

**THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BEING A DAUGHTER
OF A LESBIAN-HEADED FAMILY**

by

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Abstract

This study drew on phenomenological constructs to explore the lived experiences of daughters raised in lesbian-headed families. Purposeful sampling methods were employed to attain a sample of five women. During in-depth, individual, audio-taped interviews the participants shared their lived experiences as daughters with lesbian mothers. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological analysis. Results of the analysis yielded six common themes: 1) a sense of being different, 2) a sense of being torn, 3) a reclamation of identity, 4) a resistance to socially prescribed femininity, 5) a sense of closeness with their mother, and 6) an enhanced sense of social justice. Validation interviews were conducted to ensure the themes accurately reflected the women's lived experience.

The five daughters in this study appear to have constructed stable lives and to have maintained good relationships with friends, partners, and family. The results also indicate that age related developmental stages and the environment may have influenced the participants' experiences. All participants recalled experiencing feelings of being different from others, feelings of shame or embarrassment about their family, and feelings of pride in themselves and their family form. These findings indicate there may be a commonality between the experiences of these women and the experiences of other minority group members as outlined in minority identity development models such as the Minority Identity Development Model of Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993).

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Chapter I

Introduction

Defining Family

In 1991, 83 percent of the Canadian population lived in a family setting as either a spouse, a parent, or a never-married child (La Novara, 1993). In the United States, in 1983, approximately 73 percent of 83.9 million households reported to be families (Schaie & Willis, 1986). For the vast majority of North Americans family is a way of life. Family is believed by many to be the building block of society, "the key to civilization" (Schaie & Willis, p. 42). Leaving one's family of origin and creating a new family situation is considered to be one of the primary developmental stages of young adulthood (Stevens-Long, 1988).

Yet what, in North American society, is family? The Collins English Dictionary (1986) defines it as "...a primary social group consisting of parents and their offspring, the principal function of which is provision for its members" (p. 549). Although the concept of the nuclear family was only introduced in 1941, the definition of family in Canada and the United States has "traditionally" been considered to consist of two married, heterosexual adults and their children, living under the same roof (Che-Alford, Allan, & Butlin, 1994). Until recently the only form of family acknowledged and sanctioned in North America has been this heterosexual, nuclear family.

However, the structure of the nuclear family in Canada and the United States began rapidly changing in the late 1960s and 1970s (La Novara, 1993;

Scott, 1993). According to Scott, greater changes in the American traditional family structure have occurred in these two decades than since family record-keeping began. Similar upheaval in family patterns and forms was also recorded in Canada (Che-Alford et al., 1994). During these years there was a substantial shift in the pattern of the family structure and a marked decline in the percentage of families falling into the category of the traditional family (La Novara). Presently, information gathered from the 1991 Census Canada and the 1992 General Social Survey indicate that married couples account for slightly more than 50 percent of Canadians reported living in traditional families (Che-Alford et al., 1994). The remaining 49 percent of Canadians living in different familial situations reveals the growing diversity of family structures in Canada.

Scott (1993) reports that married couples with children in 1985 represented only 39.6% of families in the United States. The traditional, singular vision of families is expanding to include a myriad of family forms; forms such as common-law couples, childless couples, blended families, single-parent families, same-sex couples, grandparents raising grandchildren, adopted families, foster families, etc. (La Novara, 1993; Seligmann, 1990). While the model of family based on the marriage of the heterosexual couple and their biological children continues to be the socially sanctioned family form, it can, in the United States, no longer claim to be the statistical or cultural norm (Cheal, 1993; McDaniel, 1988).

The nuclear family, despite its decline in North American society, continues to be a "privileged construct" in Western society (Weston, 1991, p. 6).

However, undeterred by opposition and legal inequalities that inhibit the acceptance of alternative family form development, new family structures continue to blossom (Boyd, 1992). The concept of family no longer has one unchangeable form and society is being forced to re-examine its conception of who or what constitutes "family" (Arnup, 1991; Cheal, 1993).

One alternative family structure challenging the traditional interpretation of family is the lesbian mother and her children (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Weston, 1991)). Estimates of lesbian mothers residing with their children in the United States range from 1.5 million to 5 million (Falk, 1989; Gottman, 1989; Turner, Scadden, & Harris, 1990). Estimates of children being raised by lesbian or gay parents range from 6 million to 14 million (Bozett, 1987; Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Family Law Reporter, 1987). Although these estimates represent an approximation of the prevalence of this family form, true numbers are difficult to assess. Many lesbian mothers conceal their sexual orientation because of fear of discrimination and potential loss of child custody, making accurate figures difficult to obtain (Patterson, 1994b). These figures also predate the increase of parenting within this population during the last decade due to the availability of donor insemination and adoption (Pies, 1990). Therefore, the stated estimates in all probability underestimate the number of lesbian-headed families in the present decade (Hare, 1994).

Evolution of the Lesbian-Mothered Family

Despite the analysis of data from the annual General Social Survey, 1971-

1991, which showed over 70 percent of the United States population responding that homosexuality is wrong (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994), society at large is beginning to sanction individual lesbian and gay rights. While the acquisition of protection from discrimination has begun to open a door for the recognition and validation of the legitimacy of the existence of lesbians and gay men as individuals, the endorsement of their right to parent presents, to many, a more difficult dilemma. Many individuals who are in support of individual rights of lesbians and gay men, balk at sanctioning their right to parent and bring children into the world (Bozett, 1987).

Statistics from the Bibby Report which surveyed Canadian attitudes revealed that approval for homosexuality ranged from 37 to 55 percent (Leslie, 1996). Reflecting this growing acceptance, the Canadian government has moved to support lesbian and gay rights by providing protection from discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Act (Canadian Press Newswire, July, 1996). Also in July of 1996 a Human Rights Tribunal demanded Ottawa provide an inventory of all regulations, directives, and federal laws that discriminate against gay and lesbian couples (Canadian Press Newswire). The tribunal ordered the government to furnish corrective plans to abolish such sources of discrimination. This legal recognition enables more and more individuals to openly acknowledge their sexual orientation and family status without fear of legal repercussions, specifically child custody suits.

To counteract the absence of support from society and often the family of

origin, lesbians and gay men have formed a diverse community within the general society. The community as it is known today originated in 1969, in a small gay bar in Greenwich Village, where a rebellion by gay men and lesbians against years of discrimination and brutality marked the beginning of a new community based on dignity and freedom--"gay pride" had begun (Mattison & McWhirter, 1995). This action paved the way for the expansion of the lesbian and gay community, which is as Weston (1991) suggests, a non-erotic concept based on a shared sexual identity.

Within this gay and lesbian community there is a distinct community of women. Women who identify as lesbian, and as feminist, actively advocate women's rights and challenge sources of oppression that affect not only lesbians but all women--poverty, sexual assault, rape as a weapon of war, sexism, child care, equal pay. As well as offering lesbians a vehicle for working towards social change, the community provides a psychological kin group and a multi-faceted network of mutual support (Wolf, 1979).

Striving for recognition within this community of women have been lesbian mothers and their children. Devoid of public sanction, these families have developed their own support network and extended family in an attempt to validate their family life (Slater & Mencher, 1991; Victor & Fish, 1995).

Outside of the lesbian community little is known of these families. Although some individual attitudes and laws have changed, generally lesbian-headed families continue to be misunderstood, ostracized, and often left without

support in the face of social, legal, and religious discrimination (Fassinger, 1991). Our major newspapers, greeting cards, movies, and television all reflect the singular vision of a heterosexual family (Slater & Mencher, 1991). Views of the lesbian-headed family are often negatively biased and ill-informed. For example, the women's organization R.E.A.L. Women and the political "new right" oppose this alternate family form, seeing it as a threat to the Judeo-Christian perception of marriage and the patriarchal family form (Dubinsky, 1985). These political forces consider many of society's ills to be a direct result of the deterioration of family values and the nuclear family--specifically the loss of the husband's control and authority over the family. Government is blamed for encouraging equal pay for equal work, its sanctioning of abortion, and support for lesbian and gay human rights which, according to the political right, all lead to the decay of the traditional family (Dubinsky).

While society is making inroads regarding the recognition of lesbians as individuals, there is heavy opposition to the public sanctioning of lesbian-mothered families as a legitimate family form. Right-wing political factions and fundamental religions categorically label the lesbian population as immoral, and incapable of responsible parenting or healthy role modelling for children (Weston, 1991). Lesbians and their children claiming to be families are often seen as a threat to the building block of society--the nuclear family. Anti-gay legislation activists in the United States and in Canada use slogans such as "save the family" and "save the children" to promote their beliefs that lesbian and gay families are a

threat to the morals of society and true family values (Weston).

How valid are these concerns? Are children within lesbian-headed households likely to experience psychological impairment? Child developmental theory suggests healthy development is more likely to occur in a nuclear family consisting of a heterosexual mother and a heterosexual father (Boyd, 1992).

Although research on lesbian-headed families is in its infancy and is often based on comparisons between children of single heterosexual mothers and single lesbian mothers, researchers to date find no significant difference between the psychosocial development of the two groups of children (Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981; Patterson, 1994a; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). These researchers use a variety of measures to explore areas of sexual and gender identity, sex-role behaviour, personality characteristics, intelligence, self-concept, locus of control, and moral judgment. In summary of these findings Charlotte Patterson (1992) states: "On the basis of existing evidence, though, fears that children of gay and lesbian parents suffer deficits in personal development appear to be without empirical foundation" (p. 1033).

Although there continues to be resistance and opposition to gay and lesbian rights, society is, to a limited degree, beginning to provide a space for this alternative family form. As donor insemination, adoption, and fostering become viable options, more and more lesbians are choosing to have children outside of the heterosexual relationship (Flaks et al., 1995; Pies, 1990; Ricketts &

Achtenberg, 1987). Patterson (1995) and Laird (1994) actually refer to the present era as the lesbian baby boom. Lesbians are beginning to exercise their right to partake in one of the primary developmental stages of all young women (Stevens-Long, 1988). As shown in a study by Weston (1991), who interviewed 40 self-identified gay men and 40 lesbian women, ages 19 to 63, almost three quarters of the sample wanted to raise children. A portion of the sample were already raising children or had already raised children, and others were researching options for adoption or donor insemination. With the increase in civil liberties and legal protection more lesbian women will risk bearing children, will risk adopting children, and those with children will risk coming out of the closet.

Purpose of the Study

Despite the increase of lesbian-mothered families, research has been limited, especially in the qualitative exploration of the offsprings' experiences. Public awareness of the lesbian family is only now developing. As counselling psychologists we know little of the experiences of these families and the children that live within them. The purpose of this study was to gain a degree of understanding of the meaning of the lived experiences within a lesbian-headed household. The research question addressed was: **What is the lived experience of being a daughter from a lesbian-headed family?**

It is my contention that it is possible to gain a degree of understanding of the meaning of the lived experiences within lesbian-headed families by listening to the stories and experiences of the grown offspring of these families; specifically

listening to women within the age range of 18 to 30, who may have gained some perspective on their experience of growing up in a family headed by a lesbian mother. As sexual and gender-role identity are areas of major concern in the research, this age classification will allow the inclusion of women who have now developed their own sexual identities and relationships.

By looking at the lives of daughters raised by lesbian mothers we will begin to gain an understanding of how their lives may be similar to, and different from, our expectations and from the experience of daughters raised in heterosexual families. We may therefore have an opportunity, as Stake (1995) suggests, "to see what others have not yet seen" (p. 136). It is the hope of this researcher that this study will act as a starting point for further research; that the curiosity of other researchers will be piqued and similar research will begin to enlarge our understanding of this little known area. As McLeod (1994) notes, what has been the experience of one individual presents the possibility that others will have similar experiences. Perhaps this study will help to identify new themes and deepen our knowledge of the meanings of the experience in question, as well as increase the visibility of this relatively invisible population. Each new study adds to the pool of existing knowledge, hopefully leading to the development of a new understanding of the meaning and experience for women who have grown up within a lesbian-headed family.

As lesbian-headed families gain civil rights and recognition as a legitimate family form, the number and visibility of these families will increase dramatically,

thus underscoring the necessity for research in this field. As these figures multiply, counselling psychologists will see more and more lesbians and their children in their practices. It is therefore vital to begin to have an understanding and appreciation of the lived experiences within these families. With an increase in information about these lived experiences, counselling psychologists may also begin to develop an understanding of some of the issues faced by individuals raised in a lesbian-headed family.

In summary, over the past decades the concept of family has been dramatically changing. The singular vision of the traditional family is being challenged through the emergence of many alternative family forms. Amongst the emerging family forms, the number of lesbian-headed households is on the rise. As these families continue to grow and develop with the increase of human rights and societal recognition, lesbians and their children will begin to reach beyond the "women's community" for nurturing and support. It is the purpose of this research to attempt to develop an understanding of these families by reviewing the literature to date and by examining the lived experiences of daughters who have been raised in a lesbian-headed family.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The following review summarizes the findings and major discussions in published empirical research, clinical studies, articles and books which have investigated and explored lesbian-mothered families. The judicial system has made assumptions regarding these families. Most research to date has occurred in response to these suppositions, therefore, the format of this review will follow an exploration of the more pervasively held assumptions within the judicial system.

In child custody suits involving a lesbian mother judicial rulings have often focused on the mother's sexual orientation. Concern for the well-being of children and fear that the mother's lesbianism will negatively effect normal development, often results in loss of custody and visiting rights (Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Falk, 1989; Rivera, 1987). In an attempt to explore the legitimacy of these judicial concerns researchers, for the most part, have compared children raised by lesbian mothers with children raised by heterosexual mothers (Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok et al., 1983; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Researchers have most frequently taken what Laird (1994) refers to as a "deficit-based stance" (p. 268), basing their studies on the theoretical assumption that "...parental sexual orientation has a significant impact on children's development" (Patterson, 1992, p. 1028). It has been up to lesbian mothers to prove, through psychological testing of their children, that they have not damaged

these children through their sexual orientation.

In an effort to determine the possible existence of a causal relationship between a mother's sexual orientation and the welfare of her children, researchers have explored the following assumptions or fears within the judicial system and within society at large: a) children will exhibit confusion in gender-role identity and sexual orientation, b) emotional and psychosocial development will be impaired, and c) social stigma will seriously harm the children (Bozett, 1987; Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Falk, 1989; Patterson, 1992; Rivera, 1987). Because these assumptions represent the dominant themes in the majority of literature each point will be addressed individually.

