

NEGOTIATING PARENTING:
LESBIANS IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOTHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the experience of lesbians who are in intimate relationships with women who are mothers, specifically how they negotiate parenting. Lesbian mothers live in constant negotiation with the 'inside/outside' nature of lesbian parenting and contend daily with both the strength of ideological practices surrounding the institution of motherhood and with individual and systemic homophobia and hetero-normativity. Patriarchal perspectives permeate our current ideology, social systems, and media creating an oppressive environment for lesbian headed families to attempt to function in. Lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers lack social acceptance, language to define and include them, and are until recently almost silent in social work professional literature. The meta-theme evidenced by this research was "Negotiating Parenting", under which the themes of *Negotiating with the Mother*, *Negotiating with the Child/ren* and *Negotiating with Society* emerged as the primary themes. The theme of *Negotiating with the Mother* generated the sub-themes of *The Primacy of the Mother*, *Problematizing Parenting* and *Working Together*. The theme of *Negotiating with the Child/ren* produced the sub-themes of *Invitations to Bond*, *Naming the Role of the Co-Parent* and *Experiencing the Pains and Joys of Parenting*. The final theme of *Negotiating with Society* was shaped by the sub-theme of *Seeking Visibility and Legitimacy*. Co-researchers offer their personal stories, which are then discussed and analyzed within the context of phenomenological inquiry and post-modern feminist theory. The co-researchers were asked to discuss the quality of their lived experiences within the context of their families and to reflect upon the meaning-making that emerged for them as a result of these experiences.

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I have heard that greatness is measured by one's friends. Then truly, I have achieved the pinnacle. By my companions and family, I am rich beyond measure.

Bright Blessings
Joan Mortenson

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the experience of lesbians who are in intimate relationships with women who are mothers; specifically to examine how the women negotiated with their intimate partners, the children and society around the issue of parenting. The lesbians in this research are partnered or have been partnered with women who have children from previous heterosexual unions. This study is informed by my own position as a lesbian mother in relationship with a woman who does not have children. This study is grounded in a post-modern feminist epistemology and utilizes a phenomenological method of inquiry.

The reasons it was important to me to chose the particular social location that I did, lesbians who are in relationships with mothers, are two-fold. One, there exists a silence in the social work academic literature about this particular social location and my hope is to contribute to this literature in a grounded and practical way. Secondly, I seek greater understanding of this social location as it is my partner's position in our family, and I wanted very much to create space for equitable negotiations, to deepen my understanding and compassion for this position, and to strengthen the dynamics of my own family.

In formulating the research question, *what is the nature of the negotiating process of parenting like for lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers*, I was mindful of what Moustakas (1994) cites as the challenge for researchers using phenomenological inquiry; to pose a question that has both social meaning and personal significance. As well, the question grows out of my intense interest and curiosity in this specific and little studied area of social

life; lesbian families. My aim was to adhere to the criteria that Moustakas set out for creating a qualitative human science research question; one that seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience. The question should invite and engage the total self of the co-researcher while sustaining personal and passionate involvement. The qualitative research question does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships, but rather to illuminate through careful, comprehensive descriptions vivid and accurate renderings of the co-researcher's experiences, rather than through measurements, ratings or scores.

It was very important to me that the women participating in this research understood their position as experts and thus understood their value in this research project as co-researchers. By referring to the women exclusively as co-researchers, as opposed to the term 'participant', my hope is to position myself and the reader in clear view and reminder of the importance of the information these women share. My intention is to treat the data with reverence; to continually clarify what are their words and to qualify what are my interpretations, biases and curiosities.

As expected from a phenomenological inquiry, most themes illustrated a wide range of experiences on a variety of continuums. Some of the women drew upon both present and past relationships, some upon only the present and some upon only the past. The nature of phenomenological inquiry is such that each co-researcher leads the discussion according to what was important for me to know about the details of her everyday experience.

