex relationships between individuals and culture.

I was also curious about the processes of internal transformation individual women experienced as they formed personal integrations of the identities of lesbian and mother. I believe that women's descriptions of these processes contain the essence of individuals' positions vis a vis culture, insofar as women converse internally amidst conflicting values and assumptions, and ultimately make moves which alter reality (e.g., have children). In my mind, when a particular lesbian first imagines that she can be a mother and then actualizes the vision, she is inventing herself as a lesbian mother and transforming culture in the process. This was particularly true before the current "lesbian baby boom," which has provided some women with models that were previously unavailable (in other words, with something akin to a sub-culture). In order to consider

this particular point of meeting between individual women and dominant cultural notions, I asked my subjects to tell me how they became lesbian mothers.

This chapter contains responses to both sets of questions described above. It should be noted that each pulls for distinct moments in time. Whereas the questions, "What is a family?", and "What is a lesbian?", pull for women's current (at the time of the research) thinking, the question of how one became a lesbian mother pulls for reflection about a period of time beginning in the past. Therefore, discrepancies between the content of a particular woman's responses may illuminate changes that occur over time.

Families

Defining nouns is a process of categorization. It entails the delineation of a set of criteria by which entities can be grouped and labeled according to the essential features they have in common. This process involves both abstract and concrete levels of thought. At the most direct and obvious level, the question, "What is a family?" pulls for abstract, generalized responses. In answering, people lay out basic principles by which different entities can be classified as families. At a

perhaps less obvious level, people's answers to the question contain distillations of idiosyncratic, particular experiences. Both abstract and concrete aspects of the task of definition are evident in this study. Women articulate definitions that extend beyond their particular family structures and suggest a range of social groupings which each would call families. However, even in this abstract mode of response, their personal experiences are critical insofar as they delineate criteria which are inclusive of notions about the particular families each has both come from and created as an adult. Furthermore, variation between individuals' definitions can be seen as partially related to diverging key experiences.

Hence, the question, "What is a family?", provides an opportunity to scrutinize the relationships between people's personal experiences and their use of language. This type of analysis yields a window on culture as lived experiences that are linguistically mediated. It is important to note that there is not a uniform or simple link between experience and ideas. People vary not only with respect to particular content of experience, but also with respect to how they use their experience in their thinking: how they construe it, what aspects they draw on, and the extent to which they explicitly or implicitly integrate their experience into the activity of definition.

Furthermore, the process of definition is complex in another respect. Most words have both denotative and connotative aspects, but in any given context, certain words are more heavily laden with connotative meaning. For instance, if I ask people, "What is an apple?", various essential characteristics might be proposed in response. Are all apples red, round, crunchy edible, sweet, etc.? At what point does an entity not qualify as an apple? In defining "family," a similar sorting through of essential characteristics is necessary. Do all families contain children, people of both genders, people who are biologically related, relationships that are legally sanctioned, etc.? In addition, there is a set of more obviously emotional criteria which is highly significant: Are all families intimate, supportive of their members, enduring, etc.? When a word is more heavily laden with connotative meaning (as in the case of "family"), the process of definition is increased in complexity. People vary with respect to the extent to which they consider and weight connotative dimensions, as well as with respect to the actual content of connotation.

As the complexity of the definition process suggests, the question, "What is a family?", elicits an articulation of diverging perspectives within the culture, and thereby highlights the extent to which culture is a multi-faceted

phenomenon. This manifests itself as discrepancies within individuals, between individuals, between sub-groups, and between individuals or sub-groups and the "mainstream" culture. Diversity of experience, variations in how individuals use their experience, and the largely connotative dimension of the word, all contribute to the complexity of the picture that emerges when one asks people to define "family."

When considering this complexity, it is important to note that not all perspectives have equal weight or strength within the culture. In that respect, I see the question of definition as speaking directly to the issue of legitimacy. That is to say, the question, "What is a family?", as posed in the context of my research, is interchangeable with the question, "What counts as a family in your view?" The question of legitimacy is critical, since disjunctures between my subjects' responses to this line of inquiry and the notions implicit in our mainstream legal and social contexts are important features of the process of family formation explored herein. Indeed, if our legal system were based on my subjects' ideas, it would closely resemble the system in Denmark, or states with domestic partnership laws. I imagine, therefore, that being a lesbian parent in such settings would be qualitatively distinguishable from the experiences presented on these pages, at least with respect

to some of the issues surrounding legitimacy and disjuncture between individuals and their cultural milieus.

By and large, the women in this study provide striking contrasts to the mainstream legal and social definitions of "family," as delineated in the previous chapter. At the level of abstraction which the question entails, my subjects clearly articulate a preference for relational, as opposed to biological or legal, criteria. It should be noted that individual women have complicated and distinct views about the significance of biological connections with respect to their particular families, which are not reflected in their responses to the general question posed herein. (See Family Structure chapter for further exploration of this issue.)

Sara, Glenda, Lucy and Jessie, like most women in my sample, define "family" as a set of relationships distinctively marked by characteristics such as commitment, intimacy and caring.

Sara:

Well, that's the great question, isn't it? It's the nut of it all. When the bomb drops, it's the people you go looking for. I think it's whatever group of people takes care of you when you're sick, is the jumping off point of your activities, and the beneficiary of your efforts. So I see it as a work, health, education, joy and sorrow kind of group.

Glenda:

A family is a collection of people who care for each other and have a commitment to their relationships with each other. They may or may not be biologically connected. They may or may not be legally acknowledged. But they provide for the emotional needs of the individuals involved.

Lucy:

A family is a group of people that make a commitment to each other. An immediate family lives together and makes that daily commitment to live together. Their daily, ongoing lives are intertwined, and that includes a major base for love and support. The extended family includes other people who are there for love and support, but come and go. Still, they're people you can count on and can talk to.

Jessie:

I view it in a pretty broad way. I think it has to do with a certain level of relationship and a certain level of commitment. I mean, I have some old friends who are family to me, and Jackie has some family that she may never meet. There's a biological piece to it that's less important than the relational piece. People who are committed to each other and there for each other-- things you can count on without much question.

Though basically this emphasis on relational, as opposed to biological and traditional legal, criteria is in contrast with mainstream legal discourse, the debate surrounding current legal changes, such as the establishment of partnership laws, is an important example of the reciprocal nature of the individual/mass culture interaction

which occurs during social transformations. In the current debate, one can discern voices similar to those of my subjects seeping into the domain of legal discourse. For example, the New York Court of Appeals decision concerning gay couples qualifying for family rights with respect to housing, contains the following language: "It is the totality of the relationship as evidenced by the dedication, caring and self-sacrifice of the parties which should, in the final analysis, control." Factors such as "exclusivity, longevity, and the level of emotional and financial commitment," were considered central in the majority opinion. (2)

Negative responses to rulings such as the New York Court of Appeals decision, clarify the extent to which the question of definition of family is not simply a semantic matter, but rather, entails an important heuristic dimension. For example, in *The New Republic*, Andrew Sullivan stated that domestic partnership laws "chip away at the prestige of traditional relationships and undermine the priority we give them." He goes on to say, "Society has good reason to extend legal advantages to heterosexuals who marry. They make a deeper commitment to one another and to society; in exchange, society extends certain benefits to them." (3)

Lesbian mothers (and other alternative families), pose a challenge to our dominant cultural values. They literally contribute to the redefining of "family," as they invent new arrangements and demand societal recognition. However, in so doing, they draw on elements already present in the culture. For instance, lesbianism aside, "family" has both a relational and legal (or economic and otherwise practical), dimension in our society. Traditionally, these are paired so that we do not even particularly notice them as distinct elements, but rather, use the word "family" to refer to an entity that is both relationally and legally (or economically) defined. Non-traditional families "unpair" the two dimensions, and thereby force a certain amount of self-conscious reflection on the connection between the two. They raise the possibility that "family" may be an entity which is relationally (emotionally) defined, whether or not legally (or economically) sanctioned within the culture. As the language in the Court of Appeals decision and Sullivan's commentary suggest, once unpaired, these two dimensions may exist in polarity, thereby presenting us with the necessity of choosing the most salient aspect of the definition. On the whole, people like my subjects play a pivotal role in this kind of transformation of meaning within the culture. As a group they emphasize relational aspects of family, and from that position, question (implicitly or explicitly) the lack of societal recognition they experience. In

considering the disjuncture between lesbian mothers' definitions of "family," and mainstream legal discourse on the subject, it is important to consider both this challenge which lesbian mothers present to the dominant culture (in this case exemplified by the legal system), and the challenge the dominant culture poses for lesbian mothers: namely, how to establish and maintain a family that is basically not culturally recognized or sanctioned. Both challenges described above centrally inform this study, and will be considered in more depth in chapters exploring family structure decisions, naming, and dealing with difference.

When considered as a group, the most salient feature of my subjects' definitions of "family" is the emphasis on relational, as opposed to other, criteria (as explored above). There are also alternative ways to examine this data. In addition to considering the overall thrust of the material, individual responses can be more closely scrutinized and looked at both in comparison to each other, and with respect to the processes and content internal to each. In other words, the domain of exploration, or the world under the microscope, may be the group as a whole, individuals in comparison to each other, or individuals themselves.

In the following sequence of quotes, I consider individuals in comparison to each other. This way of looking highlights the extent to which definitions of "family" diverge in relation to key experiences individuals are grappling with. In order to appreciate this point, some basic background is necessary. Of the four women quoted above, three (Sara, Jessie and Lucy), are raising children in the context of a couple relationship. Glenda is a single mother. Sara and Jessie have both legally adopted their children, while Lucy and Glenda have both given birth to children conceived through artificial insemination with unknown donors. Sara, Jessie and Lucy share the experience of coparenting with women who are not traditionally recognized as parents, and who have neither legal nor biological connection to the children. Therefore, they have invested a great deal of energy into considering the issues surrounding families that cannot be exclusively defined by legal and biological connections. Key relationships in their families (namely coparent/child and primary couple relationships), fall outside legal and biological parameters. Although this is not the case with Glenda, she has also focused energy on consideration of family relationships that fall outside of the legal and biological domains, because her response to her single parent status is to establish supportive relationships for herself and her son (e.g., "aunts" and "uncles"), within her community and

to consider them as family. In addition to this focus on family relationships which are not biological or legally sanctioned, the four women share the absence of a need to consider the parenting role of their children's biological fathers (since the children were either adopted, or conceived through A.I. with unknown donors). When these factors are considered together, these four women's emphases on relational aspects of family seem to be particularly good fits with their personal experiences. One might surmise that a woman grappling with significantly different key relationships would define "family" from a different angle. Ruth provides an example of this. She is a single lesbian coparenting with a gay man, Nick, the biological father of their son, Jeremy. Ruth does not live with Nick, and by her own report, is not particularly intimate with him beyond the parameters of the coparenting relationship. Her situation is the inverse of the women described above, insofar as she has not had to consider non-biological or non-legally sanctioned family relationships, and conversely, has had to consider the parenting role of her child's biological father despite the absence of a primary intimate relationship between him and herself. Ruth's definition of "family" is both more weighted in the biological dimension and more child-centered than the definitions quoted previously.

Ruth:

There are people like Nick and me. We are a family with Jeremy even though we hardly even see each other. We are jointly raising this kid, and because of our connection through Jeremy, we have a connection to each other which would be much different without that. It extends into other parts of each of our families because Jeremy has relatives on Nick's side and on my side, and he's involved in both sides even though I don't have much idea who Nick's relatives are. He has more connection to mine. So we have that kind of family experience where we're sharing lives with sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews and grandparents.

Since Ruth has been more focused on a set of biological relationships (her biological son and his biological father), in which the two adults do not share a primary bond apart from their connection as parents, she both considers biological connections as more central, and tends to view the family as essentially defined by the child. In Ruth's paradigm, Jeremy is the glue which joins her and Nick, both to each other and to each other's biological families of origin. In that sense, her definition of "family" is child-centered.

Some women who do not see children as the defining feature of family life, nevertheless experience the presence of children as adding dimension to the term, "family." Jessie articulates this position.

Jessie:

Martha and I were a family before Jackie came along, but it does feel different. There's something about having kids that adds another dimension, and it also brought us each back to our families in interesting ways. We see more of them than we ever have. Suddenly, when you become a parent, other parents feel more of a connection with you.

In Jessie's construction, the addition of a child to a family unit changes extended family relationships (creates, for example, relationships such as grandparent/grandchild, aunt/niece), and creates new relationships among adults in a family through their identifications with each other as parents. This perspective should also be considered in the context of Jessie's particular experience. Her family of origin relationships have intensified since the arrival of her child, and she therefore experiences her newly created family as on a continuum with her family of origin. This is not always the case for lesbian parents, insofar as some may experience more isolation or conflict in relation to their families of origin once a child is introduced into the family. When a lesbian parent's sense of herself as part of a family she has created, is disconfirmed rather than confirmed by her family of origin, she may have to choose between two senses of family. Thus, she is not likely to experience the family she has created as on a continuum with the one she has come from. In light of such circumstances,

Jessie's notion that "when you become a parent, other parents feel more of a connection with you," can be seen as specific to her experience.

Hannah provides another example of the ways that particular circumstances may be linked to one's sense of definitions. Since Hannah made the transition from a self-definition of single mother, to a coparenting relationship with her lover, Fran, she emphasizes a temporal dimension as she approaches the task of defining "family." She sees "family" as embodying an ongoing process of becoming, rather than being a static "yes/no" type of entity.

Hannah:

I was single when I had Mindy, and I was sure I was going to be a single mother. Then Fran came along when Mindy was six months old. It has defined our relationship from the beginning. We are a family, not a couple.

I believe children develop relationships with adults on their own. You can't say, "This is the relation I want you to have with her." You have what you build. Fran wants to be a parent, so that's what she's built. They're very close.

We're becoming a family. It's not a static thing; it's a process. Mindy and Fran have had to create a relationship.

Hannah's perspective provides a good example of the way that a particular experience may function as a distinctive light or filter with respect to one's view of "family."

Dimensions of the terms which are not readily envisioned in other circumstances are thus highlighted. For instance, Hannah's sense that people may need to deliberately construct their family relationships, has implications beyond the family structure she describes, although the observation is rooted in the specific relationship between Fran and Mindy.

When one considers the different emphases in Ruth's, Jessie's, and Hannah's descriptions of "family" next to the particular experiences they are grappling with, it becomes apparent that as we communicate to each other through such commonplace words as "family," we carry within us highly personal (idiosyncratic) resonances to the terms we use. Our diversity in this realm is often not readily apparent, but it may become so at any moment when discrepancies between two parties are revealed.

Previously, I delineated disjunctures between my subjects as a group and dominant social discourses (such as the legal context). The quotes above exemplify diversity as evident in comparisons between individuals. Cultural discrepancies may also exist within individuals. In all three instances, the multi-faceted quality of culture is partially manifest through diverging uses of language. Glenda provides a description of the way this may be

experienced on an individual level. In her case, the connotative aspects of "family" are particularly salient.

As she considers her childhood experiences, Glenda points out the ways that broad ideas about "family" may conflict with individual experiences of one's own family. Thus, she highlights one way that various cultural definitions may collide in individual experience. Glenda has an idea that family is supposed to provide nurturance and support, but she understands the idea as neither part of the legal definition of "family," nor reflective of her experience in her family of origin. Ultimately, she chooses to organize her thinking around the notion that family is whoever serves the function of nurturance and support.

Glenda:

There's a great deal of hypocrisy regarding "family" in this culture. Here's "family" put out for you, but many people's families don't do what a family should do. They don't provide nurturance or support. That's especially true for many gay and lesbian people whose parents don't get it about who they are.

My idea is that it really has to do with the way people interact with each other. "Family" has certain connotations, just like "mother" and "father" have connotations, about role and relationship. I'm trying to say, "Okay, let's do it backwards. Instead of trying to base role and relationship on the labels, why not define people based on the roles and relationships they actually have?"

I think I've always struggled with being labeled in certain ways and having certain

expectations placed on me according to gender, sexual orientation, vocation, etc. I've always felt like the fact that I might not fit a certain description doesn't mean my relationships or work are any less valid. They just don't fit the pigeon holes. So this is like saying, "Let's reframe that--forget the pigeon holes and look at what's actually there."

The family I have consists of the people who fulfill the functions that a family should fill.

Sam has a lesbian grandmother. She has two grown sons, one of whom probably isn't going to want his kids hanging around his lesbian mother. I refer to her as "Grandma Rose," and my mother as "Grandma." There are also two gay men I'm very close to, and they are "Uncle Ted and Uncle Gary." He hasn't even met my brother yet.

Glenda highlights the extent to which being an outsider in relation to dominant cultural discourse, may propel one toward reflection on the uses of language both within the culture and oneself. Her desire to "work backwards . . . forget the pigeon holes and look at what's actually there," reflects a need to speak her truth and to construct a life that encompasses it. In so doing, she self-consciously takes on the task of definition as her own. This is exemplified by her statement, "The family I have consists of people who fulfill the functions that a family should fill." Here, she heavily weights connotative dimensions of the term.

As Glenda's self-reflexive response suggests, defining oneself against a cultural norm may highlight the process of

definition itself. Her self-consciousness in choosing which definition of "family" to use suggests that the uncovering of cultural assumptions and values in both the world and oneself, is part of the alternative family formation process. This is an example of the way that commonplace givens become questions during social transformations. My question, "What is a family?", is another instance of this, insofar as I specifically chose to include the question in this research because I felt that for this group of women in particular, "family" is not a taken-for-granted term, but rather, a complicated and thought-provoking construct.

Once the process of definition is thus uncovered and made into the object of reflection, a fundamental shift in one's relation to language (and others in the culture) occurs. Michelle's response highlights this type of move. Though she delineates multiple entities, each of which she calls "family," her major response to my question is not to list characteristics, but rather, to call attention to the process of definition itself, particularly the issue of who is speaking. She thereby emphasizes self-determination as a critical feature of the activity of defining "family."

Michelle:

I have three distinct and sometimes overlapping families. There's my biological family, my nuclear family and my community family. I feel that they're all really important and

really different, although my nuclear family overlaps with the other two families in a way that is comfortable and easy.

A family is any group of people who define themselves that way. I could make a definition. I could say, "People who live together or share their lives together or celebrate their holidays together." I think those are all pieces of it, but the main issue is how people define themselves.

In all of the definitions quoted, an effort to talk about families in a way that includes the speaker's own experiences is central. Many of the definitions contain equally strong efforts to include a multitude of experiences beyond the speaker's.

When one asks people outside of mainstream culture to define such basic terms as "family," a particular kind of truth-telling emerges which is in the spirit of both Michelle's and Glenda's descriptions of the definition process. In this paradigm, labeling an entity with a term like "family" is a process that works from experiences up to the word, rather than from the word down to lived experiences. While sometimes people may be able to do this with relative ease, struggles are likely to arise when such definitions bump up against contradictory ones, particularly those that are more commonly held or institutionally enacted in the culture. As I hope this chapter demonstrates, this can occur in a multitude of contexts ranging from within a

single individual, to within and between large institutional structures. Each and every point where diverging definitions collide is a frontier on which the dramas of social conflict and transformation unfold.

Lesbians

Like "family," though the word "lesbian" may seem at first glance to denote a relatively simple or unitary phenomenon, on closer inspection it is apparent that people's experiences of lesbianism are multi-faceted and complex. "Lesbian" actually means many things. The quotes explored herein do not present an exhaustive or comprehensive description, but rather, articulate a few key issues.

I asked people to define "lesbian," and to describe their coming out processes, because I believe that women's experiences of lesbianism centrally inform their decisions to become mothers and also influence the particular ways those decisions are enacted. Lesbian mothers do not all begin in the same place. By examining the meanings lesbianism has for particular women, one can see suggestions of salient issues for many lesbian mothers. These can be viewed both in terms of issues which are commonly evident, and in terms of those that are more idiosyncratic.

Lesbianism may be perceived as a matter of choice, or more as an identity which is discovered or allowed expression. It may be experienced as the phenomenon of falling in love with a particular woman, or alternatively, as the embodiment of one's broader relation to the world and the self. It may be understood primarily as a matter of sexuality, emotional focus, or politics. While some women make clear distinctions among these possibilities, for many women these positions are not readily separable. This makes sense, given that as a political movement or ideology, feminism is integrally bound up with personal life (or the realm of relationships). Hence, a woman who sees her lesbianism as part of a political orientation may very well mean by that, a stance in which her emotional and sexual beings are fully integrated. While some women in this study name their lesbianism as directly stemming from exposure to feminism, others see feminism and the gay rights movement as secondary to their lifestyles--important only insofar as these movements have enabled them to express their true selves. Diversity between women is not the only evidence of multiple meanings. One individual's experience may embody several relations to lesbianism. This is similar to the point made previously with respect to "family," and demonstrated particularly in the example of Glenda.

The quotes which follow reflect the diversity described above. Sara and Jessie articulate the tension between "lesbian" as primarily a sexual category, and "lesbian" as a matter of emotional focus.

Sara:

A lesbian is a woman who sleeps with other women. That's it right there. It's different for each person--for some it's a choice, but for others it's just who they are.

Jessie:

I can't stand it when people see lesbianism only in terms of sexuality and sexual preference. To me, it's that women are my primary emotional connections. I relate to women in terms of my emotional needs and sexual ones. So lesbianism is about organizing one's life around women.

Michelle elaborates the notion of "organizing one's life around women."

Michelle:

When I first came out it was painful and exciting to be sexual in a way I had never experienced, and to be in a relationship where I was nurtured by a woman. My previous relationship with Dave felt very different. He was supremely rational and linear, and didn't get who I was emotionally, so was unable to provide support. Coming out was in that sense a huge opening for me.

For Michelle, gender is integrally bound up with particular emotional styles. Being sexual with someone to whom she feels known emotionally, has been an especially freeing experience, one which quintessentially defines her lesbianism.

Ruth, in identifying her lesbianism as primarily about emotional attachments to women, emphatically names it as "not a political choice."

Ruth:

Being a lesbian was not a political choice for me. It was not that I'd analyzed the situation and decided that I really didn't want to be with men for some reason. It was that I felt so much closer to women, and the emotional attachments were the important thing for me. It was a natural progression in my life. It's sexual too, but I've been attracted to men too. The difference is I have strong emotional bonds as well as sexual attractions to women, and that makes all the difference to me.

Lucy also disidentifies with a political stance, and names her lesbianism as an identity which she came to allow herself to express.

Lucy:

To me, being a lesbian means that I am attracted to women, want to be with women, to focus on women. It didn't come out of a political or feminist base. Coming out was just about acknowledging that my primary focus was women, and that I could allow myself to have that focus,

whereas the whole world was telling me that as a woman my primary focus should be men. It was an enormous relief.

Although Ruth and Lucy see the issues of emotional focus and identity in contrast to the issue of politics, this is not a necessary configuration. Unlike Ruth and Lucy, Nina and Diane explicitly name their lesbianism as an outgrowth of involvement in the women's movement. For each of them, lesbianism is also a matter of emotional focus, and for Diane it is additionally a question of identity.

Nina:

I became a lesbian because of a tremendous energy and interest in the women's movement during the seventies. The possibility presented itself that, "Oh, there are lesbians, and that's one way people are having relationships," and I thought it was an interesting possibility. Because of my general emotional attraction to women, it didn't feel like that difficult a leap to make into the sexual arena.

Nina's description is a good example of the multiple stances an individual can have toward her own lesbianism. She describes a process of choosing, and then later rechoosing to live as a lesbian.

Nina:

Between my first long-term relationship and my second long-term relationship, I really rethought being a lesbian. In some ways I feel like I came out again, but in a very different way

the second time around. I really gave myself the opportunity to make a different decision if I wanted to. I gave myself permission to choose to be with men after that first experience with a woman, and to really make a choice in a way that I don't think I fully had the first time around. So I brought something different to my second relationship--I was much more fully there. Beth had never been with a woman before, and here I was reconsidering the question of being with men. So we were each in a place of opening ourselves up. There's something very exciting about the process of deciding that one doesn't have to be limited in certain ways, no matter what the issue is. That kind of energy facilitated our coming together. I didn't feel ambivalent about Beth, or that the issue was unresolved. I opened myself up to a process and in fact, made a decision to be with women.

Nina's lesbianism reflects a general attitude towards life, namely the idea that "one doesn't have to be limited, no matter what the issue is." Here, lesbianism is seen as a process of "opening up," both as an individual and within the couple relationship. In Nina's description, one can see lesbianism defined both as a political position and as a matter of personal expression. These are not seen as being in opposition to each other (as Lucy and Ruth construct them), but rather, as part and parcel of each other.

Diane similarly connects her lesbianism to feminism. She describes it as reflecting a particular stance about who she wants to be in the world--especially her desire for intellectual fulfillment and her rejection of stereotypical gender roles.

Diane:

It was really exciting. It was risky in some kind of exciting way, but it was also... The women who were the most interesting in this college were dykes: the most interesting students, the most interesting faculty members, the most interesting people in the administration.

I grew up in a social setting where if you were a girl the choices were to either be beautiful or to be smart. And somehow this was an extension of that. I mean, you could either be beautiful and kind of be possessed by men, or you could be smart and not have men around much. So I had already made the choice that I didn't want to just be beautiful, and so I was going to be smart; and so this all just connected up with that. That's the bottom line of what it all meant.

I went through a really radical separatist phase about that time, but I don't think in my heart I was so much of a radical separatist as I was just really excited to be part of all this stuff. It was all just extremely new. There was always a sense of excitement and newness and really being a part of history.

It's hard to say what being a lesbian means to me now because it's so much the baseline of who I am. It just is who I am.

In contrast to Nina and Diane, Lee experienced her lesbianism initially as the phenomenon of falling in love with a particular woman, not as a relation to a community or political movement.

Lee:

Well, we met the day we both applied for a summer job at an air force base, to be secretaries. I was doing it very sort of reserved and straight and all of that, and Pam came in more in a flamboyant style, and was outraged that they were making us do a typing test. You know, it was

just one of those things that you read about. I really noticed her and thought she was really something else, and she later said she had similar reactions to me. At the time, we were both involved with men that we were pretty serious about--very serious about. Then I started work, and about a month later she came and started work and we, you know, just started doing things together. We went out for lunch and we did a lot of plays and things that you can do in nice summer weather. Then at some point we made love, which was a total shock to both of us. My family was just an incredibly conservative, traditional Midwest family, and Pam's was very, not Midwest in origin, but very conservative. So there was nothing in our background or experience that would prepare us.

Lee's description highlights the process of moving from an isolated, decontextualized experience (one with no name), to joining a community and context through applying a name ("lesbian"). In a sense, this is the inverse of Nina's and Diane's descriptions, which highlight progression from a sense of possibilities to actual relationships.

Lee:

I mean, I didn't even know what the word "lesbian" was, and neither one of us, of course, thought we were lesbians at that time. We didn't know what we were, mind you, and we just thought it was this very rare event that had never happened to women before, and we had this unique relationship--it's crazy now, but... It was only about two years after that, two or three years, that we moved; and on the same day, each went out with a different friend, and who at lunch said, "How long have you and Pam been involved in a lesbian relationship?", or some phrase like that. We went home that night and said to each other, "You won't believe what happened," and so then, you know, the classic "click." We thought, "Oh, that's what we are."

Lesbians frequently engage in ongoing processes of sorting through internally held positive and negative images of lesbianism. Lily and Lee provide descriptions of these processes. In their struggles, one can see strands in common with the legal and social contexts described previously. Lesbians may be constructed as: not part of the world, lonely, not part of families, not legitimate. Cultural notions are taken up by individuals and experienced on deeply personal levels. The polarities of gay pride and gay shame yield tensions which develop and evolve over the course of individual lives.

Lee describes the double-edged nature of the consequences of naming herself as a lesbian.

Lee:

What changed for us at the point when we began to define our relationship as "lesbian," is to have the advantages of the larger community--we would know that we'd be going out with another lesbian couple. It doesn't feel quite as alone; although that's the point at which you confront the reality that you are living out what is viewed as a totally deviant, immoral, horrible lifestyle.

I think the primary feelings for us were not about the rest of the world, but mostly about our families of origin, who were really terrible on that stuff; and the fear that we all have in these kind of situations--the feeling that the choice is going to be staying a lesbian and giving up that family, or not being a lesbian, which of course is unthinkable. And the reality is, what ends up happening is you do lose them.

Lily highlights the internally held negative images of lesbianism.

Lily:

When I first started thinking about myself as lesbian, I kept thinking I couldn't be gay because: "Gay people are not like us. Gay people are not horrible people, but they're lonely people. You know, lesbians are unattractive women who can't get a man." So my attitude was, "I'm not one of them." And then when I met lesbians who didn't fit that image, I still worried a lot that people wouldn't like me if they knew I was a lesbian. There's still some of that. If there weren't, I'd be coming out all the time, every chance I had. I don't come out every chance I have. Part of that is caution about the world, but part of it is a feeling that you have to make an excuse for it, that it's not quite normal.

I have not encountered any lesbians who do not in some sense hold their lesbianism in tension with the homophobia of society. This can take several forms. For some women it means that lesbianism is primarily experienced as a minority identity, as Glenda suggests.

Glenda:

Lesbianism is an identity issue. Some people hold it as just, "I happen to love women," just like, "I prefer one kind of sexual activity over another." For some people, that may in fact be how they deal with it--as one small part of their lives, just as for some people their religion is just a small part of their lives. But my sense is that since there are value judgments in society, it's not just something like, "You have blue eyes or you have brown eyes." If you're gay, or if you're of a different racial background, it's a big deal in this society; so to me, the lesbian

identity is more importantly an identity involving being part of a minority.

In some cases, lesbianism may be fundamentally defined by the struggle to have the courage of one's convictions--to fight for an authentic life in the face of severe opposition. Glenda, Diane and Lily speak to this point.

Glenda:

I know what social conventions are. I also know if I were trying to fulfill them I'd be a very unhappy person, because it's not who I am. For me, lesbianism is not a choice. I could choose not to act on it, but I don't feel like it's really a choice for me. I think for some women it is.

Diane:

I don't think my parents meant this, but it was a big deal in my family that no matter if everybody else in the world is doing something, if you don't think it's right to do, then you shouldn't do it. This is the logical outcome, but my mother has said to me, "Well, I didn't mean this." My parents meant to make us good citizens. They didn't mean to make us iconoclasts. They really didn't have any idea when they were saying, "If all the other kids in the class talk when the teacher leaves the room, if it's not the right thing to do, then you shouldn't do it," that when we got to be adults we'd still believe that and live our lives according to it.

Lily:

There's a lot of strength in being gay. There's a strong community and a lot to be proud of. When I think of lesbians in general and the lesbian community, I think of independence. I

think of people who are not bowing or playing into society's conception of what a woman should be, and who are often very accomplished. I think there's a lot of courage and creativity that doesn't come as a result of being gay or lesbian, but is related in this way: My theory is that many people have the potential to be either gay or straight, but to most people it's abhorrent because they can't imagine doing anything the rest of society wouldn't approve of. So I think people who do manage to be gay are often people who have very strong convictions or strong personalities.

Lesbian Mothers

As one considers the different experiences of lesbianism described above, several questions regarding the transition to lesbian motherhood come into focus. How do an awareness of the world's homophobia, and internally held negative images of lesbianism affect the parenting decision? What does the choice to become a mother mean in the context of a life centrally defined by a fierce struggle for self-determination? How might two women who are committed to feminism choose to arrange parenting? The choices lesbians make when forming families may vary, partially as a function of how each holds her lesbianism.