Sexuality and Gender-Role Development

Judicial rulings have frequently been influenced by the assumption that being raised within a lesbian-headed family will result in gender identity confusion. Patterson (1992), in her summary of the research findings in this area, states that in studies involving over 300 offspring of lesbian or gay parents no evidence was found to confirm this supposition.

One of the earliest studies exploring this concern was conducted by Hoeffler (1981) whose sample consisted of 20 lesbian mothers and 20 heterosexual single mothers and their only or eldest child. Using a modified version of Block's Toy Preference Test, Hoeffler uncovered no significant difference in gender-role behaviour between the two groups of children. In her interviews with the children's lesbian mothers, Hoeffler reported the mothers believed their children's

peers had the most influence on their acquisition of sex-role behaviour.

Similar results were found by Golombok et al. (1983) who used standardized interviews and parent and teacher questionnaires devised for the Isle of Wight epidemiological studies to comparatively explore child development of children raised by lesbian and heterosexual mothers. The researchers interviewed 27 families from the lesbian population including 37 children, aged 5 to 17 years, and 27 single parent heterosexual families including 38 of their children. The instruments consistently failed to identify any differences between the two sets of children in respect to sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex-role behaviour.¹

Continuing along this same line of inquiry, Kweskin and Cook (1982) used the Bem sex-role inventory with 22 lesbian mothers and 22 heterosexual mothers to investigate sex-role behaviour in their children. The reported results showed no significant difference between the two groups for self-described sex-role behaviour or perceptions of ideal sex-role behaviour in children.

Hotvedt and Mandel (1982) also explored issues of gender identity and sex-role behaviour in children of both lesbian and heterosexual mothers. Within a sample of 50 lesbian mothers and their 58 children aged 3-11 and 20 heterosexual mothers and their 25 children of similar ages, the authors found no evidence of significant differences in terms of gender confusion for boys between the two groups of children. Using the Jackson PRF Children, the WPPSI WISC-R,

¹ In present research the term sex-role has been replaced with gender-role. Throughout this review these terms will be used synonymously.

Green's sex-role behavior tests, and the Bene-Anthony Family relations Test, the authors reported the only significant difference between the children of the two groups of mothers was that the daughters of lesbian mothers scored less traditionally feminine than did daughters of the heterosexual mothers. As a result of analysis of all data, the researchers concluded that although this significant difference was discovered within the two groups of daughters, the difference did not give evidence of a confused gender identity (Hotvedt & Mandel).

Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, and Smith (1986) also found similar results in their research. For the purpose of assessing psychosexual and psychosocial development of children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers, the authors used the WPPSI or the WISC-R, the H-Scale for Children, and audio-taped interviews with 56 children living with lesbian mothers and 48 children of heterosexual mothers. The results revealed no significant differences between the two groups of children on sexual identity or gender role preference and no evidence of conflict in gender identity for children of lesbian mothers. The instruments did reveal some differences in traditional sex-typed standards in girls. The daughters of lesbian mothers preferred traditionally masculine job roles significantly more often than daughters of heterosexual mothers, and often wore less traditionally feminine clothing. These differences, however, did not exceed the normal range for girls of their age grouping (Green et al.).

While these results indicate that being raised by a lesbian mother does not lead to gender-role confusion, Gottman (1989) and Kirkpatrick et al. (1981) point

out that most of these studies have been conducted with pre-adolescent children. Sexual orientation and gender identity of children is difficult to predict before adolescence (Gottman; Kirkpatrick). Responding to this need for investigation into the sexual orientation and psychological well-being of post-adolescent offspring, Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997) conducted a longitudinal study. The sample was composed of 47 young adults of both genders, 21 raised by heterosexual single mothers, and 25 raised in lesbian-headed households. In the initial study, data was gathered on the children, who averaged 9.5 years of age, mainly through semi-structured interviews, with a follow-up study occurring 15 years later. The evidence from this research did not support the supposition that lesbian mothers will raise lesbian daughters and gay sons. In searching for a resolve to the supposition that children from lesbian-headed families are more likely to be lesbian or gay, research has focused mainly on sexual orientation as opposed to other aspects of intimate relationships. Tasker and Golombok (1997) expanded this area by looking at friendships, crushes, relationships, sexual fantasies and identities.

Paul (1986) uncovered similar findings in his exploration of the psychosexual and psychosocial development of 34 adult children, male and female, of lesbian, gay, and bisexual mothers or fathers. Through structured interviews, the researcher found that 15 percent of the sample identified themselves as gay or lesbian, which he concluded matches the general social pattern norms. Paul also reported that during their adolescence most of his sample questioned their own

sexual orientation. In concurrence with this, Tasker and Golombok (1997) found that the young adults from lesbian-headed families seemed to have thought more about their sexual orientation. They felt there was a greater choice for themselves, and were more likely to pursue a sexual relationship if they felt a same-sex attraction than were the group raised by heterosexual mothers. The participants from lesbian-headed families appeared to be more able to discuss issues of sexual development and contraception with their mothers than the alternate group raised by heterosexual mothers.

Although the implication present in all research to date is that a child's sexual orientation and gender-role identity is not associated with the mother's sexual orientation, researchers concur that there are problems in the literature in terms of the samples used. Most studies have had small samples composed mostly of parents who are Anglo-American, middle class and well educated (Cramer, 1986; Patterson, 1994b; Turner et al., 1990; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). These samples may, therefore, not be reflective of the norm for children raised by a lesbian mother.

However, despite research flaws, there has been no support for the hypothesis or assumption that lesbian mothering results in confusion in terms of appropriate gender-role identification or that it leads to an increased possibility of a child developing a homosexual orientation (Cramer, 1986; Patterson, 1992). The research findings on sex-role behaviour and sexual orientation imply that gender-role confusion and homosexuality may stem from realms other than parental

sexual orientation.

While these implications may begin to alleviate societal concerns for the psychosexual development of children within lesbian-headed households, it does not address judicial concerns regarding the psychological development of these children. I turn now to a more detailed review of this literature.

Emotional and Mental Health of the Children

The second most frequent hypothesis as to the possible consequences of lesbian mothering is that children raised in these families will exhibit psychosocial abnormalities. However, the research of Golombok et al. (1983), discussed in detail in the preceding section of this review, presents evidence quite contrary to this hypothesis. The comparisons between the two groups of children in this study indicated no differences regarding prevalence of difficulties with emotions, relationships or behaviour.

Similar results were reported by Kirkpatrick et al. (1981) whose comparative study examined the psychosocial development of 40 children of 10 lesbian mothers and 10 heterosexual mothers. Each child was evaluated on the WISC, the Holtzman Inkblot Technique, the Human Figure drawing, plus a 45 minute interview in a semi-structured playroom. Drawing on the results of these evaluations, the authors state the "...prevalence of disturbance among the children was not found to be a function of the mother's sexual object choice" (p. 545). The implication of these results is that the emotional health of children is not contingent on a mother's heterosexuality.

Charlotte Patterson (1994a) also found normal child development in her sample of 37 lesbian families, each having at least one child between the ages of 4 and 9 living in the home. In an attempt to illuminate the psychosocial development among children raised by lesbian mothers, Patterson utilized the Achenback and Edelbrock Child Behavior Checklist, the Eder Children's Self-View questionnaire, and a standard interview relating to sex-role identity. The results of the study revealed that the behavioural problems of children of lesbian mothers were rated as significantly smaller in comparison with Achenback and Edelbrock's normative and clinical samples which consisted of over 800 children aged 4-11, and no greater than the children in Eder's normative sample of 5.5 year old children growing up in heterosexual families. Patterson found the children of lesbian mothers scored in the normal range for measures relevant to aggression, social closeness, and social potency. The only significant difference identified by this author emerged in the area of self-concept. Children of lesbian mothers reported:

"...that they experienced more reactions to stress (e.g., feeling angry, scared, or upset), and also a greater sense of well-being (e.g., feeling joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves) than did the children of heterosexual parents studied by Eder (1990)" (Patterson, p. 169).

Patterson speculates that these children may be more willing or better able than other children to identify and report a variety of positive and negative emotional experiences.

Further research which failed to support the supposition that children raised in a lesbian family will have impaired emotional and psychological development was conducted by Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997). In this study described earlier in the review, the researchers found no significant difference between the children raised by lesbian versus heterosexual mothers in terms of anxiety levels on the Trait Anxiety Inventory. The authors also reported no significant differences between the groups in levels of depression as measured through the Beck Depression Inventory. As this was a longitudinal study, the authors were able to report that the children from lesbian-mothered families continued to have good adjustment in personal and social development, functioned well as adolescents and young adults, and had good mental health in adulthood. These young adults reported having good relationships with their mothers and, in comparison with the group with heterosexual mothers, reported more positive relationships with their mothers' sexual partners. "Mothers' female partners could perhaps more easily be added to the family in the role of a 'second mum'" (p. 148).

No significant differences in cognitive functioning and behavioural adjustment were revealed by Flaks et al. (1995) whose study compared the parental skills of lesbian and heterosexual parents and the psychosocial development of their children. The research sample was composed of 15 lesbian couples and their children, ranging in age from 3 to 9 years, and born through donor insemination, with 15 matched, heterosexual-parent (mother/father)

families. Cognitive functioning of the children was assessed through the administration of the WPPSI-R. The Achenbach's Child Behaviour Checklist was used to assess behavioural adjustment and social competency of the children. The researchers in this comparative study found the chief difference between heterosexual parents and lesbian parents to be as follows:

...lesbian couples were more aware of the skills necessary for effective parenting than were their heterosexual counterparts. Specifically the lesbian couples, proved superior in their ability to identify the critical issues in child-care situations and to formulate appropriate solutions to the problems they noticed. (p. 112)

Flaks et al. concluded as a result of their study that "...neither father presence nor parental heterosexuality is crucial for healthy child development" (p. 113).

In an effort to identify and explore the major issues faced by children of lesbian mothers, Pennington (1987) conducted interviews using open questions with 32 children from 28 lesbian-mothered families whom she had seen in her clinical practice. This researcher found difficulties arose when attempting to determine whether the problem a child experienced was related to the mother's sexual orientation. As the result of her research, Pennington suggests it is the quality of mothering that is needed for healthy growth and development, not a particular sexual orientation.

Turner et al. (1990) interviewed 11 gay fathers and 11 lesbian mothers for the purpose of exploring the dynamics of parenting in gay and lesbian families.

All parents believed their sexual orientation had not been a cause of "long-term problems" in their children and most parents reported strong parent/child bonds (Turner et al., p. 64).

Researchers Green et al. (1986) also attempted to further our knowledge of the differences in heterosexual and lesbian mothers' parenting styles and abilities, and of the differences in the psychological development of their children. The authors used the Bem Sex Role Inventory, the Adjective Checklist, the Jackson PRF-E, and a questionnaire on a sample of 45 lesbian and 45 heterosexual mothers. Lesbian mothers scored higher on self-confidence and seeking leadership roles while heterosexual mothers scored higher on abasement and deference. On measures of parenting experiences both groups demonstrated great similarity. These results imply that parental experiences are not greatly affected by their sexual orientation. Perhaps we must consider factors other than sexual orientation when measuring healthy parenting.

Studies to date do not support the hypothesis that sexual orientation is a key factor when measuring effective parenting (Harris & Turner, 1986). This supposition was confirmed by Schulenburg (1985) whose book on gay parenting is based on information from her nationwide survey in the United States. Over 500 gay and lesbian parents responded to the survey. Basing her conclusions on the opinions of the parents and personal interviews with some of their children, Schulenburg found a common theme throughout their responses: "...lesbians and gay men are and have been loving, committed and effective parents able to raise

secure and healthy children" (p. 5).

In summary Flaks et al. (1995), Golombok et al. (1983), Gottman (1989), Kirkpatrick et al. (1981), and Patterson (1994a) all support the conclusion that being raised by a lesbian mother does not necessarily lead to the development of psychopathology. While inroads have been made into understanding facets of child development that have the potential to be affected by parental sexual orientation (i.e., self-concept, aggression, social closeness, and social potency), there is need for further research. The samples used in studies to date have been limited. Similar to studies on psychosexual development, samples in this area of research have been composed of predominantly white volunteers-- highly educated, and economically privileged--thus narrowing the generalizability of the research findings. However, as more lesbian mothers and their children gain greater social visibility, available samples in future may be more reflective of the actual population.

As can be seen, research in the domain of psychosocial development of children raised in lesbian-headed families is in its infancy. Further research needs to be conducted to establish concrete conclusions regarding the well-being of children in these homes. Another major societal anxiety is the popular assumption that the stigma associated with homosexuality will be detrimental to these children's well-being. The research exploring this assumption is addressed below.

Stigmatization and Social Acceptability

This concern that children raised by homosexual parents will be the

recipients of damaging social and peer stigmatization has been tested by researchers. In fact, the available research findings suggest the contrary may be true. For example Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997), in their interviews with 25 adult children raised by lesbian parents, found that stigmatization by peers did not prevent these offspring from forming "meaningful and rewarding friendships" (p. 205). According to Tasker and Golombok, adult offspring of lesbian mothers had no greater recollection of being teased than did the 21 adult offspring who had been raised by heterosexual parents. However, the young adults raised by lesbian mothers in this study did report being afraid of attracting prejudice during their adolescent years. The authors suggest that Goffman's (1963) concept of courtesy stigma², the fear of being discredited through association with their mothers, will be a major factor when these adolescents consider bringing a friend home. Many worried about peers discovering the lesbian identity of their mother either through her dress and/or behaviour, or through objects of concern at home such as lesbian posters or books. This group also spoke of telling a close friend about their mother's lesbian identity, but withholding the information from others. Here the study supports the work of Bozett (1988), whose research of children of gay fathers led him to report on the importance of the children feeling they had control of their family information in relationship to their peers. As a result of his findings, Bozett hypothesised that children of gay fathers used social control

²Courtesy stigma is E. Goffman's term for the stigmatization of individuals who are associated with stigmatized people such as lesbian women.

strategies in order that they may be perceived by others the way they wish to be perceived. Tasker and Golombok found that this stigmatization and worry over peer group prejudice developed in adolescence--that younger children did not encounter such problems with their peer group. The authors found that the fear of stigmatization from the peer group and being teased were also key components in the development of personal attitudes towards growing up in a lesbian mother family.