Mason (2002) describes sampling illustratively or evocatively within qualitative research as a means to providing a 'flavour' of a phenomena—hopefully a vivid and illuminating one, rather than seeking to make universal claims or generalizing the

experiences of a few to the greater population based on the notion that certain people are meaningful data sources for the intellectual puzzle in question. Based upon what I view as a set of relevant ontological properties of the social world, vis-à-vis experiences of lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers, while continuing to follow Mason's logic; there exist a myriad of variables of characteristics in which these women differ, and my explanations were fashioned on the basis of an analysis of their connections and relationships.

Qualitative interviewing positions the participant as expert - this was an empowering experience and often the co-researchers voiced their appreciation for the opportunity to have their stories and positions heard and taken seriously. Additionally, although talking about this sensitive subject—the intimate relationships the co-researchers had with their partners and their children—could be distressing, it also had the potential to be extremely therapeutic. The co-researchers said they felt greater ability to speak about sensitive issues unfettered by the concern of inadvertently 'outing' themselves or their partners as their security in confidentiality was increased in a one to one setting.

In process with these women, I encouraged them to share their experiences in a grounded way. My hope was that this would assist me to get an actual visceral sense of their *everyday* and lend greater credibility to my interpretation of their experiences. These invitations lead to potential themes that were shared by three or fewer of the co-researchers at a time. There were unique experiences for some of the women, including one of the co-researchers having been in and exited an abusive relationship. Finally, the last section covers the topic of outcomes from the grounded perspective of the co-researchers. One woman in particular was very clear about her hopes for the implications of this research, while others

led me to understand how social work practice could increase the efficacy of their relationships and negotiations with their communities at large.

All the co-researchers in this study had to navigate a relationship with women who already had children; as it was a criterion for participation. The purpose of this study was to examine what the everyday experience of this relationship is like for women who have not had children of their own and enter intimate relationships with women who do. The experiences ranged from positive to negative and often had profound and direct impact on the relationship the co-researchers had/have with the children.

The non-biological lesbian parent begs primary focus because it is her existence and experience that particularly challenges traditional concepts of 'parent', 'mother', and 'family'. I strove to discover how these courageous lesbians forge new ground as they figure out how to name themselves and how to negotiate roles with their partners, and how it is that they form such strong practical, financial and emotional bonds with children with whom they often experience insecure social and legal status (Epstein, 1996; Nelson, 1996).

Before the first interview was finished I realized that my own assumptions—informed by the literature, wider media and my own beliefs—about lesbians in relationships with mothers were challenged. None of the co-researchers interviewed considered themselves 'mothers' or that their relationship role to the children was 'to mother'. Instead, these women thought of themselves as unique and essential parts of a 'family' and found my attempts to name their experience as 'co-mother' to be at the least inadequate and imprecise and at worst, erroneous, and potentially impositional. While the scant existing academic literature renders lesbian families almost invisible, the co-researchers Oshun, Marie, E and Nuna, and their partners Wyca and Liberty, (all pseudonyms) confirmed that there are also a scarcity of role

models and cultural references for lesbian parenting. Further, what is available traditionally focuses on deficits, custody battles, or is presented in defensive comparison to the heterosexist 'norm', and thus may not be entirely accurate or deeply explored enough to reveal the essence of everyday lived experience in lesbian family life (Shore, 1996; Saakvitne, 1998). The women enjoy/ed special relationships with the children of their partners and discussed candidly how they negotiate/ed their roles (implicitly or explicitly) with both the children and their intimate partners. The relationships with the children also changed quite dramatically for all the co-researchers if the relationship with their intimate partners ended. By far the most universal of experiences was the contestation of the term 'co-mother' and the problematizing of everyday language. There was also a strong collective sense from these women that they were indeed an integral part of a family—*their family*. Each woman demonstrated a very strong sense of attitude toward their relationships with their intimate partners, their children and both sets of extended families, not to mention society in general.