While for some women the identities of lesbian and mother are seen (at least initially) as contradictory, for others they are more easily integrated. The following section explores the different ways that my subjects became lesbian mothers.

Lee plainly states her internal sense of the contradiction between lesbian and mother identities.

Lee:

I had my moments where I thought no matter how much I wanted kids, I never would be able to have them, either because Pam felt so strongly or because I felt like, "Well, that's one of the prices you pay for being a lesbian," and "You can't have it all," and, you know--this is important--"You've got a wonderful relationship and you'll just have to accept that; and you'll have dogs your whole life and you'll love them, you know."

For many women, their convictions about this point entail considerable feelings of grief and loss. Michelle describes both her sense of grief and the moment of excitement when her ideas shifted.

Michelle:

When I first came out in 1975, being lesbian seemed like it meant not having kids. I didn't know any lesbians who did. Shortly after that I came to know some lesbians who'd had kids in heterosexual relationships.

At some point, I remember looking at my lover and feeling I wanted to have a kid with this person, and knowing we couldn't do that--couldn't share that together. I felt profound loss about that.

Shortly after that, in 1979, a lesbian I knew inseminated. That blew things wide open for me. It became, "I can choose these relationships which are much more satisfying, and I can have a kid--I don't have to give anything up."

Whereas Michelle's shift came as a direct result of her awareness that some lesbians were in fact choosing to have children, Diane's thinking shifted more as a result of a change in her internal sense of possibilities. In other words, she envisioned herself as a lesbian mother in relative isolation and without a sense of precedent.

Diane:

I always expected to have kids when I was growing up. When I got to about high school it started to get clearer and clearer to me that I didn't want to get married. Towards the end of high school I started telling people that I was going to be somebody's mistress. I was going to go live in Europe and I wanted to be somebody's mistress. They could pay for my apartment, buy all my clothes and see me on Tuesday afternoons, and that was it. In that fantasy it didn't fit to have kids. I didn't stop wanting them, but I think I stopped feeling that they were going to fit into my life. In college I came out; and then I didn't know any lesbians who had children. The older women I knew who were lesbian had never married, or if they had they'd never had kids. It was the middle-seventies. I just thought I'd made this choice to be a lesbian, and that precluded the other choice to have kids. It wasn't until the late-seventies that it started to occur to me that I could actually have a kid and still be a lesbian. It seemed like a huge revelation and a really remote possibility. But the more I thought about it over the years, the more I really wanted to do that.

It was just a given. It was just, "That's how life is. If you're a lesbian you don't have kids." Just like, you know, I had brown hair. Being a lesbian was something I was. It was always really clear to me that I was a lesbian, and the choice was whether I was gonna act like who I was or act like somebody else. I remember when I was first with Kim--she'd been with someone before me who had a kid. She'd kept in touch with her, and we went to visit them one time; and I

remember talking on the way back from the visit about how it would be kind of neat to be with someone who had a child, because then you could have a kid. And she said, "Well, you could just have one." It's like it never occurred to me that I could just have one. It was a real revelation, like "Oh yeah, I could." Then I went through a long period where I knew that was something I wanted to do someday and I'd figure out how to do it later. When I moved here at the end of 1980, I knew of two people who had just done it. Now that I know a lot more people in the community, I think that there might have actually been four. But I mean, people just weren't. It was just still a very new thing to do. Even now, when you leave the city it's still a very new thing to do.

Karen describes the way in which her sense of possibilities and her lover's sense of closure around the issue of children played out in their couple relationship. She provides a good example of the ways in which conversation between women is the source of invention. Her description also contains a good example of the considerable thought and effort lesbians put into their decisions to become parents.

Karen:

Terry and I have been together for seven-and-a-half years. It was my first relationship with a woman. We were 29 and 33 when we got together. I had always been involved with men, and always figured that at some point I would marry a man and have children, but I always wanted children. When it started occurring to me that I might not find the man of my dreams, I still always figured I would have a child by myself--I just wanted to settle my career first. So when I got involved with Terry it was great. I never really wanted to do all the work of bringing up a child by myself. I never really wanted to be alone with that. So

it was terrific. What better thing to do than make a family of our own? I think she had pretty much done what a lot of gay people and lesbians do when they start to accept their identity as gay--that also means for them mourning the loss of the idea of children. I think she'd pretty much done that. She pretty much figured she wasn't ever gonna have kids because she wasn't gonna have a conventional marriage. My wanting to reopened that for her and she started to feel like, "Great, let's have a family." We started talking about this a few months after we got together, and decided it was something that we really wanted to put a lot of time into planning and thinking about: time to be together as a couple, to learn how to negotiate things, time to feel like we really had something together and the children's arrival wouldn't feel like a deprivation to us as a couple--there's no way for that to be entirely true. Also time to research it. At the time we were doing this there was not much to research. We really were pioneering--there was almost nothing. So what we did mostly was spend a lot of time talking about what our conceptions were of children--what our ideas were of why we wanted kids, how they would fit into our lives. I think we really put several years of work on what these children were going to mean to us. I'm really grateful that we did, because I think we learned a lot about each other in the process, and went into this knowing that we were both equally committed to it, and for reasons we both felt good about. We really talked about what we were gonna do about the coming out process, what we were gonna do about our families; how did we feel about doing something so unconventional, how did we feel about how we were gonna help the kids with that?

Some women established a sense of themselves as lesbians prior to seriously considering the issue of whether or not they wished to be mothers. Hence, they did not experience a sense of conflict or loss around the issue. However, over the course of time, either because of a

partner's desires or because of internal stirrings, they began, as lesbians, to explore the identity of parent.

Jane and Mary provide examples of women who, having integrated a sense of themselves as lesbian, began to think about parenthood at a time in their lives when it seemed like an option rather than a closed-off road.

In Mary's case, her sense of possibility was primary.

Mary:

I didn't think seriously about having kids until three or four years after Deidre and I got together. I was twenty-nine when we first got involved, and my main occupation in life was trying to figure out how to have a relationship. I knew lesbians who'd had kids from marriages, and that seemed fine. By the time I thought about it, I knew women both lesbian and straight who were starting to have children. A lot of what made me think about it was my relationship with my nephew and watching my sister and brother-in-law with him. Ultimately I came to terms with the fact that my life would feel empty without a kid.

Jane describes her sense of the hardship involved. In her case it was precisely that sense of difficulty that engendered a careful decision-making process.

Jane:

I've talked to some women who say one of the hard issues regarding coming out was a sense that it meant they weren't going to be a parent. It wasn't like that for me--it was just a joyous

coming together. I think it's because I was in my early-twenties, and having children wasn't really on my mind. When it became an issue for me it was already in some sense an option as Debra and I discussed it. It was clear to me that if we didn't do it, it would be because we just felt we couldn't. It was a harder option, certainly a more difficult option--it was there for us if we wanted it, but it was something that was going to take some pain, some struggle. So if we didn't do it, it would be out of choice, but a piece of that choice would be that it was a lot more difficult--that it wasn't going to be just the joyous, supported decision it might be if we were a heterosexual couple.

In part because we were lesbians, we went through a very in-depth process of exploring whether this was something we wanted to do, and how we would do it and why we were doing it. So by the time we made the decision I felt clear and there was no doubt in my mind.

Amy is an example of a woman whose decision to become a parent was rooted in her relationship. Her transformation regarding her sense of herself as a parent occurred in many respects after her daughter, Anna, arrived. For Amy, the primary issues around the decision had less to do with her being a lesbian and more to do with her feelings about having children in her life.

Amy:

Sara and I had been in a relationship for about three years, and she was pursuing having a child, and I felt like I had to--we had to make a decision about whether we were going to stay together in order for me to feel okay about it.

I wasn't sure that I wanted to be a parent. When I was a teenager, I'd stood at the bottom of

the stairs and yelled at my mother that I hated her and would never have kids.

So we went through a process of figuring out if we were going to stay together, and that slowed down Sara's adoption process. We decided to do it together. I knew that Sara had to become a parent, and if I wanted to stay with her so would I. I didn't see that there was a way that we could stay together and she could do it without me. I think the main thing that had to be ironed out actually was our commitment to each other.

So after committing to each other, Anna arrived and I still wasn't sure I wanted a kid. Right up until the last minute, I was saying that there was a possibility that the kid would arrive and I just wouldn't be able to live with a kid. That was definitely in the back of my mind. But within about a week there was just no question about my being committed to seeing her grow up, and loving her and loving the process of being parents.

I think there's something about an infant that's so vulnerable and so dependent that I just felt very opened up in terms of being able to love her and be available as a reliable, constant person for her.

I hadn't been sure that I'd be able to feel that way. I'd been scared of what was going to happen when a kid arrived--afraid of what I was going to lose and miss. When I remember feeling that way now, I can't remember what it was that I was afraid of giving up, because so much more came.

Tricia, Nina, Lily and Glenda are all examples of women who had a strong sense of themselves as potential mothers, which they did not hold in conflict with their lesbian identities. This seems related both to the milieus in which they live and to their personal approaches (for example, Glenda's repudiation of social conventions).

Tricia:

I had always wanted to have a child in my life. I came out when I was twenty. I put it on a back burner because I didn't know if it would be possible--if I'd meet another woman who would want it also. . . .

Nina:

I always knew that somehow children were going to be in my life--that I was going to be a mother. And being a lesbian never felt like I was making a choice not to be a mother--which probably had a lot to do with when I was a lesbian, which was the seventies when there was a sense of opportunity, all sorts of opportunities for women.

Lily:

I always expected to be a mother. In my early childhood training I always expected that I would be a mother. I suppose when I was younger I expected to have a traditional family because that's the only model available to you, but I always knew I wanted to have children.

When I was a teenager, I thought to myself that as long as I was going to go through menstruation I was going to have a child, because that's the only reason to go through that every month. The other thought was that you only live once and you should do what you want to do. I wanted to experience everything, and certainly having a child, and even childbirth itself, was part of the experience of living. I think I would have been happy to adopt, but I would have missed the experience of being pregnant and going through childbirth. I wanted to try everything.

Then, when I came out at age twenty-seven, it never occurred to me that just because I was a lesbian I wasn't going to have a child and a family. I always knew I was going to have one. The idea of being a parent was always something that appealed to me; but the idea of being married never quite fit.

Glenda:

I have rarely felt constrained by social convention. My feeling was that there was no reason why I shouldn't have kids. Being a lesbian just makes it physically and logistically harder to do.

It was clear to me that what kids need is someone who takes good care of them, and who loves them and is attentive to their needs and respectful of them. It doesn't so much matter what kind of configuration or package that comes in.

As these quotes suggest, at the point when one chooses to become a lesbian mother, different issues are salient for different people. In some cases the process entails a need to work through internalized homophobia at a new level. For some women, the idea that one can be a parent involves renewed hope where there had been grief. For other women, the choice to parent is a natural extension of their stance in the world, including their lesbianism. As should become more evident in the chapters that follow, the issues which are present in the early stages of the family formation process may reappear in new forms throughout various stages of the family's development, or alternatively, may give way to new concerns.

Chapter 9

Family Structure

[F]or a domain of action, a behavior, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it. These elements result from social, economic, or political processes. But here their only role is that of instigation. They can exist and perform their action for a very long time before there is effective problemization by thought. And when thought intervenes, it doesn't assume a unique form that is the direct result or the necessary expression of these difficulties; it is an original or specific response--often taking many forms, sometimes even contradictory in its different aspects. . . . To one single set of difficulties several responses can be made. And most of the time different responses actually are proposed. . . . This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response . . . constitutes the point of problemization and the specific work of thought.

Michel Foucault(1)

While the preceding chapter dealt with the meanings certain words ("lesbian" and "family") have for my subjects, this chapter deals with women's concrete decisions regarding their family structures. In that sense, it deals with meanings as expressed through actual entities in the world (as opposed to purely linguistic constructions). This chapter explores the thinking and emotions underlying specific family structure choices, as well as the

ramifications of those choices (e.g., women's thoughts and feelings about how their families currently function).

To paraphrase Foucault, when lesbians choose to become parents, the concept of family "loses its familiarity," and "a number of difficulties thus emerge." The "given" of family is transposed into a "question" which is responded to in a variety of ways. Foucault's idea that once a domain of action (in this case, family formation), enters the field of thought, there are "original or specific response(s), often taking many forms, sometimes even contradictory in [their] different aspects," is critical to my analysis of women's family structure decisions. There are many choice points for women forming "alternative families," and each point is laden with multiple meanings and concerns. For an individual woman, the process is enormously complex in that some concerns will most likely have to supersede others in practical terms. Furthermore, women's thinking about ideal choices is tempered by the actual options available to them (and this in turn is mediated through their perceptions of those options). Couples have to grapple, in addition, with differences between each couple member's concerns. In short, a great deal of thought underlies lesbians' family structure choices. The exploration of that thought provides an opportunity to examine cultural notions about families as they are enacted in actual lives.

I have ordered women's quotes so that by and large the issues surrounding adoption versus biological conception, and known versus unknown donors, are initially fleshed out. Subsequent sections deal respectively with men in children's lives, gender of children, couple relationships and coparenting, and sibships. Though this is generally how the data is organized herein, women's ideas and feelings regarding these issues are not always so readily separable. Hence, some overlap may appear.

I have grouped the quotes in sequences which illustrate contrasts and convergences with respect to particular notions that I wish to highlight. However, in the interests of maintaining some of the complexity and richness of my subjects' voices, I have not always limited their quotes to the particular point I am making at any given moment. Therefore, my commentary on certain segments may narrowly focus on particular issues and neglect other points that individual women are articulating. I encourage the reader to attend to the quotes both within the frame of my commentary and on their own terms.

First Steps

Sara, Angie and Ruth exemplify diverse modes of perceiving and reflecting on the issues surrounding adoption

versus biological conception and known versus unknown donors. Each of their stories contains key aspects of the considerations these decisions entail. I look first at the issues highlighted by these three women, and subsequently elaborate on salient points through the addition of other women's voices.

When considered together, Sara, Angie and Ruth illustrate the fact that women take up information about societal structures in different ways, and respond "specifically and uniquely." This is particularly evident with respect to women's perceptions of the legal and social parameters of adoption and insemination.

Sara names adoption as her first choice, and links this both to a sense that she could love any child, and to concerns about "the world's" negative view of alternative insemination. While she is painfully aware of the legal vulnerability adoption entails, she is not deterred by it.

Sara:

I always wanted to adopt, ever since I was little. I went to therapy when I was in college, and he asked me about my childhood; and I remember telling him my favorite show was Oliver Twist. I tend to think artistic themes reflect people's lives. So I always thought I'd adopt, but I guess growing up I thought I'd have my own kids and adopt also. I'm a teacher, and I thought if I had an A.I. sort of baby, which I wasn't that interested in doing--but if I did do it, it would

make it harder to get jobs. I mean, the world tends to think that adopting is, like, this beneficent thing. As the mother of a friend of mine says, "It's such a mitzvah." The world tends to think of it more like that, whereas they think of these A.I. babies as kind of nasty. I guess I'm pretty conscious of what the world thinks about all these different ways of making families.

I've taught in one room schoolhouses in rural areas, and a lot of the kids live with their grandmothers or aunts. It made me realize that, first of all, I could love any kid. A lot of people are worried when they adopt, about things like, "What if the kid isn't smart?", or something like that; but it's not an issue for me. The other thing was that I had no hesitation that the child would feel uncomfortable. Basically, I think what kids really need is people who they know will always be there until they're ninety, or fifty. The worst thing is not having anybody who's consistent. So I thought we could overcome a lot of the problems that might arise.

I guess I never thought the adoption system would end up being so prejudiced towards lesbians. I never thought you could come out, but I never really thought they'd go after gay people. I was adopting during the whole foster care issue. I never thought that would happen. I was so stuck on the idea that people only see what they want to see. I couldn't imagine people going after lesbian parents, because I thought they don't even see them. But obviously I was wrong.

You find an agency that you think will be sympathetic, and if the agency is smart they don't ask, so they don't have it on their records. They know--there are certain social workers who get all the lesbian parents. The agency I went to has all the supposedly undesirable children. So there's this attitude which most social workers have, that it's more important for the children to get a home. They don't worry about it so much. They're trying to pull out child abusers and people who are going to crack under the strain. I think they figure if you make it through the waiting for the kids and the whole process, that you're going to be able to survive having them.

With the second child I worried about the lesbian issue. She's not adopted yet, so you hold

your breath. You have to go to court. There's been one case in this state where the judge said, "Well, we hear there's homosexuality in the household," and they continued the case. They had somebody eat dinner with them every night for a month or so. So that's why I'm so worried. We actually know these people. Now they can't get any other agency to deal with them. The court said they're fit parents but they can't get a sibling.

First you have to get through the adoption and then you have to get them naturalized. My mother is sure that immigration is going to screw it up. Neither of these guys is a citizen yet.

I was so paranoid at Anna's finalization that I went by myself. Everybody else brings all this family and cameras. I felt, "If we get through this it's going to be great, so we'll go by ourselves in our pink dresses." The woman working there said, "Don't you want your picture taken?", and I said, "No thanks!"

Three important aspects of the biological conception versus adoption decision are highlighted in Sara's description. First, the weight women place on biological connection between parent and child varies. Sara states clearly that she knew she could love any child. For her, parenting is not essentially defined by a biological relationship. Women's senses about the relative importance of biological connection may be tied into essential personal constructs about what parenting is, and what they value in the activity. While Sara represents one end of the spectrum, Ruth articulates the other.

Ruth:

I didn't think seriously about adoption. I had no income, and didn't think I would be allowed to adopt. I also wanted the physical experience of pregnancy. I thought I would be happier with a child I gave birth to.

Ruth names adoption as something she barely attended to. Here, a leaning toward the view that parenting is in some sense defined by biological connection, is evident. For example, her statement, "I would be happier with a child I gave birth to," contrasts with Sara's sense that she "could love any kid."

Sara also raises the issue of "the world's" and her own discomfort with alternative insemination by unknown donors. This issue is multi-faceted, and may include general concerns about children not knowing their genetic roots, as well as specific discomfort with lesbians utilizing alternative insemination. An example of the latter would be considering alternative insemination for an infertile heterosexual couple as acceptable, while seeing insemination for a lesbian as problematic. It is sometimes difficult to tease these concerns apart and to identify the aspect that is homophobic.

Finally, Sara graphically describes the legal and emotional vulnerability adoption entails. In her case, her

awareness of the legal/social parameters of lesbian adoption raises fears but does not act as a deterrent. She views the situation as territory which is to be carefully navigated.

On the other hand, Angie, taking up the same information as Sara regarding the adoption process, is both too indignant and too frightened about the institutional homophobia inherent in the process to seriously consider it as an option. In fact, she links her consideration of this issue to her ultimate decision to use an unknown donor, the option she sees as entailing the least vulnerability and the most integrity for her family unit.

Angie:

We were very stuck on the method of conception--known versus unknown donor. One of the things that happened around the time we were thinking about it was the foster care issue in Massachusetts. We also knew women who had adopted young children through foreign adoption, and I talked to a few of them and listened to their descriptions of the home study process. I felt very uncomfortable with the idea that somebody was judging you, and that you in a sense had to give them this little drama that, "I'm the one who's adopting and this woman is my roommate." Not only did we feel angry about the injustice of it, but we also felt frustrated by the fact that as a couple we had so much more to offer in terms of the structure of our lives than this fallacy would indicate. We've talked again about adoption in terms of a second child, and some of that has eased because we're more experienced and feel more secure as parents.

When "foster care" happened, we were very indignant about the idea that we could be judged in that way. If we had gone along with the little

drama of who we were supposed to be, it wouldn't have barred us from adopting, so it was really our decision that we wanted as few external people out there, judging us or making decisions about our lives, as possible. We didn't want that interference. That spilled over into the issue of the donor. We know two women who had a child through a known donor, and the child ends up having nine-thousand grandparents. In their case it's worked out very well with everyone involved, but when we thought about it at the time it felt weird to think of so many people making decisions about this child's life. We really needed to feel in control.

The issue was, we were the parents and we wanted to make the decisions as the child grew up about other adults in the child's life. It's not that we wanted to shelter the child away from other people, but we certainly didn't want an obligation ready-set. So, given that we wanted some kind of integrity as a family unit, we decided to go with an unknown donor.

In addition to her resistance to the scrutinization and "fallacy" which the adoption process entails for lesbians, Angie highlights another critical dimension of this stage of family formation. At the point when women are first trying to figure out how a child will come to be part of their family, they need to consider how the parenting unit will be defined--for example, is there a parental unit (a single woman or lesbian couple), which maintains its integrity, or are there other parents or authoritative figures who will enter the family unit along with the child? In Angie's case, her clarity about wanting the couple to maintain autonomy and integrity as a parental unit fits with the choice to use an unknown donor. While adoption does not

necessarily involve other active parent figures, it does, as Angie points out, explicitly introduce at the outset, authorities external to the family unit. Many factors play a role in perspectives on this issue. These include the couple relationship as well as individual women's senses of vulnerability and security in the world.

For some women, the issues of legal vulnerability and integrity of the parental unit are important but overridden by other concerns. Ruth illustrates this through her description of the transformation in her thinking about known versus unknown donors.

Interestingly, Ruth begins in a place that is similar to Angie's position regarding legal vulnerability, but she describes an internal process of reconsideration. She comes to view alternative insemination with an unknown donor as "unfair to the child," insofar as s/he would be unable to know his or her genetic roots. Ruth sees the unknown donor phenomenon as analogous to adoption in that respect.

Ruth:

At first I wanted an anonymous donor. My sister did the initial research for me and arranged for three men to be sperm donors. I didn't want to be able to figure out who the father was, so she acted as a go-between. I did get pregnant, but I had an early miscarriage. After that I re-examined my thoughts about the anonymity issue, and decided that I wanted to know

who the donor was and I wanted my child to know who their father was.

I had been in a dilemma about it all along. I was mostly worried about legal issues and custody issues. I wanted to have control over decision-making for the child and where I lived, and I didn't want anybody claiming rights to this kid. That was my big issue. But the other side of the coin was from thinking about adoption and how adopted kids want to know who their parents are. It seems that's such an important issue for so many adopted people. I figured it would be like that for a kid who was inseminated and didn't know who their father was, and I just thought that wasn't fair to the child. So that was what I eventually went with. I decided that was more important, and the legal stuff could be worked out somehow. I just thought about it all over again and decided it was a good thing I had this miscarriage because it gave me a chance to re-evaluate, and then I was more sure of what I wanted to do.

Ruth's idea that children need to know their genetic roots (their biological parents), ultimately overrides other concerns. It is important to note here that Ruth had the option available to her to coparent with a known father. In addition, her single parent status means she does not have to deal with the complexity of a known biological father in the context of a family including a non-biological co-mother. The issues of available options, implications of known and unknown donors for single versus coupled lesbians, and the relative weight placed on children knowing their genetic roots, will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections.

Sara, Angie and Ruth represent several core issues in family structure decisions. Their stories contain diverging views of: the relative importance of biological connection between mother and child, lesbian parents' vulnerability in relation to society, the importance of children's knowledge of their genetic roots (with respect to known versus unknown donors), the impact of family structure decisions on the primary couple relationship, and each woman's sense of available options.

As one can see, these issues converge in any given decision, with different women giving priority to different concerns. The complexity of the decision-making process for couples may be intensified by the necessity of integrating or negotiating around diverging priorities. In the following sections, the issues delineated above will be further explored.

Conception Versus Adoption:
The Meaning of Biological
Connection Between Mother and Child

When considering the relative weight placed on biological versus social connections between mothers and children, one can see some core notions about the meaning and value of parenting. Jessie and Lucy reflect opposite preferences (like Sara and Ruth, previously quoted). In

explaining their preferences, both of them make explicit statements about what parenting means to them.

Jessie:

Adoption was my first choice. Biological birth and pregnancy were never something I yearned for. I didn't have aversive feelings, but it wasn't critically important to me. For me, being a parent is raising a child and being a part of his or her life, and having the child be a part of my life.

Lucy:

It was always clear we wanted a child biologically. We thought about adoption as the process went on, because of the length of time it took to get pregnant, but it wasn't a paramount thought. Part of it was that I wanted the experience of being pregnant. I approached it that the way you get babies is you have them. You get pregnant and you have them. You adopt them if you can't have them. That may be a prejudice I carry.

While some women define their parenting primarily in relational terms, others consider biological connection to be an essential aspect of their mothering. Women who fall into the latter category cite a desire for the experience of pregnancy, and concerns about "bonding" with their children, as primary factors in their decisions to biologically conceive rather than adopt. Women's notions about the significance of their biological bonds to their children are often inextricably bound up with their experiences of their

families of origin. Michelle and Pauline exemplify distinct versions of this phenomenon.

Michelle:

I was clear that I wanted to have a child biologically. It had something to do with my father dying--I wanted to reproduce as a result of that. I also see it as a healing experience, an opportunity to reparent--to be healed through the experience of parenting a child. For me, that is related to biological connection. It felt really critical that I experience pregnancy.

Here, Michelle expresses her urge for biological connection with a child as being linked to her family of origin. The experiences of pregnancy and raising her biological child are seen as providing both continuity (as a response to her father's death), and healing (a chance to parent differently than she was parented). Some women with similar desires might not see them as necessitating biological conception, but in Michelle's experience the fulfillment of these parenting wishes is specifically linked to biological connection to her child.

Pauline, speaking from her experience as an adopted daughter, describes her wish for biological connection to a child as stemming from her more general need to be close to someone that she is biologically related to. She also has concerns about her ability to bond with an adopted child.

Here it seems that adoption is a key experience in Pauline's life, around which her feelings of "rootlessness" cluster. This leads her to a very strong sense that biological connection is a necessary underpinning to the kind of parent/child relationship she wishes to create.

Pauline:

I wanted to be pregnant. If I had children, I wanted to carry one. Part of it was that I wanted someone to be connected to me. I wanted to have my family.

Bonding means connecting with your child, forming a relationship. I wanted someone who was connected with me physically. Biologically it's just me, and I wanted somebody else. It's hard feeling it's just you. You don't look like someone except by coincidence, and everything you do is just coincidence. You're not connected to anyone. It's something you take for granted when you're not adopted.

I considered adoption, but I realized I had to have a child because I had such a hard time really bonding. I didn't know if I could do it with a child.

For me, bonding with a child would be hard without a biological connection. It's hard to describe. I've always been rootless in general, like a floating entity. I tend to be able to let people come and go. So I was afraid the connection just wouldn't happen.

While Michelle and Pauline speak about the primacy of their family of origin experiences, some women's thinking about the question of biological connection versus adoption can be seen as reflecting their present rather than their

past. These women speak about their beliefs as stemming from the particular relationships they have to their children. For instance, Hannah points out that her experience of parenting is limited to her relationship with her biological child, and therefore she speaks from that place. On the other hand, Mary describes an internal change which occurred as a direct result of her relationship to her adopted child.

Hannah:

I'm glad I have the biological connection. If I were an adoptive parent, I'm sure I'd feel like a parent, but this is my experience. It's all I know. What I feel is that Mindy and I have a particular relationship because she is my biological child and because we were alone together for the first six months.

You are literally connected. Your whole being is creating this child inside you. It's an intimacy that you don't have with anyone else.

Mary:

Somewhere in there was a feeling about wanting to give birth--wanting to see what would this child be like that was biologically, genetically mine. It's funny now though, because I'm so far away from it all. At the time I had strong feelings about it, but now having Sylvia, and being so satisfied with having her, I don't feel any lack.

Deidre and I will talk about this sometimes. Is there anything missing because we didn't give birth to her, or because we didn't know her from day zero? You know, she's just so alive and so much a part of our family that there just doesn't seem to be anything missing.

So it's almost like I have to reconstruct why I wanted to give birth because I don't have that feeling--literally, that physical feeling--that I had at the time. When I think about a second child now, mostly I think in terms of adoption.

When one considers the question of biological conception versus adoption in light of family of origin experiences on the one hand, and women's current relationships with their children on the other, it becomes apparent that people make sense of their lives both by reading backwards (to key childhood experiences), and by seeing their values as embedded in current circumstances. These are two paths through which emotional experience is translated into beliefs.

As these women make clear, constructions of mother/child bonding and the relative importance of biological connection involve thinking and feeling on many levels. That is to say, women respond to this issue from deeply rooted emotions as well as from culturally embedded theories. Sometimes women can clearly articulate and identify the influence of these theories. For example, Mary underscores the powerful impact of psychological theories on women's decision-making processes. She argues strongly that the idea that children do not "bond" after a certain age can be a huge deterrent to prospective parents considering

adoption, and she contends that it does not fit with her experience.

Mary:

There's a lot of talk in American psychological child development circles about bonding and how kids don't bond unless they do so at an early age. There are a lot of theories that are fairly frightening when you're considering adoption, especially international adoption, where by and large you don't get an infant. Often, twelve to fourteen months is the youngest, and frequently it's quite a bit older. So it's terrifying to think, "What if you got this kid and the kid never really clicks with you?" There are plenty of theories that will tell you, "Yup, that's right--it's going to be a big problem."

It doesn't seem to have been a problem. So that has reassured me about adoption as a fine option, and it's even made me bolder to think about an even older kid, like a three- or four-year-old.

As Mary reflects on the notion of "bonding," she describes the process of becoming a mother to an adopted child as a process of relationship formation. In her case, part of the process occurred at a great physical distance from her daughter.

Mary:

Women say, "I'm so scared I won't bond." I say, "Right, you won't." It's one thing to give birth when you've been beginning the process in utero. Even then it may be hard. Bonding doesn't happen in a second. All of us who adopt had pressure on ourselves to develop instant rapport with a kid. I was in this room full of people, staff people staring at me waiting for this magic

moment. I felt the expectation in them and in myself of an instant miracle. Firstly, if it's international they won't resonate to your speaking English. She was very withdrawn--halfway between self-contained and withdrawn. She'd had minimal attention. Kids there didn't get a lot of personal attention. At a year old she'd had no experience of personal attention. I'd brought some toys and I don't think she'd ever seen things like them before. They put her in my arms. She made no eye contact, no noise. I think she never had had the experience of, "When I cry someone will take care of me." At one point she made a little strangled cry. I felt really scared. Was she okay? Was I okay? She was uncomfortable in my arms, and one of the staff people started speaking in her language and she responded to that. It made me feel inadequate.

The hardest time was between December and April. It was so bizarre to see her and then leave her there. I felt closed off to her--like they'd handed her to me and then taken her from me right away.

We hired someone to be with her, which made a big difference in her development. Also, we talked to her in our heads every morning, and we had photographs that we poured through over and over again. Now we all look at them together. There are shots of kids she spent the first year of her life with. She loves them. I look at her and wonder, "What is she thinking?"

The day she arrived was the longest day of our lives. She was unhappy the whole time. The next day we thought, "What have we gotten ourselves into?" The next day we were at a party and she looked at everyone, then turned around and saw me, and it looked like she said, "You're more familiar--you're it." She had decided, "I'm with you." Several days later a similar thing happened with Deidre. I think of bonding as, "You're the two I'll choose over everybody." She has very little preference between us.