Given the nature of our heterosexist culture it would be foolish to presume no stigmatization occurs; the issue is whether or not psychological damage is incurred as a result of courtesy stigma or teasing. Boyd (1992) argues that children are teased over everything from the type of jeans they wear to the colour of their skin. She goes on to suggest that the process the child uses to overcome or cope with the stigmatization may actually generate strengths in character development. Patterson (1992) makes a similar argument, suggesting that children raised in lesbian-headed families may benefit from their experience through gaining a greater appreciation of and openness to cultural diversity and minority rights. Tasker and Golombok (1997) found that neither group was more supportive of women's rights in general, but the group with lesbian mothers expressed greater support when the mother "sympathized with feminist causes" (p. 99).

The supposition that children raised in lesbian-headed families will generate strengths in character development has been supported through the

research of O'Connell (1993). O'Connell's study explored the impact of mothers' lesbian orientation on their adolescent children. The researcher, using open-ended interviews and a questionnaire with six women aged 16 to 23 and five men aged 19 to 23, reported sons and daughters expressing strength which they believed they had developed as a result of living in a heterosexist society.

Huggins (1989) used the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to compare the self-esteem of adolescent children of divorced lesbian mothers and divorced heterosexual mothers. The results indicate no significant difference between nine boys and nine girls raised by a lesbian mother, and nine girls and nine boys raised by heterosexual mothers. However, the results did indicate higher self-esteem scores for those children whose mother lived with a lover or had remarried regardless of sexual orientation. It would appear that social stigma did not affect the self-esteem of the children raised by lesbian mothers, and that in fact parental relationship status may be a more significant factor than sexual orientation in the development of self-esteem for children.

In researching the experiences of lesbian mothers, Hare (1994) used structured interviews with 28 lesbian couples raising 51 children with a mean age of 10 years. The researcher asked mothers a two-faceted question: a) what are the potential problems the children might face? and b) what are the potential benefits of being raised by a lesbian mother? Hare found the greatest concern for these parents was stigmatization. Over 78 percent of the parents reported concern about stigmatization, though to their knowledge their children had few

experiences of being overtly stigmatized. Regarding prospective benefits that had direct relevance to being a member of a non-normative family structure, just under 50 percent suggested that their children would have a greater tolerance for diversity.

As indicated by Patterson (1992) and Tasker and Golombok (1995), there is a scarcity of information regarding the experiences and opinions of adolescents and adults who have been raised by lesbian parents. In one of the first studies attempting to bring some enlightenment to this area, Lewis (1980) interviewed 21 male and female offspring of lesbian mothers, ranging from 9 to 26 years of age. Lewis encouraged the children and young adults to talk specifically about the difficulties experienced as a result of their mothers' life styles and to discuss the influence this had on their lives. Some children spoke of having a sense of being different from others; some experienced a need for secrecy and a disproportionate fear of social stigma if the secret escaped, resulting in feelings of isolation; some experienced intense anger towards the mother; and others found the lack of social and institutional support for the family difficult. Even though Lewis directed the childrens' attention to the *difficulties* experienced, the problems, according to Lewis, appeared to be secondary to the childrens' total life experience. Almost universally each child espoused pride in her/his mother's courage for challenging societal norms, and many said the experience of being raised by a lesbian mother opened their horizons for picturing themselves in non-conventional roles if they so wished. Tasker and Golombok (1997) also found many of the young adults raised

by lesbian mothers were proud of their mothers' identity and became involved in the political arena of gay and lesbian rights. The young adults brought up by lesbian mothers in this study were also "significantly more positive about their family identity than were those raised by the comparison group of heterosexual mothers" (p. 65).

Continuing in the vein of examining the opinions of the offspring, Paul (1986) interviewed 34 men and women aged 18 to 28 who were parented by homosexual or bisexual men and women. Both Paul and Schulenburg (1985) found that children who learned about parents' sexual orientation in adolescence or later reported a more negative affective reaction to the information than those who learned at a younger age. The more open and happy the parent appeared to be with their orientation the closer the relationship between parents and their children. The greater the self acceptance of the parents, the more accepting the children were of their parents' sexual orientation. Tasker and Golombok (1997) found similar results in that the young adults whose mothers were out and politically involved in lesbian and gay rights or feminist issues reported a pride and acceptance of their family identity.

Rafkin's (1990) study included interviews with over 30 children and young adults of both genders raised by lesbian mothers. As the author attempted to explore the experiences of these children, Rafkin reported difficulty in unravelling which negative life experiences reported by these children (e.g., difficulties in school) were due to the mother's lesbianism and which had other causes. A

limitation of past research, as Rafkin and Pennington (1987) observed, is that many of the variables affecting the lives of the children such as divorce, types of parenting, or qualities of relationships cannot be separated from the context.

In summary, the literature to date has failed to provide evidence in support of three common assumptions regarding the well-being of children raised by lesbian mothers: a) children will exhibit confusion in gender-role identity and sexual orientation, b) emotional and psychological development will be impaired, and c) social stigma will seriously harm the children.

Although research findings have supported normal psycho-social development, normal gender-role development, and healthy peer relationships, studies have been selective and limited. As mentioned earlier, small, purposeful samples make generalizability to the population of children of lesbian mothers limited. Also, much of the research has been based on the opinions and perspectives of the parents, using self-reporting. The greatest limitation with studies using self-reporting such as those conducted by Pennington (1987), Schulenburg (1985), and Turner et al. (1990) is the lack of triangulation of data that would add validity to the findings. Perhaps, as Harris and Turner (1986) suggest, parents in these studies may have overrated the positive development and adaptation of their children because of the stigmatization associated with homosexuality. Limitations such as the lack of triangulation of data, small sample size, the composition of the samples (i.e., white, middle-class, educated children and parents); and the scant number of studies conducted on children of all ages

raised by lesbian mothers clearly indicate the need for further research.

As is apparent in the research findings of Lewis (1980), Paul (1986), Rafkin (1990), and Tasker & Golombok (1995), these researchers have found a rich source for meaningful insights into lesbian-headed families. All studies conclude with the recommendation of further study of children's experiences within a lesbian-headed household. Perhaps we can begin to gain a deeper understanding of the personal significance, struggles, challenges and richness of the experience of these children by listening closely to their stories. It is, therefore, the purpose of this study to expand our insight into these families headed by a lesbian mother by looking through the eyes of their young adult daughters and tapping into the lived-experience of these offspring. It is this researcher's contention that through the co-exploration of these experiences we may develop an understanding of some of the meaning of the experience and the issues encountered by daughters raised in a lesbian-headed family.

Chapter III

Methodology

Research Design

To capture the underlying themes of the experience and to gain some understanding of the meaning of being a daughter raised in a lesbian-headed family, an interview study primarily based on phenomenological principles was selected as the research design. An open interview method allowed the researcher to shift from the standard researcher-centered focus of searching for reliability and validity, to a participant-centered focus. This focus provided space for the participant to construct coherent meaning and make sense of their experience, and to relay this understanding within the research interview (Mishler, 1986).

As I was relying on the knowledge and first-hand experience of the participants, this methodology provided the opportunity for the co-creation of discourse between interviewee and interviewer. This co-creation of discourse gave each participant the opportunity to discover her own voice and her own understanding of how she constructs meaning of her life experience rather than meaning being imposed on her experience by the researcher (Mishler, 1986). The researcher was then given the opportunity to see a truer picture of "how individuals perceive, organize, give meaning to, and express their understandings of themselves, their experiences, and their worlds" (Mishler, p. ix). This research method also allowed the study to be continuously guided by the basic research question: **What is the lived experience of being a daughter from a lesbian-headed**

family?

A phenomenological approach in this interview study was important, as knowledge is limited by biased assumptions and information (Colaizzi, 1978). This research design enabled the researcher to set aside those biases as much as possible and return to the experiences of the individuals themselves as a valid starting point for constructing an understanding of the lived experience and meaning of being a daughter raised in a lesbian-headed household.

Personal Assumptions

In phenomenological inquiry, Van Manen (1992) suggests the researcher make every effort to expose personal presuppositions and biases that may lead to a premature interpretation of the themes and meanings of the experience in question. This self-scrutiny allows the researcher to suspend or bracket personal biases and assumptions (Osborne, 1994), or at best, as Van Manen (1992) states "...hold them at bay" (p. 47).

To minimize faulty interpretations, Colaizzi (1978) also advises the phenomenological researcher to gain a conscious awareness of why they are involved with their particular project. Therefore, I began to illuminate my presuppositions by reflecting my personal connection with the research question in an attempt to confront and set aside these biases as I worked with the research participants and attempted to be faithful to their stories.

Several months ago two lesbian friends of mine announced their intention to have children. My initial reaction was one of discomfort with their decision. I

began to question my reaction. Did my reaction stem from factual knowledge or was it a subconscious reflex to moral teachings absorbed while being raised within a heterosexist culture--internalized homophobia? After perusing the literature I came to believe that my response was not based on research or proven information but rather on society's general assumption of difficulties for children in lesbian-headed families. After this initial inquiry into the limited available literature I began to think that pervasive discrimination appears to be far more problematic than the actual experience of being raised in these homes. This information has brought me to my present position of believing that characteristics other than sexual orientation are greater measures of healthy parenting. I have left behind my initial position and have adopted a more neutral stance regarding children raised in lesbian-headed families.

While conducting my research I expected to discover that each participant would have had a wide range of life experiences. As the women interviewed have been children during the 1970s and 1980s, when homosexuality was classified as a deviant human behaviour, I expected most of these women would have been born of heterosexual parents, and would have gone through the pain of separation and divorce of their parents. I believed they also would have had life experiences which have been greatly influenced by a heterosexist culture and their own internalized homophobia.

Coupled with societal disapproval of homosexuality is the media's constant reflection of a singular vision of family life. As these women have been enveloped

within this heterosexist perception of family, many may have grown up feeling different from other children and other families. I expected this sense of difference would be at times negative, and accompanied with some life experiences filled with the secrecy and shame which accompany "courtesy stigma" (Goffman, 1963).

Based on testimonies of children raised by lesbian mothers found in the literature, I assumed these women would have developed strengths and an openness to others due to their experience of being raised in an alternate family structure. I also assumed this experience would not, as many suggest, lead to gender identity confusion and a greater likelihood of their being homosexual but would provide an opportunity for these women to explore their own sexual orientation and gender identity. It was my opinion that these women may have had the freedom to explore options of sexual orientation not available to daughters of heterosexual mothers.

It is the hope of this researcher that as I exposed and set aside these biases and presuppositions about the lived experience and meanings of growing up in a lesbian-headed household for the participants I was able to more fully grasp the themes reflected in their stories. With my biases bracketed, I attempted to understand the participants' stories as they experienced them, as unobtrusively as possible (Van Manen, 1992). As I attempted to discover themes and meanings, I maintained this awareness of potential bias, and remained open to both the negative and the positive experiences of these women.

Participants

The selection of participants in this interview study was purposeful, as each participant must have experienced being a daughter raised in a lesbian-headed household, and each must have had the ability to articulate this experience (Colaizzi, 1978). Participants were selected "opportunistically" (Rosenwald, 1988, p. 259). These women were willing to invest time and energy in not only relating their experience but in reviewing and commenting on the accuracy of the accounts of their respective stories and my thematic analysis.

For the purpose of this study five to eight women ranging from the age of 18 to 30 were sought. It is believed that five participants were sufficient to ensure saturation of common themes (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1994). The rationale behind the choice of age range was two-fold. First, this age selection is cohort specific, with each of the women having grown up during a similar time period. These women were raised in an era influenced by the rise of feminism, and the growing force of a gay rights movement. Secondly, women of this age group have some distance from their childhood experience, which enabled them to reflect back yet simultaneously be close enough to their childhood and adolescence to recall these experiences.

Recruitment

To identify information-rich cases for this study the researcher placed advertisements in the local lesbian and gay newspaper, Xtra-west, and in the Georgia Straight (see Appendix A). Advertisements for the study were also

posted at a variety of locations on the U.B.C. campus, Banyen Books, Women in Print, Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium, and Capers coffee shop (see Appendix B). The researcher also conducted informal networking in the local lesbian community. Women and men within this network who were aware of suitable participants were asked to contact these individuals and, if interest was shown, encourage the prospective participant to contact me by telephone for additional information.

As potential participants responded by telephone, I determined each woman's suitability according to the inclusion criteria. The first five individuals who met the criteria were accepted for the study. An interview was scheduled for these women at a mutually agreed-upon time and location; one that was the least distracting and most convenient and comfortable for the participants.

Procedure

As the data source for this phenomenological approach was verbal accounts of personal experience, establishing an empathic rapport with each individual during the initial interview was of primary importance. During this in-depth interview the purpose of the study was reviewed and a general orienting statement (see Appendix C) read at the outset to maximize consistency with all participants. Issues of confidentiality were also addressed and an invitation given to each participant to choose a pseudonym which would enable the individual to retain anonymity throughout the documentation of the study. Each participant was also asked to read and sign two copies of an ethical consent form (see

Appendix D) with one copy being retained by each participant. The women were reminded that all participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The researcher attempted to be immersed in the reality of the participant in an effort to understand each woman's story from the inside (Osborne, 1994). This was accomplished through empathic listening and by eliciting the individual's life experiences with as minimal a structure as possible. Advanced empathy, open-ended questions (see Appendix E), clarification, paraphrasing and immediacy were used in an attempt to empower the participant to share her story in a manner meaningful to her. This format was used to get "as close to the prereflective experience of the person as possible by making the interview process minimally intrusive" (Osborne, p. 183). During the interview I wanted each woman to focus on her experience as a daughter raised in a lesbian-headed family.

All interviews were tape recorded and I kept process notes of non-verbal responses, body language, and personal insights or thoughts that supplemented the understanding of the participant's lived experience. This interview averaged between one and one-half to two hours in duration, and no participant expressed a need for more time to fully express her story. Each woman was also encouraged to write down any insights she may have had after the interview and to telephone the researcher at any time with this information. After the data analysis was completed each woman received a copy of the extracted themes and her own

personal bio-synopsis. After each woman had an opportunity to read and absorb this material, a validation interview was conducted with four of the participants, in their homes, to ensure the accuracy of both the bio-synopsis and the extracted themes. As the fifth participant was in Sweden at the time of this interview, all data was reviewed and discussed by letters sent through the postal system and e-mail.