Lesbian parents are challenged with invisibility and social exclusion. As surely as heterosexual families receive social validation, inclusion and support through systems that are heterocentric, lesbian families are powerfully excluded from society (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997) through a lack of cultural acceptance and appropriate language to name their experiences. To be identified as a 'childless lesbian' or as the 'non-biological parent' is to be identified in and through a sense of lack (Muzio, 1993). This struggle with language was part of our experience together as we attempted to bridge gaps and unpack my own assumptions that because lesbians are women, they will mother. Studies of lesbian families that consider the potential and diversity within each experience are essential (Epstein, 1996).

Lesbian parents live in constant negotiation with the 'inside/outside' nature of lesbian parenting and contend daily with both the strength of ideological practices surrounding the institution of motherhood and with individual and systemic homophobia and heterosexism (Epstein, 1996). Gabb (2001) describes this off-centred model provided by lesbian parents as valuable in challenging the heterosexual 'logic' of both the reproductive narrative as well as the ingredients of 'family'. These lesbians contend with social and political factors that further marginalize and impose upon them such terms such as 'co-parent' or 'step-parent', which are typically applied in a heterosexual context and are loaded with value connotations that are often negative, such as the infamous 'wicked stepmother' (Hall & Kitson, 2000).

I make no claims to the generalizability of the co-researchers experience, but do assert that each of their experiences are valid and noteworthy, especially in the light of the silence that exists in social work academic literature on the experiences of lesbian parents in general, and lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers specifically. I also contend that within the unique experiences of the co-researchers, grounded applications can be excavated for the field of social work. As a practitioner, I know that we seldom encounter circumstances that reflect those of the hypothetical subjects found in clinical text-books, nor do we encounter the same family issues twice in the same way. Therefore, I see it as valid to illuminate the experiences of the co-researchers and to glean the social work applications inherent in their experiences as appropriate, applicable and contributory to the field of social work.

I chose to research through a phenomenological approach to create hospitable space for lesbians to share their everyday lived experiences of parenting in families. My feminist interpretations invite the lens to focus from 'margin to centre' in order to challenge the

dominant discourse on family, mothering and couple roles. My aim is to invite and amplify the often silent voices of lesbians in relationship with mothers. I hope to widen the very narrow lens on the lesbian family and lesbian parenting. I strive to discover how these courageous lesbians forge new ground as they figure out how to name themselves and how to negotiate roles with their partners, and how it is that they form such strong practical, financial and emotional bonds with children with whom they often have no legal or biological connection.

I sought to convey what I was shown by Marie, Nuna, E and Oshun; what treasures were brought to me, in a way that acknowledged their pain and their joys. My task was to shed light on the experiences of others while protecting the sanctity and the rawness, to remain true to the spirit and intention of their words and keep their words instantly recognizable to the co-researchers themselves as interpretations of their true experiences. I submit their collective words to be viewed with a sense of reverence by the reader for their beauty and magnificence within the full continuum of human experiences. I strive to find just the right words to convey the exchanges of what I guard like precious family heirlooms; these treasures passed on to me that hold lifetime significance to others.

There were a couple of times during the interviews when it struck me quite distinctly that *this* was the essence of the women's experience; this moment of her talking, sharing and feeling her story when the co-researcher had me so engaged, the discussion had a surreal quality. At those moments, I thought to myself...this is the essence. I share these moments by way of bringing the reader closer to each co-researcher.

The co-researchers have also convinced me that this method of research; patient, open listening combined with an absolute veneration for their unique experiences can facilitate a co-created and accurate account of their everyday lives.

The meta-theme evidenced by this research was “Negotiating Parenting”, under which the themes of *Negotiating with the Mother*, *Negotiating with the Child/ren* and *Negotiating with Society* emerged as the primary themes. The theme of *Negotiating with the Mother* generated the sub-themes of *The Primacy of the Mother*, *Problematizing Parenting* and *Working Together*. The theme of *Negotiating with the Child/ren* produced the sub-themes of *Invitations to Bond*, *Naming the Role of the Co-Parent* and *Experiencing the Pains and Joys of Parenting*. The final theme of *Negotiating with Society* was shaped by the sub-theme of *Seeking Visibility and Legitimacy*.