Mary's description illustrates one way that powerful emotional experiences may come to override received stories

and lead women to restructure their belief systems. The process of relationship formation with her daughter was not predictable or known to her in any way before it occurred. Though Mary was skeptical of the bonding theory she refers to, she did not fully give it up as part of her belief system until her own experience contradicted it.

It is interesting to compare Mary's thinking to Pauline's with respect to the question of bonding and adoption. As one looks at the two of them, it is apparent that if one's experience matches a received story, the received story appears true and has the power to structure future experiences. Pauline's feelings about adoption, stemming from her own experience, match the theory Mary refers to. In Pauline's particular story, adoption entails difficulty bonding. Mary, in contrast, has an adoption experience in which bonding is not problematic. Hence, comparison of Mary and Pauline suggests that differences in theory (beliefs) may sometimes be more accurately understood as differences in key experiences.

Risks of Adoption

Another factor which affects the choice between biological conception and adoption is women's perceptions of and responses to the relatively greater vulnerability

adoption entails. This can be an important consideration at the outset of the family formation process. Mary and Glenda speak to this point.

Mary:

At one point we considered my getting pregnant. Part of what was operating for me was some real panic about whether this adoption was going to happen, and a sense that the heterosexual world might make it very hard for us to adopt. There could be all kinds of laws passed to prevent me from adopting, but nobody could stop me from giving birth.

Glenda:

I decided that I really wanted to have a biological child--at least one. Part of that was really looking for a sense of family for myself that nobody could question, one that was clear and unambiguous--that there was a blood connection--that there wasn't somebody else who could come in and claim him that I would have to struggle with. Part of that might have come from being a lawyer.

Women's responses to the risks of adoption vary and include: avoidance of adoption, adopting but doing so without disclosing their lesbianism, or adopting as openly gay women. In all cases, the fear and personal conflict engendered by the social system are profound.

Mary and Jessie describe their experiences of these conflicts.

Mary:

If you've given birth, there's a remote possibility of jeopardizing your family by being out, but in adoption the state could go to court. Besides worrying about losing your own kids, you worry about how the door to adoption could be closed for others. I think those of us who have adopted see the outness issue more pragmatically, whereas those who haven't are more ideological.

Deidre and I had decided for good reasons that we were not going to be out to the adoption agency, although I was clear that I lived with Deidre and the social worker met her. We talked about going to get Sylvia together, as friends, but we were afraid we might not be able to pull it off. We didn't want to make a political statement. The climate in the state was very negative. We were out in other settings and we weren't used to being closeted, but we were worried about not being able to adopt otherwise.

Jessie:

At one adoption agency, they never mentioned sexual preference. Then I went to another agency, met with the director, hit it off, and she promised me a baby. Then she handed me a piece of paper saying who wasn't eligible, in bold face print--criminals, insane people, homosexuals--it was highlighted.

Martha and I had said all along that we would never lie. I wouldn't disclose unless specifically asked. We knew a couple who had gotten a child, and then, after eight months, someone in court found out about their lesbianism and the baby was put in ad litem. I wasn't willing to do that to a baby or ourselves.

I wasn't willing to misrepresent myself in that way. It made me very angry--the risk of losing a child and having both the child and us incur that kind of loss. I wouldn't place us in that kind of jeopardy.

At one agency the woman asked me about Martha. She said she wanted to know who Martha was to me. I hemmed and hawed. I said, "We've

known each other a long time--we're good friends. She's eager to help." Then she said she was wondering what the nature of our relationship was. I was dying. She wouldn't quit. Then she looked me in the eye and said, "Is she your lover?" My eyes filled with tears. I said, "I don't know what my answer will mean to you." She said, "We have a number of lesbian women involved here together, and we want to be sure Martha is involved at the right level." You get sort of paranoid. I told her "Yes," and we got put in a group with other lesbians.

I felt like I had been unnecessarily put on the spot--like I was in the frying pan and kept there for a while. She might have wanted me to come out, but I didn't know if it was safe to do that. Ultimately I was relieved, but I felt really strung out. I cried all the way home. It felt like it was my last chance, and to have it be questioned in that way and truly not know if it was going to be okay was devastating. The only parallel in my mind is infertility--wanting something so much and not being able to have it. Had all the doors to adoption been closed I might have considered A.I., but I was thirty-five and had never been pregnant, and didn't know if I could. It was a real sense of terror before she let me know it was okay. Things run through your mind. Like I wanted to disavow that I was a lesbian and I also hated being put in that position.

Mary's and Jessie's stories highlight the extent to which women may feel threatened and even traumatized by the homophobia inherent in the adoption system. However individual women choose to handle the dilemmas the system imposes on them, they are propelled toward intense self-examination as they attempt to position themselves during the adoption process.

Homophobia

Somewhat paradoxically, while adoption may present lesbians with more vulnerability (e.g., the question of whether they will be "allowed" to do it), it can also be seen as "less provocative" than lesbians becoming pregnant (particularly through unknown donors). In this sense, some women I interviewed articulated a complicated link between homophobia and perceptions of adoption versus alternative insemination options.

Martha, Jessie and Jane elaborate upon Sara's reference to the world's negative view of alternative insemination. They express the ways in which their internal senses of the issue affected their decisions.

Martha explicitly names the choice to adopt as partially linked to internalized homophobia. In this paradigm, pregnancy is viewed as "too radical a step," and "possibly unfair to the child," whereas adoption is seen as a beneficent act that "balances out" negatives. Martha describes this kind of thinking as both an internal process and as the way she perceives her family's views. Hence, both relational and personal issues enter into the decision-making process.

Martha:

I think kids in lesbian families have certain obstacles to face. Jackie's got threefold: She's black and she's in a lesbian family, and she's adopted. I think she's going to have multiple issues to deal with. But on the other hand, in terms of A.I., it seemed to me more reasonable to take the kids that needed homes and deal with it that way as a first step in terms of integrating gay families into society and having kids, and that actually going out and getting pregnant was-- I don't know--just a little bit more extreme than I can deal with.

Pregnancy is more deliberately bringing a child into the world to deal with a situation that's complicated and difficult, and I don't know if that's fair. I guess you could say the same thing about adopting a child, but to me it has a different flavor. She needs a home and we both feel we can give it to her. It sort of balances out.

Retrospectively, Martha views these ideas as linked to homophobia in herself.

Martha:

I have a feeling that someplace in me I internalized a whole value structure, that you take a child who wouldn't have something otherwise and you give it to them, and that balances out the sort of negative things you're also giving them in terms of their need to deal with society around difference. It's becoming clearer to me that that's where I was coming from when we made the decision to adopt.

She also makes a connection between her own thinking and her ideas about her family's reactions.

Martha:

I think pregnancy is a more radical step, for instance, in terms of my family. Having seen my family this summer react to Jackie, I realized that I had expected people to be more disturbed. Sort of like people tolerate us as a couple quite well--we're not overtly out, but they accept us as a couple and treat us as a couple. And I had expected people to be bent out of shape about us having a child. I had thought they'd be homophobic about it or think it was odd. Instead, we got this "Isn't it wonderful that Jackie has such loving parents" reaction.

Martha's description suggests that people's environments (families of origin and work contexts), may play a pivotal role in their decision-making processes. Women think about what mode of introducing a child into their family unit is going to be most acceptable to those in their environment. Here, their internal concerns are interwoven with the views of people in their surroundings, particularly when they wish to enable close relationships to thrive.

Jessie, for instance, cites her family and work situations as important components of her decision to adopt.

Jessie:

My family would have had a more difficult time if I'd chosen to get pregnant. They were very supportive of my decision to adopt. It fit in with their humanitarian values. It was important to me that my child be very strongly accepted in my family.

Also, it would be hard in my work life to be pregnant and single. So in some sense my feelings about the decision were contextually based.

In addition, Jessie is uncomfortable about A.I. with unknown donors for reasons that are both linked to and distinct from homophobia.

Jessie:

I was clear that I didn't want to do alternative insemination with an anonymous donor. Being pregnant with someone's sperm when I didn't know who they are, was odd to me. Also, the issue of explaining to a child about A.I. was something I worried about.

This may be my internalized homophobia, but I felt worried about having to explain to a child that I chose to bring her into the world with an anonymous donor. As it was, I had to deal with my guilt about adopting as a lesbian, and adopting a black child. My adopting her is my choice and I have to come to terms with that, but there seems to be something different about consciously creating a child, than adopting a child who's out there already in the world.

While Jessie exemplifies the fact that women's thinking about the alternative insemination versus adoption decision can include a complex overlay of specifically homophobic ideas, and concerns that are independent of that (e.g., "being pregnant with someone's sperm when I didn't know who they are"), for some women the specifically homophobic aspect of their thinking is both more readily apparent and more central in their decision-making process.

Jane, for example, views her initial thinking about adoption as centrally linked to internalized homophobia. When she came to that realization, her choices regarding family structure shifted.

Jane introduces language about lesbians' "rights" to have children biologically, and she asserts this both internally and in relation to external opposition. In Jane's story one can also see the interplay of internal conflicts and women's immediate environments (particularly families of origin). Jane's stance regarding pregnancy initially placed her in a markedly different relation to her family than the one Martha describes.

Jane:

We were leaning toward adoption at first because we felt it would be easier for us to deal with our families, which would have been true.

Adoption would have been some poor kid who was already brought into the world by somebody else who was screwed up, and "Well, we were better than nothing." Debra's parents said after the fact, "Why didn't you just adopt?" There are single people who adopt all the time. It would have been easier to pick up the phone and tell my mother we decided to adopt. Then her thinking would have been that this kid was already here. I still think they wouldn't have welcomed us with open arms, but I don't think the intensity of the struggles would have been the same as with us saying not only do we have the right to parent, but Debra has a right to get pregnant and bring a child of her own into the world.

We were in couples therapy and spent a lot of time and energy on this decision. As we pursued

it, it became clear that Debra wanted to be pregnant and that the thing that was pushing us most toward adoption was our fear about dealing with our families. We felt it would be much easier to say to them that one of us was adopting than it would be to say one of us was getting pregnant. Once we realized that, we felt it wasn't a valid reason to go the adoption route. So we decided Debra would inseminate.

Together, Martha, Jessie and Jane articulate a complex network of beliefs surrounding the alternative insemination versus adoption decision. One can see that homophobia frequently does not stand clearly apart from other aspects of women's thought processes. It also often does not solely account for women's dilemmas about this decision.

Nevertheless, homophobia can be a critical dimension of women's family structure choices. Jessie exemplifies the complex overlay of homophobia and other concerns. For example, her discomfort with anonymous insemination is articulated as linked to both a worry about children having unknown parentage (explored in subsequent sections), and guilt about being a lesbian bringing a child into the world. Similarly, a desire to adopt a child may stem from many factors. It may include the definition of one's parenting urges as about relational rather than biological connection (as previously explored), and it may simultaneously include a sense that as a lesbian one has more "right" to adopt a child than to become pregnant. Frequently, women's motivations are mixed rather than clear-cut. However, in

some instances concerns can be teased apart. Jane, in contrast to Martha, Jessie and Sara, articulates the homophobic aspect of her thinking about adoption as clearly central. It is therefore not surprising that her uncovering of that line of thought leads to a change in her decision.

Known Versus Unknown Donors

When lesbians consider biological conception, the choice between known and unknown donors is critical. Within the general categories of these two options there are additional choice points. Sperm obtained through sperm banks may be from completely unknown donors or donors who can be identified to the children when they reach the age of majority. Known donors may have varying degrees of involvement ranging from only providing sperm to equally sharing parenting. The choice to conceive a child with a known donor is more open-ended than the choice to use an unknown donor, insofar as relational configurations within the family may change over time and agreements initially entered into may have little connection to what develops as the child matures. Change may be initiated by the child, either biological parent, the lesbian coparent or any combination therein. In addition, other adults may come to play key roles (e.g., paternal kin). Changes in the family constellation may be consonant with or contrary to

individual members' desires. As was described previously, involvement of known donors entails a high degree of legal vulnerability as well. On the other hand, the choice to use an unknown donor entails more closure. This may also prove to be either consonant with or contrary to family members' wishes over time. For example, both children and parents may come to desire access to information or a relationship with the donor that is not available. Both closure and open-endedness with respect to the issue of known and unknown donors can be seen as advantageous, disadvantageous, or (more commonly) mixed.

As women face the choice between known and unknown donors, a variety of concerns come into play. These include: legal vulnerability, children's needs regarding information about or relationships with their biological parents, women's level of comfort with anonymous insemination (this includes an assessment of their own needs regarding information about or relationships with donors), the ramifications of an additional relational involvement in the case of known donors, the position of the non-biological lesbian coparent with respect to a known biological father, responses to difference from normative family structure models entailed by anonymous insemination, and homophobia (both internalized and in the world). In addition, women's available options are particularly salient with respect to

this decision, insofar as their senses about ideal arrangements are often not matched by options in their immediate environments. Once again the complexity of the decision-making process should be apparent, insofar as the concerns listed above overlap and must be prioritized by each woman, as well as negotiated among key family members.

The choice to use an unknown donor is often bound to a desire to maintain the integrity of the family unit. The idea of integrating another adult into the family may be perceived as problematic both in terms of relational considerations and in terms of legal vulnerability. Some women may be more concerned about one or the other of these issues, but to a certain extent they are not separable. In addition, the unpredictability of using a known donor may be a deterrent to some couples. Karen describes worry about all of these areas--the relational and legal parameters of known donor involvements and the uncertainty inherent in that choice.

Karen:

We actually started getting the mechanics in motion about three years after we got together. We had decided to do it through an anonymous donor. We decided it was really important to us to be a family, that there be nobody around who could claim some position in our family or claim some position in our children's lives in such a way that it would really complicate things. We wanted to know that we made the decisions about finances, schooling, discipline, all that stuff.

We didn't want someone else, whose values we might not appreciate, intruding. We didn't want to be in the position that people are often in who have children from a marriage, when they divorce and they then have to deal with their child's father their whole lives even though they divorced him because they couldn't stand him. And we also were concerned with not putting ourselves in a position where somebody could one day get high and mighty and decide they want custody, and decide we weren't fit parents because we're lesbians.

So we decided we did want to do it with an anonymous donor.

In Karen's description, the interplay of several factors is apparent. She expresses a disinclination to enter into a parenting relationship with someone who she is not otherwise intimately involved with. Her analogy to the relational configurations of some divorced parents is particularly salient here. In addition, Karen expresses fear of legal vulnerability. Here, it is important to note that two aspects of the legal parameters converge: namely, the rights of a known donor and the particular fear of being declared "unfit" parents because of lesbianism. One question this raises is: If lesbians were not discriminated against as lesbians, would the option of parenting with known biological fathers be more appealing to some women?

When women are at this stage of the parenting decision, they grapple with both their own needs and the needs of their children as they perceive them. Often these are not

readily separable, insofar as people are trying to figure out what family structure will be optimal for all family members. Lily articulates a set of overlapping concerns that are similar to Karen's. She specifically names her awareness of her own needs as an aspect of the decision.

Lily:

I don't know if I can really separate out what the child's need for a father might be from what my needs were not to have a father meddling in my affairs. I just didn't want to risk that.

We were pretty against a known donor. We didn't want to have an extra involvement. We felt that it was enough for the two of us to agree on discipline and all the things you have to do with a child, and that we couldn't deal with the complication of a third person. Also, I'm concerned about somebody changing his mind and saying he wants the child after all.

In many couples the non-biological coparent's role is of major concern, and this is often seen as much more problematic if a known biological father is involved. While Karen and Lily cite the issues of legal vulnerability and the complexity of adding an additional parental figure to their family unit as reasons for choosing anonymous insemination, Lucy highlights another concern: namely, the need to establish the non-biological coparent's relationship to the child as primary.

Lucy:

We were pretty clear from the beginning that we did not want an active male participant in the child-rearing process. We wanted Bonnie and I to be the primary parents and not have any negotiation or attachment to another person. At that time we felt we wanted to secure Bonnie's identity with the kid. We wanted the child to see Bonnie as the parent.

Diane similarly expresses concern about her partner's parenting role. She names her couple relationship as central to the decision to use an unknown donor, insofar as her partner's legal and psychological vulnerability regarding unequal parenting status overrides other issues. It is important to note that not all couples perceive the presence of a known biological father as necessarily undermining the non-biological coparent's role. However, both in terms of legal vulnerability and societal recognition, the non-biological coparent's role is potentially altered by the presence or absence of a known biological father. One important factor in the consideration of this issue is the level of trust women feel in relation to particular men they may consider as coparents or known donors. With regard to this, Diane points out the ways that women must confront discrepancies between ideal choices and actual options. This is an especially important aspect of the known versus unknown donor choice. The

decision often entails a process of reflection about which risks one is willing to take.

Diane:

We talked a little to a friend of ours who was married--she and her husband were trying to get pregnant, and she thought it would be great if he could donate some semen and we could get pregnant too. We talked briefly about that and decided that it just wouldn't work, although we liked him a lot and we thought he'd make a great parent. It was just too complicated. It's hard enough to be in a relationship with two people and raise a kid, but we just didn't think we could do it with four people. We felt like in a perfect world, if we knew the perfect person, it would be fine to have a known donor, but we didn't know the perfect person, and barring that, it just seemed too risky. There were just too many risks involved, especially for Chris, in raising a kid when you knew the donor and he would have a lot of legal rights she wouldn't have.

In many cases, women's family structure decisions are significantly affected by the options available to them in their immediate environments. Along with Diane, Michelle and Glenda exemplify this.

Michelle:

Our initial vision was that we'd find a donor we knew that would be slightly involved--like an uncle, not a father--but the baby would be able to know the person. We asked a lot of people but no one was willing. Either they wanted to be really involved or they were afraid we'd come after them for money. After a long while we began to look into insemination with anonymous donors.

Glenda:

I ruled out a known donor because I didn't want to share parenting with any of the people I knew--there was no one I knew who I wanted that kind of connection with. Had there been somebody like that, I certainly would have considered it.

When women make decisions that are essentially compromises between ideal and real possibilities, their ways of processing these decisions over time may be central to the family dynamics. For instance, women may go through grieving processes regarding their first choices (e.g., a wish for a known donor that has given way to use of anonymous insemination). They may remain ambivalent about their choices or they may work through to a more resolved place. As children develop and introduce their own issues into the family interactions, women's initial feelings about this decision may be re-evoked or transformed.

Since outcomes are not always based on women's first choices, family structure decisions do not necessarily reflect women's positions on the issues explored herein. Hannah is an example of someone who maintains a mixed view of both her particular decision and the decision in general. She ultimately chose to coparent with a gay male friend after having been refused anonymous insemination by her H.M.O. because of her single status. She argues strongly about the legitimacy of alternative insemination with

unknown donors at the same time as she articulates both advantages and disadvantages of her decision to use a known donor.

Hannah:

Initially I was drawn to having an anonymous donor. I just thought it would be easier, and still think it would be easier in a certain kind of way. But it didn't work out for a number of reasons, and it did work out with Steve, so we just went ahead and did that.

I think there are advantages to both. I can only speak from my perspective of having an involved father. There are advantages and disadvantages to it. In many ways it would be easier not to have a father around because then you just don't have to deal with any of it. You make all your own decisions, the ultimate control. On the other hand, when I think about how hard it is for Mindy, or how she has all these issues about wanting us all to live together and be a "normal" family, I think having to figure out how to deal with that issue without having an involved father in the picture would be very difficult.

Basically I feel this way about the issue-- and this was true both before and after Mindy's birth: When a child can really understand this, you tell them the truth. I think having anonymous donor insemination is a legitimate way for lesbians to get pregnant. It just is logistically the way people do it, and it's a legitimate thing to do, and the children should know that. There's no negative judgment for me about that. It's what I would have done; and what I'm saying, from the perspective of having Mindy, is I think it might have been harder to deal with some of the issues that come up in that circumstance than it is to deal with what I have, but I don't really know because I'm not in that other situation. I'm only guessing.

Hannah introduces the idea that her daughter's perceptions of normative family models would be more difficult to deal with if she did not have a known biological father. Often, when women are deciding about this issue they try to imagine what concerns their children may have, and how comfortable they would feel grappling with them in different family structure contexts. Thus, the process of sorting through the known versus unknown donor question entails not only an imaginative leap with respect to children's potential issues, but also self-examination with respect to one's own limits of comfort in parenting children with those issues.

It is important to note the ways that broad historical and social circumstances reciprocally interact with the options available to particular women. The AIDS crisis is an especially complex example of the interplay of biological and social processes. AIDS has had a great impact on the family formation process within the gay community, insofar as many lesbians who would have coparented with particular gay men have been unable to do so because of their HIV status. Some lesbians will not consider gay men because of the risks involved. In many ways, lesbians and gay men choosing to enter into coparenting relationships can be seen as an ideal solution to some of the dilemmas posed herein. Often, lesbians' friendship networks include gay men with

whom they feel intimate and therefore comfortable regarding coparenting relationships. Frequently this is also an ideal arrangement for the men insofar as they would like to be parents as well. The legal issues are substantially altered by the fact that if both parents are gay they are equally vulnerable in the legal system, and therefore homosexuality is not a source of leverage. Some women currently consider gay donors, but at this time it involves the additional complexity of sorting through the reliability of risk assessment and HIV testing. Several women I interviewed became pregnant with gay men just prior to widespread consciousness about AIDS. Ruth and Hannah point out the desirability of coparenting with gay men, and Hannah notes the impact her changed consciousness about AIDS would have on her decision at this time.

Ruth:

It was important to me that Nick was gay because I thought it could be a lot more complicated if a man got married and had kids, and perhaps the wife would want to have some claim or the two together would want to have this other kid join their family. It felt legally more complicated.

Hannah:

I would only have considered an anonymous straight donor. I would never have considered a known straight donor, for legal reasons.

I can't believe we did what we did. I got pregnant just at the beginning of the AIDS

hysteria. Steve is not a promiscuous person and I knew that. We certainly talked about it. Basically, all you could do at that point was to have a very complete physical and have blood tests and hope for the best, and that's what we did. If they had an HIV test, he didn't take it before I inseminated. We talked to a doctor about all the risks, and he essentially said there wasn't much. But it was before all the hysteria and it didn't occur to us to be really worried. Of course I'd do it all differently now.

When women are considering known versus unknown donors, their perspectives on children's needs to know their biological fathers may play a critical role in the decision. The fact that some sperm banks offer the option of identification of donors when children reach the age of majority adds another element of complexity in that it presses one to consider in more detail the issue of what particular aspects of known versus unknown paternity are more or less desirable. Glenda, for instance, considered and then rejected the possibility of identification of the donor when the child reaches eighteen, because she sees the availability of the information and relationship at that point in time as potentially detrimental.

Glenda:

I thought about the idea of a donor who could be known to the child at eighteen, because I feel I'm making a decision for him in choosing to have an unknown donor who he can't find out about.

My sense of it was that I would feel very uncomfortable with having this specter around--

this ghost of a father who eventually would come to life.

I'm raising this kid and all of a sudden this guy could come along, especially at a developmental point, late adolescence, when kids are questioning their own identities anyway, and say, "I'm your dad."

Marie articulates worry that children's responses to not knowing half of their genetic roots (as in unknown donor insemination), will parallel adopted children who engage in painful searching processes. She emphasizes the extent to which the relative newness of the technology means there is a largely unknown factor to contend with: namely, how children will cope at various life stages.

Marie:

If you think about it selfishly, as a lesbian parent the totally anonymous donor feels better--it's more secure and safer. You don't have to think about anybody else being involved in any kind of way. I just don't think it's the best thing for kids. I'm sure that the kids that were conceived that way will manage, and I think if you handle it levelly and unhysterically and matter-of-factly, it will be okay. But we don't know--we haven't had a generation of kids getting to be ten and sixteen and twenty-one, not knowing anything about their biological backgrounds--half of their genetic material. What we do know is kids who were adopted and don't have that kind of information. Most of them go through, at some point, something about it whether they end up searching or not. It just makes sense to me that if you can provide a child with that basic information, then you should.

I was glad to meet the person. I don't know what I think is genetic and what isn't. It's just nice to have a sense of who he is, what he looks

like and what kind of person he is. Just so that it's not a total unknown. And who knows how it will be for Brendan? Maybe he'll want to see him, in which case he can.

In comparison to some women previously quoted, Marie is less concerned about legal vulnerability, partially because she removes herself from the system. That is to say, she sees the issue as manageable on a relational basis which does not involve courts. This is exemplified in her idea that it is possible to find a man who "will do what he says he'll do." Thus, she exemplifies one way in which people participate in constructing their own relations to institutions such as the legal system.

Marie:

Our first choice is a known donor who would be uninvolved in the sense of not doing any decision-making or having financial responsibility or anything like that. We wanted somebody who would be willing to be, in a vague, undefined sense, in the child's life to some extent, without getting any rights over anything.

I've seen arrangements with shared parenting involving the father, and they look fine, but generally I think you do that with somebody that's already in your life--someone you know and have values in common with. We have a friend who has that kind of arrangement, and there are certainly advantages. It's hard to project into a situation where we had that kind of male friend, but my instinct is that even if we did, I'd rather have the family unit be Jana and me and the baby, not other people in ambiguous positions.

I don't have the kind of fears around the legal stuff that some people do. You have to pick really carefully. Obviously there are certainly men out there that you could enter into this kind

of relationship with and it would be a disaster. But I don't think it's impossible to find a situation where you can have some confidence that this guy will do what he says he'll do. This man that ended up being the donor for Jana is not interested in being a father. He's a nice guy, he's fine, but it's just not in his game plan to parent or to be responsible for kids. Given the relationships and interactions we've had, I can't really imagine him turning around and saying, "This is my son and I want something with him." I just don't think it's going to happen. I understand legally you leave yourself open. I think the dangerous kind of man to do something like this with is someone who is conflicted and who's doing this because he wishes he had kids. Then, ten years down the line he might turn around and say, "I want the child."

Once decisions about the use of known versus unknown donors are made, feelings about the issue continue to evolve as the family unit develops. Hannah, Ruth, Pauline and Glenda articulate different perspectives on the arrangements each has settled into.

Hannah points out the complexity of sharing parenting between three people who have distinct relationships to the child.

Hannah:

There are pros and cons on each side. Even now, many days I wish I had used an anonymous donor. Parenting is hard with other people. People have different styles, different priorities. There can be lots of conflict and it can be hard on the child.

With Steve it's complicated because we don't live together and we're very different. I only

discovered how different we are since we had a kid, and Mindy really has to adjust to living in two different households.

Having become parents to Mindy before Fran and Hannah began their relationship, Steve and Hannah had difficulty integrating Fran into the family.

Hannah:

It's not like it was that easy. Often, early on, I felt very threatened and wanted Mindy to be mine. I would say, "She's my kid"; and Steve felt threatened too. He has the biological advantage and Mindy understands that connection, but Fran is much more a parent in an ongoing way. The first year we all had a hard time.

Steve said he felt threatened, that it worried him, and I would reassure him because I feel that he does have his relation to Mindy. Then also, I'd get angry at Fran sometimes and say she didn't know how to do certain things, that Mindy was my kid. It would have been different if we had decided to have her together, and I think it will be different with Fran's kid. I bet Fran will get to understand the biological bond because it will happen with her child. It's not that you're not a parent without that, but it's a different kind of connection.

Sharing parenting with a known biological father is slightly less complicated when the lesbian mother is single. However, as Ruth and Pauline exemplify, women's experiences of this kind of arrangement vary.

Pauline:

When we first met, we talked about how we felt about kids and being a parent. He seemed to have the same ideas as me--that you need to have respect for children. We talked some about how we would make decisions. Mostly I end up making them since she lives with me and I'm more affected by them, but he certainly gets consulted and we talk about major decisions.

Mark is very loving towards Kelly. He really cares about her. He makes an effort to see her and play with her. My sense is that he tries to do what she needs. If he comes over and she goes to sleep or just can't cope for some reason, he'll just hang out and say that's fine. So he really seems to be able to know what she needs at the time, and he's very flexible.

Ruth:

We started out from point zero saying we didn't know what this relationship was going to be, and saying that I was going to be in control. He was at Jeremy's birth and originally came to see him once a week.

I haven't seen him in action as a full-time parent, so I don't know what that would be like. Mostly it feels like he gets to be the "good daddy." He takes him on weekends and devotes himself to playing with him during those two days, but he doesn't have to arrange baby-sitting or daycare or trips to the doctor--the day-to-day parenting things. I sometimes resent that and wish that if he's going to be a parent he would experience that side of it too.

At first I tried to control the visits. I tried to have input around what Jeremy would eat and how much television he'd watch. But Nick didn't want me to stick myself in that scene at all, and I can understand that too. So Jeremy learned to live with two different sets of rules, and I don't think that one is better than the other really.

I think mothers in general have stronger bonds with their children than fathers do,

especially if it's a birth child. But what I see mostly is that the person who's not the primary parent, not as constantly responsible, has more of the role of playmate.

Glenda chose, as a single lesbian, to become a single parent through an unknown donor. Her situation has prompted her to reflect on the delineation of parental roles and the ramifications of all parenting roles being embodied in one person.

Glenda:

As a single parent, I don't have to deal with competition or who gets called "Mommy" or who is the primary parent if there is one, and frequently there is one and people didn't expect it to be that way. There are advantages to that situation--you have two people, you get a breather. But there's not a question--he's the kid and I'm the parent.

Well, what are the traditional roles of mothering and what are the traditional roles of fathering and parenting? I think a lot of times the father role is to play and be a little freer about the rules. In relationships you can split it, whether it's same sex or opposite sex relationships, but it doesn't work that way with a single parent.

The day-to-day needs person, who is usually the mother, has to pay more attention to the rules. If you're the one who has to stay home with the kid if he's sick, you're going to be a little more cautious about letting him stay out in the snow longer and sled riding, not because he's necessarily going to get so sick, but because if he gets a little cold it's going to be an inconvenience. On the other hand, a father wouldn't necessarily think about it. They'd think about having fun.

I really need to pay attention to doing both--to say, "Okay, let's do this," and then, "Let's have some fun."

There's a certain intensity in the relationship which could either be an asset or a difficulty. If at some point I get into a big struggle with Sam and he doesn't have someone to deflect it, or I don't have that, it could be a problem for us.

I think kids go through a developmental triadic way of interacting--they will find someone to split off against the other. I think kids in single parent families will find a way to do that.

Fathers

As one examines women's thinking about the choice between known and unknown donors and the extent of involvement they wish for in the case of known donors, ideas about the significance of fathers become evident.

There are several dimensions of fatherhood which are relevant. In some instances these are considered separately, while in others they are fused. Women vary not only with respect to their actual decisions, but also with respect to the emphasis they place on each of the various aspects of fatherhood. The aspects considered herein include the genetic dimension (e.g., a child's biological connection to the donor or father), the gender dimension (e.g., the function of men in children's lives), the social dimension (e.g., the fact that having an identifiable father

or known donor is closer to the culture's normative nuclear family model than alternative insemination with unknown donors), and the structural dimension (e.g., one parent versus two parents versus three parents). An example of the separability of these facets is the distinction one can draw between children having fathers in their lives versus children having men in their lives. One can think about children having men in their lives without necessarily concluding they must have a known father. On the other hand, the issue of genetic connection cannot be separated out from the known versus unknown donor choice--children either do or do not have access to their genetic roots. Although analytically one might be able to consider the four dimensions named above as distinct issues, in people's actual lives they may not function as such. For example, a particular woman may consider the issue of a child knowing his or her genetic roots to be fused with the issue of a child having a family that is closer to or farther from the culture's normative family model. Although that construction is not a logically necessary one, insofar as there are aspects of the genetic connection issue that are separate from and extend beyond the question of social conformity, people's experiences in the world may yield particular connections in their thinking.