Data Analysis

Following each interview all audio tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcripts were then analyzed loosely following Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological analysis: a) the researcher began by reading each transcript to procure an initial sense or feel of the participant's experience, b) returning to each transcript, the researcher then highlighted meaningful phrases or sentences; c) through the use of creative insight, meanings beyond the literal words of the participants were extracted from transcripts, audio-tapes, and process notes; this step is noted by Colaizzi to be somewhat adventuresome as it requires "the researcher go beyond what is given in the original data and at the same time, stay with it" (p. 59); and d) repeating the above steps for each protocol the researcher extracted themes both common and diverse. The researcher then formulated a bio-synopsis of each participant's experience. A validation interview was arranged to ensure the accuracy of the analysis. Before the interview each woman was presented with a bio-synopsis of her life experience and given a list and description of the common themes to confirm or disavow the accuracy and

"goodness of fit" of the analysis (Osborne, 1994, p. 181). New information and changes were included in the final articulation of themes. Most of the information gathered during the latter interview validated the extracted themes. However, further reflection by some participants caused me to refine the themes a little further. For example, one woman felt she did not so much internalize the dominant culture's view of the lesbian-headed family, as respond to it. The theme was refined to reflect her experience more accurately. The final interview and ongoing dialogues with the participants ensured that the resulting analysis neither distorted nor omitted essential aspects of the experience of the co-researcher.

Throughout the data analysis the researcher vigilantly guarded against intrusive meaning-making (Van Manen, 1992). I did my best to tolerate ambiguity, and resisted the temptation to discard themes or data that were discordant with otherwise harmonious findings. As Colaizzi (1978) states, "what is logically inexplicable may be existentially real and valid" (p. 61).

Limitations of the Study

Several factors limit this study. As time and resources were limited only a small number of women were interviewed. Also, two interviews may not have been sufficient to fully glean the information necessary to formulate a complete reflection of the deeper meaning of the lived experience of these women. However, this time allowance was sufficient to give an accurate reflection of these women's lived experience.

For this study, the sample consisted of a relatively homogeneous group

composed of Caucasian, able-bodied women raised in working and lower-middle class families. Each participant was a highly motivated volunteer who was clearly able to articulate her experience. These women may not have been representative of the larger population of daughters from a lesbian mother family. It is important to remember that even if the sample is extended, research based on individuals' remembered impressions will only provide human constructs of reality. Interview studies of this type provide insight into the experiences and lives of others, but never one unilateral definition of truth--no matter how diverse the sample.

The resulting bio-synopses and themes derived from this sample, however, may have empathic generalizability. As Sandelowski (cited in Krefting, 1990) states, it may "...present such accurate descriptions or interpretation of human experience that people who also share that experience would immediately recognize the descriptions" (p. 216). Osborne (1994) describes this empathic generalizability as occurring when "...findings are valid to the extent that they resonate with the experiences of others who have experienced the phenomenon in question" (p. 180). Although the unique experiences of the participants in this study cannot be replicated, detailed descriptions of all aspects of this study will allow comparison with future research regarding the experience of growing up in a lesbian-headed family. Continuous qualitative studies of this nature involving adult children raised in lesbian-headed families may then confirm the empathic generalizability of my findings.

Another potential limitation of the study is the individual participant may have been influenced by the construct of social desirability (Sigelman & Howell, 1991). As the subject of lesbian motherhood is often fraught with moral judgments, participants may have presented an overly positive view of their family situation in an attempt to prevent further discrimination. However, as the purpose of this interview study was to gain an understanding of the meaning of the lived experience, factual information regarding the participants' experience was not necessary and perhaps not even possible to attain (Mishler, 1986; Van Manen, 1992).

Chapter IV

Results

This chapter will present a brief bio-synopsis of each participant, an acknowledgment of the major differences in their life stories, and a listing of common themes that have emerged from the analysis of the five women's life experiences, followed by a detailed discussion of each of these themes. Although each woman's story and life experience differed, many common threads were found throughout their experiences.

The Participants

Five women participated in this study. Two of the participants volunteered for the study after hearing about the research through word of mouth within the lesbian women's community. Another participant responded to an advertisement placed in *The Georgia Straight*, a local alternative newspaper. A fourth participant heard about the study during a workshop on same-sex couples counselling. The fifth participant volunteered after reading a poster which had been placed in the Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium. Three other respondents expressed an interest in the study: Two were unable to be contacted at the time of the interviews and the third woman did not meet the age criteria.

Following is a bio-synopsis of the five women and a brief description of their family form during childhood:

Arienne. Arienne is single, 19 years old, and self-identifies as bi-sexual and Caucasian. As of September, 1997, Arienne has been in Sweden studying English

literature and philosophy while on a year-long university student exchange program. Arienne lived the first three years of her life with her mother and father, who were not married. Arienne has one younger sister, who has a different biological father. The parental relationship ended when Arienne was four. All contact with the father was stopped when it was discovered that he had been sexually abusing Arienne and her younger sister. At approximately age six, Arienne's mother explained to the children the nature of her sexual orientation, as she was having romantic relationships with women. Shortly after this Arienne's mother began a relationship with a woman that lasted approximately five years. Arienne experienced this woman as a parent figure and a true member of the family. After this time period, Arienne and her sister lived alone with their mother, who supported the family through her work as a writer and through welfare. The family also lived for a time with another lesbian-headed family. Throughout most of her school years, Arienne was enrolled in French immersion school programs.

Arienne's mother is presently in a five year life partnership with a woman to whom Arienne refers as a parent figure. Arienne and her sister were adopted by their mother's partner in September, 1997.

Desiree. Desiree is 24 years old, and self-identifies as heterosexual and Caucasian. She is presently working as a nanny for young children. For the past three years Desiree has been living with a man in a committed relationship. She was conceived through a heterosexual relationship which dissolved when Desiree

was approximately two years old. After this time, she and her mother lived with another man, a relationship which produced Desiree's younger sister, who is presently 20 years old. As Desiree puts it: "that was the end of the men".

However, although men did not live in the home, Desiree continued to have sporadic contact with her father throughout her growing up years and lived with him for a year at the age of 13. During her 14th year Desiree lived with other relatives. Desiree attended public school from grade one to twelve.

At age 6, Desiree's mother explained to the children the difference between the traditional family form and the lesbian-headed family. At age eight Desiree was introduced to her mother's lover who would become, according to Desiree, more of a parent to her than her father. Other than the two year period of living away from home as a teenager, Desiree lived with her mother, her mother's partner and her sister from age 8 until her late teens. Desiree's mother and her partner have been together for approximately 16 years and Desiree considers them to be her nuclear family. She maintains regular contact with them.

During her younger years Desiree describes the family's socio-economic status as poor working class, with the family struggling economically during these times. When Desiree was age 13 her mother returned to school, completed her B.S.W. and began working in a government position. The family's socio-economic status then changed to professional middle class.

Mary. Mary, aged 27, is a self-identified heterosexual, Caucasian woman who is presently completing a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology. She has

been in a committed relationship with a man for the past year. Mary was born to a heterosexual, married, mother and father who were divorced when Mary was one. Mary has no siblings. Following this marriage, Mary's mother married again for a one year period and then lived common-law with a different male partner until Mary was 8 years of age. After this family structure, Mary and her mother moved in with a woman and set up a lesbian-headed household. During this three year period Mary did not consider this woman to be another parent figure. She did, however feel the woman was part of her extended family. Mary's relationship with this woman continued for several years after the break-up of the mother/lover relationship. After this time Mary lived alone with her mother, as according to Mary her mother preferred to keep the mother/daughter family a separate entity from her love relationships. Although these partners did not live in her home, Mary said she became quite close to them and considered several of them to be extended family members. Mary attended public school from grades one through seven, and an alternative school from grades eight through twelve. The family socio-economic status was middle class.

Throughout her growing up years Mary has had regular contact with her biological father, often spending summers with him. The contact continues, however, it is presently less frequent. Mary continues to have regular contact with her mother and they maintain a close mother\daughter relationship.

Lucy. Lucy is a 26 year old, Caucasian woman who self-identifies as heterosexual. She is presently a student of English literature. She has been in a

common-law relationship with a man for the past six years. Lucy and her two older brothers were raised by their mother and father until Lucy was approximately two years of age. After this time period, the eldest brother lived with his father while Lucy continued living with her mother. Lucy's middle brother lived with Lucy and his mother, but spent periods of time residing with his father. Lucy continued to have some contact with her father throughout her life. This contact, as described by Lucy, is respectful and mildly obligatory.

Lucy's next family constellation was communal and was composed of children, women, and men. At the age of five, Lucy's mother disclosed to the children the structure of family forms differing from the traditional family. Throughout Lucy's growing up years, her mother frequently had a live-in female partner. From age 11 to 18 Lucy's mother was in a partnership relationship with a woman whom Lucy felt was a step-mother figure for her. During her school years, Lucy attended alternate school settings from pre-kindergarten to age 8 and again from age 14 onwards, and public schools during the other school years.

Lucy considered the family's socio-economic background to be working class until she was 11 years old, supported at times through welfare, and middle class from that time onwards. Today, as throughout her life, Lucy maintains a close, intimate relationship with her mother.

Chelsey. Chelsey is 20 years old, Caucasian, and self-identifies as heterosexual. She is presently living with five other adults and is working as a waitress and an au pair. Chelsey has no siblings and has only met her biological

father on one occasion. She has had no further contact with him. During her first three years of life, Chelsey's mother had romantic relationships with men. From age 3 to age 5 Chelsey lived alone with her mother.

At approximately age 5, Chelsey became aware that her mother was in romantic relationships with women. While Chelsey was growing up the family constellation differed--at times she and her mother lived alone, at one time they lived in a communal house, and at other times Chelsey's mother's same-sex lovers lived with them. For one three year period Chelsey describes her mother's same-sex partner as a parent figure.

Chelsey recalled the socio-economic background of her childhood as poor, with her mother supporting the family with work as a seamstress and with welfare. She attended public school throughout her elementary and secondary school education. Chelsey has maintained a close relationship with her mother and remains in frequent contact with her.

Common Themes

Although the following themes will point out the many similarities within the experiences of the five participants, it is important to acknowledge some of the differences within their experiences. As seen in the bio-synopsises, participants left the heterosexual family form at various ages. Mary was the oldest, age 8. She was also the participant who spoke of having the greatest struggle with "being different" and wanting to be "normal". Desiree's mother has experienced the longest partnership with a woman and Desiree often spoke of the "stability" that

this long term relationship gave her. It was beyond the scope of this study to compare Desiree's experience of having two mothers over a period of time with the experiences of women who lived with a single mother and/or a mother with multiple partners. One other difference that may have importance was the variation in contact with a father figure, although no clear pattern emerged.

Following is a detailed exploration of six common themes that were extracted from the in-depth interviews and the validation interviews. The themes are loosely related to age and life stages. The first three themes were most salient for the women from approximately the time of entering school until puberty. The last three themes were most salient during adolescence and young adulthood. The themes are as follows:

1. A Sense of Being Different
2. A Sense of Being Torn
3. A Reclamation of Identity
4. A Resistance to Socially Prescribed Femininity
5. A Sense of Closeness With Their Mother
6. An Enhanced Sense of Social Justice

Theme 1: A Sense of Being Different. One of the dominant themes throughout each woman's story was the sense of belonging to a family structure that was unlike the traditional heterosexual family form promoted in our society. This resulted in a personal, internalized sense of being different. The awareness of this difference began for most of these women within the family home with

their mothers bringing differing family forms to their attention. Awareness was further developed as each woman gained a greater consciousness of the views of the external world and other family situations. As one woman stated: "I don't really know that I thought it was all that different, but then when you start to go to people's houses and realize..." Each woman's experience of this sense of difference varied depending upon the stage of their development and the context in which they experienced life. Some women expressed having feelings of shame and a deep desire to be "normal like everyone else." Others felt "weird" and "didn't want to be as noticed" which led to keeping the nature of their family a secret. Finally, as the women matured they expressed having feelings of "pride" in this sense of being different.

For four of the co-researchers, the awareness of belonging to a family form which differed from others was brought to their attention at an early age by their mothers. For example, in the words of Arienne:

I must have been about 6 years old...she tried to explain to me that some women don't get together with men they get together with women and live with women and do all the things with women that most people do with men, or whatever, and then I just remember being thoroughly uninterested, not understanding what the big deal was.

The women reported that they had not been strongly impressed by this information but remembered having a rather "so what" attitude. At this early stage of their lives, primarily under the age of eight, the influence of family values

appeared to be greater for the women than the influence of the values and views of peers and society in general.

The real impact and internalization of the awareness of difference into their self-perceptions occurred when each of the women began to experience their home situation as negatively sanctioned by the outside world. As these women aged, the perceptions of those outside of the family had considerably greater influence on their sense of being different. The dominant culture's perception of this family form began to influence how each woman perceived her family and herself. As Lucy stated:

I had really little or no awareness of any difference in my family life until, of course, the mainstream world, the outside world told me about it in a pretty forceful way, about this difference, and that not only was it different but it was wrong and bad, that happened most strongly when I was ten.

The awareness that society did not approve of their family form created considerable discomfort for these women. Mary recalled many times when she wished she could be "just, kind of like everyone else, not sticking out, not weird." One participant recalled wanting a home "like my grandmother's house, that's what normal was." Another recalled the impact of negative societal perceptions towards her mother's lifestyle on her own self perception: "There was something wrong with my mom and then, therefore, there was something wrong with me or I was different, I was weird...". This sense of being viewed negatively was further reinforced

through social barbs from peers directed both towards themselves and towards others (e.g., over-hearing words such as fag, homo or dyke used in a derogatory fashion on the school grounds). Mary recalled a particularly painful comment from a girl in her peer group who said: "Don't take a bath with Mary because she'll make a pass at you because her mom's a lesbian."