The following study invites the reader to critically consider the specific social location of lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers and children while at the same time come to understand the powerful position that wider society and modern culture play in the development of this type of family.

Literature Review

Literature has been examined primarily from academic journals, with an emphasis on a concerted effort to access Canadian literature, though very little was found either in Canadian journals or Canadian content in International journals on this topic. Several meta-analyses of literature were examined, as were some influential texts in the field.

Lesbian Parenting

Finding literature on lesbian parenting was akin to seeking any kind of information on subjects regarding marginalized or taboo topics in our society. Academic literature is

significant in having an earnest scientific approach to the topic, be that a quantitative or qualitative perspective. However, almost any inquiry on popular search engines like 'Google' or 'Mama' would pull up ample hits of porn and quasi-hate literature. In an effort to be thorough, texts were also examined and some included providing the widest and most comprehensive gathering of information possible.

The Lesbian Family Research Landscape

Research on lesbians has increased in the last decade (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004; Stacey, 2003), however, traditionally, this population of women and families has been largely neglected in professional literature (Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2002; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Saakvitne, 1998; Laird, 1993; Slater & Mencher, 1991), with the exception of discourses that have erroneously linked lesbianism to mental health and psychopathology (Morrow, 2001). Speziale & Gopalakrishna (2004) note the shift from a medical model and its focus on the individual patient, to the current post-modern consideration of a social systems model with foci upon couples, families and children. Sadly, very little is known about lesbian families in their social contexts; how they negotiate their daily lives, and specifically how lesbians are fashioning family and redefining notions of kinship (Laird, 1994).

Lesbian families and lesbian motherhood have been typically presented as a contradiction, oxymoronic and antithetical to the patriarchal entrenched paradigm of a nuclear family with mom, dad and 1.5 children (Stacey, 2003; Laird, 2000; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Parezo & Robbins, 1999; Shore, 1996; Laird, 1994) and thus, have been almost fully illegitimated. Muzio (1993) points out that patriarchal society views the biological mother as the true mother, while her partner occupies a netherworld of the invisible (m)other,

a role that affords much less status and recognition than her partner. Luce Irigaray (cited in Whitford, 1991) defined patriarchy as “an exclusive respect for the genealogy of sons and fathers and the competition between brothers” (p. 24). Muzio (1993) insists that we must first understand patriarchy and its impact in order to understand the oppression felt by lesbian parents; “patriarchy is not only insistent upon women bearing children by and for men, it is, in fact, dependent upon it” (p. 216). By denying men sexual access, “lesbians subvert the patriarchal order in that they refuse to be defined in or through their relationships with men” (p. 217).

Families that are headed by straight parents fit with the patriarchal prescriptions of society, as such; these parents do not face the same concerns that were expressed by lesbians in this society. As Speziale & Gopalakrishna (2004) noted in their study of social support and functioning of lesbian families that straight families are safeguarded by their privileged status in society, and parents in this family constellation rarely fear that their children will be treated negatively by persons with authority or power within their neighbourhoods, schools, churches or health care settings. In their study, they found that lesbian parents were “concerned about rejection and harassment of their children because of their sexual orientation” (p. 180). Institutionalized heterosexism (Stacey, 2003; Saffron, 1998; Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997) is omni-present in our Canadian, Western, European-based culture. Gabb (2001) calls for the analysis of our current social systems which promote individualization based upon “the fraternal-democratic capitalistic state and the two-gendered system”, to “cross the dividing lines between mother and non-mother” with the hope that “such a crossing...could allow children to grow up with the psychosocial potential to form bonds not restricted to the monogamic family structure”, to “identify with objects of their desires

instead of repudiating them” and to “cultivate ethics, sensibilities and capacities of multiplicity and maternity” (p. 22).