Lily considers the question of known versus unknown

donors largely in terms of the issue of social acceptability.

Lily:

Mostly we're concerned that our kids would be real hung up on "I want a father," or "I want to know who he is," and feel like they're incomplete or something because they don't have that. It's not easy--you can't just say, "Too bad, you don't have a father. You have two mothers, you lucky kid." Then you'll get, "Everybody else has a father," which is mostly true. So I think you'd have to say, "Well, you're different," and "There are different kinds of people." Hopefully, since they're biracial, they'll have a little bit of a sense of being different that is not "bad-different." They'll be accepting of their different status and, with that sense of identity, be strong. I'm active in identifying as an Asian-American woman, and being proud of that identity as opposed to seeing it as a negative one. I'm confident that the children will have positive racial and cultural identities, and hopefully, since they have that, they'll also have a positive identity in being children of lesbians.

Like Lily, Mary and Hannah point out the connections between their thinking about fathers and normative cultural constructions of the family.

Mary:

The other day I had this reaction--I don't know where it was coming from. I was upstairs and I was watching Sylvia asleep in her crib. We had just finished reading a story--and most books have mommies and daddies in the stories. I thought, "Sylvia's never going to have a daddy," and I felt sad for her about that. Maybe it's especially because she's adopted, and here's this little adopted kid and somewhere in the world there's a man who was part of her birth, and she's probably

not going to know either the man or the woman who are her biological parents. That's a loss that feels real to me. However much she's got two mommies, and whatever we'll say about that, what she'll never have in her life is a daddy, and that's got to be acknowledged.

People can quote all the statistics about single parent families and mother-headed families and so on, but still, to whatever extent we think about kids as having mommies and daddies, we like to think that they have good relationships with their mommies and good relationships with their daddies, and she's never going to have a daddy.

If we lived in this absolutely free-flowing world in which there wasn't a sense that you give birth, that's your kid, you own that kid, you're the parent--sort of how I think of the kibbutz, which is a significant attempt to blur the sense of ownership and say that raising children is a collective adult responsibility--in that kind of world, "No daddy, so what?" Because it's not even an operative term. But that's not the world we're raising Sylvia in. We're raising her in a world of nuclear families where there is ownership of kids for better or worse. In that world where she'll go to school and every June one of the art projects will be Father's Day presents, how is she going to accommodate herself to that?

Hannah:

Millions of children don't have fathers, or have abusive fathers. I don't see that men are so terribly involved with their kids anyway. I mean, in spite of the "new man"--that was a flash in the pan, having men involved. I know a handful of men who are really involved with their children, but basically most children grow up without having warm nurturing relationships with their fathers.

But I think we live in a culture that makes it really hard for kids who don't have fathers. I mean, the culture is everywhere. It's not as if Mindy has had an enormous amount of contact with the classic nuclear family, but she knows about it.

Lily's, Mary's and Hannah's emphases on normative cultural models of the family contrast with Michelle, who like Marie (previously quoted), considers the issue largely in terms of the significance of biological connections.

Michelle:

I'm very consumed by the connections. I look at Ian and see my grandmother's hands. He's an incredible dancer and my father was too. I don't know if there's a dancing gene. That's why I wanted a Jewish donor--I wanted the history and culture. A known donor would have embodied more of that.

Also, Ian's relation to the donor has been a presence for me since he was born, and it's more true as he gets older. It's hard to sort out my own sadness about my father and my sadness for Ian in not having that relationship.

In addition to thinking about fathers as male parents and genetic parents, one can consider their traditional role as the "other" parent. Lily suggests that this is an important dimension of child-rearing, one which is separable both from biological connection and from gender.

Lily:

I don't think kids need fathers per se. I think they need parents, and that it's generally better if they have two parents rather than one, because when you only have one parent, the parent/child relationship can be very intense and difficult for both of them. I think having the two of us, two parents, is sufficient. It doesn't matter whether one of us is male or not. It would only matter on the outside. I think we'll make an effort to do things that, quote-unquote, a father

would do--you know, the traditional male things such as sports. And we also have male friends who are part of the kids' lives.

Men in Children's Lives

Beyond the question of known versus unknown donors, lesbian parents consider the issue of the relative importance of men in children's lives. In some instances women see this as dependent upon the gender of the child, whereas in other instances they consider the issue more generally.

Having become pregnant through an unknown donor, Michelle thinks about the question of men in her son's life as separate from the issue of a father.

Michelle:

Now the issue of knowing his biological father versus having a man in his life is separate because we don't know who the donor is. Now it's the relationship with a man that is important to keep working on.

Most people Ian goes to for support are women. Most people who do that in the world are women, but some men do it also--my father did--and I want Ian to experience that. I would want that whether he was a boy or a girl.

Some women are particularly concerned about male children needing male role models. Marie and Ruth exemplify this in their concerns about their sons.

Marie:

I worry about the fact that right now there is no special person for him who is a man. He has a lot of uncles and we have male friends, so he gets general exposure. But the people he has intimate contact with in terms of nurturing and supportive roles in his life are all women. And I worry about how he'll construe whatever parts of lesbian sub-culture that can seem anti-male, because I think there still is some of that stuff.

Ruth:

I didn't know much what I thought about men in kids' lives until I saw it in action. I don't think it's essential, but I do think it's a wonderful thing for the kids I've seen relating to both men and women. Specifically for Jeremy--he lights up in a different way when he's with a man that he likes, especially his father or my father, but also friends of mine.

I guess I do believe there's some kind of male bonding experience that goes on that's a really different kind of communication or different kind of energy than what happens with men and women or women and women. Jeremy talks about going somewhere that he can do "boy stuff." My idea is that it isn't essential to have both genders in a kid's life--it wouldn't damage them not to have that, but it is an enriching and important experience.

As the mother of a daughter, Jessie also tends to think that men are more important in the lives of boys because of the issue of identification.

Jessie:

Most of the men in my life in a day-to-day way are in my work life. In my social life there are men, but not with as much regularity. We socialize with a lot of women. It's not unusual

for us to be at "all women" events.

So if I had a son I think I would have looked for men for him to be involved with because I would have wanted my son to have more of a day-to-day relationship--I mean a much more continuous relationship with men than what's true of my life now.

I just think, in terms of boys' gender identifications, that if they don't have real relationships with men who can give them messages that it's possible to be a male and also be warm, nurturing and available, that boys are left with the most awful stereotypes in terms of what it is to be a boy--you know, little Rambos running around.

I think the same thing is true for Jackie with racial identity--in the absence of a real relationship, you're left with whatever the social constructs are.

I also don't want her to have just a stereotype idea about what it's possible to expect from men and what men can be, but her primary identification is going to be with me and other women.

In contrast to the three women just quoted, Glenda sees gender as a somewhat more fluid category. This is suggested by her sense that she could put herself in her son's place and that she does not think he has an a priori need for male role models, though she is open to assessing a particular situation as calling for that.

Glenda:

I identify myself fairly androgenously, so I don't think that there's this "secret world of men." I'm not saying there aren't differences, because I feel there are. I'm not saying they're biological, but in our society there are

differences. It's just that I don't feel like I can't put myself in his place in a lot of ways.

I think there may be points developmentally where he would need someone--it may be more that he needs distance from me at a particular point--not so much that he needs an identity figure. But it may be that he needs a man so he could see that men do things a certain way, and I would try to arrange for it. But it would come only out of an assessment of what the situation is, because I don't think that generally it's a necessity.

It's good to know that there are other people like you, so if he never got exposed to men that would be a problem. I don't think it has to be a parent, but I do think he needs exposure. What's more important though, is which men he does get exposed to.

There's so much of "Boys do this and girls do that," around. If anything, I think it's advantageous to undercut some of that by saying, "Women can do these things--'So-and-so' fixes cars," or "This man you know sews, while this other woman you know doesn't know how to sew."

My sense is that if there really were something going on where he needed more contact with men, I'd try to arrange it. I think of it more as happening at a particular time rather than as a lifelong thing.

Unlike the women previously quoted, Diane and Sara do not link the issue of men in children's lives to the gender of the children, and see exposure to adults of both genders as an important aspect of all children's development.

Diane:

I think it's really important for kids to be exposed to people of both genders. I don't think it's of major importance that they have parents of both genders. They just need that kind of connection somewhere in their lives. For Lisa, if

she didn't have men in her life, they would be really foreign and strange and an object of curiosity. I think she wouldn't know what to do with them, and I think it's important that she does. There are men in our lives, so we didn't got out and make a conscious effort to provide that for her--it just happened.

Sara:

What I want for my daughters is, I don't want them to think men are all horrible or all wonderful. I think it would be better for them to experience something real, because otherwise they're going to get it from television or books they read. They'll know what Judy Blume thinks about men, but not much else. Mostly I've taught boys who don't have fathers--it's the same thing. They don't know what men are so they don't know what they're supposed to be, so they run around trying to prove that they're men. They pick up whatever intersects with their personalities from the culture. On a deeper level they don't know if men will respect them, and they don't know how to gain their respect. I'd feel the same way about men in these kids' lives whether they were boys or girls.

Hannah and Lucy are relatively less concerned about the presence of men in children's lives.

Hannah:

I think it's inevitable that children have men in their lives, and it's okay that the men that are around are there. But the reality is that given the opportunity, most men don't form the kinds of relationships with kids that involve a real commitment. I know a lesbian couple who went out of their way to establish a relationship where their kid could have contact with a man. He made a commitment for seeing the kid one time a week, and then he was gone after a year.

Lucy:

I think kids need people, men and women, but if it happens to be all women it will probably be fine. I can't control all the people who will be in her life. My idea is that Maura will seek people out and people will be put in her path. I think she'll understand that there are people who are nurturing and people who are not. It's a stereotype that says women are nurturing and men are not, but I'm not going to go out and find her a nurturing man so that she can know that men are nurturing. The fact is, I can provide my kid with what I know, and it would be false for me to say I'm going to go out and find a man for her to be involved with. We know some very nice men, but they're not interested in having a kid in their lives.

Gender of Children

The women in this study expressed a range of views regarding preferences with respect to gender of children. In some instances, thinking about gender is linked to ideas about the different demands entailed in parenting boys versus girls. A primary example of this is the idea that boys are more in need of male role models than girls. However, as was previously suggested, many women do not link the issue of men in children's lives to gender of children. It is interesting to attend to women's articulation of their thinking about these issues, since they reflect deeply held values and beliefs about gender in general.

Mary:

Deidre and I have slightly different views about gender. She always preferred a girl, and I

had very strong preferences not to choose. When I went to the adoption agency they asked me if I wanted a boy or a girl. I can articulate this intellectually, but it was really a very strong physical feeling that it was not right to choose--that you don't get to pick when you give birth, and that seems right to me. I could have all these fantasies about why I prefer a girl or why I prefer a boy, but who knows--when you get a kid, who knows what's in store for you? To me, getting a kid is different from going to the pound and picking out a puppy.

My fantasies of having a kid were all about girls, but the sense that picking was wrong was so strong that I would never have done it, and I wouldn't consider wanting to have a child if I didn't think it was just as fine to have a boy child as a girl. I feel like I would have to look myself in the mirror and say, "how come I don't want a child, I want a girl child? And what does that mean? What assumptions am I putting into the world that say not that I want to be a parent, but that I want to be a parent of a girl?"

For Deidre the preference was a practical matter. She worried that adolescence could be a really difficult situation for two women with a boy. And there certainly is a theory that says, aside from saying that all kids need fathers, that boys especially need fathers.

Ruth:

I couldn't decide about gender preference. I wanted a girl because I thought we would be emotionally closer. I was glad when I had a boy because I never grew up with boys in my family. I had sisters and hung out with girls all my life. I had this feeling that something was missing in my experience because I had no understanding of the male psyche. So it would be exciting to watch a boy grow up.

Hannah:

In all honesty, I wanted a girl. For a while I felt guilty about wanting a girl, but I think

it's normal to have a preference. I mean, I know lesbians who wanted boys, but I really wanted a girl. I had "amnio" so I could get ready if it were a boy--realign my thinking because I was so set on having a girl. So I was relieved. It just felt much more right for me to have a girl than a boy. I have a lot of issues with men, and I guess on a psychological level I didn't want to work them out in that way. I'd rather work them out in a somewhat less intimate relationship. At first I worried that you're not supposed to have a preference, or that people would think, "Oh yeah, of course a lesbian wants to have a girl." But ultimately that doesn't matter.

The other side of it is that it's very intense to have a girl. I think having a boy is different. Sometimes when I see my friends who have sons I wonder if maybe it would be a little easier. Mindy and I are very much alike in some ways, and we sometimes knock heads really intensely because of that. From what I've observed of women with their sons, it's a different kind of intimacy.

Jane:

We both had a preference for a girl, but it would have been okay to have had a boy. That's something we had to work out before the insemination. Basically, the reasons for the preference were in terms of identity issues. I felt like it would be easier for me to have some sense of who she was if she were the same gender. Also, it seemed that in terms of the outside world and the judgments people might pass, that lesbians raising girls was easier.

Glenda:

I wouldn't say the fact that he's a boy is irrelevant, because it is relevant in the larger society, but it's not as relevant as people make it out to be. He'll have boys to play with and girls to play with, and he'll have men around and women around.

It's easier for me to give him more freedom

since he's a boy, because personally I would be more comfortable on the extremes: If he ended up being super-macho I would not like it, but I could cope with it better than having a daughter who's into traditional feminine roles. I see that stuff as self-deprecating and limiting. So to the extent that I have these feelings, it's probably slightly easier for me to just let him be.

In some instances, women's feelings about the gender of their children changed dramatically after the children's conception or birth. This is another instance of the powerful influence experience has on belief systems.

Michelle:

We decided we would just try to get pregnant, and we had this line that "we would get the kid we were supposed to get." Right after the first bleed, I had an ultrasound and we asked the technician if they could tell the sex--it was about eighteen weeks. They're not supposed to tell you because they can make mistakes, so she gave us this whole build-up about that, but said if we really wanted to know, she would say. The whole time she was talking I was saying to myself, "Girl, girl." And then she said, "I would say it's a boy." As soon as she said that, I burst into this enormous grin. It was this completely unexpected response. Part of it was just that the baby had an identity and was real. But it also just felt somehow incredibly right.

Having a boy has been a very healing experience for me. I think a lot of my rage at men generally, and at specific men, as well as feelings of loss and disappointment, just magically healed when Ian was born, and since then as well. I look at men now in a much more generous way, and I've even begun to miss a certain kind of male energy in my life, which I think comes from having a primary close relationship to a male person.

I used to worry that as a lesbian, that if I

had a boy I might not be able to create an environment where he felt okay about being a boy, and that it would be easier for a girl to fit into an environment that celebrates women coming into their own. My wish is that ultimately there'll be a societal healing that will encompass heterosexual and homosexual relationships and all kinds of manifestations of gender identifications, without anger or the kind of splits that exist now. I feel like some of that is happening inside of me now.

Marie:

Before we knew what the gender was, we both knew we preferred a girl. Partly just because having a boy feels to me like it makes much more urgency around having some consistent men in our lives that he can know. It seems with a boy we need to move our lives around more to include men. I just don't want him to feel like he's not okay because everybody else in our whole life is female. It isn't any kind of political stance or even a conscious choice--it just sort of happened that everyone we see socially is a woman. And we've been trying to work on that. There are people we might try to enlist. But right now the people who come to the house consistently are not men. So as he gets older, what does that say to him? To me, it's not so much a traditional role model issue, although it may get to be. The place he goes to daycare has a male provider. It's not that I feel he won't understand how to grow up to be male unless he has male role models around. It's more what message he gets about the male gender being okay.

If we had a girl I wouldn't worry that she would grow up to think that men are so strange, because they're basically around. It seems to be a slightly different issue. It would be okay for a girl to feel like all of her close, home, familiar people are female.

Who knows what we'll feel when he's a teenager? I think the sexism stuff is hard--all those feminist issues about how you try to transmit values to your child without giving some sort of rejecting message--when he starts being a man as opposed to a boy.

I don't think my thinking has changed since he was born, but my feelings have changed a lot. Once we knew he was a boy from an ultrasound, it felt like it took us about a week, maybe not even, to just start feeling him as a boy child, as a fetus. I would say that progressively from then on I started feeling more and more like he was who he was, and I wanted him to be himself rather than wanting him to be female. You know, it just didn't make sense. And by now I can't imagine preferring someone else, since I'm so attached to him.

Couple Dynamics

When couples are initially making family structure choices, issues within their relationships emerge as central considerations. As women reflect on coparenting arrangements, feelings about symmetry versus clearly delineated primary and secondary parenting roles are pivotal. Some women in this study expressed comfort with asymmetrical primary and secondary parenting arrangements, while others articulated a desire for equality between partners. The desire for symmetry is not always accompanied by the achievement of it. Biological conception in particular raises many issues with respect to coparenting roles. Women's notions about the significance of biological connections are as important here as the actual biological parameters of gestation, birth and nursing. In addition, though adoption potentially sidesteps the inequality issue insofar as biological connection does not exist for either

parent, the legal parameters of single parent adoption can skew family dynamics as well. Here, it is also evident that women's interpretations of the parameters of their family structures heavily influence relationships.

In this section I consider both women's thinking prior to their family structure decisions, and their experiences once the decisions were made. Several family structure choice points are particularly relevant to the issue of symmetry or equality.

Lee explains how the desire for equal parenting roles contributed to the decision to adopt as opposed to conceiving biologically.

Lee:

In the very beginning, before we had gone to a meeting or even thought that adoption was a possibility--once we decided to have kids, Pam thought adoption would be great, as did I--neither one of us thought that it would be feasible. Her concerns which she expressed at the time, or maybe later, was that to the extent that there was some imbalance going into it, where I was so overwhelmingly enthusiastic about having children and she was at best reluctant, that to then put on the additional factor of me having the biological relationship with the child and having the experience of breast-feeding, that that would weight the scales more in the direction of my relationship with the kid. And the one thing that we were clear about, once we made the decision to have kids, is that the kids were going to be ours. It was not going to be the kind of thing where I would stay in the relationship but I would have the kid and somehow--you know, two people here,

and then one line drawn down to the kid--I mean, that was never, it's never what I wanted, and it's not what Pam wanted, and it's not what we have now.

In Lee's description, biological connection between mother and child is seen as profoundly affecting the non-biological coparent's role. Previously I explored women's notions about biological connections between mothers and children as they related to individual women's thinking about adoption versus conception. Clearly, these notions are also critical with respect to couple dynamics and definitions of roles within the family.

When there is a biological mother and a non-biological mother, it can be difficult to assess the significance of the biological connection with respect to delineation of parenting roles. Both family members and outside observers may have trouble distinguishing between dynamics which specifically stem from this particular family structure, and dynamics which are associated with inter-generational relationships in any two-parent family. The difficulty in teasing apart these two issues is compounded by the fact that explanatory frameworks may take on a life of their own. For example, it is fairly typical for children in two-parent families to play one parent off the other and to go through stages in which allegiances to one parent appear stronger

than bonds to the other. In a typical nuclear family model in which a father is a less primary parent, he may be prone at a certain point in his child's development to feeling rejected or excluded. He is also likely to discover, at another point in time, that the tables can turn (descriptions of children's Oedipal issues highlight this dynamic). In a lesbian-headed family where there are biological and non-biological parents, all of a child's expressed preference for the biological parent may be interpreted as stemming from the difference regarding biological connection. While to some extent this may be an accurate perception (e.g., biological bonds may be very significant, and as will be seen later, certain parenting roles that may follow from them, such as nursing, may profoundly affect family dynamics), it is also true that the interpretive move itself can solidify the dynamic as an agreement between all family members, when in fact the phenomenon may be potentially more transient and have multiple roots. As a researcher and clinician, it is therefore paramount that key players' explanatory frameworks be both attended to and questioned.

Hannah provides a description of the complexity of asymmetrical parenting arrangements in the case of a biological and non-biological coparenting arrangement. Her explanatory framework includes an idea that the interaction

escalates because of each person's interpretations. Hannah also points out the connection between the non-biological parent's lack of recognition in the world and her internal response to family dynamics.

Hannah:

Mindy sees me as her primary parent. She drew a picture once of her family, and I was huge and Steve and Fran were tiny. I've been with her every day of her entire life. That's not true of Fran and Steve.

Mindy feels differently towards me. She loves Fran, but it's different. Fran is more playful with her and I'm more like a mother. It's a combination of people's personalities and the biological issues. You like to think that everything is equal and the same, but it's not. For a while Fran felt unacknowledged by the world and our community. She is very much a parent. For a while we couldn't talk about the differences in the relationships we each have with Mindy because I didn't want to hurt Fran's feelings.

Sometimes Mindy is mean to Fran and Fran gets very upset, and we both worry that it's because she somehow picked up that something is wrong here--that it's Fran's presence that makes something weird. She's never articulated an idea that Fran's not her mother--it would be awful if she said that. But she acts like it sometimes. The thing is, it's an issue for Fran--she's insecure and sensitive about it, and I think Mindy picks up on that and pushes it further sometimes.

We've talked a lot about Fran's feeling unacknowledged. Also, if Mindy is hurt she'll come to me or she'll act out towards Fran if she's having a hard time--all indications that we have different bonds. Fran is hurt by that, but it's not about Fran. It's not because Mindy doesn't like Fran--it's because she's acting out--but it becomes that kind of issue. We work on confronting Mindy that she can't treat Fran this way because it hurts her, but we also talk about how Fran shouldn't take it on as a personal thing.

Nina is an example of someone who has paid close attention to the feelings stirred up by her position as non-biological coparent. She links the internal dynamics within the family to her feelings about lack of legitimacy in the world.

In Nina's description, the interplay of dominant cultural definitions (such as lack of recognition of the coparent status), intrapsychic phenomena, and family interactions is graphically illustrated. Nina also describes a process of internal change with respect to the family dynamics.

Nina:

Well, I think a lot of the dynamic with Julie when she was little was my sort of fighting for my place with her--not just in terms of the world, but in terms of Beth's and Julie's connection with each other. I was pretty relentless about it.

Just when Julie would cry and cry, and in some ways would probably want Beth, I would sort of force my way in and they'd kind of both give in to me in some ways. But it was a sense that I was going to be real important too, and Julie was going to really attach to me too. And she did, but there was a sense--one of the powerful issues I was dealing with was this whole way that I wasn't being recognized as Julie's mother. Julie's mother was Beth, not me. So in a lot of ways I felt like I had to fight hard for my place. I remember at work talking about myself as Julie's mother. And people--it didn't come out for a long time--then people started saying, "How's your daughter? How's she doing?", not just, "How's

Julie?" But it was a foreign notion to people, when there's already a biological mother there, to have an idea that there's another mother in the picture.

There were things that were confused for me at the time. I was fighting an external battle also in the family, without knowing that there was something different that I needed to be a little bit more respectful of. You know, I'm sure Julie's gonna be in therapy, on the couch, and she'll be saying, "Nina was at me all the time. She wouldn't leave me alone."

I think there was a process over the years as Julie got older, where I think I started accepting more, as painful as it was, and as much heartache and grief that I experienced, that there was something between Beth and Julie that I needed to respect that was different. It was kind of a grieving process. And I think as I was seeing other people accepting those differences in their families. There were some friends who had two kids, who I would react to a lot. They had two kids, and they were much more divided. I mean, the biological child called the biological mother "Mommy," and the other by her first name. Those kids each had their biological mothers' last names. It's different in our family.

I think I saw some people--I wasn't really happy about it. I wasn't really happy about the way some divisions got drawn in families, but there was something I was willing to learn from it. It wasn't the way I wanted to do it, but there was something I felt willing to learn as I was watching them.

As Nina sorts through the complexity of these issues, she is able to identify factors in families (other than biological/non-biological asymmetries), that may contribute to the formation of different kinds of relationships. This is evident as she contemplates the distinction between her relationship to her non-biological daughter and her

biological son.

Nina:

We both probably had more intense relationships with Julie than either of us had with Jason. I think that has to do with her being a first child, and having such a traumatic birth, and being so vulnerable since she was premature. Jason, on the other hand, is just this very hearty self-regulating kind of kid. So there's a different kind of relationship.

Nina's description illustrates how particular relationship dynamics may be exacerbated or elaborated on by certain family structure decisions. On a pragmatic level, she suggests that in cases where both couple members are planning to get pregnant, the issue of who will be the first can be profound within the couple and family dynamics.

Nina:

I was very competitive with Beth in relation to Julie, and I was jealous of her. She was nursing her and I couldn't do that. I fought a lot--this was interesting, I think--because I didn't automatically get the validation that Beth got. There was a way, in terms of our couple dynamics, that it was good for Beth to be the first one to have the biological--that Beth was the second one to be in the non-biological, more disenfranchised position, because I tend to be much more aggressive and active when I'm stressed about something; and in this case, with Julie, it was very important that I had worked very hard and was very active and out there around being Julie's parent, and really being--claiming that. Beth got to experience me doing that before she did, so I think it was helpful to her. Also, there is a way that, because of who we each are, it was better for Beth to be the first biological parent and to

have Julie's dependency and desire, and that sense of being so primary. I think it's very interesting in a couple of two women, who gets to have a child first and why--how does that relate to their particular psychological issues?

It's harder for Beth to feel like she has a place, and it's harder for her to feel like she's important. There's no way--I mean, Julie absolutely needed Beth, and she was very important. That was hard for me, but it was good for Beth. And it was good for the dynamics in our relationship. It's easier for me to feel important and like I matter. So in terms of our dynamics, if I'd been the first one to have a kid and have that relationship, it could have been really hard on Beth. Her style is to withdraw more under stress. So I think for a lot of reasons it was very good that she was the first person to have a child. It's an interesting option because heterosexuals don't have that kind of choice.

We have friends who had a knock-down drag-out battle around this issue of who was going to go first and what it would mean. It was so painful for them--they both wanted to go first. And there's somebody else we know who was considering pregnancy, and we had a lot of worries about the dynamic in her couple relationship, since she definitely tended to be the dominant one and her lover tended to pull back more. So I think this is one thing to consider.

Lily sees asymmetries in parenting roles as particularly salient with respect to power relations in the couple. She suggests that the difficulties inherent in unequal parenting roles can be partially undercut by each woman having a child biologically.

Lily:

We decided to have a kid each. I'm really glad we did because I think it makes the

relationship more equal. I know a couple where one person had the kid and the other person really legally has no rights. I think that when push comes to shove and you're having an argument, it's so easy to say, "Well, you can't see my kid." There's so much more power in one part even though you can swear up and down that it's both of yours; but when you're fighting you use everything you can, and that's something I think someone could use. When you have one each you can't use it anymore, like in a heterosexual relationship you can't either. I think it's safer to be as equal as possible. You could still use it and say, "Well, I won't let you see my kid," but then you won't get to see the other one. We certainly decided to raise them as sister and brother, so each person has a chip as opposed to one has and the other doesn't.

We figured if we both had a child at the same time, we had a fantasy of not telling which baby came from which body. We knew it was just a fantasy, but we felt like if we said that they'd be more interchangeable. Both of us could get the recognition of being a mother. If you're in a lesbian relationship and your lover has a baby, a lot of people don't recognize that you had a baby. All the attention goes to the natural, biological mother. It also had to do with our parents. We wanted them to recognize both kids as our kids, and it was clear to me that my parents wouldn't-- that they would barely recognize my biological child, much less the other, as their grandchild. So if we didn't tell them, then they wouldn't know and they wouldn't have any choice.

Like Nina, Lily describes the ways in which, despite parents' initial wishes, asymmetries can develop.

Lily:

You can't always be equal. We tried. Ideally we'd like to be equal, but I don't think it is equal. In a way it's equal because there's one each. If there were only one, I think it would be harder. There's a balance that each kid prefers each mother.

I have to admit that when you're pregnant and you carry a baby around in your body for nine months, you're aware of that baby, so when it comes out you still know that baby. I don't know how to describe it. It's like when you hold it there's a certain familiarity, although I didn't think there was any less of that when I think back on what it was like to hold Robert. When he was real little I held him and put him on my chest a lot, and I don't think I felt any different than when I put Jade on my chest. I took care of Robert for eight months without nursing him, and when I started nursing him it was a little different. There's that closeness. People never talk about it, but when you nurse certainly there's some stimulation to your nipples and there's a sensual feeling about it, like when you have sex with a person and you have that physical closeness. You have that same physical closeness when a baby is nursing. It's different from just holding a bottle.

Although we nursed both of the kids, I nursed Jade more, about eighty percent of the time. I was producing a lot of milk because she was nursing frequently, so I spent more time with her in the beginning. Claire had nursed Robert from the time he was born, a good eight months earlier. I think it did make a real difference. I mean, Jade was very dependent on me to nurse her the first few months of her life. Though she went to both of us, she knew that I was food to her more than Claire was. She knew that when I came home she'd get fed. Because of that, I put her to bed most of the time and Claire put Robert to bed. Even now we tend to do that more. Robert somewhat prefers Claire, and Jade prefers me. A lot of it is probably from the nursing and early caretaking. When Robert was little I took care of him three days a week, eight hours a day, but he was still more attached to Claire because she nursed him. The minute she came into the room there was a certain boundary that was different. I'm sure it went beyond milk. It was that smell, that closeness, everything.

We try to be equal. Certainly we love both of them as equally as you can, I suppose. I'm sure there might be some part--part of it was slightly imposed. I've traveled with Jade and been alone with Jade and not with Robert

overnight, because she was dependent on me to nurse her for so long. Then I went to visit my parents. She wasn't dependent on me to feed her, but my parents only acknowledge her, so I took her with me. You spend a week with one child and you're with them all the time, as opposed to the other child, and you do get closer. They get attached, so that's probably happened. We hadn't anticipated it to be this way. We thought it would be more equal, but I think we accept it. It might not be ideal, but as they get older I think it will be different at different times. They might use each of us for different things because of who each of us is. For example, things like who'd be more likely to say "Yes," if they want to go out, or who'd be more likely to comfort them if they have a problem--I don't think it will necessarily be their biological parent.

In thinking about symmetry issues, Lucy highlights the extent to which, as a biological parent, she has had to reorient herself in order to "make room" for her partner's parenting role.

Lucy:

Maura has two mothers. We are two women who respond in a maternal fashion to Maura. As the biological mother, I've had to defer some of that traditional role that I would have had all by myself, and that I can absolutely be thrilled by. I've had to allow someone else to mother my child, and there's a giving up in the process. I've had to make room for Bonnie. Bonnie mothers her in some ways that might not be my choice of mothering, but the child has two mothers. She doesn't have a mother and a significant other. They have their own relationship.

Lucy also sees potential conflict between cultural reinforcement of ideas about biological connection, and the

internal working of a family that attempts to operate out of a different set of assumptions.

Lucy:

I think there's a lot of cultural and societal pressure that says--well, there's a lot of emphasis on the family, and one of the ways it gets supported is an idea about biological connection. In this family though, in the day-to-day operation of this house and this family and the raising of this child, it's the day-to-day love that Bonnie shows Maura that makes her Maura's parent, far and above any amount of blood or genes or whatever goes into making all of us.