For all of the women this sense of being different was initially experienced as a rude awakening. It generated feelings of shame and embarrassment. As Chelsey recalled: "I just remember all of a sudden being embarrassed and feeling like I shouldn't talk about it...sort of feeling like it was a shameful thing or something was wrong with it." The depth to which each woman experienced the shame was contingent upon her age and the context in which she was interacting with others. The women reported experiencing the greatest impact as a result of this difference during the years from 8 to 13 when conformity and peer acceptance was most critical to them. For example, Lucy's sense of deviance was magnified from age 10 to 13 when "...the importance of the approval (of her peers) was stronger than my fidelity to my mother and her politics." During this developmental stage the women expressed shame and embarrassment related to their homes and their families, especially in their relationships with peers. For example, Chelsey said: "I was embarrassed to bring my friends to my home...if my mom had a girlfriend over or books (with lesbian content). I remember trying to hide a few books and just being embarrassed." Reflecting upon this sentiment

during the validation interview Arienne wrote: "We (my mom and I in consultation), finally moved 'the' bookshelf into her bedroom to spare me future trauma."

Also accompanying this sense of being different were feelings of fear-- "...the fear of being rejected, the fear of not having any friends or being called names or being ridiculed"; as well as an impending expectation of loss--"...I was worried too that they would find out and that my dad would take me away from my mom." During their childhood these women carried with them the knowledge that exposure of the nature of their family form to public scrutiny could result in loss of family through child custody suits or loss of family employment. Some of their fears were substantiated by actual occurrences, as in Lucy's case. She recalled being "kidnapped" by her father: "She (Lucy's mother) couldn't find us and no one would tell her where he was or where we were." Arienne recalled her family's employment being in jeopardy: "I remember Kathy hiding it from her boss for a while and then when people figured it out customers would refuse to eat the food that she cooked because she was a lesbian." Mary recounted fearing that her mother "...could lose her job. I could be taken by my dad and people would hate me..." Disclosing the nature of their families could, and sometimes did, result in very detrimental consequences.

Perhaps the greatest consequence of this sense of being different was a pervasive fear of others finding out they were from a lesbian-headed household.

As Mary recalled:

I'd have a lot of anxiety when kids would come over for sleep overs...I would just have such anxiety, like then the cat would be out of the bag, they would see that they (mother and female lover) had one bed and would be able to put it together.

For the most part, however, these women experienced greater consequences from the anticipation of disaster if peers found out, than from the actual results of their secret being discovered. For example, Desiree shared her experience when she risked disclosure of her family circumstances to members of her softball team:

...my God what did I do...I kind of just waited and you know was waiting for someone to say something or not want to be my friend or something like that...I expected, just because of the way kids talk, because of the names that they call but after I realized that it wasn't going to be a big deal...

Despite this, each woman recalled a time, primarily between the ages of 8 and 14, when keeping their families and home lives a secret was of utmost importance. During this period of their lives the women referred to their mother's lovers or partners as "the roommate". They avoided questions that referred to their home situation. For some this resulted in feelings of guilt or betrayal of their mothers. In the words of Desiree: "It didn't feel very good to not really be able to talk about my family and to have to lie and say, oh, it's just the roommate, she shares the rent."

This need to hide the reality of their families produced feelings of

loneliness and isolation. Sometimes this isolation was assuaged through associating with others living in similar family situations. For example, Chelsey remembered:

What sort of helped was I knew other kids my age with lesbian parents and so they sort of became..they're total family to me...that really, really helped because I think otherwise I would have felt really sort of isolated...

The women also spoke of the comfort they felt in finding a friend to share their secret with. Arienne recalled a time when she told her best friend: "It was just one more step in getting more comfortable with her and more honest about our lives." Others gained a sense of community by associating with individuals whose values opposed mainstream ideals: "I surrounded myself with the kids of the artists and the people that had grown up in lifestyles that were probably just as unusual at the time as ours."

In order to cope with this negative sense of difference the women also recalled working hard to establish some form of control in a world in which they felt powerless to change. Each of the women developed a sense of vigilance to protect herself and her family and "kept it a secret" when she felt it was not safe to reveal the nature of their family. Mary, for example, feared: "My dad would take me away from my mom if they knew (of mother's sexual orientation) so I'd really have to watch myself." The participants also developed methods of selective disclosure in an attempt to conceal the nature of their family form from those who viewed lesbian-headed families as deviant. For example, Lucy stated:

I would learn to control my home environment to try and protect myself from put downs really, so I would not bring people home or I would bring select people home, let select people know so I had a bit of a cushion around me to protect me...

Discovering who to tell and how required forethought and effort, as Arienne reiterated:

...if I don't think someone is going to be in my life for a while then I won't bother to tell them especially if their set of values seem to be markedly different from my own...cause it takes an effort to explain first of all like what my family situation is, second how it came to be, and third to deal with how the other person reacts.

Each woman learned the importance of assessing another individual for trustworthiness and similar values before disclosing the nature of her family situation. Each learned to weigh the risk of exposure to ridicule and rejection, against the gain of deeper intimacy and comfort which resulted from bringing the secret out in the open.

In summary, context and developmental stage appeared to play a crucial role in shaping each woman's experience of "being different". Lucy summed up the influence of both developmental stage and the environment when she said:

Until I was 8 or 10 I went to alternate schools where standards are different...acceptance is more broad and priorities are different...at 10 to 13 I was in public school where I felt more restricted by conventions and peer

pressure but it may have just been the age, I don't know, and then I went to an alternate school again where it was far from being cumbersome to be weird it was good, I had a genuine weirdness, I advertised it.

It is also important to note that this sense of being different remained throughout each woman's life. However, as seen in the previous quote, the women reported that the impact of this awareness changed from being perceived as a negative force in their lives to a positive one. The phenomenon of being different shifted from the experience of being "weird" to experiencing their difference as uniqueness. In Arienne's words: "It's my own individual fingerprint or DNA print." As the women matured and came into contact with those of similar values they gained a greater acceptance and even appreciation of their membership in a lesbian-headed family. For example Desiree shared the following sentiments:

I think it's definitely changed from being super young and hiding to rebelling against it...to coming to the point where I don't just accept it, but I mean I'm very, very proud of my mom and of Ann and brag about them to people and show everyone pictures of my family.

Theme 2: A Sense of Being Torn. All of the women in the study experienced a sense of being torn between their allegiance to their mothers and their desire to fit comfortably into the world outside of their families. This theme emerged from all the transcripts and involved an inner conflict. In an attempt to gain a sense of belonging in the world the women began to react to the dominantly-held negative view of homosexuality and lesbian-headed families. The

negative perceptions of others began to butt up against the inner belief that their mothers were good moms, good people. Out of these conflicting beliefs a sense of being torn developed. This theme also involved a sense of survival. While wanting to support and be loyal to mom, each woman also sought to gain the support and acceptance of others in order to "fit in" and be a part of the world around them. Meeting these essential needs led to an inner battle between being faithful to their mother versus being a harmonious part of a community larger than the family unit.

This sense of being torn was experienced in different ways. Arienne expressed the complexity of the conflictive beliefs that many of the women felt:

There's two strands. One strand is being ashamed of it (her lesbian-headed family) and knowing that I'm supposed to feel proud. It's like being ashamed was the dominant thing when I was younger, and then I was ashamed of being ashamed because I knew that I was supposed to be proud of it.

Others spoke of the confusion and turmoil which arose as a result of a clash in beliefs. As the women began to respond to the dominantly-held view of homosexuality, conflicting emotions forced some of the women into a position of questioning their own beliefs about their mother's goodness. This is reflected in the words of Mary:

I had this conflict that she was bad but yet I loved her so much and had so much fun with her and she's great but she's doing this really disgusting,

yucky thing..so I kind of have these mixed emotions about her.

The women were faced with the dilemma of needing to maintain a loyalty to their mother, a need which lay in direct opposition with their need to establish a respectable place in the community of their peers. In the validation interview, Lucy recalled never feeling in conflict about her mother but rather she felt it was more about self-protection: "How much of my soul do I sell in how many situations?" Lucy's experience reflects the myriad of emotions the women experienced as a result of their inner struggle:

...the stages I went through from becoming a child with little awareness of what the outside world meant..to suddenly being very aware that there was something wrong, that all this time I didn't know that there was something weird, and wrong and bad going on. And so that led to confusion and indignance and fear and shame and guilt which once again led to anger and confusion and indignation.

As seen in the preceding examples, the conflict of this sense of betrayal to mom and the sense of wanting to fit in was age related. As children needing to avoid being outcast from their peer groups, these women found themselves in the position of having to make choices between friends and family. As one woman shared:

After I was 10, peers and approval outside the home became more important. It started to compete with the approval I got in the home..the confusion was still there but there was more a tendency to conform,

basically and then I'd make up lies or use avoidance...

Harbouring feelings of shame and embarrassment about their families led the women to experience confusion and guilt over their lack of loyalty towards their mothers. This guilt was often coupled with a sense of being powerless to change the feelings, which were causing them so much inner discomfort. For example, Mary spoke of her personal challenge in living in a lesbian-headed family:

The only challenge that I can think of right now is the mixed feelings and that guilt about that and knowing how unfair (it is) to think that. She's my mom and she's so great. It's uncomfortable to feel those negative things towards her. So it was very multi-layered..I had this love and this repulsion ...this repulsion wasn't really what I thought. Why am I thinking it? And then feeling guilt about that but yet I couldn't help it.

The women took several approaches to resolving this sense of being torn. Some women expressed feelings of anger and rebellion against their mother's lesbianism. All of the women expressed a need to blend in and be part of a community of peers. For example, Arienne recalled a conversation with her mother:

I wanted to fit in with the group but at the same time I knew those words (negative terms for homosexuality) are bad to use...I remember my mom saying to me: "Arienne that's fine, you do know those words are bad to use, so if you want to use them to fit into the group well that's totally cool,

go ahead and say, you're a fag and don't worry about it".

In response to this sense of being torn the women attempted to shift from a position of hiding their family situation to adopting a "who cares" attitude, a sense of false bravado, or "whistling in the dark". Chelsey spoke of this when she recalled responding to a peer who asked if her mom was lesbian:

Yah, she is, like, do you have a problem with it, or something like that, sort of a snap back and then change the subject and just being really embarrassed but trying not to show that I was embarrassed.

Resolution of this sense of being torn between the need to "be a part of" a greater whole and the desire to remain loyal to their mother came over time as each of the women began to find the inner strength to reclaim their identity as daughters of a lesbian-headed family; a process that is explored in the next theme.

Theme 3: A Reclamation of Identity. Another phenomenon that occurred throughout the women's stories was the reclamation of identity as a daughter of a lesbian-headed family. This process was progressive for each of the women and involved a shift in perspective of their family form. Each woman's visioning of her family moved from: a) an early childhood belief in the normalcy of their family form to, b) a belief in a sense of family deviance, and finally to c) an acceptance and appreciation of their unique family configurations. This reclamation of identity began during the later teenage years and was often influenced by the context in which the women lived.

Around their mid-to-late teen years, each woman began to move away

from the dominantly held negative view of their family form, shedding the sense of secrecy and shame that accompanied this vision of family. This change appeared to be prompted by a need to resolve the discomfort that accompanied the secrecy and the sense of being torn which occurred in their earlier years. As one participant recalled: "I wanted to get over all my fears that I knew were holding me down and holding me back from being happy...and this (embarrassment of her mother's lesbianism) was one of the first things that I let go of." As the women matured they appeared to have "enough confidence and encouragement" to veer away from peer conformity and begin to question and challenge the attitudes of others. They developed a greater sense of openness with their peers about the nature of their family form. As the women were able to push against the tide of popular beliefs surrounding lesbian-headed families, they gained a sense of pride in their family and their heritage.

The process of identity reclamation appeared to begin with a change in consciousness. For some participants this change in how they visioned their family came about through their experiences in alternate schools. The teachings they received in these schools broadened their view of "normal" life experiences which in turn enabled the women to see their family in a new light. For example, one woman realized: "I was part of a minority...it didn't make me bad or weird or wrong". For other women this change came as a result of maturation and "just sort of recognizing that there are always differences" in the lives of people. The women began to question the negative stance of society in general towards

lesbian-headed families. For example, Lucy shared her understanding: "When I was a child I was being told it (the abnormality) was about my home, now that I'm older I'm learning it has more to do with conventions and fears of others than about my home." Each woman developed an awareness that the negative view of the lesbian-headed family promoted in North American society was being imposed on them from outside and that perhaps this was inaccurate.

Following this awareness or change of consciousness there came a strong need for resolution of the inner turmoil caused by their previous rejection of the validity of their family. The stress produced through the secret keeping and the feelings of being torn appeared to prompt this identity reconciliation. For example, Chelsey shared:

There's too many things I've kept inside and by keeping secrets and stuff inside I think its just too hard, too hard to relate to other people cause I've got all this stuff going on inside.

The women began a path of action which involved breaking out of their shroud of secrecy. They appeared to ease into their family identities by testing the reactions of others to the nature of their family form. Positive feedback led to further disclosures. For example, Mary said: "I remember being kind of shocked in a way that it could be not such a big deal, you know they could still accept me." By their late teenage years, the participants talked about the ease they felt in risking exposure of the nature of their family form to others yet maintaining some discretion. As Arienne said: "...by grade 12 I was completely, completely

comfortable with talking about it." This comfort in telling others was often coupled with "just feeling more comfortable with myself." With these revelations and the self-identification as daughters of lesbian mothers, the women eliminated, for the most part, the need for family secrecy in their lives.

Another aspect of this process of identity reclamation as a daughter of a lesbian-headed family for some of the women was the importance of challenging their own beliefs and the beliefs of others around them. With a sense of pride Arienne shared her experience of challenging the perception of her classmates:

...there were two of them actually, and one of them had just made a comment about gays and being morally wrong, and I said "Well why?", and challenged him to defend his position. And of course he didn't have anything to say really. That was one challenge met successfully.

A part of their identity reclamation also involved confronting their own homophobia which resulted from the internalization of the dominant view of lesbian-headed families. In Arienne's words:

I felt less legitimate in being embarrassed about it...I was just as every bit as legitimate as everybody else in the world, everybody who was the daughter or son of a heterosexual couple.

After the women gained greater freedom in revealing the nature of their family form, the process of reclaiming their identities as daughters in lesbian-headed families appeared to move into a phase involving bragging about the families' merits. Over time, and as they gained greater comfort with themselves

and their families, the women wore their identity as a symbol of status, a badge of honour amongst their peers. The following excerpt is an example from Mary's story: "I like to tell people, like kind of almost a show off thing, in the politically correct day and age. "You guys think you're politically correct well I grew up with a lesbian mom, you know, so humph."