In particular there exists a paucity of studies on lesbian families in Canadian literature; most academic research is based upon American studies (Bennett, 2003; Golombok et al., 2003; Stacey, 2003; McNair, Dempsey, Wise & Perlesz, 2002; Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2002; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Parks, 1998; Tasker & Golombok, 1998; Wright, 1998; Nations, 1997; Allen & Burrell, 1996; Tully, 1995; Lewin, 1993; DiLapi, 1989). While Canadian culture is arguably influenced by American culture, Canadian culture is decidedly distinct. Fiona Nelson (1996) has done the largest Canadian study, covering a variety of lesbian family constellations, and a prominent Canadian Women’s Studies journal has dedicated a special issue to the topic. Hequembourg & Farrell (1999) cite that the scant and previous research on lesbian families has many limitations, including the need for research on the internal processes of this family constellation, namely the differences in experiences among mothers including the vantage of the step-mother, co-mother or co-parent. “The lesbian co-parent is seen only as a shadowy figure” (Rohrbaugh, 1989, p. 57). Tasker & Golombok (1998) also point out that prior literature regarding the co-parent (or co-mother) in lesbian families was obtained largely through the voices of the birth mother and/or children.

Laird (1994) points out that often the academic literature takes a ‘problem-saturated’, ‘deficit-based’ stance, while few have “attended to what might be characterized as the extraordinary strengths, courage, resilience and innovativeness found” in the lesbian population (p. 268). Few scholars have asked how it is that lesbians and their children do so well *in spite* of the fact that they live and raise their children in an often destructive, homophobic world (Laird, 1993, p. 210).

Lesbians do not belong to a monolithic collectivity to be contrasted with straight culture. "Such an effort, opposing two 'cultures' in some sort of reductionist or binary opposition stance does an injustice to the enormous diversity within each group" (Laird, 1994, p. 272). Hare-Mustin (1987) refers to this as making the 'alpha-error'; to exaggerate the difference between lesbian and heterosexual life.

The potential arises, given the marginalization and asymmetry that it catalyzes in the family, that the children may adopt heterosexist ideas about the 'other' mother's place in the family, "especially when they are old enough to distinguish between 'real' and 'other'. The risk is even higher in lesbian families where the relationship between the children and the non-biological parent is not facilitated by early childhood bonding (Morrow, 2001). Regardless of their origins, nuclear families that are headed by lesbian couples with children embark on a life course where there is scant recognition and validation (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004; Stacey, 2003). Bialeschki & Pearce (1997) have problematized the power associated with gender roles and institutionalized patriarchal structures surrounding family and kinship.

Morrow (2001) notes that lesbian-headed families are primarily established through choice: "the practice of selecting family members" as opposed to "defining family on the basis of biology or social tradition" (p. 66). Lesbian families with children are particularly conspicuous targets of homophobia as they interact daily with non-gays. Morrow describes a woman who "one of the most radical and terrifying acts of her life was walking into a Parent Teacher Organization meeting with her co-parent" (p. 67).

The 'families we choose' experience of lesbian families is one of the most feverishly contested issues in contemporary family politics. The issue addresses:

the mounting cultural paranoia over whether fathers are expendable, to nature-nurture controversies over sexual and gender identities and the gender division of labour, to the meaning and purpose of voluntary marriage and most broadly, to those ubiquitous 'family values' contest over the relative importance of family structure or process, of biological or 'psychological' parents (Stacey, 2003, p. 163).