It's a different relationship but not decisively so, especially at this stage. When Maura gets out there and hears a lot about the importance of "Mommy" and the great deal that "Mommy" matters in her upbringing and development--"Bring this home to your Mommy," and, "Mommy this and Mommy that"--she's going to hear me emphasized over Bonnie. But in this house, in this place, Maura's got two parents and she's working it out.

Again, the internal functioning of a family is not readily separable from culturally embedded issues. A non-biological parent's lack of public recognition may significantly affect family relationships. Jane describes how, despite her basic sense that asymmetry within the family is acceptable, she is prone to conflict about her lack of legitimate parenting status.

Jane:

We are a family. In my day-to-day functioning I feel like I'm a parent. But when I confront outside forces or realize that if I walk

into a hospital and say I'm her "Didi," which is the name she gave me, it's not going to mean a whole lot to them. If they wanted to give me a hard time, they could. If she's bleeding they could try to track down her mother because my signature isn't good enough.

Even with adoption, one or the other of us could not have legal status. And also, generally speaking, when we walk the streets as two women and a child we are not seen as a family unit.

I feel sometimes like I have to fight to get validity as a parent. When Kimberly was small, if we'd go out together, whoever was "wearing" her was assumed to be the mother, and the other person was assumed to be the friend. I used to hate it if we'd run into people who related immediately to Debra as the mother because they'd seen her pregnant. I always wanted to jump in and say, "Do you realize I'm also a parent of this child?"

On some level, I say it's irrelevant--it doesn't matter what Mary Smith down the street thinks of my relation to this child--but it actually matters a lot to me. I want recognition as this child's parent. When Debra left town this weekend, I got in a panic about making sure I knew where the power of attorney was. If she falls and cuts her chin, they don't have to accept my signature to go ahead and stitch it. I'm always aware that in many respects, legally and otherwise, I'm not recognized as this child's parent, and that's hard.

Every time we make new childcare arrangements I worry. I project onto them--are they going to acknowledge me as a full parent? Then I have to look at my own stuff--do I really see me as a full parent, or is my own upbringing and homophobia getting in the way and saying, "No, this isn't legitimate"?

Biological connection between mother and child has many ramifications with respect to coparenting arrangements. One central issue may be nursing.

Tricia describes her "naivete" at the time of her daughter's birth as stemming from an idea that two women coparenting would be about equal, insofar as both had been socialized to be nurturing of a child. She was surprised to find that, in large part because of nursing and a rather traditional division of labor, her family dynamics closely resembled the most traditional heterosexual family models.

Tricia:

I was incredibly naive. I thought because we were two women that it would be much more mutual--that it wouldn't entail someone feeling left out because they didn't get enough attention. I thought of that as more typical of heterosexual relationships, where the man might say, "I need to get taken care of and nurtured myself." It was really a shock and awakening for me when that happened between Randy and I.

Women's modes of thinking about the parameters of biological connections can profoundly influence their family dynamics. Whereas Tricia was taken by surprise, Diane and her partner attempted to counteract the asymmetry of nursing. In their story, one can again see the reciprocal nature of women's thinking and family structure parameters, insofar as nursing prompted them to change some core ideas.

Diane:

We had always planned on me being the one who'd get pregnant, because Chris has a number of medical problems and she's also older--she was forty-one--so it didn't seem like she'd be a good

candidate. I was young and healthy, so it seemed like I was the right one. That was a pretty easy decision for me. It wasn't ever an issue for me that I would share the kid with Chris. I think it was an issue for her whether we could really do it and be equals. A lot of that was, having grown up in our culture, that's not how families work. People don't have equal responsibility for their kids. At the time that I was pregnant, the other women we knew who had kids didn't seem to be doing it in what looked to us like a really equal fashion. We didn't want to have a kid who called one of us "Mommy" and the other by her first name. We didn't want the kid to think of one of us as her mother and the other as something different. We both wanted to be parents and we both wanted to be equally involved.

When I was pregnant it was so much me. The way the world works, a kid belongs to the people s/he is biologically related to, and doesn't belong at all to anybody else. So we felt like we really had to counteract that. When I was pregnant it was almost impossible to do it, because except for our closest friends and some of our family, it never occurred to people that it was Chris's kid I was carrying. After Lisa was born it meant things like, when we went out in public, Chris was usually in charge of the baby--she'd change her and carry her around and introduce her to people. In those first few months when all she did was nurse, it kind of gave me a break, but it felt like it also made a point with people that this was really Chris's kid. And it provided some great moments of entertainment: We went into a restaurant once, and I was eating and Chris was carrying the baby around, and someone came over and said, "What a beautiful baby," and Chris said, "Thank you," and she said, "Is she yours?", and Chris said, "Yes." A minute later she sat down and Lisa started to nurse at my breast, and this woman just turned around with her jaw on the floor and kept looking at us.

Although we'd thought about it ahead of time, nursing turned out to be an even bigger factor than we'd imagined. It's all you do. It was hard. We both felt it was important to nurse her for health reasons, and also for the kind of connection she gets. So we tried to devise other ways for Chris to get the same kind of connection with her that I got through nursing. In some ways

it wasn't really possible. What we came to was that equality can't be measured in small segments, but has to be measured in some broader way. We could still have equality in our relationship with her and with each other, without having Chris spend minute for minute as much time with Lisa as I did nursing, or without having Chris nurse her too. Some of the other things we did try to make that connection between Chris and Lisa are: They took baths together almost every day, really long cuddly baths, because it felt like part of the bonding I got with Lisa was all that naked skin. Chris also took her on walks. As she got older and nursing was less important, things really evened-out. For a long time Chris gave her a bath and put her to bed at night.

My sense is that she needed that particular activity, and if we could have put one of my breasts on Chris, it would have been fine with her. She needed to nurse--it wasn't really about me. I mean, it wasn't like she wanted me and I could give her a bottle instead--it was the act of nursing. We talked periodically about whether we were going to wean Lisa or she was going to wean herself, and each time we talked about it, it came down to the fact that we really wanted her to wean herself.

When she was eight months old I stopped nursing her before she went to bed at night. She woke up in the middle of the night to nurse. She nursed well past her second birthday. By then, she'd get up in the morning and nurse. It was only that one time, but I know it was hard for Chris that there was still that one way that--one thing she couldn't do for Lisa and one ultimate comfort that she couldn't give her. So when Lisa was really sick or really hurt, that's what she wanted to do, and Chris couldn't do that with her. I know that was hard.

The contrasts between Nina, Diane and Tricia are good examples of the way in which asymmetry has specific characteristics that vary on a case-by-case basis. For instance, in contrast to Nina's process of coming to terms

with the asymmetry of biological connection and nursing, Diane focuses on the invention of alternative bonding interactions.

Asymmetry is not always seen as a problem. Some women are accepting of it, as Marie articulates.

Marie:

In retrospect, we were pretty realistic. We always said, and still do, that we want to coparent equally, and I think we are. I think we do that, but we recognized from the beginning that, particularly early on, the biological factor makes a difference, especially with breast-feeding. He will still, if he's hurt or something, want her and go to her. It's progressively less that way as he's gotten older.

My instinct about it is that there's a physical security that he has from her body. Though he and I are very physical--he cuddles with me--my instinct--and I've really got no basis for this, it's just what I think--is that there's a degree of physical relaxing that he gets from her body. It's just the way it looks.

I wouldn't have chosen to forego breast-feeding, because I think it's good for kids, and if you can do it, you should. It's been established that it's the best food in terms of nutrition, and I think there's a psychological comfort and security. Jana wanted to breast-feed--I mean physically wanted to, out of the experience of the pregnancy. I think there is something to these hormones.

Jane also expresses an acceptance of asymmetry. Her story describes a form of parental love particularly relevant to those in "secondary" coparenting roles. Here, Jane's need for affirmation gives way to her desire that Kimberly have exactly what she needs, including Debra.

Jane:

If Debra's not around, Kimberly will always reach out to me for comfort. But if we're both around, she goes through periods of wanting Debra more. It seems to coincide with her becoming more independent. For example, during the period she was starting to walk, as her language developed, and as she spent more time at daycare--anytime her independence or time away from home increased--coincided with times when if something happened and I went to comfort her she'd say, "No, don't want you, want Mommy." Even before she was speaking, she'd throw her arms toward Debra. The most amazing and powerful thing for me about that was that I really wanted her to have that. I can be fairly selfish I think, and in my head I'd known before it ever happened that I wanted to be careful not to put my stuff on her. I didn't want to give her any kind of message that it wasn't okay for her to feel whatever she feels, including to prefer Debra over me. But once it happened, it felt like, "Yeah, that's what it's about," and what felt really good to me was that I genuinely wanted her to have what she needed. It's not that there aren't times when it's painful for me to see her in pain and go to her and have her say, "I don't want you." But I also have this overwhelming feeling that what I want is for her to know that her feelings are okay whatever they are, and that I want her to get what she needs.

While biological connection may seem to foster asymmetry, it is fascinating to note that in the absence of it, asymmetry can be socially created. Single parent

adoption provides an example of this. Again, it is not only the legal parameter that creates the emotional tone, but also particular interpretations of those parameters. In the absence of biological connection to a child (as in adoption), the fact of single parent adoption may create an asymmetry which mimics what may occur when a child has been biologically conceived by one partner. Here, it is not biology which is taken up in the family, but rather, institutional and cultural definitions. Martha illustrates this point.

Martha:

If we could have done a double parent adoption, we would have. It would have solved a number of problems--insurance benefits and free tuition. I would like to have a legal arrangement, but in this state there is no way to make me legally connected to her. If we split up I have no legal recourse. I can't go to court and ask for visiting privileges. I don't think that would happen. Jessie would value Jackie's relationship with me, but you never can tell--people can get pretty nasty in break-ups.

In some ways you could say my role is more like a traditional father in that I'm not as involved and I'm not the first line parent, for example, dealing with daycare, etc. In my family, my mother would have done all that, and my father was available but he wasn't home as much. So I've always thought of myself in that sense as more of a traditional father, but I just spent the entire weekend with Jackie and am realizing that I'm more involved than my father was.

The asymmetry works in my favor, because if I'm tired I can say to Jessie, "Your daughter is bothering me." Seriously, it doesn't bother me on a day-to-day basis, but there is some background vulnerability involved. What's gotten clear to me

with Jackie is that I'm a real softy when it comes to kids and dogs, and the rest doesn't really matter. Once they get to you, they get to you. If you're wondering do you hold back because she's not really yours--you can't do that. She's there.

One reason to get a second child would be for Jackie to have a sibling. In some ways it would make sense that s/he should also be legally Jessie's child, and have Jessie's name. I mean, if Jackie's going to have a sense of having a brother or a sister, then they ought to be her brother or sister. Why mix it up--have another kid in the family but have them have a different name, and have her have to figure out whether it's really her brother or sister. That seems confusing to me, and I don't really have a big need to have my own kid per se. So if we're really doing this so Jackie can have a sibling, then she ought to have a sibling.

If you worry about the external structures in terms of how she's going to relate to that, then you should make it as easy as possible. If she'd have to explain different names to people--it's complicated for kids when, for instance, they have different names because of divorce.

Jessie also describes the family dynamic engendered by the legal parameters.

Jessie:

There's absolutely no way Martha can be a legal parent. I'm waiting for the finalization to come through before we draw up the paperwork, but she will at that point be her legal guardian so that if anything were to happen to me, Martha would be Jackie's guardian.

If something were to happen in our relationship, I feel deeply committed to Martha and Jackie maintaining a relationship. This is a source of worry for Martha I think, because there's nothing we can do legally to assure this. Our lawyer said we could draw up a contract including visitation, etc., but she also said it

would be very rare for it to hold up in court. I think it has to be more just our commitment to each other that if something were to happen--if we were to live separately--Jackie would live with me, but I would do everything I could in order for her to have an ongoing relationship with Martha, because Martha has been her other parent.

I think though, that this is a source of great pain--I mean, she's drawn to tears over this. It's very frightening for her. She says, "What if you fell in love with someone who lived in California? Then you'd move...", but in my mind, Martha has been a parent to Jackie and will always be a parent to her, will always be an important person in her life. I feel deeply committed to them maintaining contact.

In contrast, Mary does not view the legal definitions inherent in single parent adoption as particularly salient. Here again, one can discern that individuals participate in constructing their relations to cultural definitions and institutions.

Mary:

Deidre has no legal claim on Sylvia at all. I suppose if I wanted to really fuck her over I could do that. We have legal papers specifying that if I were to die, she is the person who should take care of Sylvia, but as long as I'm alive she has no more standing than anyone else, unfortunately.

We thought of our roles as being quite equal, equal as we could possibly make it. When we were going through all the legal stuff around the adoption it was just me, in theory, doing that. In fact, Deidre was behind me all the way. Our idea was that we'd split the finances absolutely fifty/fifty, split the care of Sylvia fifty/fifty, and that Sylvia would think of both of us as her parents. Really the only difference is that legally I am her parent. It's a significant one,

but for us it's not a big one.

Sibships

As parents make decisions about having more than one child, their ways of defining sibships reflect thinking about genetic connections, relational connections, and in some instances, cultural (or ethnic) connections.

Karen:

We decided we wanted two children the same age. . . . I think some of the feeling was we were bringing up two kids that were going to be socially different in a lot of ways, and that the closer they were in age, the more they would have each other to share things with about how to negotiate social things. . . .

I got pregnant in November of 1980, and Terry got pregnant two months later. So we went through our pregnancies together, which was really lovely--if I had an ache or a pain, I knew she understood. Our son, Neil, was born in August of '81, and Faye was born in September of '81. Life was real chaotic with two babies. It was also ecstatic--we were thrilled to be parents. Our son died when he was four months old, of crib death. I guess we're still getting over--I think there are ways in which you never get over that. We did make a decision to have another child--I personally needed to have another child. I needed to know I could produce a healthy baby that could survive. Also, we wanted to have two kids. We really didn't want to bring up an only child. It gives the kids a lot to have someone else to fight with and to share with and to compete with. . . . Anyway, Kevin was born last August and he's fine.

Lily emphasizes the racial connection as a defining feature of her children's sibship.

Lily:

A lot of people suggest if you're going to have two kids you should use the same donor, but we rejected that idea. I guess if we were both white or both Asian I might have accepted that; but clearly if our kids had the same donor then they wouldn't be the same in terms of race. Claire's reason was that she didn't want the kids to be alike because of the father--that it would be giving the donor too much power to say that they're brother and sister because they have the same father. The reason they're brother and sister is not because they have the same father, but because they're raised by us.

We were really concerned about race. We wanted the kids to share racial backgrounds. We wanted them to be half Asian and half white. We agreed on that right away. I knew that my kid was going to be at least half, if not fully Asian, and we wanted them to be alike--to be brother and sister. It was really important that they be like each other. If one kid was Asian and the other white, that's a drastically different experience in the world--in the U.S., anyway. So we wanted them to share an experience closer.

Hannah, in contrast, emphasizes the possibility of genetic connection.

Hannah:

Fran does not want to have an anonymous donor. She feels quite strongly that the child should have a father. We've actually talked to Steve about him being the father, but Fran and he have a difficult relationship, and I don't know at this point whether it would be a good thing or a bad thing for them to do it. One positive thing is that the child would be Mindy's genetic sibling and that would be nice for her. It would be nice for them to have the same father. It would be less complicated in that there would be less people. It would be nice for the kids to share

all their parents. Logistically it's a lot cleaner.

Lee thinks about ethnicity as a bond for her children, and also treats the orphanage itself as a bonding factor.

Lee:

It would have been fine if Maggie had ended up being an only child--that would have not been my preference, 'cause I feel like especially with Pam and I being older, that I want both of them--both of them have all the issues to deal with about not having their own biological family. It just seemed like--whoever knows if these things work out?--but I wanted them to have each other as they got older. And it probably would have been fine if Jill had come from a different country or something, but I thought it would add to the specialness of their relationship if they shared a common cultural history. So that's part of--it's very much a major reason for why it was important to get a child from the same country, and in fact, from the same orphanage.

Mary raises the issue of symmetry, in that she sees Deidre's adopting as potentially balancing. However, she treats all possible forms of defining connection (e.g., legal, ethnic), as secondary to the actual relationships.

Mary:

I know couples who've adopted two kids and one has adopted one, and the other has adopted the other. I've always thought that was really nice--for whatever balance you think is important in the world. So it would be great if Deidre did it this time, but if she didn't, I have a hunch it wouldn't be a real big issue for us if I were the one to do it again.

I think it would be great if the second child came from the same country as Sylvia, and from the same region as well. But it would be a ten percent consideration--an icing on the cake sort of thing.

Women's thinking about sibships is yet another arena in which the question, "What is a family?", is central. These women ask, "What will make our children siblings?"--common genes, ethnicity, or simply the fact of being raised together?

Concluding Remarks

I hope this chapter has demonstrated the truth of Foucault's notions regarding social transformation. Family formation presents itself as a set of problems for lesbians. A partial list of the broad biological, social and historical factors that constitute the groundwork for lesbian family formation at this time includes: the feminist movement, the gay rights movement, developments in reproductive technology, the adoption structure, AIDS, homophobia, women's socialization as mothers, the fact that two women cannot reproduce biologically, the legal system. Faced with the variety of parameters delineated in each of these phenomena, particular individuals respond to the problems of lesbian family formation with diverse solutions. There is not one necessary response, although there are

certain parameters or limits around the set of possible responses. The multiple issues inherent in the family formation process are differentially weighted and organized for individuals depending on their particular histories, contexts and approaches to the world. Furthermore, in looking at this process it is not possible to neatly draw lines between individual histories (and perspectives), and broader cultural phenomena. For example, the issue of how women weight biological connections between mothers and children is simultaneously a matter of individual predilection, deep-rooted cultural constructs and idiosyncratic circumstances. This can be said of any of the issues discussed in this chapter.

In concluding, I want to comment on the process of constructing this chapter. Of all the sections, this presented the most challenging organizational issues. The complexity of the decision tree for any one woman defies neat categories. When considering a group of women, the complexity is exponentially intensified. In fact, all the delineations I've made (e.g., category headings such as "Risks of Adoption," or "Couple Dynamics"), are in some sense false, insofar as in people's actual lives these are woven into a complex network of reciprocally influential factors. It is somewhat like isolating a single cell under a microscope to even attempt to name the relevant issues. A

certain kind of knowledge is thus gained, but it has only a tangential relation to understanding the cell as part of a particular living organism.

As a clinician, the usefulness of delineating relevant issues (such as those articulated in this chapter), is akin to the usefulness of a map. In my clinical work, I use this type of information as a guide to help me know what to look for or wonder about. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind the incompleteness of this type of catalogue of issues, and to remain open to hearing forms of silence and invention not previously counted.

Chapter 10

A Rose By Any Other Name

[T]he names of things have nothing whatsoever to do with how simple or complicated they are.

Antonio Skarmeta
Burning Patience(1)

Homophobia is a powerful factor in the lack of adequate language for lesbian experience. As I hope I have demonstrated in previous chapters, relationships which are culturally sanctioned have names that are both commonly used and defined in formal institutional structures (such as the legal system). Hence, the words "husband" and "wife" have relatively straightforward meanings. One way in which the forbidden, illicit nature of lesbian relationships is expressed in the culture is through a lack of such public, commonly understood naming. Hence, individual lesbians (and to some extent various lesbian sub-cultures), grapple in relative isolation with the question of appropriate names for their partners (lovers, mates, companions, etc.).

Similarly, when lesbians construct relationships to children, the questions surrounding names are quite complex. What is a child named? What does s/he call each of his or her parents? The issues are not defined simply by a lack of names, but rather, just as powerfully by the presence of

names and conventions in the culture which may or may not adequately reflect the particular relationships in these families. For instance, "mother" may be readily applied to a lesbian who bears or legally adopts a child. The larger culture is likely to acknowledge that relationship precisely in common terminology. However, when that happens and a coparent is involved, her relationship is also defined by that naming, albeit negatively. If one parent is the mother, what is the other? This particular problem is partially engendered by the newness and relative novelty of the situation. The definition of "mother" thus comes into question: Is it a biological function? A social function? Can a family have more than one mother? I wish to emphasize here that these seemingly neutral questions of definition cannot be considered outside of the context of pervasive homophobia. For example, if one decides to name both parents "Mother," one would have to contend with a specifically homophobic rejection of that construction within the culture.

Similarly, names of children reflect relational configurations. Typically in our culture, children's last names coincide with their biological fathers', though more recently due to the influence of feminism, some children's names are combinations of their fathers' and mothers' last names. Single women's children typically have their

mothers' last names. Lesbians, in naming their children, take a stance regarding the question of whose child this is. Does the child have the last name of the biological or legal mother, of the father if known, of the lesbian coparent, or some combination of the above? Sometimes, lesbians, like others in our culture, use children's first and middle names as a way of establishing familial connections as well.

The complexity of naming stems in part from the multiple functions the naming process encompasses. For example, one aspect of naming is the determination of meaning. In this domain, names follow from an internally consistent, formal logic. For instance, an individual may declare that the term "mother" refers to a person who performs a specific set of functions in relation to a child, and therefore call any person who fits that criteria "mother." Another person may declare that "mother" encompasses a gendered meaning and can only be applied to a woman who serves that specific set of functions. These two individuals disagree in the domain of meaning, or on a semantic level. Their formal systems of definition diverge, but each is internally consistent. Some differences between my subjects with respect to the naming process can best be understood as this type of semantic disagreement.

However, there are other aspects of the naming process which greatly influence people's decisions in specific cases. Insofar as entering a specific linguistic system (e.g., sharing a language), involves participation in a set of group relationships, the process of naming entails the establishment of one's relationships to others in a group. Naming is a specific form of linguistic construction in which an entity (person, thing, relationship, etc.), is identified to a larger group. When parents name a child they say in effect, "We call this child Susan, and we expect that she will call herself Susan, and that you in the world will call her Susan." Thus, a set of agreements are proposed. In most instances we do not notice the complexity of the arrangement because we simply participate in it. However, when there are disjunctures between various people's ideas, the agreement process is revealed as a complex set of relationships. One aspect of the complexity which thereby becomes clear is the question of who determines names. It is important to look more closely not only at what is proposed, but also at who proposes it to whom. There may be disjunctures between two parents, between parents and various parts of the larger culture, between parents and children, or as one may begin to imagine, between a variety of participants grouped in multiple combinations.

When lesbian parents think about the questions surrounding naming, they take a stance regarding many sets of relationships. A partial list includes: a couple's relationship to each other, individual parents' relationships to the children, the children's relationships to the larger culture, the parents' relationships to the larger culture. Names are used both within the family (as family members identify themselves to each other), and between the family and the world outside. Thus, the process of naming partially constructs both internal family relationships and the family in the world.

Individuals' beliefs and desires regarding all of these relationships thus play pivotal roles in the naming process. For example, some women argue that names are precisely a way of joining with the culture, and that it is in the best interests of a child to insure that s/he will have a way of doing that. Hence, they may choose to use the most traditional terminology in their naming process, expecting the child to call only the biological or legal parent "Mother," and giving the child that person's last name. They thus attempt to construct for the child a particular relation to the larger culture. On the other hand, some women feel strongly that names should first and foremost reflect one's sense of definitions, and that the culture should be pressed to join with the family in honoring names

thus established. In a case like this, a couple might decide that both women should be called "Mommy" by the child, and that the larger culture (in the form of all who come into contact with the family), should be educated to do the same. The child in this instance might have a last name which is a combination of both mothers' names. In cases like these, women create linguistic systems or alter the dominant linguistic system. In both examples, women attempt to establish particular relationships between themselves and the world, and between their children and the world, in addition to establishing family members' relationships to each other.

Thus far I've argued that the naming process is influenced by women's sense of definitions (e.g., formal semantic logic), and by their values and desires regarding multiple sets of relationships, which I call the pragmatic dimension. In addition to these two factors, women's beliefs about language itself and child development strongly influence their approaches to the dilemmas outlined. I call this the meta level of language. The question of how children develop language is a crucial underpinning to the naming process. For example, some women believe that their own decisions about the use of language are quintessentially determining of the child's use of language. Hence, their expectation that the child will use the names for parents

which the parents repeatedly use to refer to themselves, leads to an emphasis on planned use of language around the child. On the other hand, some women believe that children's language development is much less within the domain of parental influence, and they therefore respond to the question of what the child will call each parent by essentially saying, "Whatever s/he decides to call us." These parents are potentially much less consistent and conscious regarding their own use of names in the child's presence.

Finally, individuals' participation in the naming process is influenced by their beliefs about the relative importance of names altogether. Some women feel that names are extremely critical aspects of relational life, and that they both construct and embody particular kinds of relationships. A woman who believes this is likely to attend closely to the emotional ramifications of differential use of names. She may be particularly concerned, for example, about the question of whether a child calling one parent "Mommy" and the other by her first name is actually learning to thereby hold and value the relationships unequally. On the other hand, some women believe that names have very little to do with people's actual relationships with each other, and they are therefore

more likely to focus on the ways in which relationships "transcend" whatever names are established.

The four aspects of naming delineated above (beliefs regarding: definitions, relationships, children's language development, and the relative importance of language), affect everybody's thinking about the issues surrounding names. The complexity of any particular person's process in this domain is influenced not only by the particular content of each area of thought, but also by the relationships between each area and the relative emphasis placed on each. For instance, a person's sense of definitions may conflict with her desires regarding the child's relation to the larger culture, and in such a case she may choose to emphasize one set of values and ideas over the other. Thus, one might find two women who agree that the term "mother" should be applied to all who perform certain functions, but in one case the woman may construct a family in which both parents are called "Mommy," and in the other case the woman may wish for only one parent to be called "Mommy." In the latter instance, the decision may be determined by a choice to emphasize a set of values regarding the child's relation to the larger culture over the woman's internal sense of definitions. Decisions such as these are emotionally laden and generally entail considerable pain, confusion, pride,

love, etc. Again, when couples are in the process together, the complexity may be intensified by their diverging views.

As lesbians consider the issues surrounding naming, they respond both to a state of namelessness and to the names which the larger culture might give them. Since lesbians love in defiance of social norms, they grapple with the question of names at the same time as they contend with questions of power and self-determination. Lesbians are certainly not the first or only people who have confronted the intertwined forces of language and power in their personal lives. When one's sense of personal identity and desire differs markedly from the dominant cultural conceptions, "givens become questions," to again recall Foucault. The following dialogue between well-known "forbidden" lovers is suggestive of the extent to which names can be simultaneously both totally irrelevant to, and absolutely formative of essential human relationships.

Juliet: O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name!
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

Romeo: Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

Juliet: 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.

So Romeo would were he not Romeo called,
 Retain that dear perfection which he owes
 Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
 And for that name which is no part of thee,
 Take all myself.

Romeo: I take thee at thy word.
 Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized.
 Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

Juliet: What man art thou that, thus bescreened in night,
 So stumblest on my counsel?

Romeo: By a name
 I know not how to tell thee who I am.
 My name dear saint, is hateful to myself,
 Because it is an enemy to thee.
 Had I it written, I would tear the word.

Juliet: My ears have yet not drunk a hundred words
 Of that tongue's utterance, yet I know the sound.
 Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?

Romeo: Neither fair saint, if either thee dislike.(2)

One tragic aspect of Romeo's and Juliet's situation is that despite Juliet's conviction that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," the pair is ultimately doomed by their names. In private they play with the notion of disavowing their names (and interestingly, thereby their families as well), but ultimately they cannot simply escape their relationships to the world beyond themselves. I understand their deaths not as a necessary outcome, but rather, as one particular scenario.

The lesbian parents quoted herein are in the process of struggling with the interface between themselves and a world

which does not support the lives they have created. In so doing, they are neither absolutely free of public convention nor absolutely "doomed" by it. Their responses to the complex and difficult dilemmas they face embody an impressive array of creativity and invention.

Glenda, as a single lesbian parent, points out the ways in which she doesn't feel adequately represented by traditional terminology.

Glenda:

I think when women are in the process of figuring out what their family is going to be, it's better to just use first names and figure out what kinds of relationships you'd like everyone to have, without using labels like "mother" and "father," because the labels are so loaded.

I'm a single parent. Sam calls me "Ma." I'm his mother because society says women who are parents are mothers and men who are parents are fathers. But I think of it as: He's born into a one-parent family. In terms of roles like mother and father, I do both, so it's not like he doesn't have something in terms of a role. He happens to have a donor biologically and a mother biologically, but in terms of parenting he has a parent who he calls a mother, but I do both functions. "Mother" is just what I am in the context of society's expectations. It's like, "Well, so he doesn't have a father?" Well yes, he does--I'm his father too in the sense of what fathers do.

Between mothers and fathers they do all the parenting functions, and different mothers and fathers divide that up differently depending on who they are as people. I don't think it's gender-linked particularly, but the names are gender-linked, so that's why I'm his mother, but

in terms of this interview I consider myself to be Sam's parent.

Glenda's thinking underscores the extent to which parenting roles, gender, and a traditional nuclear family model are all intertwined in our use of the words "mother" and "father." Though she only comments essentially on the semantic realm, the complexity of the naming process is already discernible insofar as she identifies multiple meanings.

Jane introduces an aspect of the pragmatic dimension of naming, insofar as she points out the difficulty of not having a public, universal name despite the fact that within her family unit a name has evolved. Speaking from the position of non-biological mother, Jane describes the experience of the disjuncture between the way the relationship is named within the family and the way it is essentially unnamed in the larger culture.

Jane:

In terms of what Kimberly was going to call me, that was a really hard question. I just hated that there was no name for what my relationship to her was going to be. As much as I tried to say it shouldn't be such a big deal, it was a big deal to me. I felt we couldn't have her call both of us "Mommy." There are some people who've tried that, but I just thought it wasn't realistic--that it wasn't going to happen and it would only confuse her anyway. It seemed to me she needed some way to distinguish us. I mean, we will refer to the

fact that she has two mothers at this point, but I think that trying to have her call us both "Mommy" felt unrealistic. I really didn't want her to call me Jane. Probably someday, ultimately she will call me Jane and that will be okay, but I also felt like I wanted some name for her to call me. So we played around with it for a while when she was an infant, and at that point came up with "Maji"--it was an idea that combined Mommy and Jane. Before she started to talk that's how we referred to me. Then when she was just starting to talk she called me "Didi." At first we thought it was just a fluke, but then she repeated it in another context. I don't know where it came from--if it was from "Maji" or just something she created for some reason, but it's stuck. Now she refers to me as her "Didi." When she plays with her little teddies, sometimes there's a "Mommy" and a "Daddy," sometimes a "Mommy" and a "Didi." She knows that daddies are men and that I'm not. It doesn't mean anything to the world, but at least I have it.

I remember shortly after coming out to my sister, she remarked to me that it upset her that there wasn't a name for her relationship to Debra--that it felt to her like a sister-in-law relationship but she couldn't really refer to her that way. I think it's a much milder form of what I feel about names. I mean, names are important. If I'm in the supermarket and Kimberly calls, "Didi," it doesn't mean anything, and that part really upsets me--that there's not some universal way of explaining our relationship to each other.

I still think it will always upset me that there isn't a universal name for who I am to her. It feels like it's important enough that there should be something.