As the women continued to age and to mature emotionally many of them moved from the position of bragging to one of regaining a sense of dignity in regards to their family. For example, Chelsey spoke of the shift that occurred for her as she shed the sense of shame and embraced her identity as a daughter of a lesbian mother with a sense of pride:

It's totally changed over the years because I've gone from total extreme opposites, just feeling like when I was younger feeling embarrassed about the fact that I was the daughter of a lesbian mom to just feeling really proud about my mom because she's just trying to be true to herself and follow her heart.

The women found the strength to reclaim this identity through several sources, often the family itself and friends. Most of the women spoke of having received an inner strength from the power of their family unit. This strength provided a foundation, an inner security and self-confidence which allowed them to reclaim their identity as a daughter of a lesbian-headed family. As Lucy shared: "My mother's confidence and convictions and the love I had for her and the happiness and comfort I had at home was strong enough to overpower those

things (society's negative attitude toward her family form)." Chelsey spoke of finding the courage to reclaim her identity through the example of a cousin from a lesbian-headed family:

She'd be talking about her mom's girlfriend or just totally bring it up super casually and really openly and that sort of helped change the way I felt about it because she was really cool and really popular.

Identity reclamation for these women involved a return to the sense of family normalcy the women once felt in early childhood. All of the women arrived at a point where their identity as daughters of lesbian mothers became an integral part of their sense of themselves as women and as individuals. Chelsey spoke of being a daughter of a lesbian mother as: "...just one part of who I am...It's just a part of how I grew up and it's not anything super different or out of the norm." The women maintained their awareness of the dominant homophobic view promoted in the world around them but this view no longer had a detrimental impact on their lives. For example, Desiree reflected: "... I don't think it should be such a big deal and I really don't see it as a big deal and I don't understand why so many people have such a huge problem with it."

Theme 4: A Resistance to Socially Prescribed Femininity. One common theme running throughout each woman's story was what appeared to be a learned resistance to the social discourse on femininity. The women in this study noted differences between their views and outlooks on women and that of their friends who grew up in heterosexual-headed families. While other young girls their age

were playing with Barbie dolls and absorbing socially advocated ways of looking and acting for young girls and women, these women were consciously being taught other ways of being. This imparting of a raised consciousness may not have been a direct result of being raised by lesbian mothers. Rather this may have been the consequence of growing up in a woman positive environment with a high level of awareness of social issues for women. As one participant suggested: "I hate to contribute this all to my mom being a lesbian rather than my mom being just the person she is, one fact of which is her being gay."

The women described having developed a heightened awareness of standards of physical appearance for women and of the pressures to conform to the image of a super model. They spoke of having had the freedom to develop their own sense of beauty rather than adopting that which was imposed upon them outside their family. The resistance to socially prescribed femininity also included learning to respect themselves as women and as "equal persons" in a world where women are often not valued as highly as men. Finally the women shared how the celebration and valuing of womanhood they had received from their mothers led to a sense of security and treasuring of their own womanhood.

Growing up in a world of feminists with "strong feminist role models" enabled the women to develop less restrictive values regarding their bodies. They were able to resist and challenge some of the social pressures to conform to the feminine images of the day. For example, Lucy recalled:

I developed a sense of my body and what's okay about it ...and examining

the pressures that are on me and why and how I'm responding to them.

"Wait, why do I feel like I should shave my legs, or why am I plucking my eyebrows or whatever."

The women spoke about cultivating their own concept of beauty that didn't always "lean toward the conventional." They felt able to: "...clear away some of the crap that society tries to impose...like that women have to be a particular way, standards of beauty and all that kind of stuff." This awareness was exemplified in Arienne's words:

I've grown up with a different set of values in terms of, not necessarily what's good and what's bad but just things like a different concept of beauty ...this probably isn't fair but it seems like the heterosexual paradigm of the beautiful woman is playing into what men want women to be, whereas the lesbian paradigm of the beautiful woman is valuing a woman being the way she wants to be, and I find that a lot more attractive than trying to be somebody for somebody else.

The women also expressed an awareness of equal employment opportunities for women and spoke of a personal sense of entitlement. In the words of one woman:

I've grown up in an atmosphere where we were expected to feel entitled to a lot more than most women seem to raise their daughter's to feel...like you are entitled to have an orgasm in your sexual experiences or..what's another example..jobs.

In a world where women and women's bodies have not always been honoured, these women have appeared to gain a sense of self-respect. The following example from Desiree's story exemplifies the importance of respect for self and others, and the awareness of pulling away from the norm of the woman as care giver:

The respect issue is just a huge thing in our house, you know, to respect your body and for other people to respect it. And to respect yourself and not let yourself become a doormat and to have a relationship that's very equal, not to have one person doing all of the taking and the other person giving all the giving...

While the socially prescribed discourse on femininity spoke of women's life stages in negative terms (e.g., referring to the menstrual cycle as the curse or a time of being dirty), these women experienced a community where stages in womanhood were celebrated and valued. For example, Mary spoke of her first menses and her mother's encouragement to celebrate the event:

My mom was trying to get me to value it but I still felt dirty and gross none the less because I think society kind of outweighed all the messages she was trying. But now, I think she kind of planted seeds and then all society's stuff went on top of that, and that was where I was for a long time. But now that stuff, as I get older, has gone away and the initial seeds she planted have been able to grow.

Each woman appeared to have developed a strong sense of herself as a

woman. They actively resisted accepting socially prescribed standards of femininity. These experiences appeared to be the result of growing up in women positive environments with mothers who challenged mainstream conventions. The women appeared to have gained security and comfort within themselves as women, as a result of the influence of being raised in a woman positive family. Chelsey spoke of the tremendous impact a feminist role model has had on her life:

It's really helped me be secure in becoming a woman, in being a woman..it's just a feeling that I have in here (pointed to her gut) and like a security that I have. It's so hard to describe because it's so powerful but it's so hard to put into words.

Theme 5: A Sense of Closeness With Their Mother. All the women in the study referred to the relationship with their mother as being a very powerful and integral part of their lives. They spoke of a treasured sense of connection in this relationship--an intimacy which they perceived as often lacking in many of their friends' mother/daughter relationships. The intimacy and closeness they experienced resulted in a feeling of "security" and a perception of being well-mothered. This experience of feeling well-cared-for was further enhanced through the experience of being mothered by the extended network of women within the lesbian women's community. Through these experiences of being mothered the women developed very strong ideas about motherhood and what, for them, constitutes good mothering. With great conviction, the women expressed

opposition to the social discourse on "good mothering" which equates quality mothering with heterosexuality. For example, during the validation interview Arienne wrote: "As a lesbian, my mother has had to constantly challenge the status-quo and society's pre-conceptions of what a mother and a woman should be. And I've grown up both watching her do it, and joining in."

The experience of intimacy which emerged from the participants' transcripts involved feelings of affinity and closeness with their mothers. For example, Mary stated: "We're very close and we have a very good relationship and friendship." The intimacy within these mother/daughter relationships also reflected qualities of comfort and openness. As one woman shared: "Our house was always just a very open house and we could discuss anything, and everyone was really open with each other." The women spoke of having had the freedom to discuss subjects that were generally considered difficult to discuss within a child/parent relationship, especially issues related to sexuality. For example, Arienne stated: "My mom has definitely tried to create an atmosphere in which it's okay to ask questions...you know about condoms, or about S.T.D's, or pregnancy."

All of the women also reflected on a deep sense of reliability and mutual caring in their relationships with their mothers. One woman shared: "We rely on each other a lot", while another participant spoke of feeling like she was always able to count on her mother: "She has been there whenever I've really needed her to be there, and I think my mom's great, like I love her and I know she loves me." Many of the women felt the intimacy and closeness they shared with their

mothers was different from many other mother/daughter relationships. For example, in Lucy's words: "I'm closer to my mother than any other person I know to their mother."

Another component of this sense of being well-mothered included their experiences in the lesbian community which, in many cases played the role of an extended family, and in other cases provided role modelling. One woman spoke of experiencing a "fussed over specialness" from the women in lesbian community. Another woman spoke of a lesbian couple who were part of her extended family: "...they were basically like surrogate parents to my sister and I, same thing every Christmas, every birthday, we were always together." Lucy spoke with emotion about the importance of this community to her in terms of role modelling. She spoke of her appreciation for their contributions to feminism and the respect she feels for them:

I don't know how women my age feel around, aging women, crones, 50ish, but they are a real comfort to me, and it evokes a lot of my admiration, I mean that generation of feminism in women is really quite spectacular, so I have a lot of warm fuzzy feelings..I think a lot of them, for their accomplishments, and the kind of things they faced.

As a result of this special closeness with their mother and this connection to the lesbian community in general, these women felt they had developed a self-confidence and security as women. As one participant stated: "I feel it's really helped me be secure in becoming a woman...it's like a security that I have." Along

with this sense of security in their womanhood, the women felt they had cultivated a sense of pride in themselves and in women in general. This was reflected in the genuine pride and appreciation each of these women expressed for their mothers. For example, one woman shared the following words: "I'm really proud of her...she has done a really good job."

While one of the outcomes of experiencing a sense of intimacy with several mother figures was a sense of comfort with women, several of the women spoke of the consequences resulting from lack of men in their lives. Many felt they had to work hard to gain a similar level of comfort with men especially those in positions of power. This is exemplified in the words of Desiree:

There weren't a lot of men in our life growing up so that was one area that things were a little bit weird at first. And I guess I sometimes have a really hard time dealing with men that are authority figures just because I've always been around a lot of women. Having a man tell me what to do just kind of irks me a little bit and I really have to remember just to chill out and to listen or whatever.

As the women reflected upon their experience of being raised by a lesbian mother, each of them challenged the myth that good mothers are heterosexual. Desiree, in a very moving moment shared her experience listening to lesbian women who were in the process of losing their children in custody battles based on their sexual orientation. In tears Desiree recalled the following:

I remember marching with all these women and hearing some of their

stories. Most of them had small children that they had gotten taken away, and I remember thinking: "That's really stupid. There is no way that you can tell me that this person's not a good mother simply because of the choice she makes." And I remember thinking about that, and that having a pretty big impact on me just because if my Dad had done that, imagine what kind of life I would have had growing up with him instead of with my mom and Ann. It had a pretty big emotional impact on me and it still does to think I could have grown up without my mom and Ann.

Each of the women shared similar beliefs that sexual orientation had little to do with maternal capabilities. This sentiment is exemplified in the words of Chelsey who, speaking of her mother's lesbianism, said:

I don't think it extremely effects who you are because I think the most important thing is just being raised in a secure, loving household rather than a household with two moms, or two dads, or a mom and a dad.

The women believed the personality of their mother and her skills in parenting were the most salient factors in their experience of being well mothered. As Mary stated:

It's how the child is parented that is most important, not the parent's sexuality. I think my mom was such a great parent and had really good parenting skills and so that's what makes me different from everyone else.

Theme 6: An Enhanced Sense of Social Justice. Throughout each woman's transcript lay an expression of self-awareness coupled with a sensitivity to many

socio-political concerns in our culture. This enhanced sense of social justice appeared to have several components, the first of which was the development of a social consciousness. This consciousness included an awareness of injustice, discrimination, and oppression, and an ability to be "very questioning of the status-quo." The enhanced sense of social justice also contained a sense of openness both to self and others. The women appeared to have a receptivity to choices of lifestyles, and an acceptance and awareness of differences amongst people. Finally, the women spoke of having attained a special inner strength which enabled them stand up for, and maintain, their beliefs in the rights of all.

The participants in this study appeared to have developed a social consciousness. Throughout the interviews, each woman generated an impression of thoughtfulness towards others and exhibited a strong sense of social justice and fairness. Many of these women felt they had a greater degree of "political awareness" regarding social issues than most of their peers. Lucy expressed this in the following words: "I'm aware of my privilege as a straight, white female...and I think I'm aware of that in a deeper way than a lot of my friends are."

The women also spoke of being aware of their own potential to be discriminatory and the steps they took to correct this. For example, Lucy recalled: "challenging myself to notice things in the world around me" and a mutual challenging between herself and her mother--"you know you can't just say something about Chinese drivers or about welfare mothers and get away with it and we can't say stuff in front of each other and get away with it." Arienne spoke

of monitoring her thoughts in an effort to be more understanding of others:

I do watch myself very closely..try to be aware of bad thoughts against somebody like, if I'm feeling hostile towards somebody I kind of go: "Is this discrimination or is it just because they're an ass hole?"

Some of the women demonstrated their highly developed social consciousness by actively fighting for the welfare of others, particularly the rights of lesbian women and gay men. One heterosexual participant who is a member of G.A.L.E., the Gay and Lesbian Educators in B.C., spoke of her sense of personal obligation: "I owe something to the people who have taken things to the point where I have them." Another woman expressed her commitment to the principles of justice and inclusion in the following words: "I want to see things change...to see that other kids don't have to say that it's the roommate on the couch, and to be able to bring in pictures of their family to school."

Along with this awareness of injustice and discrimination, the women felt they had developed a sense of openness in regards to accepting differences-- differences in skin colour, sexual orientation, cultural heritage etc. For example, in reflecting on her upbringing Desiree said:

I don't really consider it a very negative experience at all. I think that as a whole it was very positive and that it taught me to really be accepting of all different kinds of people, and to not just look for the surface and judge it based on that but to really get to know people and to give them a chance. I guess to look at the other side of the picture all the time and not just to

judge it for the face value of it and, you know, be a little more understanding of all different situations, people and the way they react.

This openness was evident as the women shared thoughts which expressed a keen understanding of oppressed minority groups such as lesbian women and gay men, racial minorities, and women in general. For example, Lucy spoke of her work with the B.C. Teaching Federation regarding anti-homophobia programs for the schools:

Few people are involved in that sort of thing who aren't gay and I mean that's because of my experience growing up. This is a very important, I feel, field to be working in, working towards. There are a lot of white people working against racism because it hurts us all.

These women felt they had been given a "broader perspective of people in general" and "empathy for people in different situations."

This sense of openness also involved a personal sense of freedom in regards to alternative lifestyles. Mary expressed how the exposure to different lifestyles enlarged her personal vision of lifestyle opportunities:

...to see that things are flexible, you know, that there is not just this one way of being. We construct how we choose to live...you don't have to have this rigid approach. There's lots of different ways and I saw that there's this way and then there was that so I can pick and chose from different ways of living.