Lack of Adequate Language

The results of Morrow's study (2001) focused on "the extraordinary agency that is exerted by story-telling in defining and establishing lesbian headed families with children in forging their relationships with diverse social institutions and communities" (p. 66). Morrow found that while story-telling holds importance for non-gay families, "it plays a more critical role for lesbian families whose access to the full range of resources that produce and sustain heterosexual families is impeded by a matrix of homophobic attitudes about homosexuals" (p. 67). While Canada is in the process of enacting laws to promote and protect the rights of the queer communities (see Appendix II), and as cultural customs such as marriage are only beginning to emerge and be a legitimate option for lesbian families, Morrow asserted that "story-telling enacts some of the family-forming functions otherwise executed by civil and religious practices and conventions" (p. 68). We have been taught that secrecy and silence, the inability to 'tell' our lives is debilitating, that if we cannot fully tell our stories, we turn them inward, we internalize society's negative messages about us, as women, as members of oppressed groups (Laird, 1993). Laird (2000) points out that lesbians have "no relational scripts, no parental or family role models" and in this sense must "continuously reinvent themselves and their family cultures anew" (p. 459). "Identity making...is always a retrospective process, a restorying, and a reweaving of experiences as they have been assigned language in the larger cultural discourse and by individuals themselves." (p. 460). Women's words and women's speech genres have often been ridiculed, discounted as

'gossip', not taken seriously, and disallowed in the public forum where major social and political decisions are made (Laird, 1994, p. 273).

Researchers and women feel that there is a lack of adequate language to describe lesbian families (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Hall & Kitson, 2000). As this lack of adequate language is evident; it thwarts the lesbian co-parent's ability to claim space, participation or power (Muzio, 1993; Cantrell, 1994; Nelson, 1996; Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997; Parks, 1998; Hall & Kitson, 2000), though signifying an opportunity to evolve the conceptualization of family. Some feel that there is a great deal of cultural baggage in the words 'family' and 'mother' (Shore, 1996). The term 'co-parent' does not really convey or explain this person's role or relationship to the child (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991) though Muzio (1993) points out that this term is "somewhat friendlier, a benign term" yet "a co-parent is neither 'mother' nor 'father', a necessarily genderless being" (p. 226). These lesbians contend with social and political factors that further marginalize and impose upon them such terms such as 'co-parent' or 'step-parent', which are typically applied in a heterosexual context and are loaded with value connotations that are often negative, such as the infamous 'wicked stepmother' (Hall & Kitson, 2000). Even the seemingly neutral label of co-parent for the non-biological mother can prove problematic because it has traditionally indicated the role of either mother or father (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004). To be identified as the 'non-biological parent is to be identified in terms of lack (Muzio, 1993). Just as women are identified as men who lack (Irigaray, cited in Whitford, 1999), non-biological lesbian parents are identified in and through a sense of *lack*.

Naming the Role of Co-Parent

Nelson's (1999) study demonstrated how confusing the word 'mom' could be, and how the use of the word dissolved the lesbian parents (both biological and non-biological) into some generic mothering entity with no individual identities. Her findings detail:

Many of the women felt that a child should have someone to call 'mom' and this usually was the biological mother but the couples really struggled to come up with another term for the non-biological mother that was just as special and significant as 'mom' rather than using her name. Unfortunately, the English language is not flexible enough when it comes to identifying or even allowing the possibility of two mothers for one child. Some couples settled on referring to each woman by name, and others couples called the biological mother 'mom' and took their search for a name for the non-biological mother outside the bounds of the English language. (p. 33).

Gabb (1999) speaks to our children's process of 'naming', which refutes the reductive duality that underpins the heterosexual matrix. Children "challenge the 'natural' linkage of gendered roles to those of parenting and transform the interrelationship of gender and sexuality into a dynamic blend of embodied potentialities" (p. 346). Gabb asserts that when the binary of two sexes becomes displaced as in lesbian families, then the possibilities of 'naming' need not necessarily be *limiting*, but is potentially *limitless*.