Kimberly's name for Jane functions as an aspect of their relational connection--it serves an emotional purpose within the family. However, while it is a source of connection between Jane and Kimberly, it also functions to separate them from the larger culture in that it, unlike the

term "mother," does not have universal meaning. Here, it is apparent that names can act either as a connection or a division between families and the dominant culture. While Jane's comment focuses on the experience of a parent in the face of this, her thoughts raise the question of how this type of disjuncture affects children.

Marie also expresses the pain of not fitting into larger cultural terminology, and suggests the partial remedy of forming "sub-culture" consensus regarding names.

Marie:

It's certainly one of the areas where there aren't words for the important things in lesbians' lives, because of homophobia. There's not really a word I like for "lover." We use "partner," but it's so ambiguous. I think this is the way language reflects our interface with the larger culture.

What we've seen with kids who are older is that they're going to do what they're going to do. Presumably it's somewhat influenced by what they hear, but we know a number of children who have just sort of evolved their own pet names for the co-mother.

People are handling names in very different ways. People parent differently and make all of these decisions differently; but I would like us to arrive at some things that we do in the same way. I don't know if that's possible.

I hope that we can come to some consensus as a community of lesbians and kids, about some of the language issues. For instance, as the kids get older, I'd like to see them collectively talk about their co-mothers. That's how I would like to handle the question of what you call the other mother--by trying to normalize it for kids and let

them know it's not just their individual family trying to defend their difference to the rest of the world, but that instead, there's a community of people doing that together. Then you don't have to feel so totally alone with it.

To some extent that is going to happen because many of these kids do have each other. The language issue seems to me to be a way that you could concretize the fact that there is a community.

Marie's thinking explores a particular kind of invention as a response to silence. As she suggests, inventions may occur on both individual and communal levels.

An alternative approach to the question of legitimacy is use of a culturally sanctioned name for both parents. Sometimes when couples are particularly concerned about the issue of symmetry in parenting and legitimacy of the coparent's role, they use the same common cultural term for both women: namely, "mother." Here, reclaiming the power to define one's experience is enacted in the realm of language. This is both a pragmatic move (a move that creates a particular relation to the culture), and a semantic move (one that is based on a particular mode of defining mother: namely as a relational, social category).

Karen:

One thing we wanted to make clear is that we're both mommies. It's not Mommy and Aunt Terry or Mommy and Aunt Karen; we're both mommies, we're equally parents, neither one of us is a quasi-

daddy, and our children are both equally ours. Terry is Faye's biological mother, but I am every bit as much her mother and Terry is every bit as much Kevin's mother, and the two kids are both siblings; so one of the things we did was to give the kids the same last name, a hyphenated name. Both kids call us both "Mommy" and they distinguish us through our own private family names--Faye calls Terry "Mommy-Bear," and me, "Mommy-Seal."

Interestingly, Karen and her partner have used private names to create cross-bonding (in the linguistic realm), between non-biological children and coparents. Terry and her non-biological son, Kevin, are identified as the "Bears," while Karen and her non-biological daughter are the "Seals." One can also see the consistency between the family's internal structural definitions and naming, insofar as both children have both mothers' last names. Here, Karen's and Terry's desire for integrity of the family unit and equality in parenting roles is expressed and reinforced linguistically.

Nina's family structure is similar to Karen's in that both women have one biological (and one non-biological) child. They also use names to establish and reflect internal definitions, including both women being called "Mommy," and both children having the same hyphenated name.

Nina:

Our kids both have the same last name, and Julie calls us both "Mommy," and both by our first names. Yet when she needs one of us to really be "Mommy" in a totally cuddly way, in a "take care of me" way, she'll use the names in the way she needs to. If she's very focused on me and needs me to be especially comforting, Beth will be in the room, and she'll call me "Mommy," and she'll do the same with Beth, if that's what she's needing from her. Sometimes she'll call us both "Mommy." Mostly she calls us both by our first names. We've really allowed her to do what she needs to do--we don't feel she has to call us anything.

Nina points out the role the child's use of language plays in the naming process. In her observation, Julie uses "Mommy" in part to reflect an emotional need. Here, the connotative dimension of the term is particularly salient. Parents may respond differently to children's introduction of their own terms into the naming process. Here, Nina values allowing Julie to "do what she needs to do." This is an example of how women's ideas about children's language development and use of language affect the naming process.

Diane also sees symmetry in the parenting relationships as important. Her view about naming is consistent with that perspective insofar as both she and her partner use first names and "Mommy." She is an example of someone who consistently defines "mother" as a social (rather than

biological) entity. She emphasizes the semantic dimension of naming here.

Diane:

A real mother isn't who carried you during pregnancy. A real mother is who takes care of you and who you call "Mommy," and who lives in your house and holds you in her lap and does all those things that mothers do. It's a social function, not a biological function. Since that's how she's going to have grown up learning it, I think it would be really hard for her to let go of that and suddenly have some other definition in her heart. It's not that she wouldn't try other definitions. Also, it's not just our little family unit that deals with it this way. It's all our friends and relatives--really her world right now. I know other families do it differently, but that's how we do it.

Diane's thinking about how children develop and use language led to deliberately planned particular ways of using names in Lisa's presence. Here, she describes her approach and offers another example of how children affect the naming process by introducing their own ways of speaking.

Diane:

We decided that Lisa could call us whatever she wanted, but we would refer to ourselves before she knew how to talk, as Diane and Chris, because that way we would be giving her permission to call us by our first names, and we wouldn't be setting up the whole "Mommy" thing. As it turned out, as soon as she could talk she began to call us both "Mommy," and she still does. She calls us by our first names when she wants to--she's very

flexible. It doesn't seem to bother her at all that she has two mommies.

In Diane's description, one can see how significant language is, with respect to children's interface with the world beyond the family as well as within the family itself.

Diane:

When she says "Mommy," sometimes she means either one of us. Sometimes she means a particular one of us, and if the wrong one comes she says, "I didn't want you." When she was really little she used "Mommy" and "Daddy" to identify roles instead of to identify specific people. Other kids at daycare only called their own mommies "Mommy," but she called everybody's mommy "Mommy"; and she called everybody's father "Daddy." So it was just an interchangeable term. At that point, she'd refer to us as "Mommy," but whenever she really wanted one of us she called us by our names. The other kids used "Mommy" as a name, the same way they thought of "Diane" as my name, whereas I think Lisa thought of "Mommy" as a role, because she had names for all of us and "Mommy" was an extra term. I had a sense she was trying to figure out what it went with, and the same applied to "Daddy." In my own childhood, I remember being older than she was, and if people asked me what my mother's name was, I thought it was "Mommy." People ask Lisa, and she knows our names, so that says to me that she must have had some different concept than I did.

Even now I don't have any sense that she thinks of one of us as her "real mommy," or "more mommy" than the other. There are times when, for whatever reason, she asks for "Mommy," and I know which one of us she means. And there are lots of times when she says "Mommy," and we both say, "What?" We do that without thinking about it and it's not a surprise to her.

She goes up to people who have babies and says, "Is her other mommy at home?" Sometimes people ignore it. Sometimes they say, "No, she

only has one mommy, but her daddy's at home." Sometimes they don't know what to say. She seems to take all of that in stride. She'll tell people she has two mommies. Sometimes they say, "Oh no dear, that isn't really possible," and she'll say, "But it is." Other times they say, "Isn't that nice--two mommies--what a lucky girl." That surprised me. I would have expected more people to say "No," but they haven't, and I'm pleased about that.

For the most part, when she talks about having two mommies she doesn't get a negative response. It probably has partly to do with the fact that she's young, and most times it comes up we're there or in control of the setting she's in. But that's not true all the time. Once, on an airplane, she kept asking this woman where her baby's other "mommy" was, and the woman kept saying, "What?", and Lisa kept saying, "Its other mommy."

Diane's description of Lisa's use of language raises fascinating issues regarding family/culture interactions. The family's use of language establishes a norm for Lisa from which she approaches others in the culture, as evidenced in her query, "Where is her other mother?" I suspect this phenomenon has a strong developmental component, and that as Lisa gets slightly older and more exposed to dominant cultural contexts, the question about other mommies will drop out. This gives one pause with respect to Adrienne Rich's ideas about the "collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language." One wonders about the unconscious memory a child may have of that type of construction.

Naming does not always reflect a one-to-one correspondence with family definitions. For instance, a family in which parenting roles are symmetrically arranged may not use naming in a way that reflects this, and conversely, a family with asymmetrical role definitions may use more symmetrical naming strategies. Hannah, unlike Nina, Diane and Karen, clearly has a primary parenting role in relation to her daughter, but she also notes that Mindy calls both her parents "Mommy." This exemplifies a looser connection between family structure and naming.

Hannah:

Mindy calls us both "Mommy," and variously, "Mommy Hannah" and "Mommy Fran." She doesn't distinguish between us with respect to names.

For Mindy, her family just is. It's me and Fran and Steve. We're her parents. She sees us as her parents. She talks about "her mothers," unless she's talking about one of us in particular.

Some women may want naming to reflect equally important parenting roles at the same time as they are concerned about the child's capacity to distinguish between them through names. In these instances, variations on the term "mother" are used.

Lily and Angie deal with their valuing of symmetry by using terms which are equally "legitimate" version of "mother."

Lily:

Claire is called "Mom," and I'm "Mama," because that's the term in my culture. I don't believe a kid could call us both "Mom." How could they know which one they're calling? And we didn't like first names. I guess I'm sort of traditional in that way--it seems disrespectful for children to call adults by their first names.

Sometimes when we say that Robert calls Claire "Mom," and me "Mama," people will ask, "And what does Jade call you?"--as if Jade would call me "Mom," and Claire "Mama." It would never occur to me to have one kid call us one way and the other kid do it a different way--as if "Mom" is the real thing and the other name is something else.

Angie:

Evan calls me "Mama," and Greta "Mommy." We didn't want to use first names and we weren't comfortable making up a name. We wanted something that was recognizable to other people. So this really meant "Mother" to him, yet it was different names for each of us. I've talked to other people who felt that "Mama" wasn't as legitimate as "Mommy," but we haven't thought of it that way. At his daycare center they refer to each of us in this way, so it feels like it's working well at this point.

Some women feel more accepting of asymmetry in naming. Mary and Marie exemplify this.

Mary:

When we talked about names we agreed it didn't make sense to have her call us both "Mommy" or "Mama." That seemed like she'd quickly run up against the ways nobody else in the world thought that was right--you know, "What do you mean, 'Mama' and 'Mama?'" Nobody would get that.

Maybe it's nice that Deidre and I wanted this somewhat differently so we fell into different roles that weren't conflicting with each other. Somehow we talked about it, and it wasn't very difficult to say, "Okay, she'll call me 'Mama' and she'll call Deidre 'Mama Di.'" Di was a name Deidre was called as a kid and it's a very special name to her. It's not a name that anybody else calls her, so if Sylvia were to call her "Mama Di," that would be a very special name. I call her it now sometimes when I'm talking to Sylvia, but beyond that, the only person who uses that is her father when she was a kid, and sometimes now when he writes her letters. So she has this name that if Sylvia uses for her, would really be different than everybody in the world except her father.

Marie:

Jana very strongly wanted Brendan to call her "Mommy." We know people who use first names to avoid the issue of having to discriminate, and we also know people who are both called "Mommy," which doesn't feel right to me. I think people should have different names for a child. Otherwise it's confusing.

Jana was willing to do it any way, starting from the fact that Brendan would call her "Mommy." If you start from there, there's not a way that you can do it equally. It seems to me if you call somebody "Mommy," you call one person "Mommy." "Mommy Jana" and "Mommy Marie" sounds cutesy, and doesn't feel comfortable.

Another factor in the naming process is how women consider the meta level of language--particularly the question of how important names are with respect to relationships. While many of the women previously quoted place great weight on the power of names to reflect and structure particular kinds of relationships, Marie and Amy suggest that relationships transcend the names attached to them.

Marie:

I think it's fine that I'm "Marie." The relationship is going to be whatever it is, regardless of the name. I think he is clear and will continue to be clear that he has two parents.

Amy sees naming as a fluid, changeable process. She focuses on emotional tone, and like Nina, suggests that her children use language as they need to.

Amy:

In terms of what they call us, it changes day to day--it evolves and changes. They're just going to figure it out. Once a friend of mine was talking about someone else named "Amy," and Anna was listening and she yelled, "No, that's my Amy!" I felt like she didn't have to call me "Mommy." It was clear she had a relationship to me that was key. I don't feel names are so important.

Usually I say I'm their mother. Sometimes I call Sara "Sara," and sometimes I call her "Mommy" in conversations with them, and she does the same with reference to me. We decided that we'd let them choose. We didn't feel comfortable making up a name. I didn't like that idea because I felt

like it would diminish my role. I'm happy with the way it is now because I feel like the different ways they call us clue us in to different needs, sort of like variations in tones of voice.

Sara's and Amy's decisions regarding naming reflect a basic sense that children's use of language is not within the domain of parental control. They also do not see naming as a fixed phenomenon, but rather, as one that changes over time and across contexts. Hence, Sara and Amy use names in a spontaneous, unplanned way. In addition to highlighting this aspect of naming, Sara points out the specifically public nature of naming (for example, its role in school settings versus at home).

Sara:

Anna calls us both "Amy" and "Sara" and "Mommy"--all three of them. We were the first of a bunch of people that we know to make this kind of family arrangement. Everyone we know who's done it since, has chosen different names. Maybe it was out of our confusion that we didn't choose to do it in a separate way. We have friends who use "Mommy" and "Ima," or "Mommy Beth" and "Mommy Sue."

I just felt like you can't control what they call you--but clearly you can to some extent. I just felt like it would work itself out.

I think when they go to school we might--they might have to figure something out, but maybe not. It doesn't matter to me either way.

Generally she seems to say "Mommy" when she doesn't care who it is, but the weirdest thing is that if she needs juice and says "Mommy," and one of us comes to get it, she might say it's the

wrong one. Who would care who takes the juice out of the refrigerator? But that happens more than you could possibly imagine--the wrong person takes the juice out of the refrigerator.

Sometimes it seems when she's upset she'll use our names--like she doesn't want any question about it. She'll say, for example, "I want my Amy."

Lee highlights the conflicting views of naming which may emerge when one considers both semantic and pragmatic realms. Lee views naming as a significant way that children join or feel a part of the dominant culture. In this way she takes in dominant cultural values, as for example, in her idea that children need to be able to identify one person as "Mother." However, she notes that this contradicts another level of reality: namely, that in relational terms these children "have two moms."

Lee:

The reality for these children is that they do have two moms and their mothers are lesbians, and that's a whole package that they'll have to deal with in the world; but it also seemed to me, in terms of their own development, that it was important for them to feel like they had a mother--you know, just one person who was playing that sort of primary role.

Internally I think they need it, and then I think, you know, they've got to learn at an early age that you can present yourself and your family system and a lot of other things about yourself to the world in a variety of different ways. And depending on who you're presenting them to, you can--there are places that you can be totally safe and open and say, "I have two moms; they're both lesbian. I have a sister and a dog," and there

are other places where you simply say, "My mom is Lee."

Lee offers another example of the ways that children introduce their own ideas into the naming process regardless of their parents' intentions.

Lee:

She calls me "Mama," although lately she's been calling me, more and more, "Lee." Although it's funny; when she's upset or needs something, it's "Mama," and when we're having a conversation she'll say, "Lee, now what do you think about this problem they're having with the whales?", which is one of her typical questions. And it's always been "Pammy" for her, although lately it's been "Mama Pammy." And the irony is that we've had this debate--not debate--awkwardness, because when Jill came, Pam refers to herself with respect to Jill as "Mama," because we've had some--it's all very confusing, 'cause when I'm around Jill I sometimes refer to myself as "Mama," and Maggie, in her infinite wisdom, will at some point say, "Well, who's the real Mama around here?"

Well, it's funny. She's really joking, because when she's out in public, in fact, she said it to two of my mother's best friends--"I'm very lucky; I have two Mamas"--so in Maggie's mind she has two mothers. I'm "Mama," and Pam's "Pammy," but that doesn't mean that Pam isn't a "Mama." And that's how she sees it. And that's how we hope Jill will see it.

Jessie highlights how differences in understandings about the family structure affect naming. In this sense, family role relationships are defined through the naming process itself.

Once again, this dimension of naming occurs in tandem with other dimensions. Thus, Jessie points out the convergence of both family structure definitions and concerns about how the child will interface with the world. This is another instance of the interaction between semantic and pragmatic dimensions.

Jessie:

Jackie may call Martha "Mom." We wouldn't say, "Don't call her Mom," but in our language we refer to ourselves as "Mom" and "Martha."

Martha and I think about ourselves as parents--not two mothers. Partly that's because Martha saw herself as helping me. We refer to me as "Mom," and Martha as "Martha." Part of what I think about is a kid being in a straight school system and saying she has two moms. There's my coming out, but also her coming out to her own world; and I struggle with how to help her make certain choices and to be respectful of the choices she makes ultimately.

Another part of it is Martha's position. If she had wanted to be called "Mom" too--that's a symbol of something. It's not that I would have opposed it. She was so clear that she saw herself as an adjunct, and she also has feelings about women putting their issues onto their kids when the kids have to survive in a hostile world. So it was compatible with my views.

Insofar as names reflect and structure family relationships, changes in the family structure may play out in the naming process. Tricia and her lover separated shortly after the birth of her daughter. Thus, she describes the links between naming and role delineation,

particularly as they are manifest during a state of flux within the family.

Tricia:

Before Erin was born, Randy was resistant to using "Mommy" and "Mommy," or "Mommy Tricia" and "Mommy Randy." She felt Erin would develop her own term for Randy, and could call me "Mommy." I pushed for something different--for us to have the same status, like using our first names. After Erin was born, we started saying "Mommy Tricia" and "Mommy Randy." Now it's an issue. Who gets to be a parent? It's the flip side of the superiority of the biological parent. Just because you squeezed the kid out, does that make you a parent? Well, on the other hand, just because you signed a contract, does that make you a parent? I would say not necessarily. It's about who does the caretaking, worrying, etc. We're struggling about whether Randy is Erin's parent. She wants to be called that, but I'm dragging my heels because she was absolutely absent for the first six months, and has been around the last four months on her own terms. So we are negotiating around that.

I stopped saying "Mommy Randy," and that bothers Randy. She considers herself Erin's parent. I'm not sure what I think yet. Randy wants to clear it up, since Erin is developing language now.

In addition to naming of parents, women use children's first, middle and last names as ways of establishing family connections. From an anthropological perspective, this aspect of naming is interesting insofar as it exemplifies the formation of kinship networks through linguistic moves.

Jessie:

When they called, they asked me if I had a name in mind and they were glad that I did because they wanted to have the foster mother coached. From the time of the phone call, she was called "Jackie." The foster mother wrote a book for her that she can have, and in it she continually refers to her as "Jackie." I don't know what she was called the first three weeks. My guess is that they would advise the foster family not to give them a name, because children are adopted within a month to six weeks; but I don't know if the foster mother had a name for her.

We wanted a name that begins with "J," because there are a lot of "J" names in my family, so that was carrying on a little bit of a family tradition; and her middle name is a name from Martha's family--so we gave her a name from each of our families.

Mary:

Sylvia has my last name, and her middle name is a name that's in Deidre's family. We think of it as very equal. And it's very clear that Sylvia thinks of us as not necessarily the same, but equal.

Jane:

Names were a big issue for us. Some people combine their last names and create a whole new name for the children. We didn't consider that seriously, and it wouldn't have worked because of our names. I didn't have any real issue that Kimberly had to have my name, but I wanted her in some way to have a name that was significant to me and that represented my part of the family. Early in the pregnancy it wasn't as present for me, but suddenly, mid-pregnancy, it occurred to me that I wanted her to have a name that connected her to my family in some way, and that's when I decided I wanted the middle name to be Lee, my father's name. It felt important to me, because he died about ten years ago and he was someone I cared a great deal about. It felt important to be able to

say to Kimberly someday, that "your middle name is Lee because that was my father's name and he was someone I cared deeply about." Then I felt like part of my family was in there somehow.

Angie:

Evan's last name is a hyphenated version of both our names. We struggled with that for a while, because neither of us was crazy about hyphenated names. At some point we realized that his name was not Greta's last name--it was really our last names. It just hit us, and so we decided to do it this way.

We tend to think of ourselves collectively as the Adler-Browns, but neither of us is interested in hyphenating our last names; so it's Angie Brown, Greta Adler, and Evan Brown-Adler.

Lily:

This took us some time to figure out. The kids' last names are both my name. It came as a compromise--well, not a compromise, but a series of decisions. The first was that Claire wanted the kids to have the same last name as each other. I didn't feel strongly about that issue particularly, but when she articulated it, it sounded good to me. It also fit with the fact that I thought the kids should have an Asian last name because they're mixed racially, and in American society there's always a push to act more white. It seemed that since they are already not going to look totally Asian, it would be harder for them to have strong Asian identities unless they had an Asian last name.

Whereas in Angie's case the last name is used to establish a connection between the child and both parents, in Lily's case the emphasis is on establishing the sibling

connection. In both instances, the naming process does not follow along genetic lines only.

Marie makes the point that in naming the child, parents may circumscribe the child's options regarding how "out" s/he is. Thus, names can be a very significant statement to the world about how the family is defined both privately and publicly. In her case, she places a value on not foreclosing his options with respect to the possibility that he might wish to define himself publicly within the more traditional dominant cultural terms. Here, Marie is focusing on the pragmatic realm of children's names.

Marie:

Before Brendan was born, Jana and I had a big disagreement about whether we were going to hyphenate his last name. We knew we were going to use my last name either as a middle name or as a part of a hyphenated last name. For some reason which I can't remember now, I didn't think we should hyphenate it.

I think I wanted to let him have more of a choice about how public he was. When he gets to be ten or eleven it will start to matter to him, and I wanted a name that he could do what he wanted with.

Last names of children have practical as well as symbolic significance, as Marie's example demonstrates.

Marie:

In the hospital, since we had hyphenated our names for him, when I arrived at the nurses' station they assumed I was his mother. It would have worked out anyway, but it was nice not to have to explain it all to the nurses, since they only allowed parents and grandparents in.

Naming may also be a significant aspect of extended family relationships. Here, connections between family members may be established through names. However, the process is complex in that extended family members may not define the family in the same way as the primary family unit does.

In Marie's case, there is agreement among family members about the significant constellation of relationships.

Marie:

I told my father that Jana was going to try to get pregnant and that we wanted him to be the grandfather of this child if he wanted to be. He was totally thrilled--really touched. We named the baby for him--Brendan's middle name is my father's name.

In Jane's case, her mother's transformation with respect to acceptance of the family unit is reflected in a move to name herself as grandmother of Jane's non-biological child.

Jane:

My mother said, at some point towards the end of the pregnancy, "Well, I guess when the baby is born and gets older, he or she can call me 'Grandma,' because there won't be another 'Grandma.'" So I didn't have to discuss it with her. She immediately took on the name "Grandma."

Jane's description also highlights the disjuncture extended family members may experience in relation to their cultural milieus. This may be even more intense than the disjunctures the primary family units experience, in that grandparents and other kin frequently have less access to the lesbian sub-culture, and hence may experience more isolation regarding their family roles.

Jane:

She works at an office in Queens--at one point before Kimberly was born, she said something about how she wished she could talk about this with her friends at work, but she worked with a lot of old fuddy-duddies, and they wouldn't understand. This was the same woman who'd accused me of creating a child who would need therapy all her life because she'd be so miserable.

While Jane and Marie describe naming as reflective of agreements between extended family members and the primary family unit, in the following example the uncertainty of extended family relationships is reflected in the naming process.

Amy:

Sara's mother and my mother get together, and Sara's mother refers to my mother as "Grandma"-- she'll say to the girls, "Here comes Grandma Eve." So there's a way in which it's thrust on her. But I refer to them as "Eve and Michael," because I don't yet feel accepted enough by them to give them "Grandma and Grandpa." It's problematic on all sides.

Diane:

My mother is Lisa's grandmother. My stepfather doesn't want to be called her grandfather, so he's called David. We refer to Chris's parents as her grandparents, but they've been very unpleasant about us having a kid, and only recently started to be willing to see Lisa and me. Lisa will tell you that she has two grandmothers, but I don't know how Chris's parents think of themselves.

Michelle:

We were visiting Leslie's parents and Ian and I were walking around, and he turned to me and said, "Where's Grandma?" So far, the only "Grandma" he knew was my mother, because Leslie's parents made it clear they didn't want to be called that. I said, "You mean Grandma Pat?", and he said, "Yeah, Grandma Pat." I was astounded because he in fact got the relationships right. But it concerns me about what will happen when he's old enough to figure out the discrepancy and he has questions like, "Why isn't Pat my grandma?"

In Amy's, Diane's and Michelle's descriptions, naming reflects the unresolved differences between people's definitions of family relationships. Mary, on the other hand, suggests that such unresolved differences may not be

reflected in the naming process. Her description highlights the fact that naming is only one dimension of defining family roles.

Mary:

I haven't heard it directly, but a while ago my sister told me that a relative met with my father to construct a family tree. My father basically, quite purposefully left Sylvia and Deidre off of it and my sister challenged him, but he said, "No, we won't be doing that," and that was it.

But when he comes to visit, he's called "Grandpa," and he likes to be called that. He refers to himself as "Grandpa," and acknowledges her birthday and Christmas, just as with his other grandchildren.

The naming process in lesbian-headed families reflects the mutual embeddedness of language and experience. In many instances, family structure (delineation of roles and relationships), is reflected in and partially structured through names. An exact correspondence between family structure constellations and naming is not apparent across the board however, because so many other factors enter the naming process (e.g., notions about the significance of language, different styles of parent/child negotiation regarding use of names, different feelings about the function of naming in the larger culture).

Since names are used both within the family and in interactions across many other contexts, the process of naming embodies families' confrontations with the world. Differential uses of names can be seen both within extended family systems and in interactions between family members and others in the environment (including institutional structures). Children develop language in these multiple contexts, and therefore are faced early on with the complexity of diverging approaches to naming. Even very young children manifest this. Lisa's question regarding children's "other mommies," or Maggie's question regarding "who's the real mommy," are examples of children's early exposure to the distinct definitions inherent in different contexts.

This observation raises many questions for future work. How are children's consciousnesses affected by their early awareness of the multiple meanings inherent in key words? How do they ultimately define their own family constellations?; and what role does language (specifically, use of names) play in that? How do these children's uses of names develop over time?

Naming serves many functions, and plays out (sometimes in contradicting ways), on multiple levels of people's lives. It is a key arena in which the interactions between silence and invention are manifest in lesbian-headed families.

Chapter 11

Dealing With Difference: The Family in the World/The World in the Family

Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap

It is a waste of time hating a mirror
or its reflection
instead of stopping the hand
that makes glass with distortions
slight enough to pass
unnoticed
until one day you peer
into your face
under a merciless white light
and the fault in a mirror slaps back
becoming
what you think
is the shape of your error
and if I am beside that self
you destroy me
or if you can see
the mirror is lying
you shatter the glass
choosing another blindness
and slashed helpless hands.

Because at the same time
down the street
a glassmaker is grinning
turning out new mirrors that lie
selling us
new clowns
at cut rate.

Audre Lorde(1)

Although at the time I undertook this research project I thought I was well aware of the depth and breadth of homophobia and racism in our culture, I found as the interview process progressed that I was continually taken aback by the scope of these two forces in our "collective" cultural consciousness. I began to view this work as centrally defined by our culture's negativity towards differences of many kinds. For example, I tried to imagine what this project would look like if we lived in a world which welcomed and positively valued differences. It became clear to me that legal and psychological discourses, as well as the discourse of my subjects in such a welcoming context, would be so dissimilar to what I have in fact encountered, that one would be hard-pressed to attempt any connection at all between the imagined and actual projects. I underscore my awe in response to this evidence of our culture's intolerance of difference because I believe that institutional and individual forms of discrimination are so pervasive and insidious, that we frequently fail to even notice the magnitude of the destruction such intolerance yields in our lives on a daily basis. In conducting this study, I was continually brought face to face with my own tacit and somewhat cynical acceptance of both internal and external manifestations of fear of difference.

As I conversed with women about how one raises children in a world where they are likely to encounter discrimination, I was repeatedly jolted by the painful undercurrent of questions like this: "How can I help my child to feel good about herself in a world where she is likely to be frequently labeled as inferior?" This chapter focuses on the complexity of women's responses to questions like this. I hope to demonstrate that the particular conflicts and dilemmas lesbian mothers face with respect to these issues, are both unique to lesbian-headed families, and more generally related to the activity of mothering in this culture.

Racism and homophobia are distinct entities which nevertheless share important features: namely, the embodiment of fear and negative valuation of differences, and the concomitant oppression of people identified as belonging to a "different" group. I consider the two together because for the women in this study, the practical effects of racism and homophobia are similar insofar as both raise the pressing questions of how one nurtures and protects children who are very likely to be objects of discrimination at some point in their lives. Beyond that similarity, there are many differences between the realms of racism and homophobia, even when one considers them only in relation to the families in this study. Although I may

touch on some of the distinctions, an exhaustive analysis of them is beyond the scope of this project. I have limited my analysis to the specific concerns raised by the women I interviewed. Since my subjects, with one exception, are white (and thus racially privileged), homophobia is more fully explored herein than racism.

Thus far, this work has addressed several aspects of homophobia, including the ways it informs legal discourse, psychological research, practical parameters of family formation, women's feelings about family formation, and the development of language through which family relations are described. To a lesser extent I have touched on the ways in which racism affects the adoption process when it involves white lesbians. It should be noted that this is a very particular and narrow slant on racial issues in this culture--one which focuses primarily on the concerns of white women contemplating or actually raising children of color.

In this chapter I look specifically at the ways in which my subjects frame their relations to homophobia and racism (in the case of adoptive mothers). The complexity of the resulting vision stems from the mutual embeddedness of individuals and culture. Fear of difference, in the form of homophobia and racism, resides not only in the external

world, but also in my subjects, their families of origin, and their children. When women are thinking about how to raise children in a culture which negatively frames difference, they must consider both how the child will be in the culture, and how the culture will manifest itself in the child. A good example of this double consciousness is the extent to which lesbians worry about the potential of homophobia in the world to damage their children's self-esteem, and simultaneously about the potential of homophobia in the child to strain family relationships. While lesbians and gay men have dealt for a long time with the manifestations of homophobia in their families of origin and in themselves, an area which has been relatively less attended to is the introduction of homophobia into a family unit vis-a-vis children. This raises very complicated dilemmas for lesbians who are trying to nurture and protect children at the same time as they try to create authentic lives for themselves and to teach their children values stemming from that endeavor. This chapter contains several angles on women's attempts to deal with homophobia and racism in themselves, their families of origin, their children, and the world beyond the family.

Insofar as mothering entails a desire to protect children from harm, lesbian mothers are in a particularly painful position with respect to homophobia in the world.

Often, before they conceive or adopt a child they begin to worry about the ways their children may be harmed by homophobia, and hence indirectly by their lesbianism. Women vary in the extent to which they take on the responsibility for homophobia in the world and experience concomitant guilt. One might look at this variation in part as a function of the degree of internalized homophobia.