The participants spoke of having been given a liberty to be themselves through

their growing up years; an opportunity that others might not have been given. For example, Chelsey spoke of this freedom in regard to her sexual orientation:

I'm more open to anything, like I've never been with a woman but it's not something that I'd rule out, you know, because I recognize that I am attracted to women and men and I don't know if I had grown up with a father and my mom was married, I don't know if I'd have that same sort of out-look. I think it taught me to be more open to everything.

The women also spoke of developing an inner strength which enabled them to remain true to themselves and their beliefs as a result of being raised in a lesbian-headed family. One woman recounted gaining this strength by: "...having a mother who encourages you to be yourself regardless of what yourself is, you know and not to take other people's shit if they don't agree with the way you are." The words of Desiree exemplify the beliefs of many of the women:

I don't consider it to be any kind of a negative thing really, for the one small part of my life where it's a bit difficult but that makes you who you are. I think it made me a stronger person to have to go through that and to realize that I am proud of my family.

In conclusion, chapter four has provided an exploration of the meaning of the extrapolated themes in each of the women's lives. Chapter five will provide a comparison between the results of this study and past research. It will also include discussions on the implications of the research findings for counselling psychology and for further research.

Chapter V

Discussion

As noted in the literature reviewed in chapter two, most research in the area of lesbian-headed families was conducted in response to judicial assumptions about the aberrant and potentially destructive nature of this family form.

Researchers (Flaks et. al., 1995; Golombok et. al., 1983; Patterson, 1994a) often compared heterosexual-mothered children with lesbian-mothered children in an attempt to verify the normalcy of the children from the latter groups. The purpose of this study was to gain a degree of understanding of the meaning of living within a lesbian-headed family from the perspective of the adult daughter, in order to help inform counselling research and practise. The research question was: "What is the lived experience of being a daughter from a lesbian-headed family?" This chapter begins with an exploration of significant findings of this research in comparison with the existing literature. The implications of these findings for counselling and future research are also discussed.

Comparison to the Literature

There is a scarcity of literature exploring the lived experiences of young adults raised by lesbian mothers. However, the available research will be compared and contrasted with two of the most striking areas of findings in this study that are particularly informative for counselling psychology. Firstly, the experiences of being a daughter raised in a lesbian-headed family appeared to be related to the women's age and life stage. Secondly, when the community at large

held a negative view of the lesbian-headed family, the women's experiences appeared consistent with those described in minority identity development models, specifically the Minority Identity Development Model presented by Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993).

Age and Life Stage. In his study of adolescents and young adults of gay fathers, Bozett (1988) concludes that age and maturation is a factor influencing how children manage their parents' homosexuality. As the women in this study shared their experiences, it became evident that the personal significance of the experience as daughters raised by lesbian mothers--how it was perceived and lived--differed according to their age and life stage. For example, in this study the women reported having no significant feelings of being different from their peers in early childhood.

During late childhood and early adolescence, however, when conformity and peer acceptance are critical to healthy social development (Dunn & McGuire, 1992), the women in this study reported being impacted by their negatively-sanctioned home situations. They recalled experiencing a negative sense of being different in comparison with peers; being affected by stigmatization and the fear of being teased; and developing a need for control of the information regarding their family form in order to gain acceptance of peers.

The women participating in this study spoke of having a sense of being different from others. They noted that the experience of being different during this life stage was decidedly negative. Similarly, the children and young adults with

lesbian mothers interviewed by Lewis (1980) reported also "struggling with a sense of differentness" (p. 199). At a time when peer conformity was especially important, participants of both studies reported times of feeling isolated and alone. They reported worrying about peers discovering the lesbian identity of their mother. The participants in the present study also recalled feeling more self-conscious and less secure during this time period when conformity to peer ideals was of primary importance--a time when being different in any way was difficult.

The findings in the research of Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997) revealed that although participants raised by lesbian mothers experienced stigmatization by peers, it did not prevent them from establishing meaningful friendships throughout their lives. The women in the present study reported similar experiences of stigmatization. It did occur in varying degrees, however, it did not hinder the formation of social relationships. In both studies the participants' anticipation of being rejected or teased was reportedly more negative (i.e., causing fearfulness and anxiety) than the actual event. According to the participants of these studies, being teased or rejected because of their mothers' sexual orientation was not a major factor in their growing up years. Researchers in the field of the lesbian-headed family have yet to support the hypothesis that children raised in these homes will be damaged as a result of social and peer stigmatization.

The findings of Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997) indicated that fear of stigmatization from the peer group was a key factor influencing how children feel

about being raised in a lesbian-headed family. However, this was not cut and dried for most of the women in this study, as they experienced feelings of being torn. On the one hand, they felt a need to develop a sense of belonging in the world of their peers by hiding the sexual orientation of their lesbian mothers, and on the other hand they wanted to remain loyal to them. At times they appeared to find an inner strength which enabled them to hold onto their own beliefs regardless of peer and societal pressures. The women in this study experienced this time of conflict during their younger adolescent years when the values of the members of their peer group made it difficult for them to be open and positive towards their family. Developmental theorist Rayner (1978) suggests that it is a part of normative development to begin a process of de-idolizing one's parents, preferring the company, the beliefs, and way of life of one's peers. Some of the women in this study began to adopt the dominant culture's perception of this family form when peer conformity and acceptance was most needed in their lives.

During these younger adolescent years the women in this study also reported experiencing a fear of attracting prejudice, and expressed a need to have a sense of control regarding the information about their family form. This need for control was addressed by Bozett (1988) who, using unstructured in-depth interviews with teenagers and adults with gay fathers, suggests the major life task of these individuals is the "management of their own identity through the use of social control strategies" (p. 553). Bozett's findings indicate that younger children might not disclose information but rather refer to the father's lover as an uncle.

Similarly, the women in this study remembered referring to their mother's lover as the "roommate". Especially during late childhood and early adolescence, these women feared bringing friends home and having the revelation of their mother's sexual orientation occur through some object such as a book title or poster, before they were ready to expose this information.

Tasker and Golombok's (1995; 1997) research findings indicated that many of the participants with lesbian mothers feared peer hostility if the nature of their family form was made public. Similar findings appear to occur in the present study. According to the women in this study, maintaining control through selective disclosure was considered paramount in order to avoid such negative consequences as peer rejection, ostracism, loss of their mother's employment, or loss of custody by their moms. They spoke of telling close friends about their mother's lesbian identity, but remaining cautious about telling others. Most women in this study were surprised to discover that disclosure of their mothers' sexual orientations with select friends led to an increase in their comfort and intimacy with their friends; not a loss of, or negative change in their friendships.

Despite the need for selective disclosure and secrecy, the women in this study reported eventually being able to include close friends in their family situations. Similarly, over half the participants from lesbian-headed families in Tasker and Golombok's (1995; 1997) research were able to tell a close friend who did not react negatively to the information. The women in this study reported their need for control over this information lessened as they aged. In their later

teen and early adult years the women appeared to have developed a greater ability to be open with their peers about the nature of their family form.

In this period of late adolescence and early adulthood, each of the women in this study spoke of having a treasured sense of intimacy with their mother. Similarly, Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997) reported that generally their participants with lesbian mothers had good relationships with their moms. As the women in the present study matured they began to feel able to resist the negative perception of the dominant culture and gain a pride in their heritage. They even spoke of bragging about their family of origin. The findings of Lewis (1980) indicated that by adulthood the participants in her study universally expressed pride in their family and in their mothers' courage to challenge societal norms. Tasker and Golombok's findings were similar, in that the young adults in their study who were raised by lesbian mothers were significantly more positive about their personal family identity than the corresponding group raised by heterosexual mothers.

Another area of import in late adolescence and early adulthood was the gender identity and sexual orientation of children raised in lesbian-headed families. Although detailed measurement of gender role development and sexual orientation was beyond the scope of this study, informative findings were brought to light. Patterson (1992) summarized the research of over 300 offspring of lesbian mothers, finding no evidence to confirm confusion regarding gender identity. The women interviewed in this study spoke of feeling clear and secure in

their womanhood. They also acknowledged the important role that women, specifically their mothers, their mothers' partners, and other women within the lesbian community, played in modelling womanhood.

In research conducted by Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997), participants from lesbian-headed families reported having more positive relationships with their mothers' female partners than the comparison group had with their step-fathers. The women in this study also recalled having developed close relationships with their mothers' female sexual partners, and were often able to integrate the partner into the family as another parent figure.

Although there has been little attention given to exploring the influence of the lesbian community on the lives of children raised in lesbian-headed homes, all the women in this study spoke of the increased sense of security and self-confidence they felt as women, and the pride in their womanhood as a result of their close relationships with this woman-centered lesbian community. The women all spoke of having developed self-respect as women. They saw themselves as equal persons in society with a sense of personal entitlement to equal employment opportunities.

The research of Flaks et. al. (1995) compared the psychosocial development of children from lesbian and heterosexual parents. The implications of their results were that their participants appeared to have healthy gender role development without a father presence in the home. This also appeared to be the case for the women in this study. The women in this study did report having some

difficulties regarding the lack of men in their lives. Several of the women made reference to having to work harder at their relationships with men--especially men in positions of power. However, three of the five participants reported being in long-term committed relationships with men.

Little research has addressed the experiences of daughters from lesbian-headed families in relationship to traditional social norms for women. The rejection of these social norms appears to be a significant learning for this study. The women in this research reported developing a heightened awareness of societal pressures to be traditionally feminine. They believed that growing up in an alternate community of women gave them the opportunity to cultivate a more personal concept of beauty--one that did not always "lean toward the conventional". Further, these women demonstrated an awareness of the option open to them to resist this socially prescribed femininity.

Hotvedt and Mandel (1982), whose research explored issues of gender identity among children ages 3 to 11, of lesbian and heterosexual mothers, found daughters of lesbian mothers scored less traditionally feminine than daughters of heterosexual mothers. Along similar lines, the findings of Green et al. (1986) revealed that daughters of lesbian mothers differed in traditional sex-typed standards for girls. For example, the daughters in Green et al.'s study showed a greater preference for traditionally male work roles and often wore less traditionally feminine clothing. Both these studies utilized young children in their sample, therefore it is unknown whether the trend for daughters of lesbian

mothers to reject the "less traditionally feminine" will continue into adulthood.

The results of this study appear to indicate that it does.

Most research regarding sexual development of children raised by lesbian mothers has also been conducted with pre-teen children--a developmental time frame when the sexual orientation of children is difficult to predict. However, results from the young adult samples used by Paul (1986) and Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997) indicated that lesbian mothers do not appear to have a higher number of lesbian daughters and gay sons than heterosexual mothers. The results of this study are similar in that one of the women in this research self-identified as bi-sexual, four self-identified as heterosexual and no one self-identified as lesbian.

More informative than their sexual orientation, perhaps, is the following: Each woman in this study felt she had the option of pursuing a same-sex romantic relationship if she felt so inclined, knowing there would be no maternal resistance to her choice. These women indicated they had spent time questioning their sexual orientation, although the women varied in their degree of comfort with the idea of engaging in a same-sex relationship. The women also reported feeling a freedom to discuss matters of a sexual nature with their mothers. Similarly, Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997) found that the young adults in their study who were raised by lesbian mothers felt they had a greater choice to pursue a same-sex romantic relationship and were more able to discuss issues of sexual development with their mothers than their heterosexual counterparts.

According to the women in this study, as they matured they felt able to claim their womanhood with a sense of pride, to explore their sexual orientation, and to gain a sense of pride in their family. They also reported having developed a special strength as a result of their experience as daughters of lesbian mothers. Several authors (Boyd, 1992; Patterson, 1992) speculate that the process used to overcome stigmatization and the sense of being different may generate strengths such as a greater appreciation of human rights and an openness to cultural diversity. The results of this research, as well of that of O'Connell (1993) who used open interviews with young adults of lesbian mothers, appear to suggest that these speculations may have some truth. Both the participants in O'Connell's study and in this research, felt they were stronger persons as a result of being raised in a lesbian-headed family.

In her research with lesbian mothers, Hare (1994) found that one of the prospective benefits parents felt would result for their children as members of a non-normative family structure would be to gain a greater tolerance for diversity. The findings of this study confirm these parents' beliefs in that all the participants felt they had developed an enhanced sense of social justice. This sense of justice included a broadening of horizons in terms of non-conventional roles and greater acceptance and awareness of differences amongst people--especially those from minority groups. The women's statements left the impression of a sincere thoughtfulness towards others. Not only did they display an intolerance of social injustice perpetrated by others, they also appeared to be keenly aware of their

own prejudices.

Exploring this awareness of social injustices, Tasker and Golombok (1995; 1997) found that young adults raised by lesbian mothers expressed strong support for the rights of women, especially when the mothers promoted feminist ideals. All women in this study had mothers who supported feminist causes and each woman in turn expressed an awareness of, and concern for women's rights.

In summary, the results of this research indicate that age and life stage appear to influence the experiences of daughters raised by lesbian mothers. The available literature supports this supposition. Late childhood and early adolescence appear to be the most difficult time for the women in this research--a time when feelings of being different, worrying about being stigmatized by peers, and needing control seem to be of paramount concern. In later adolescence and young adulthood these women appear to have gained an appreciation for their heritage and to have developed special strengths as a result of being raised in this alternate family.

Minority Identity Development. Although identity development in the research has scarcely been addressed beyond what Bozett (1988) has proposed, as seen in the previous section, it appears to have significance in this study. Each of the participants reported being affected by the attitudes of others towards their family form. For the women in this study, when the dominantly-held view of the lesbian-mothered family was negative, a pattern of minority identity development appeared to emerge. For example, the Minority Identity Development Model

(MID) presented by Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993) theorizes that members of a minority experience a process of conforming to the discriminatory dominant culture's view of their group, which then leads the individual to self depreciation and group depreciation. The women in this study spoke of either taking on negative attitudes towards their mothers and their family form at various stages in their development, or hiding and lying about their family form. They recalled having fears of being ostracized and/or teased by members of their peer group. They also expressed feelings of being different from others, as seen in the previous section on age and life stages.

In the MID Model, the stage of conforming to the dominant culture is often followed by a period of dissonance, where minority individuals are in conflict between group depreciation and group appreciation. For most of the women in this study such dissonance was reflected in their struggle between accepting the dominantly-held negative view of the lesbian-headed family, and maintaining their personal beliefs that their mothers were good moms and their families were healthy. They spoke of feelings of being torn between remaining faithful to their mother and being accepted as a member of their peer group.