Women who have a high degree of internalized negative self-images clustering around their lesbianism may be more likely to manifest their dilemmas regarding child-rearing, in the framework of questioning their rights to bring children into the world. At its most extreme form, this frame may yield a decision not to have children, or it may even curtail the contemplation of parenthood altogether. Women who have worked through their relations to themselves as lesbians to a point of greater comfort may tend to emphasize homophobia in the world as the source of difficulty. Although this frame could also yield a decision not to have children in that it is seen as potentially too damaging to a child, in general the emphasis on external homophobia is more likely to lead to a problem-solving approach in which one considers the question of how one can raise children in the context of the cultural prevalence of homophobia. It is important to note that the two ends of

the spectrum just delineated, often manifest themselves in mixed form in people's actual experiences.

Regardless of whether they question their "right" to bring children into a world where they will be discriminated against, or alternatively, rail against a world which would thus harm their children, lesbian mothers share a common concern: namely, worry about the effects of homophobia on their children's lives.

Jessie describes the pain such worry entails. She links the issues of racism and homophobia as they impact on her relationship to her daughter. In her description one can see the extent to which these issues are not finally resolved, but rather, are continually re-evoked and reconsidered throughout the course of parenting.

Jessie:

She'll have to deal with more--certain discrimination because I'm a lesbian and because she's a black child of white parents, Did I have the right to adopt her as a white person? As a lesbian?

I had a whole set of ideas before she came, and a different set after she arrived. Before, I was more distant and had a political stance that the world is full of all these inequities--that we live in a world that is racist and homophobic, and I shouldn't be working out of it myself. I felt I could network with other black families so she'd have an opportunity to relate to black and biracial people. I had an intellectual analysis

and a sense of what I could do that allowed me to go forward with the process.

In terms of the lesbian issue, my thinking was that it's our society that's fucked up, and I'm not going to allow beliefs that I don't adhere to, to dictate my behavior. My ability to parent doesn't have anything to do with my sexual preference. I also had the idea, and still do, that my being a lesbian gives me a sensitivity about difference. I'm white and privileged, but by being a lesbian and a woman, in certain contexts, I have some sense of what it's like to be different in our society.

Jackie came home at six weeks. When she was four months old there was an incident. I was taking her upstairs and I lost my footing and tripped and dropped her. I caught her before she hit the stair--it was an automatic response, and she was fine. But that day I just cried after I realized she was fine. It brought up for me, "What pain will I bring into her life?" It was an accident, but she could have gotten hurt. For a week after, I thought a lot about whether I had a right; and also, no matter how careful you are, things can happen to children. I knew her in a way, and had a relationship; and I thought, "What is it going to be like for her being black and being in my family--and my being a lesbian?" All this came up emotionally in a way it hadn't before, because she's a real person and it wasn't pain on an abstract level. She may have to endure pain because of a choice I've made. I sat with that. My social worker said that was all true, but it was also true that Martha and I were able to give her an enormous amount. When I was caught in the pain, it was hard for me to hold onto what we were able to give her.

Jessie articulates a process of sorting through the issue of responsibility regarding discrimination against children. Her thinking contains notions about both external and internal loci of responsibility: e.g., "The world is full of all these inequities--we live in a world that is

racist and homophobic," and "She may have to endure pain because of a choice I've made." At one level, Jessie clearly distinguishes between society's flaws and her own, and she thinks about strategies to effectively cope with the destructive forces she has thus identified. Simultaneously, she describes how at another level, the clarity of this type of thinking is shaken by the intensity of her emotional bond to Jackie. This is an instance of a particular way that a central issue in mothering plays out specifically for lesbians. How does a mother relate to a child's pain, particularly pain that is connected to her own choices?

The question of responsibility and guilt in relation to children's experiences of discrimination is an arena in which the activity of mothering may come into direct conflict with work women have done internally, regarding their personal responses to homophobia and the establishment of positive lesbian identities. Here, old issues may have to be reworked in order to achieve integrated responses. At the same time, lesbian parents may draw on their own experiences of grappling with discrimination, as they approach the issue of how their children will be affected by homophobia and racism. In so doing, they consider the strengths which such experiences can engender, in addition to the pain they entail.

Jane:

I want Kimberly to feel good about the choices she makes for herself. One advantage we have to offer her as lesbians is that we've struggled very hard to make the choices that were right for us--both in terms of being lesbians, and choosing to have her. We ultimately got some support, but certainly not initially, and we had to do it pushing against our families all the way. I guess you always want to make up for the things you didn't get. So partially I want her to be able to make the choices that feel right to her, and I want her to understand there isn't a map for how she's supposed to be. Having made the choices we have in our lives, I think we can teach her that.

Jane notes that her experiences of being unsupported make her particularly focused on offering her daughter support and room to "make choices that feel right to her."

Karen argues strongly that having to deal with being different can be a positive aspect of individual development. Here, she inverts the worry about consequences of homophobia and notes the strengths that can develop out of grappling with one's difference from cultural norms. Karen extends her thinking on this issue to include the experience of being physically challenged in this culture.

Karen:

Well, it's bringing them into the world with a ready-made difficulty that they have to deal with. Of course, just about every kid who gets brought into the world has some sort of difficulty they have to deal with, whether it's because one parent is a workaholic, or they're the only person

of a particular ethnicity in that neighborhood. I don't necessarily think that fitting in in every way is a plus to be striven for. We were expecting our children to have to deal with being different, and being different in a way that evokes fear and hostility in some people; and we knew that wasn't gonna be easy for them.

My feeling about it in general, is that for gays and lesbians, having to deal with who you are when it means other people may not accept you, forces you--well, you can sink or swim with it, but assuming you swim--it kind of pushes you to a greater maturity than you might have to be pushed to if you were just like "The Joneses." It forces you to be more of an individual, or it encourages you to. It can be the catalyst for you individuating more than you might need to if you were a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male in a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant community. Or you may never have challenged who are you if you should lose your support system, or you may never have challenged why you've chosen these particular people as your support system--you simply fit into the group, so that's your group.

I think in the process of coming out and learning to deal with our differences, we have to ask ourselves a lot of questions, we have to define ourselves more clearly, we have to define our priorities and values more clearly, we have to constitute family systems for ourselves not just because that's the neighborhood or that's our family--we have to decide for ourselves who we want to be our support systems. I think that that can lead to more maturity. It's a challenge. So I think we felt that we were posing a challenge for our kids--that they would have to deal with something and that we would help them deal with it.

It wasn't always gonna be easy--it certainly can be painful to realize there are people out there who think you should burn in hell--but that they could grow from it. Ideally, what we do is try to provide them with a kind of nurturing home life that allows them to grow with it, that allows them to learn how to think for themselves and not just run with the pack.

An added thing along those lines: Neil was born a dwarf, and we had to confront right away

that he was gonna be different in a big way. He was gonna be a kind of different that everyone could see instantly, and that was going to affect almost every area of his life. One of the things we felt--I don't mean to say that it wasn't a shock and there wasn't a lot of pain--but once we mobilized ourselves around how we were gonna deal with it, find support, and help him be the best he could be, one of the things we felt was that our experience being gay really gave us a lot in that sense, because we already had a model of how it's possible to really value yourself even though there are some people who don't. We were really thrilled with the idea of helping him learn that. . . .

Lee also argues about the strengths emergent from grappling with difference. She, like Karen, highlights the idea that the experience can heighten one's awareness of the importance of personal integrity.

Lee:

It seems to me that where you can turn all of this around to an advantage, is that we will be the kind of parents who can start at an early age working with their kids, and know that there are always certain things that you're gonna do or gonna be that the larger society or some segment of the larger society doesn't approve of--and you have to learn early how you survive in a system where that's the reality. You share with them the kind of skills you have learned to do that, and to help them--it's basically a values clarification. You help them learn that they don't need to be defensive about--it will be hard for them, it will be painful. We will always be there for them to share that pain with; we will not be able to change it, but you will be able to survive it and endure it. What you have to be clear about is, as long as you feel right about something then you go forward from that position and you learn to deal with the rest.

There are several strategies that women value as responses to discrimination towards their children. Here, Lee emphasizes teaching children from one's own experience, and being emotionally present for them (e.g., "sharing the pain").

As Amy considers the issue, she emphasizes the development of cultural pride. Here, she links discrimination based on sexual orientation of parents to discrimination based on ethnicity. Thus, she draws on her childhood experiences in thinking about how to address these issues.

Amy:

The way I connect with their identity has to do with my being Jewish--growing up as a Jewish minority in a Protestant neighborhood, where we were discriminated against. I was brought up to feel proud of my difference and to feel a sense of pride in who I am. Part of that came from my family, and part from seeking out and being with other Jewish children and getting a sense of my Jewish culture and what was special about it. I feel like that's true for these kids also, both in terms of their ethnicity and as children of lesbians. I want them to have a sense of the country they came from, which is a part of who they are, just as Israel and the shtetl in Eastern Europe are parts of me. And similarly with respect to having lesbian parents and to our being lesbians, it's being able to accept yourself, your difference, and not feeling ashamed, but feeling proud of having been different. I felt proud growing up, about not having Christmas trees--I looked down on Jewish kids who had Hanukkah bushes--I had a sense of pride even though there were kids who didn't invite us to their birthday parties. I want these kids to feel proud of

having two mommies, and the wonderful things-- things that will be different in good and growthful ways.

Amy's, Lee's, Karen's and Jane's descriptions suggest different ways that parents find points of identification with their children and draw strength from these points.

One distinction to be drawn in considering racism as a factor in adoptive parents' lives versus homophobia, is that while discrimination based on being children of lesbians can be a source of identification between mothers and children, discrimination based on race can act as a divider. Lee highlights this, and adds that though she feels somewhat equipped to help her children handle racism, she also feels that she is in unknown territory, since she is racially privileged. The lesbians in this study who adopted children of color suggest that, with respect to their children, racism is as, or more worrisome than homophobia.

Lee:

And then there's the issue of being brown-skinned and living in America, which is essentially a racist country. And that one--I feel like Pam and I both have a lot of learning to do from black people and other people of color, about what all that means. Obviously we can do a lot of reading about it, and we have, but it's not the same as talking to people. We have a lot to learn about what that means and how you survive, although it seems to me that being a woman and being a lesbian in this society has some clear parallels to that phenomenon--that we have enough

of our own learning that we can pass that on to both of them. And that's related to being daughters, being raised by lesbian mothers.

The parallel is that in each situation you have someone in the situation that's disapproved of by the majority society--you know, this society operates fine for white men. Whether you're a lesbian or whether you're a black person or a person of color from another national origin, you are viewed as an outsider, and so in that sense I feel like we have some understanding of what it means to be on the outside looking in.

I feel that the way in which racism is more oppressive--and it can be, not to evaluate them or measure them, but--than the homophobia of this society. I haven't experienced that--I mean, I am the beneficiary of the racism in this society. I'm a white person--I'm part of the problem; I'm not part of the solution. So, to really understand what it's like to be singled out on the basis of the color of your skin is something I haven't experienced first-hand, and it's something that I will need some help from other people in order to be able to be effective and help them. So I think there is a parallel, but a fair distinction to be drawn.

Mary also notes both the common strands and discrepancies between homophobia and racism, in her concerns about her daughter.

Mary:

We worry less about homophobia than we do about the race issue. I feel particularly helpless as a WASP. In this country, you don't get more race privilege than I have, so I feel particularly helpless around the race issue. At least around the gay issue I feel like I'm actively involved. I don't feel as helpless with respect to preparing Sylvia for it, or knowing how to respond when it comes, or knowing that it's my pain too. At least I feel that Sylvia and I are on the same side of the fence on that one, whereas

the race issue is a way in which we're just inevitably on different sides of the fence.

We have to train her that people will treat her in racist ways at times. I worry that she may not have the right protection. My black friends talk about their parents sitting them down and telling them about racism. It feels important, in that she'll be better able to cope to the extent that she isn't taken completely by surprise. It's easier for me when I'm not taken by surprise by homophobia than when I'm blown away.

Also, if people relate to you as less good due to color, but you think of yourself as better than, it can help. It's similar with lesbian culture--that there are places where we feel better, and people who we are particularly proud of. It's a cultural pride.

Like the other adoptive mothers in my sample, Mary considers the ways in which racism and homophobia may converge in her child's life. She also focuses on the question of what experiences enable children to cope well with these forces. Here, she highlights the importance of helping children feel good about themselves through parental love.

Mary:

It is paramount to me that Sylvia grow up feeling good about herself. That's why the race issue scares me; because to whatever degree this culture tries to make you not feel good about yourself if you're not white, it's worrisome. And then there's the danger that you can't feel good about yourself because your parents are lesbians. All those things present themselves as issues, but mostly I feel optimistic because both Deidre and I feel good about ourselves and have wonderful friends and good relationships with our families, and I feel like all of that will affect Sylvia

more than the sexuality or race issues. She's being raised in a very accepting, loving way. We really want her--we're unambivalent about that, and I think those things will affect her.

Mary points out the damage discrimination yields: namely, lowered self-esteem. Though one can point to the ways that struggling through experiences of discrimination can engender strengths, it is also important to note that the presence of homophobia and racism in these children's lives makes feeling good about themselves a task to be achieved, rather than a given. In her highlighting of this, Mary presents an important, unromanticized view of discrimination in lesbian-headed families' lives.

As a whole, these quotes reflect a heightened awareness of discrimination. This awareness leads to reflection about the issue of pain in children's lives. Is pain always a negative experience? How can it be most constructively dealt with? How can it be avoided? How can it be harnessed as a positive force? Women's identifications with their children play a pivotal role in their thinking about these issues. Hence, one can speculate that women's views on the subject will be dependent in part on the ways in which they have worked through their own experiences of pain stemming from difference, and embraced the strengths which have thus been engendered.

The women in this study all express concern about how the world's intolerance of difference might negatively affect their children's development. They put a great deal of effort into thinking about how they could maximize their children's well-being in the face of prejudice. Thus far, several women quoted suggested strategies of parent/child interaction as responses (e.g., teaching from one's own experience, being emotionally present and loving).

Another point which many woman raise is the importance of helping children to make connections with others in similar family situations. This is seen both as a way of protecting children from a sense of social isolation, and as a way to counter the dominant cultural notion that the nuclear family model is normative. In a sense, this exemplifies a specific way of dealing with the disjuncture between individual values and dominant cultural values: namely, the establishment of sub-cultures.

Tricia:

Kids need to get socialized, but I'm not sure I want my kid socialized the way this culture does it. There are certain things I don't want transmitted: homophobia, racism, sexism. I want Erin to get exposure to lots of different people, but I want to be able to keep a close eye on what the exposure consists of.

Karen:

We really have tried to make some effort to get close to other lesbian families, particularly donor-inseminated families, not so much for our support, but for the kids. We want the kids to feel they're not the only ones, that there are other kids who deal with these issues--just to see that there are other families. It's one thing to say to our kids that there are different ways to have a family, and, "Some families have a mommy and a daddy, and some families have two mommies, and some families have two daddies," but if all they ever see are families with a mommy and a daddy, it's gonna be tough to get across the idea that this is just another way to have a family.

Mary:

One thing we feel strongly about is how important it is for Sylvia to know other kids who are adopted by lesbians--other kids of lesbians, number one, other kids who are adopted by lesbians, and particularly, other dark-skinned children adopted by lesbians. Our feeling is that it will be an important reference group for her. At whatever point these kids are trying to make sense of the world, they'll get some help from their parents, but they get much more help from their peers. So I think it's going to be important for this group of kids to be able to talk together, rather than having all her friends be white, middle-class kids from heterosexual nuclear families, with her trying to sort all this out by herself.

In addition to exposure to other similar families, some women see exposure to diversity itself as an important aspect of their children's development.

Hannah:

I think it's important for Mindy to know other kids of lesbians, but I wouldn't want her in

a daycare situation that was only kids of lesbians, because it's not real. It's not what the world is about. In the real world there are people in all different kinds of situations and all different ethnicities, cultures and sexual preferences. I want Mindy to be where all of that is present and respected. That's very unusual of course, but it's my goal.

When lesbians choose to raise children, they frequently find that they face anew issues which were first manifest in their initial coming out processes. The choice to present or not present one's lesbian identity to one's family of origin, friends, colleagues and others in the world entails grappling with the complexities of many relationships and diverse responses to lesbianism. There is tremendous variation among lesbians regarding how they address coming out issues and how those in their environments respond. When a lesbian becomes a lesbian parent, she moves into a realm in which new aspects of people's ideas about lesbianism are revealed. In many ways, the shift entails a new coming out process, one in which the complexity is compounded by the fact that it involves consideration of children and multiple family relationships.

The quotes which follow exemplify homophobia as it presents itself in the interface between lesbians and their families of origin. One can see both continuities and shifts between families' modes of dealing with the

revelation of lesbianism per se, and their modes of dealing with lesbians' decisions to raise children.

Nina's initial coming out process entailed a working through of many difficult feelings between her parents and herself. By the time she made the decision to become a parent, her own parents had accepted her lesbianism, developed a warm relationship with her partner, and were welcoming of their decision to raise children together. Nina's non-biological daughter was readily considered their granddaughter.

Nina:

When I first came out to my parents it was hard initially. I think they basically related to it as, "This is one of Nina's phases." It was not what they'd expected. After a few years, they adapted to it. There's a sense that I always expected that from them--I mean, I didn't expect anything less than that. I expected them to deal with this, and get comfortable with it and meet me. I remember being shocked when they didn't--really surprised.

Both my parents say--I mean my father--I talked to him last week, and he said, "Oh, Beth--she's the love of my life. I just adore her"; and he says, "Now, don't tell your sister,"--this is not how they usually are--they're not into this sort of splitting--"don't tell anybody, but she's my favorite in-law." And my mother introduces her as her daughter, which is very nice. My parents are very close to our family. They very much claim Julie as their granddaughter.

In contrast, Lee's difficult interaction with her family regarding her lesbianism, remains unresolved and deeply formative of extended family relationships. Her partner Pam's family also does not fully join with Pam and Lee in defining their family unit. In Lee's story, one can discern the ways in which homophobia and a traditional way of defining "family" (as in the legal system), can come together within extended family units in a way which creates a sense of illegitimacy for lesbian-headed families within their own family networks. In cases like these, various family members may disagree about just what the set of family relationships consists of. For example, a child may refer to an adult as a grandparent, while the adult does not thus name the relationship. These instances clearly exemplify the ways in which culture (e.g., traditional definitions of "family," or homophobia), enter into the heart of family life and individuals' consciousnesses.

Lee:

Since I told them, their position has been that Pam is no longer welcome to visit with them; so what I have done, reluctantly, is I visit them with Maggie, you know, once or twice a year. They've accepted Maggie as their grandchild, although not with much enthusiasm, which is a disappointment for me. Now we're having a new round with my family because they are totally unaccepting of Jill. They do not in any way think that she's their grandchild. They feel that she has Pam's name, so she's not theirs. They don't want her to come visit them because, "How would they explain it to their friends?" It's a disaster.

Pam's mother, unfortunately, died in December. Prior to that, her family was equally unaccepting, although toward the end, particularly because of the death, but even before then, there had been some movement on their part. They were a little more accepting, although it was funny--they never accepted Maggie as their grandchild. They were waiting for Jill to come, because she would be theirs. I mean, I don't understand this view of the world, but it's one that they're all locked into.

They moved here so that we could all be with Pam's mother when she was dying, and her father stayed on; and he's actually been--he's come around. I mean, I don't know that he thinks of Maggie as his grandchild, but she calls him "Grandpa," and he's, you know, kind about it.

As Lee's story begins to suggest, sometimes families of origin who are initially rejecting of lesbians' decisions to raise children, become transformed through their relationships to the children themselves. These instances highlight the extent to which cultural processes are not static or fixed, predictable entities, but rather, sets of relationships which can be influenced even by very small beings.

Tricia's story reflects the extent to which the decision to raise children may propel a lesbian to deal with people about her lesbianism in a fuller way than she did when she initially came out. Here, the child influences family relationships indirectly (e.g., by impacting on her lesbian mother).

Tricia:

My father was really flipped out. He'd had a hard time around my lesbianism, and to him this was worse--like, "How could you do this to a child?" It was a typical homophobic response--the liberal homophobic response--"I don't care what you do, just don't flaunt it. It's one thing if you're a lesbian, but it's not fair to put Erin through it." He's worried about kids making fun of her. Other than worries about the outside world like that, my parents don't have issues about my parenting.

I wrote them a long letter and put it on the line when I was pregnant. I said, "Don't blame me for the homophobia in our culture by saying I shouldn't have a kid," and I told them I would try to protect her. I think it really shocked them to see they're the homophobic people I was talking about. I said that they have to accept, not just tolerate me, if they wanted me to be part of their lives. I'd said some of that to them when I first came out, but not as much. They had a much stronger reaction to the pregnancy, and Erin really compelled me to deal with them, more than my own stuff had. I wasn't surprised by their reaction, but it was hard to hear my parents say, "How could you do this to your kid?" It was painful and sad, aside from being angering. Here was this person they'd managed to love all these years, and now a part was revealed to them that had been hidden previously, and they were going to change the whole relationship. It made me question how much I valued such a relationship. Now they're crazy about Erin. The letter affected them and time passed. I think they see I'm not doing anything horrible to Erin.

In addition to introducing new aspects of the coming out process within family of origin contexts, children may propel women to reconsideration of their stances in work contexts. Jane illustrates this.

Jane:

One important thing that happened was around my work. I never actively hid anything, but I didn't actively share anything with people I didn't care to, either.

When Debra got pregnant, that felt very different to me. I felt like, "This is a major event in my life, and I can't go through the next nine months as if it's not happening. This is very important to me. Whenever anybody else at work gets pregnant or their partner gets pregnant, it certainly is discussed and it's a very exciting thing." So I needed to be able to talk about it, but I also realized that meant I'd have to come out to people I didn't necessarily want to come out to.

I'm generally a person who takes time getting to know people--never mind my sexual preference. My style is one in which I don't get intimate real quickly. Now I feel I've been forced to change that in certain respects--that I don't have the same control.

Some people knew I was a lesbian, so I just had to tell them about Debra. But there were others where I had to say, "I don't know if you know that I'm a lesbian..." It was very freeing for me, but also very vulnerable.

All in all, it was a very positive experience for me. I didn't get any horrible reactions. I got questions--like, "What does all this mean, and how do you explain it to the child,"--but certainly no negative reactions toward me. It was a very supportive environment. They gave me a shower and invited Debra to the shower. Now work is a new experience because of Kimberly's existence.

I'm treated as a parent regardless of what people may feel in their gut. I've realized how important it is to me to feel that I get that respect and caring from my work environment. I hear stories about people, particularly non-biological parents, who could never talk about their role as a parent. I could never live like that. It sounds unbearable to me.

As women consider the issue of how "out" to be once they have children, a range of responses is evident, and again, many factors come into play.

Parenting may be one arena in which lesbians manifest gay pride. This can be an important aspect of self-expression and lesbians' relations to the world, as Glenda and Mary suggest.

Glenda:

I am very clear about being out about myself and him. Different people make different choices about this, but my feeling is that there's nothing wrong with how it's been done, and that people need to know that this is okay to talk about and it's okay to be like this.

When I go to the doctor's office, I wear a gay pride T-shirt because I want them to see that here's a different kind of situation, and look how well this kid is doing.

Mary:

It feels like we're defying a social norm. The social norm is that lesbians and gay men aren't parents, and I feel proud about defying that in what I think of as a very healthy way. I feel we've affected people. For example, Sylvia's pediatrician--I don't know how many other lesbian clients she has, but she has us, and she sees us being wonderful parents with Sylvia, and that's going to change her, I think. So I have that sense of pride about being a part of showing the world that some of the assumptions they make are not right.

One's degree of "outness" also affects one's level of social isolation versus connection. This, in turn, is likely to affect children's abilities to feel integrated in the world. Karen illustrates this. Her stance about outness is formulated both in relation to her own need for recognition and connection, and her perception of her children's needs. She also identifies her effort to educate people about the family's definitions.

Karen:

We made a decision when we started, that we were gonna go the route of being out everywhere. I think having kids forces you to go one way or the other with it. Either you really go back in the closet or you're out everywhere, because it just comes up all the time. So we're out as far as school, the pediatrician; we won't go anywhere where they don't understand we're a family and feel at ease with it. So I've come out to a number of parents of Faye's friends. I'm sure that it's made some people uneasy about it--they don't tell me about it. That's mostly the kind of reaction you get--people keep their discomfort to themselves. It may be that they're uncomfortable enough that it has stopped them from pursuing contact--I don't know. The neighborhood parents and kids seem real at ease with us.

People have to be taught--they have to have it explained to them that you don't say to Faye, "Which one is your mother?"--lots of people ask her that. You have to educate people and say, "We're both her mother," so people learn to say things like, "How are your mommies?" It's a learning process, and I don't mind doing that teaching with anybody who's willing to learn.

It gets scary for me sometimes. I take Faye to an art class, and for some reason, everyone is from Queens and they're all avid church-goers; so I was uneasy about coming out, and I didn't. I was talking to one of the mothers, and after many

weeks, we were talking rather personally about her husband, and I would talk about me and Faye, and Kevin, but never mention Terry. After a while it started to feel weird, and I found myself pulling back and feeling like I didn't like her all that much. Then one day I decided to come out to her, and she was wonderful--she was perfectly delightful. She said, "Oh yeah, my sister's gay too, and she also has a kid." I had such a rush of love for this woman. I became real clear to me that my not coming out to her was making me not like her--it was making a barrier between us. It was an important lesson for me that I have to risk that, because if they don't accept me, they don't accept me; but if I don't take the risk, then I'm gonna make a barrier. It's not always easy. . . .

As Karen struggles to define her own stance regarding presentation to the world, she also notes that her children need to find their own ways of being in the world. In Karen's case, a particularly salient feature of the dilemmas surrounding presentation to the world, is the absence of a known father.

Karen:

We were at a judo exhibition, and an old friend of Terry's came up to Faye and said, "Oh, you're so cute. How'd you get to be so beautiful? You must have a good-looking daddy!" We decided not to say anything--there were too many things going on and this wasn't someone we were likely to ever see again. Afterwards, I went over to Faye and said, "You know, when somebody asks you about your daddy, you don't have to say anything if you don't want to, but you can always tell them, 'I don't have a daddy,' or 'I have two mommies instead of daddy,' if you want to--it's up to you how much you want to say," and Faye said she didn't want to say anything. Terry felt awful afterwards, that she hadn't corrected her friend. . . .

I have a feeling Faye is storing up some feelings about this whole daddy issue that are gonna get expressed sometime soon--she's not ready to talk about it yet. I think she'll have questions--like, "Everyone seems to assume she has a daddy; does that mean that she did have one and lost him?"--things like that. . . .

There are several practical dimensions of the decision regarding outness. Many women make distinctions between being out as lesbians and being out as parents to their children. Establishing a legitimate parenting role in relation to one's non-biological or non-adoptive child necessitates thinking through one's stances with respect to many institutional structures. Nina and Mary describe this process.

Nina:

So that first--there was a lot of trauma, there was a lot of terrible worry and concern, fear; but also, some interesting things happened. For one thing, we absolutely presented ourselves as a family, that Julie had two mothers. We really dealt with the staff in a way in which we expressed both our positive self-regard and our real expectation that they could and would be relating to us as the family unit that we were; and they really did--you know, on a progress note--"Mommy's in this morning," or "Nina called." We were both working because Beth didn't take maternity leave at the time; she recovered from surgery and then went back to work, and we would go to the hospital twice a day. You know--"Nina, Julie's mother, was called, and we let her know about our intention to do an X-ray, and she said it was okay."--you know, it was like they really respected our family unit, and were very responsive to us.

Well, we hadn't talked about it ahead of time because we didn't know there would be this emergency. We knew that as a family we were very much in this together. As soon as the doctor said, "Who's the father?", and I said, "I'm the other parent--I'm Julie's mother also," and it was not really thought through, because there wasn't the opportunity to anticipate that. There's a way--it's interesting--I feel like it was important. From the minute Julie was born, we were thrown into interfacing with these people and this institution--our own pediatrician, and this entire hospital with all its staff. And we were completely out, not about being lesbians--I mean, we didn't say. It was so obvious, and everybody really knew it. But we were out in terms of us both being Julie's parents, and that Julie had two mothers and this is the story.

I remember that there was one nurse who didn't want me to stay that night that Julie was born--with Beth; and I felt like that was the only person who was weird. I remember talking to the head nurse about it. I felt like we were informing people about who we were and what our expectations were, in a really nice way--except for the first resident, that I felt like I wanted to murder. And people were very responsive. And that's basically the experience that we've had throughout the births and raising of our two children. We really will not step back from claiming our position as our children's parents. And we really have a sense that people can meet us around this; and if people have trouble or there's some difficulty, we take whatever next step we need to take. But we feel really clear at this point about not compromising around claiming these relationships. Now, I know that will probably change as the kids get older and--I mean that we're no longer in control, that they start having feelings, desires, don't want us both, or would want some protection, and all that. I think that's gonna be a major shift for us, and probably will really take some adjusting.

It was a sense that I'm willing to make a choice about coming out or not coming out around my relationship with Beth. We're adults, and I don't feel hurt or--I feel like I can really make a choice about that. But I feel like I can't make a choice around coming out or not coming out as a parent. It's a relationship I'm not willing to be

invisible around--I'm just not. To somehow imagine being with Julie and my having anxiety about claiming the relationship, or feeling like I had to hide that, felt absolutely intolerable to me, and unacceptable. In my talk, I speak about the different level of coming out around your kid. So that was a very emotional time, where I felt like I was fighting in the culture a lot, and in the environment, and even around lesbians who would say, "Oh, there's your mommy"--people do that to Beth now, around Jason, and it makes us both feel angry. It's okay if people say, "She's the mother," as long as it's not exclusive, but when people say it and you can tell it's an exclusive thing like, "This is your mother, and that's the one and only mother you have," it feels very insulting.

Mary:

In the world, we will make a concerted effort to present ourselves together. In schools, for instance, I think we'll say legally I'm the mother, so I'm probably the one who signs certain kinds of things, but that Deidre is a coparent and in case of emergency, is in fact probably easier to reach than me--and that if Sylvia brings things home to sign, Deidre might be as likely to sign as me.

Beyond names, we've had situations like taking Sylvia to the hospital and being asked who the parent is. We say we both are, and sometimes there'll be this intake of breath by the person--not even so much shock, but just they have to breathe for a second, and then they seem fine and take it from there. I often think those can be the worst kinds of situations, where it's a crisis and everyone is in a panic and kind of flurrying about. At the hospital, all they want to know is who is going to sue them--legally, who's responsible. They've been fine when we're clear they have to deal with us equally.

It's not a political issue per se, that motivates us to go together to meet the daycare people. It's because if we're going to coparent together, then Deidre's at least as interested in what happens to Sylvia at daycare, and is just as likely to drop her off or pick her up. In a way,

sometimes we don't even care whether they figure out that we're lesbians or not. We just introduce ourselves as coparents.

There might be some situations where, for the sake of expedience, we wouldn't get into it, but only if it weren't going to be an ongoing relationship and we decided, for whatever reasons, we didn't want to deal with their homophobia.

As Amy considers the issues surrounding presentation to the world, she focuses on the distinctions between parents' responsibilities to educate people in their children's environments and children's choices to present relationships in their own terms. Although these issues can be separated out analytically, there are moments when they may present conflicts in practice.

Amy:

We tend to worry and worry, and talk and talk, and then not figure anything out until we're in the midst of it all. When Anna first arrived, we said I'd be her godmother so that she had some official relationship to me. So, maybe in the schools that's what she'll choose or we'll suggest to her.

I'd be hurt by being referred to as "Daddy," because I'm not a man and I don't want to be made invisible that way. At the same time, if she felt she needed to do it, I think it would be okay with me. I'd be hurt if she referred to me as her "Daddy," but I would think it was okay if that's what she felt she needed to do at school. I wouldn't feel it was okay if the school felt she had to have a mommy and daddy, or if they treated it as, "Anna's an exception, but we're still going to teach as if everyone has a mommy and a daddy." I feel it's our responsibility to make sure the school teaches about different kinds of families, whether or not Anna wants to claim it.

There's a part of me that feels that it's not the kids' responsibility to have the onus of having lesbian mothers and to fight that battle. We can go and educate the schools that there are different kinds of families, but it doesn't need to be the kids doing it. I don't want them to feel like they need to lie to themselves or anyone else. I don't think the kids need to be able to explain our relationship to each other, but I do think they need to explain our relationships to each of them. But I don't feel it's their responsibility. They need to be able to say, "That's my Mommy," or "That's my Amy." However they're going to say it, they need to be able to claim us.

I don't feel a need to say we're lesbian mothers, but I do feel a need to not hide each of our committed relationships with these kids, either in schools or out in the world--grocery shopping, etc.

The children of the women in this study are mostly under the age of six. Therefore, the environments thus far encountered are, by and large, medical and daycare settings. Women report little difficulty with homophobia at this stage, but much concern about the move to public school milieus and older children.

Hannah:

So far, Mindy has had all positive experiences about our family constellation, because children at her age are not homophobic. When kids at her daycare center realized she had two mothers, they were jumping up and down, saying, "Lucky Mindy, you have two mothers!" What could be more heavenly to a four-year-old? They thought this was just the greatest thing they'd ever heard.

Michelle:

So far, he hasn't been thrust into a world where he's very different. I don't know what will happen when he goes to public school.

I think part of why he's so complacent with the arrangement is that he is not in a world where all he sees are traditional families. He knows he has one kind of family, but he also knows people who have a similar kind, as well as many other kinds.

Diane:

One of the least pleasant experiences so far, involved a parent at her daycare center. She told Chris about a conversation she'd had with her own daughter, Denise, and Lisa. Denise said, "When I grow up, Lisa and I are going to have a baby together and we're going to both be mommies," and Ellen, who knows us pretty well, said to Denise, "Don't be silly. Girls can't do that together." And then she reported the conversation to Chris, as if to say, "Isn't that a silly little girl. Where'd she get those ideas?" I was appalled, not only that she'd say that to her own kid, but to my kid as well. I don't know what Lisa thought about that or whether it registered for her. She never brought it up. I think sometimes at two-and-a-half, things that don't fit into a kid's experiential framework, don't register.

The women in my sample speculate about how homophobia may affect their children and family relationships during adolescence. Many consider the experiences of lesbian friends who have older children, but as they point out, these situations are not parallel, insofar as most lesbians with older children had them in the context of heterosexual

marriages, prior to coming out. Mary, Hannah and Diane reflect on the comparisons.

Mary:

Looking at friends of ours who have older kids presents a different picture than ours, because those kids at some age had to suddenly deal with, "Oh my God, my mother is a lesbian." Sylvia will go through, "Oh my God, my mothers are lesbians," because she'll learn the word at some point. She'll go, "Them? That's what they are?", but she's never going to have the surprise of, "Once upon a time, Mom was married, and now there's this big change." So it's hard for me to know, when the fifteen-year-old we know whose mother has been with a woman for ten years, says, "Clean up your act," how much of that is because those two women didn't raise the kid from the get go.

Hannah:

We have friends who have a child who was raised by her biological mother and her mother's lover from the time she was about ten. She just disinvited the lover to her graduation. Basically she said, "You've been more of a parent to me than my father, but I just can't handle this." It's terribly painful. If something like that were to happen to us, it would be horrible, just horrible. We'd have to deal and deal and deal, and try to heal the wounds.

I'm hoping that it will be different for us because it's always been this way, and we are very loving towards her, and we have a good family. So I hope that will get us all through.

Diane:

I don't think we can predict very well what it's going to be like for Lisa to have lesbian parents based on our own experiences of growing up. It's going to be different for this

generation. It's different to grow up with parents who have always been out ever since you were born, than it is to grow up with parents who started out being straight and came out sometime in your memory. I think it's a lot less likely that Lisa will have any expectation of us going back in the closet or marrying men, or those things that the kids of friends of mine who were straight when the kids were young, are raising. I think that's based on a kind of reality that the kids shared with their parents, which Lisa never shared with us. Lisa didn't know us when we were straight. Where would she get an image of us being somebody who we aren't?

It's not that I don't expect it to be an issue. It's just not in the same way. I'm sure it will come up for her, but I can't predict how. I think it's quite possible she'll get to be ten or so, and not want to come to lesbian events with us because it's embarrassing, or really cringe when one of us speaks publicly or is quoted in a newspaper. But I also feel she's going to have to learn to deal with that in whatever way she chooses.

I think teenagers go through a stage of being really embarrassed by who their parents are, and not wanting to have anything to do with who they are. It wouldn't matter who we were; I think she'll probably go through that stage, and it's probably going to be unpleasant. I don't know what form it will take, and we'll just have to deal with it when it happens.

Right now I worry less than I used to about what it's going to be like for her to be different, because I think she's really capable of handling whatever emotional stuff comes her way. It was certainly more in the front of my mind before she was born. I'm clearer now, that she'll be able to deal with it--not that it won't be an issue, but that she'll be able to deal with it and it won't wreck her life. It's not going to be the kind of thing where she grows up and thinks it's the worst thing that ever happened. I think what's different is just knowing her, and knowing what life is like and how the world treats her and us--and also, seeing it's an issue, but it's not the overriding one.

Diane suggests that her own clarity about being out is not just a personal stance, but also an important aspect of the values she wishes to give to her daughter.

Diane:

I feel very strongly about not going into the closet. It may happen that there are people she doesn't want to tell, or kids she feels uncomfortable bringing home because she doesn't trust them enough with that information. I think she would need to think about why she wants to be friends with people like that. I feel very strongly that it's important for her and for us, that we don't compromise ourselves for her benefit, because I don't think it would be for her benefit in the end.

It's different for her because she's always had two mothers. So it's not like one of us is her real mother and one of us is not. I think being secretive about us could feel, for her, analogous to what it would have felt like for me to present one of my parents as not my parent. I had a fantasy when I was growing up, that I was an orphan and there'd been a mistake, but it didn't ever occur to me to present it to the world that way. I hope she'd find some other solution to whatever discomfort she was having, but I don't know.

I think it's a much better model for her to have us be who we are and be proud of that and comfortable with that, and really up-front with that, than it would be for us to be who we are and pretend to be somebody different. That's what I want to help Lisa do--be who she is and proud of it and comfortable with it. The only way I know how to do that is to be who I am.

In contrast to Diane, Jessie emphasizes the importance of children's abilities to choose their own stances, over the value of being out.

Jessie:

I think it's important for kids to have a choice. Some people say they'll come out everywhere, but I don't feel that way. It may be internalized homophobia, but I can't see imposing certain hardships on Jackie out of our own principles, if they don't have to be imposed. I'm an adult and it's my choice. She's a child having to grapple with a lot of nuclear families.

At daycare, I said that I had adopted Jackie, and that I live with a woman named Martha. Let them draw their own conclusions. You deal with practicalities, like Martha picking her up at daycare. My assumption is that they know, but it hasn't been made explicit. I'm Jackie's mother, and Martha is an important person in her life.

There is a parallel to my own handling of this issue. I've been out all my adult life. In my work life, people know that I'm a lesbian, and I'm out to my family. But I didn't walk into daycare and say, "I'm a lesbian." I make disclosures, and it's integrated for me with people I have ongoing relationships with.

In these examples, it is apparent that life will become more complicated as children get older and have their own responses to homophobia and normative cultural models. As women imagine potential dilemmas regarding their children's homophobia or fears of homophobic responses in others, their relations to their own lesbianism are once again reconsidered. In addition, other issues are central to how these dilemmas may be worked out. For example, views of parent/child negotiation, and again, parent's stances with respect to their children's pain come into play. The following sequence contains diverse responses to the

dilemmas lesbian parents anticipate regarding their children's responses to homophobia.

Hannah:

If some homophobic stuff comes up in school and I want to confront it, and Mindy begs me not to, what would I do? I think I'd have to defer to her, or if I felt very strongly, I'd negotiate with her some compromise around it. In the school situation, she's the one who's there--I don't have to be there every day, and she does. She has to be behind whatever it is we do, or at least helped to understand it in some way. Otherwise there's no point in doing it, because it's for her that you do it. It's for her benefit and her safety; so I would try to work it out with her, and if she really didn't want me to do something, I guess I wouldn't do it.

I've got some bottom lines. Lesbians can only be lesbians safely within their own homes, basically. I mean, there is no other space where we can really just be who we are. So I wouldn't give that up. I could eat these words, but that's how I feel now. A lot of things have happened since I became a mother, that were unpredictable. You don't know how you're going to feel. I'm assuming and hoping that this is the way I'd be.

I think it's going to be very hard sometimes and we're going to have to be on our toes a lot. I feel very committed to being direct and honest about it. I don't think there's any reason to pretend things aren't as they are. We'll talk about how hard it feels, and that some people don't like us because of who we are. Whatever happens, we have to deal with it head on, and the most I can do for Mindy is be there to help her cope.

I hope she's strong enough not to take it on, and not to abuse us because of it. She's a very feisty child, and I don't know what she'll do. Either she'll be feisty in relation to us or she'll be feisty in relation to the kids who are bothering her. I'm hoping for the latter.

Jane:

In terms of the world's homophobia, I want Kimberly to have a sense that it is their problem--that it hurts her, and there's no denying that, but the problem is in their inability to accept difference and their inability to feel that whoever she is is okay, that the problem isn't in her.

I don't know how I actually imagine myself dealing with it, though. I hope I will let her deal with her friends in whatever way she chooses to. I would love nothing more than for her to say, "Well, this is who I am, and either my friends deal with it, or they're not my friends." But there are going to be times when she feels like she wants to hide it. That may hurt, but I also feel like I'm strong enough to say that that's okay--those are her relationships, and I feel that she needs to decide. In other words, I won't come out to people in her life that she doesn't want me to be out to--at least I hope I won't.

At that point I'll certainly be talking to her about what that's like for me, but I feel that it's her choice in her life how she wants to deal with this issue. She will have an impact, and affect our decisions in terms of who we come out to and how we relate to people. I also feel that we'll be discussing it openly among the three of us, in terms of how each of us feels. It will be something we work out case to case.

Mary:

If Sylvia wants us to be closeted in some way, I'd probably initially go along with what she asked, but then I'd talk about it with her. What I imagine is somehow I might be taken by surprise the first time she said it about a particular person in a particular situation. I mean, that's how kids are--they don't generally give you a month's notice, but two seconds before their friend walks in the door they say, "By the way, don't do any of that weird stuff in front of my friends." So my sense is, "Okay, fine, for the moment," but afterwards we'd probably want to talk with her about it, and at some point might want to

make rules about what would feel comfortable to us as an accommodation, and what would feel like a real violation.

When she gets older, high school for instance, we might cut space different ways. In terms of an official relationship to her school, we'd maintain that together, regardless of her feelings about it. But in terms of her peer relationships, I can see thinking about it in different ways. It might be that we'd feel her really good friends needed to know because it would be too difficult to have a kid over here all the time who didn't know, but in terms of her casual friends, they might not need to know. I can imagine she might have some particular teacher where she thought it would present some problem, and conceivably we could say "fine" to that, but I can't imagine taking that stance in relation to a whole institution, because I don't think either of us would be willing to be cut out of that really important communication.

Glenda:

We'll have a discussion that, "There are all different kinds of families and this is the family you have. Sometimes people are going to give you a hard time about being Jewish, or being raised by one parent, or being raised in a lesbian household. Some people might make comments or be prejudiced that way, so it's up to you to decide how you want to deal with that. We can work on it together. Whatever your decision is, I'll help you with it."

I don't want Sam to feel that I'm not proud of who I am, or that there's something wrong or we have to pretend it's different from how it is. On the other hand, I don't want him to feel like you always have to make an issue out of it. I'm fairly well-known in the community, and am very publicly out, in general. If he went through a period where he needed me to be a little less public, my first response would be to talk it over with him so I wouldn't have to do that, but if he felt strongly, I could meet him halfway.

I think he may go through a phase where he doesn't want to acknowledge anything about me,

though I think if we have a decent relationship, it won't be that extreme. But adolescents do sometimes do that, and I can be respectful of his need to do that. I suspect that the more respectful I am of his need to do it, the less he's going to need to do it.

My feeling is that if he chooses to hide around the issue, it will be because he's feeling embarrassed or ashamed, or doesn't want to put up with the shit he's going to get. To me, that would mean there's some work to be done--that we need to at least try to talk about why he feels that way, and be clear about what's happening.

Michelle:

We've always been out because we could afford to be, with very little risk. That feels different now. There's a whole new level of not wanting to create a situation that's dangerous or scary for Ian.

If he has feelings about not wanting us to be out at some point, we would have to negotiate around it. There are plenty of things I'd feel ready to accommodate him on, and there might be some I wouldn't. I would certainly respect his wish not to be embarrassed, but I don't think I'd go around the house hiding everything or putting books away. I've never been very good at pretending I wasn't a lesbian or pretending I'm normal. But I suspect it will be different with Ian, because my relation to him is different and I obviously don't want to do anything that is going to create a really painful or uncomfortable situation for him. I mean, I don't want him to be called names or ostracized at school. It may happen, but I don't want to incite that. At the same time, as I'm saying this, a part of me feels people like that aren't worth having as friends anyway, so I don't know what we'll do.

I hope that he is minimally pained by whatever shit he gets for having lesbian parents--I hope it's not a source of real anguish for him. The plan is that by the time he gets to be a teenager, he'll have enough of a solid foundation and working relationship with Leslie and I, that we can help him deal with what's hard--and also,

that he'll have enough perspective to not internalize what comes at him around that stuff. That, of course, is hard for an adolescent, but it's the ideal. I think chances are we'll actually go through a really hard time.

It is evident as women speak to the issues surrounding presentation to the world, that the world enters the heart of family life. Responses to homophobia may centrally inform family relationships. At the same time, it is also true that these families enter the heart of the dominant culture as they interact with those in their immediate environments. Each woman's stance about lesbianism in relation to herself, the world, and her child, is simultaneously part of her individual experience, part of a cultural phenomenon (e.g., if all lesbian parents were closeted, then lesbian mothers would remain invisible, thus contributing to the perpetuation of cycles of discrimination), and part of children's development. Many meanings are inherent in the interactions regarding coming out.

Questions of presentation of the family to the world are particularly fraught with issues of silence and invention. When and how do lesbian parents oppose silence? When do they join with it? When do they take it up and invent out of it? What are the effects of each of these moves on parents and children? How do family members

negotiate around diverging desires? When a parent assesses a child as having conflicting needs (e.g., to not be hurt in any given moment by homophobia, and to not feel one has to hide in the long run), how does she choose to respond?

These questions pointedly evoke the issues Sara Ruddick has identified as inherent in the activity of mothering in this culture. Lesbian mothers are often especially conscious of the potential conflict between the struggle for authenticity, and the effort to raise children who will thrive in a world which is not always welcoming.

Chapter 12**Good Mothers****What My Child Learns of the Sea**

What my child learns of the sea
of the summer thunders
of the riddles that hide in the curve of spring
she will learn in my twilights
and childlike
revise every autumn

What my child learns
as her winters grow into time
has ripened in my own body
to enter her eyes with first light.

This is why
more than blood
or the milk I have given
one day a strange girl will step
to the back of a mirror
cutting my ropes
of sea and thunder and spring.
Of the way she will taste her autumns--
toast-brittle or warmer than sleep--
and the words she will use for winter
I stand already condemned.

Audre Lorde(1)

Notions about what it means to be a good mother pervade our cultural consciousness. As Adrienne Rich points out, the good mother archetype can function as an oppressive force in the lives of mothers. At the same time, mothers strive to achieve and maintain certain values. As they do so, their personal notions about good mothering act as a guide. As I listened to women's stories about their families, I became very curious about the values which guide each woman.

I believe a monolithic good mother archetype fails to encompass the plurality of mothering experiences. Hence, in an effort to elicit a chorus of responses, I asked my subjects, "What is a good mother?" This chapter contains their answers, which I let stand for themselves.

Lucy:

There's no such thing as a good mother. It's such a loaded phrase that I want to let it go completely. What helps me to be good at this job is when I'm able to be clear about where I begin and end, and where Maura begins and ends. When I'm respectful, it helps me to be a good mother.

Jessie:

I say what kids need is simple; but it's ironic to me that I also think raising a child is one of the most complex things anybody can ever do in life, and yet there's absolutely no focusing on that. I mean, it's just assumed you'll know what to do.

Being a good mother involves knowing what a child needs and being able to shift gears as those needs change. I think what's hard is balancing meeting a child's needs with letting a child figure out things for herself and do things for herself. So it involves giving a child space to do that, but also knowing when she's getting overwhelmed and needs help in order to get herself back on track.

Part of what being a good mother involves is being able to know what your own needs are, and getting those met fairly well. It's hard being with a baby all day long. Part of what has helped me to be a good mother to Jackie, is my feeling "given to" by friends and by Martha.

Tricia:

Being a good mother can't be separated from being a good woman and being good to yourself. I end up fluctuating between the two. Being a successful parent is being able to balance my needs and hers, not to anyone's tremendous detriment. It involves being able to balance that, and give Erin the best sense of herself and the best ability to take care of herself later, through intense nurturing. You don't spoil kids by doing that. You help them to take care of themselves later on.

Ruth:

It's an impossible question really, but I'll try to answer it. Right now, I think a good mother is someone who can really listen and go inside a kid's way of thinking about things, and respond to who that person really is, at the same time being really clear about her own limits and boundaries.

That's the big challenge for me. I think of myself as basically a good parent, because I love being around my kid and I feel a kind of unconditional acceptance of him, but I don't think that's enough as far as being a really good parent goes. I'm working on trying to be more present for him in what he's trying to tell me about

himself--not just verbally, but also the ways he tries to express who he is. I'm trying to be more aware of how I can connect with him on his level, and how to do that without having the feeling that he can have everything he wants. The struggle is how to be non-judgmental while also saying, "You absolutely cannot do the following things." I have a terrible time with limit-setting. I would like him to do everything he wants to do, but it doesn't work that way. Also, on the other hand, I can sometimes get preoccupied with my own thoughts and feel bombarded by his demands for attention. I've developed a habit I hate, which is being able to answer and talk without paying attention to what's really going on.

Pauline:

Part of being a good mother is being a good listener--also remembering what it's like to be a child, not being judgmental, knowing your kids have feelings. They're people, not just kids, and they need to be respected. I think of the Sweet Honey in the Rock song, "Your Children Are Not Your Children." They don't belong to you and don't have to be like you. There are things you're going to want. What if you're disappointed because they're not what you expect? You have to accept them for who they are.

Glenda:

I think being a good parent is mainly about being respectful of the child and treating him as an individual in his own right. It is an interactive system, though. There isn't just a model or a specific formula--it's more what is right for the particular people involved. For example, if Sam were a different kind of kid and I were being responsive to him, I would have to be a different kind of parent, not necessarily in terms of my basic attitudes, but in how I respond to him. He might have been a kid who needed more structure, and I would have had to be sensitive to that and picked up on his needing more than I was giving him. Or alternatively, he might have needed more flexibility than I was giving him.

Empathic interaction is probably more important than anything else, whether you're a man or a woman, or lesbian or straight. That stuff is just about convention, as opposed to what people need as infants in order to develop. And there's no specific formula for that--it really does depend on the individuals involved. If you know something about your own issues and can manage them, it helps. But there's no one way to achieve that.

Marie:

It's important to give a child some kind of political context--an experience of different kinds of people. Part of being a good parent is exposing kids to lots of different experiences and people, because that's who is actually in the world.

It feels so dangerous to have a child these days, or to be a child. If you expand the concept of protection to many areas, then that's really what kids need. They have within them the growth potential and the urges for autonomy, independence, getting big and doing their own thing. What they need from adults is enough support and enough protection and enough care in the environment to be able to do that. I don't tend to think that kids need to be taught a whole lot as much as they need to be allowed to develop as they would naturally. Obviously kids need limits, but I see that as part of protection, as making a boundaried, safe space for them to grow in.

Michelle:

Since Ian was born, I'm more overwhelmed by the amazing responsibility. I think it's an incredible leap of faith, and it's the only way to have a kid. If you really get it how powerless and responsible you are, you couldn't do it.

To not be able to ultimately protect someone you love is a horrifying burden. To not be able to make sure that he's safe is a really hard thing. It's hard to strike a balance between not

wanting him to experience the world as a dangerous place--between him feeling good in the world, and being able to take care of himself--to be careful.

I suspect that different kids need different things. What I have in my mind a lot with Ian, is that I want him to feel good about himself and I want him to feel loved and safe, and like he's okay--that he's not bad, and there's not something deficient about him. I try to understand his process and his motivation, and I try not to trap him--to always give him a way out, and build in the idea of mistakes, as opposed to badness.

Sometimes I think it's hard for adults not to be abusive to kids or to put them down. Children have this energy which can be contrary to adult energy. They have so much exuberance and energy that if you come home and you're tired, it's hard not only to tolerate that energy, but to help a kid feel like it's fine for them to be that way. There are so many subtle ways that adults put kids down. And sometimes there can be a fury that the kid is not listening, or in your control, somehow. I try to catch myself in those moments and stop the dynamic, but sometimes I can't. Then, if I feel like I behaved in less than a fair manner, I try afterwards to talk with him about it and say, "Listen, I was mean," or "I was angry," and validate his experience of that.

Hannah:

I promised myself when I was pregnant that this child would know that I love her. To me, that's the one thing my mother didn't do so well at. I tell Mindy all the time, a million times a day, and I show her by taking as good care of her as I can.

I let her have her feelings, which we certainly didn't do in my family growing up. We weren't allowed to get angry, especially. My mother doesn't believe in feelings--"You just go on," and "Every day is a new day," and "You can't dwell on the past." These are all quotes: "Tomorrow is another day," "What's done is done." It's humorous being a mother, because no matter what, you find yourself doing the very same things sometimes. I'll say to Mindy, "Tomorrow is

another day," but it doesn't mean the same thing. When my mother said it to me, she truly meant, "Stuff your feelings and move on." Mostly, when I say that to Mindy I don't mean for her to have to stop crying or not have her feelings. She has her feelings all over the place--she's very out there, and I'm glad for that. When I was a kid, I was very neurotic and balled-up and unhappy. I don't want her to be that way, so I let her have her feelings.

Amy:

My mother is a model for me in that she really took pleasure in all her kids. She really took time and educated us in different ways. It's something I aspire to more than I actually achieve. I think she took more time with us than I take with these girls. At the same time, there are things she did that I don't want to repeat. I feel like she was so invested in each of us that separation was really hard, and I don't want it to be so hard for my daughters. I think my mother was so unhappy in her life that she was living through us, and I feel resentful of the ways she mediated my relationships with the world. I try to be careful about that, but then I find myself tending to jump in.

Sara:

A good mother is someone who is prepared to take a hold and make grow any of those unexpected things that might come. You have to take your blinders off and look at your kid like they're just this whole little bundle of possibilities, and let each possibility have space. You can't just decide, "I want an athlete." Then you have this kid who has a whole lot of other skills--maybe is good at math and music and spelling bees--but you're so focused on the soccer team that you don't get it. Being a good mother involves that kind of openness to your child in a lot of different situations.

What you have to give to the future is your parenting, through your children. All you are to your child is their parent. That's it.

Mary:

I've spent many hours reconstructing my childhood. What matters to me as much as how my mother literally treated me, is who she was and how she was in the world. I am very proud of her. Here was this woman who ended up being in a wheelchair at a time when there was no accessibility to stores, etc. I saw the degree to which that got her down, but I also saw all the things she still did. I feel very proud of who she was in the world, so I think that's going to be true for Sylvia also. I'm sure she'll care about how I treated her, but somewhere, as an equally important path, is going to be her noticing who I am and how I am in the world.

A good mother is true to herself. To me, Sylvia learns as much from watching me and watching what I do and how I am--even when I'm not directly interacting with her--she learns at least as much from that as she does from all the times I pick her up and hug her and kiss her, or whatever. I feel like the most important thing that I can do as a good mother is to keep trying to be a good person in the world, in all the ways that matter to me. That's going to be the really profound stuff that she'll learn from.

Chapter 13

Concluding Remarks

It is 1990. An increasing number of lesbians are having and raising children, singly and in couples. People are beginning to be aware of this fact. It is being talked about in popular media and academic social sciences. An analysis of the significant historical and social factors which have yielded this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this project, but to once again recall Foucault, I believe that a number of "social, economic and political processes" have served as "instigators." These include women's socialization towards motherhood, feminism, the gay rights movement, and developments in reproductive technology.

The parameters within which lesbian family formation occurs are marked by pervasive homophobia which is manifest on both individual and institutional levels. Thus, the legal system, adoption community, and medical establishment present lesbians with particular constraints as they bring children into their lives. There are also biologically imposed constraints, most notably the fact that two women cannot reproduce. Finally, there are parameters that are both biologically and socially engendered, such as the impact of the AIDS crisis on family formation in the gay community.

Although a fundamental premise of this work is that we construct our worlds through the meanings we create, I do not see this as occurring in a vacuum or in a world of limitless possibilities. There are constraints--some biological, some social, and most, an amalgam of the two. Furthermore, individuals respond to the parameters they perceive, and thus establish their own domains of limits and possibilities. There are constraints surrounding us, but they are not static and absolute. We make what we can of them, or as Foucault says, "Obstacles and difficulties" are transformed into "problems to which . . . diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response." This work has attempted to present some images of the diverse ways that lesbians are perceiving and organizing constraints and possibilities, as they form families at this time. In the process of creating families and raising children, lesbians feed back into the culture and transform the set of constraints and possibilities therein.

I see the relationship between individual consciousness and culture as aptly reflected in the process of painting. An artist uses tools that are manufactured by people, out of materials derived from nature. These include canvas, brushes and paint. As an individual artist approaches her canvas, she brings a consciousness that has been formed in particular social and historical contexts, and she uses

symbols that are derived from those contexts. Thus, culture is behind the painting, and in fact, makes it possible. Simultaneously, the artist's consciousness and approach to her endeavor is uniquely her own. She creates a painting that is both part of her world and part of herself. The painting, which is now both a material reality and an extension of consciousness, is available for others to see. Once put out into the world, it is taken up in other people's consciousnesses, and thus creates a new set of possibilities and constraints. For example, a person might view the painting and be moved by it to see a situation anew, and in turn, to create something of her own. Thus, culture creates and transforms our lives, just as we create and transform culture.

When lesbians create families and raise children, these families and children are part of the world, and thus influence culture as much as they are influenced by it. In this work, I have attempted to demonstrate both aspects of this process: namely, the ways lesbians respond to cultural parameters (e.g., through family structure choices), and the ways the presence of these families challenge and transform cultural contexts (e.g., the debates in legal discourse, the transformation of people who come into contact with these families).

Lesbian parents, at this moment in time, speak from an important vantage point. They have sensibilities which reflect the experiences of: defining oneself against social norms, questioning traditional gender roles, dealing with discrimination against oneself and one's children, and creating new relational configurations, as well as language to reflect those configurations.

This work began with the premise that the lenses one looks through are extensions of the self, which profoundly affect what one sees (and hence, who one becomes through that vision). Furthermore, I have argued that the lens of empiricism, particularly as it is manifest in traditional psychological discourse, yields effective blindness to the complexity of lesbian-headed families. I see this not as a coincidence, but rather, as systematically related to the homophobic context within which such discourse occurs. Having made this observation, I set out to redress the silence about lesbian-headed families in psychological discourse, and to explore the interplay of silence and invention in lesbian mothers' lives. Like the lesbian mothers I interviewed, I too am both a product of my time and an individual with my own idiosyncratic approach to the world. My lenses are derived from feminist theory, social constructionism, and personal experience. It is those

lenses which have yielded the descriptions and questions posed herein.

Though in undertaking this project I have contributed to the formation of a category--namely, "lesbian mothers"--I do not see it as a monolithic phenomenon. My aim has been to discuss the basic parameters of the family formation process for lesbians (in other words, the rules of the game), and then to describe a few people's diverse responses to those parameters. In exploring this territory, I have suggested that language and experience are mutually embedded, and that meanings shift over time, both within individual lives and across cultural contexts.

From both clinical and research perspectives, this work suggests several areas that warrant further exploration. How do lesbians' senses of family and lesbian identity inform their decisions regarding creating families of their own? How do couple dynamics inform both the decision-making process and relational configurations as they develop over time? How do feelings about biological connections between mothers and children, and between fathers and children, play out? What happens when disjunctures between definitions of family configurations occur (both within families and between families and others in the environment)? How does homophobia in the culture affect family life and children's

development? What role does language (particularly naming), play in family relationships and children's development over time?

This work has left me profoundly curious about the children's perspectives, especially as they change over the course of development. Children will influence family interactions and the larger culture as well. I am also interested in seeing how the phenomenon of lesbian-headed families will change as it becomes increasingly prevalent in our society.

Previously, I likened this work to the process of constructing a movie. A movie is, in fact, a series of still images or frozen moments. Insofar as this writing is like a movie, there is a great deal that remains outside my frame. There are many questions I neglected to ask my subjects, and many of their answers to the questions I did ask are not included herein. The voices of family members are also missing--children, partners, fathers, grandparents, etc. I interviewed twenty women. Thus, many lesbian-headed families are not to be found within these pages. Finally, this work reflects a particular moment in time--other moments are outside the frame.

What then, is inside the frame? A mirror, reflecting back your own eyes as you gaze into it. A self-portrait, my vision of my vision. A prism, refracting the viewpoints of a few women riding the crest of a wave that has not yet come to shore. From this vantage point, it is unclear how the rest of the journey will go, and what waves will follow.

I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth.

Michel Foucault(2)

Notes

Opening Quotations

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⁹ For example: Harlene Anderson, Harold Goolishian, Karl Tomm, Michael White.

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¹⁷ Rosaldo, p. 143.

¹⁸ Rosaldo, p. 153

¹⁹ Rosaldo, p. 141.

²⁰ Geertz, "Thick Description...", p. 30.

²¹ Geertz, "Thick Description...", p. 19.

²² Geertz, "Thick Description...", pp. 14 and 15.

²³ Geertz, "Found in Translation...", p. 44.

²⁴ Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View - On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in Local Knowledge, p. 58.

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, "Introduction," in Local Knowledge, p. 10.

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, "The Way We Think Now: Toward an Ethnography of Modern Thought," in Local Knowledge, p. 155.

²⁷ Geertz, "The Way We Think Now...", p. 157.

²⁸ Gergen, p. 267.

²⁹ Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (W. W. Norton and Co., 1976), p. 13.

³⁰ Rich, Of Woman Born, pp. 194-195.

³¹ Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," in Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (Routledge, 1988), p. 153.

³² Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory, ed. Joyce Treblicot (Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), p. 214.

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⁵ Lewin, p. 7.

⁶ Lewin, p. 7.

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