The third phase of this model focuses on a process of resistance and immersion. This resistance of the dominant culture can then lead to depreciating this culture and raising the minority group and self to a level of appreciation. Indeed several of the women in this study spoke dramatically about a time in their lives when they actively resisted and "put down" the "inferior" dominant

culture. During this time the women began to re-immense themselves in their own culture, reclaiming their identities as daughters of lesbian mothers. They began to brag about their families and challenge the attitudes of others.

The fourth phase consists of a time of introspection. Here members of the minority group reflect on their attitudes toward the dominant group and the minority group. In this research this appeared to occur at a time when the women were feeling a deeper sense of security about their identity as daughters of lesbian mothers. This sense of security allowed the women to examine their rigid beliefs in regard to their family form and move toward a more personal autonomy. During this phase the women also began to be aware of other minority groups experiencing similar oppression. Atkinson et al. (1993) suggest this occurs during the stage of introspection. These authors also hypothesize that during this stage members of minority groups develop "an attitude of selective trust and distrust (for the dominant society) according to dominant individuals' demonstrated behaviors and attitudes" (p. 32). The development of this attitude was clearly described by the women in this study.

Finally, according to the Minority Identity Development Model, a member of a minority group comes to a time of self and group appreciation coupled with selective appreciation towards the dominant group. For example, the women in this study appeared to reclaim their identities as daughters of lesbian mothers with an open sense of pride in the uniqueness of this family form. They formed meaningful relationships with others in the dominant culture but developed a

keen ability to detect and avoid those with negative attitudes towards homosexuality. At this phase the women in this study also developed a "greater understanding and support for all oppressed people, regardless of their similarity or dissimilarity to the individual's minority group" (Atkinson et al., 1993, p. 33).

The women in this study all appeared to move through these different phases in their lives, some in a more clearly pronounced way than others. The authors of the MID Model do not suggest that all people belonging to a minority group go through the full range of stages within their life time, nor are the boundaries between the stages necessarily clear cut. Atkinson et al. (1993) point out that some members of minority groups raised in a family functioning at a level of self appreciation and group appreciation for both the minority and the dominant group may never experience the primary phase of conformity.

In this study it appears that context outside the family form has an influence on how these daughters experience the stages of minority identity development. Little is mentioned in the literature about the effect of an environment which gives legitimacy to the lesbian-headed family form. For example, in this study attendance at alternate schools, where alternative family configurations were accepted, was reported to have a positive effect on the participants' attitudes towards their family. The family form actually became a source of pride. However, the women reported that while attending mainstream schools, where attitudes towards homosexuality were derogatory, they experienced feelings of embarrassment regarding their family form. Following this theory and

based on his findings, Bozett (1988) proposes: "The more negative children perceive societal reaction to homosexuality to be, the more strongly they assume society will react negatively toward them on the basis of their imputed or virtual rather than actual social identity" (p. 561). For the women in this study their feelings of secrecy, shame, and fear of being subjected to ridicule and loss were virtually eliminated when the social context positively sanctioned the lesbian-mothered family.

Minority identity models such as the one presented by Atkinson et al. (1993) can provide important insights into the lives of individuals from minority groups such as the women participants in this research. Further research will be needed to validate the supposition that the experiences of children from lesbian-headed families fall within the domain of existing minority identity development models.

Implications for Future Research

Limitations in time and resources have made it impossible to determine whether the results of this study have exhausted the possible themes of the lived experiences of daughters raised in lesbian-headed families. I would recommend a larger, more diverse sample to add variations to the possible themes and expansion of the differences that exist, as well as to further refine the themes presented in this study.

If civil liberties for lesbian-headed families continue to expand and there continues to be an amelioration of the negative social climate impacting upon

these families, greater numbers of participants will most likely come forward for future research. Perhaps young adults with a greater variety of life experiences will be available for study. For this study, the sample consisted of a relatively homogeneous group composed of Caucasian, cohort specific, able-bodied volunteers raised in working and lower-middle class families. These women may not have been representative of the larger population of daughters from a lesbian-headed family. The inclusion of women participants of varying ages, women of colour, and from varying socio-economic backgrounds will all lead to a greater understanding of the lived experiences within these families.

To provide a greater understanding of the lesbian-headed family, it may also be important to study other members of the family such as sons, mothers, and mothers' partners. The son's perspective will give another important viewpoint from which to gain understanding of this family form. Will he have had similar experiences regarding stigmatization, peer pressures and feelings of being different to the daughter? Research comparing the experiences of the two genders may give significant insights into psycho-social and psycho-sexual development of children raised within this family form. Exploring the experiences of lesbian mothers will also add the advantage of viewing the lives of these children and this family form from another perspective.

As the results of this study indicate, being part of an extended community of women was perceived as playing a significant role in the lives of these women. Based on these findings researchers may wish to look more closely at the role of

the mothers' partners and the role of the lesbian community in the lives of these children. For the women in this study the family constellation varied--one woman was raised by two women parents from the age of eight onwards, the other participants lived at times with their single moms and at times with their mothers' partners. All the women considered at least one of the mothers' partners to be like another parent figure. To date we have scant information about the lived experiences of children raised by two moms.

Although four of the women in this study had continuous contact with their biological fathers, it was beyond the scope of this research to explore the role of the fathers in the daughters' lives and the impact of the fathers' presence or absence. Future research in this area is needed to bring about new information on the role of nonresidential fathers and of men in general in the lesbian-headed family. The women in this study suggested they had initial difficulties with men in positions of power. Future research may give further insight into this claim.

All participants in this study were offspring from heterosexual relationships, one woman never living with her father and the other four participants living without a father in the home from early childhood onwards. As Tasker and Golombok (1997) suggest, the mothers of these women may be considered by some to be bisexual. This brings to light a whole new area of study and indicates the need for future research with children born into lesbian-headed families, whether through donor insemination or adoption. It will be important to explore the experiences of children who are raised from birth in lesbian-headed

families, without a known father figure.

The results of this study suggest that developmental differences play an important role in the experiences of children raised in lesbian-headed homes, therefore it would be of value to utilize longitudinal studies. This methodology would enable the researcher to explore how participants' experiences vary based on their age and life stage.

The findings of this research also indicated that the participants, raised in a heterosexist society, appeared to have experiences outlined in minority identity development models, specifically the Minority Identity Development Model of Atkinson et al. (1993). Future research in the area of daughters of lesbian-headed families will be important to verify these findings. The participants of this study also indicated that their experiences as daughters of lesbian-headed families altered when the environment was positive (such as when they attended alternate schools where different family forms were validated). Therefore, it may be of value for researchers to explore the effect of the context and environment. Comparing the effects of attendance in mainstream schools versus attendance in alternate schools may give further insight into the role of the school environment in shaping the experiences of children raised in lesbian-headed families.

Finally, in this research study, adult daughters from lesbian-headed families shared their own experiences of what it was like to be raised in their families in a heterosexist environment. Our understanding of children from this family form would be significantly better if future researchers continued to listen to the voices

of all members of this family form through open, in-depth interviews such as those utilized in this study.

Implications for Counselling Practice

In this section the research findings will be reviewed as they relate to the counselling practice. As options such as donor insemination, adoption, and fostering become more available for lesbian women, the number of children raised in lesbian-headed families will increase significantly (Jacob, 1997; Pies, 1990). With this foreknowledge it is prudent for counsellors to begin to gain some familiarity with this family form and the experiences of these women and children.

This study brings to light a number of salient issues for counsellors to consider, especially the impact of counsellors' biases towards the lesbian-headed family, the significance of developmental stages, and the importance that context plays in the lives of children raised by lesbian mothers.

Before beginning the counselling process with a client raised in a lesbian-headed family it is imperative that counsellors examine their own beliefs, biases, and pre-conceived notions about this family form. As the study revealed, these women reported being very sensitive to the prejudiced or judgmental attitudes of others. All personal values regarding normative family forms or alternative families will impact the counselling process and chances are good that the client will be aware of any biases or prejudices exhibited in the counselling sessions. As was evident throughout the study, positive attitudes towards lesbian-headed families helped to reduce feelings of shame and embarrassment for these women.

These findings suggest that such support may help younger clients maintain a positive regard toward their family form and may also assist older clients to reclaim with pride their identities as daughters from lesbian-headed families.

The women in the study stated throughout the interviews, that not all happenings in their life were a direct result of their family form. Therefore, it is important not to assume that a client's issues necessarily relate to the fact that they have been raised in a lesbian-headed family. However, the findings of this study indicate there are significant issues for women raised by lesbian mothers that may indicate to counsellors when and why counselling may be most beneficial.

The more difficult experiences for these women appeared to occur during the late childhood and early teenage years when peer acceptance is most important (Dunn & McGuire, 1992). This indicates the importance of the counsellor having an understanding of developmental and age-related stages. During early adolescence the women in this study spoke of attempting to come to terms with feelings of being different from others, a difference that was decidedly negative during this life stage. They reported feelings of shame and embarrassment in regards to their family. They also expressed having feelings of guilt as a result of this embarrassment. Children and adults of the lesbian-headed family may also have feelings of anger towards their family or towards the dominant cultural group which negatively sanctions their family. Therefore, as Bozett (1988) suggests, these children may be in need of understanding the

heterosexist nature of society. Bozett goes on to indicate that children with gay and lesbian parents may need help to see that much of their stress may not be related to their parents' gay identities, so much as it has to do with their reactions to society's attitudes towards homosexuality. It may be beneficial to empower sons and daughters of lesbian mothers with the realization that although they have no control over society's view they can develop a power over their own reaction to these views.

During pre-adolescent and adolescent developmental stages the women also reported a need to control the information regarding their family form. The counsellor may need to empower the client in this regard. Clients may have high levels of anxiety directly related to the fear of others finding out their mother is a lesbian. To lessen anxiety, clients may need help understanding how and when to share information both in the counselling sessions and with peers or colleagues. Bozett (1988) refers to this as situational ethics--when to be open and when not to be. All the women in this study spoke of the need to selectively disclose information for fear of being rejected or betrayed by their friends. The women also feared that untimely disclosure might result in negative consequences, ranging from ostracism and being teased by peers to parental job loss or child custody suits. However, each woman also reported that her feeling of being different changed as she matured and as she was able to sort out her own beliefs about the family form.

In this study it became evident that context also may have played a

significant role in how the women experienced life as daughters of lesbian mothers. The extended environment in which they lived, whether positive or hostile, seemed to play a critical role in shaping how they felt about their families and themselves. When the major peer group negatively sanctioned the family form, the women appeared to have experiences similar to those outlined in minority identity development models such as that presented by Atkinson et al. (1993). Therefore, it may be of value for counsellors to have a working knowledge of these models when working with women from lesbian-headed families. This information can be especially useful for counsellors who have not experienced being part of a minority group.

As clients from lesbian-headed families begin to examine their interpersonal relationships, it may be of value to be aware of the role that the lesbian community plays in many of these children's lives and its possible role as extended family. Each woman in this study had the experience at some point in time where mother's lover became a parent figure. It may also be noteworthy that some clients may have had limited experiences with men during their growing up years, as was the case for some of the women within this study. The women all reported being initially unsure with men in positions of power. This being the case, clients may be in need of information and guidance in how to relate to men in positions of authority.

Finally, all the women reported developing a special strength as a result of living in a heterosexist world. When working with clients with lesbian mothers, it

will be beneficial to watch for evidence of this strength and help the client to draw on it for other areas of her/his life.

Summary

Researchers in the field of lesbian-headed families are beginning to call the present era the "lesbian baby boom". With an increase in civil liberties and human rights, more lesbians are choosing to have children whether through donor insemination, adoption or fostering. Other lesbians are coming out of the closet and bringing their children with them. These families are often left without support in the face of social, legal, and religious discrimination. As counselling psychologists we know little or nothing of these alternative families nor the experiences of the children within these families, thus limiting our ability to be a support system.

The limited research available suggests that children raised in lesbian-headed families are not harmed by this experience. The women in this study appear to have stable lives and to have maintained good relationships with family members, partners, and friends. The findings in this research seem to suggest that, although the women did struggle, there were some real benefits which resulted from their growing up in a lesbian-mothered family. Speculation about whether daughters raised in these homes might develop greater tolerance for diversity in our society appears to be supported by the interviewees. Each of them expressed genuine concern for the rights of others, and an openness to differences in lifestyles.

Through their openness and willingness to share their lives with us, these women have provided a little more insight into the lesbian-headed family.

Hopefully further research that goes back to the individuals who are living this experience will expand upon these findings and give us an even deeper understanding of lesbian-headed families.

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Appendix C: Orienting Statement

The following statement will be read by the researcher to all participants at the beginning of the first interview.

I am interested in learning about your experience as a daughter raised in a lesbian-headed household and how you understand and make sense of this experience now, as an adult woman. There has been very little research in the area of lesbian-headed families and next to none from the perspective of a woman who has personally experienced growing up with a lesbian mom.

I am asking specifically about your lived experience as a daughter growing up in a lesbian-headed family and the meaning this has for you in your life. Please feel free to take the time you need to reflect on and answer this. You may start to talk about your experience and its meaning for you as a daughter from any point in that experience. At some point I would like you to describe how you understand and make sense of your experience, within the current context of your life.

During the interview I may ask you for more information or clarification about something that you have said in order to be sure that I understand your experience as fully as possible. It is important that you understand that you are in no way obligated to answer or discuss anything you do not feel comfortable with.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Appendix E: Sample Interview Questions

General research question:

What is the lived experience of being a daughter from a lesbian-headed family?

Additional interview questions:

1. Looking back can you tell me a story that involves your awareness of being the daughter of a lesbian? (A story as a child, as a teenager, as a young adult)
2. How would you describe your life as the daughter of a lesbian, particularly in comparison to the lives of other friends whose mothers were heterosexual?
3. How have you experienced the reactions of others to the knowledge that your mother is a lesbian?
4. How do you feel your life has been affected by being a daughter raised in a lesbian-headed household? What were the particular challenges? What were the greatest benefits?
6. What, if any, effect has being a woman raised by a lesbian mother had on your relationships with friends, family members, colleagues or lovers throughout your life? Your sense of yourself?
7. Has your sense of yourself as a daughter of a lesbian-mother changed over the years, and if so how?