Hequembourg & Farrell (1999) submit a legend or key for understanding the confusion around the paucity of existing language that is used, though without much consistency:

Stepmothers are partners who form relationships with birth mothers who have children from a prior relationship. Co-mothers are women who are partnered with birth mothers who conceived through alternative insemination. The ambiguity of the co-partners role is illustrated by the lack of formal terminology to refer to her place in the family. Even in the academic literature, depending on her relationship to the children, the partner of the birth mother is referred to as the 'co-parent' (Victor and Fish 1995), a 'co-parent partner' (Hare 1994), a 'non-biological mother' (Bencov 1994; Nelson 1996), a 'non-biological parent' (Kenny & Tash 1992), a 'co-mother' (Muzio 1993), a 'step-mother' (Nelson 1996; Victor & Fish 1995), and the 'invisible (m)other' (Muzio 1993). Unlike the birthmother who has a biological claim to motherhood, the partner's claim is socially constructed and depends on the validation of significant others; her partner, the children, her own kin and the legal authorities. (p. 542).

Lesbian families use many different terms, such as 'aunt', 'co-parent', or simply the partner's first name, to describe the partner of the lesbian mother. In general though, neither lesbian stepfamilies nor clinicians and researchers agree on a common term for the partner of a lesbian mother. The key point is that there is even more dissensus about what to call the partner/stepparent in lesbian stepfamilies than there is in heterosexual stepfamilies (Hall & Kitson, 2000).

Barriers to Meaningful Negotiations within Lesbian Families

Lesbians experience a lack of rituals in their lives that are afforded to the heterosexual population (Parks, 1998). Ritual is multivocal; much of its power lies in the fact that its language, its metaphors and symbols, speak to us on many levels at once (Laird, 1994, p. 284). Mencher and Slater confirm the lack of attention to gay and lesbian families in family therapy literature, and specifically note that the "lesbian family itself suffers from the absence of normative rituals to mark the family life cycle" (p. 375).

Morrow (2001) discusses the importance of the 'confirmation narrative' for lesbian families: "stories that verify and announce family membership", as they "define the place and role of individual members in relation to others in the family" (p. 68). Morrow sites an important sub-category of the conformation narrative, that "which addresses the position of the lesbian co-parent whose relationship with the children is not considered valid by heterosexual standards because she lacks the legal custody of them and/or because she is not their biological mother" (p. 68). "This variant of the confirmation narrative legitimizes the maternal identity, agency, and authority of the co-parent often labelled the 'other' mother even among lesbians" (p. 68). The basis of this parent's involvement is primarily psychological and emotional, founded on the relationships that she sustains with her

partner—the biological, legal and custodial mother of the children. This co-parent is often prohibited from fully exercising parental rights by both school systems and health care providers, both notorious for interfering with the co-parent's ability to exercise authority or agency (Morrow, 2001). In fact, Morrow harkens to de Beauvoir that the 'other mother' risks the loss of social identity that results from objectification:

Her parenthood may be construed as less than genuine. She is illegitimate, not a 'real' mother. She is understood as secondary and subordinate rather than as a co-parent sharing responsibility and authority with the legal mother. Thus, her 'otherness', so conspicuously signalled by the common nomenclature of 'other' mother, connotes alterity and inauthenticity in heterosexist society (p. 70).

Exploring life at the margins illuminates the centre or central and dominant story (Laird, 2000). This pervasive marginality of lesbians reflects a continuation of cultural blindness (Parezo & Robbins, 1999). We begin to see the special strengths of this last visible minority, strengths that come from standing at the margins and from having to be particularly alert to and critical of prevailing cultural and political discourse (Laird, 1993, p. 210). How to 'pivot' to the centre, to at times being with the experiences of the marginalized person or group, to at times stand at that point, to put their experiences at the centre of our lens, to not start from the question "How are they different from the assumed norm"? (Laird, 1993, p. 212). Lesbian mothers live in constant negotiation with the 'inside/outside' nature of lesbian parenting and contend daily with both the strength of ideological practices surrounding the institution of motherhood and with individual and systemic homophobia and heterosexism. Gabb (2001) describes this off-centred model provided by lesbian families as valuable in challenging the heterosexual 'logic' of both the reproductive narrative as well as the ingredients of 'family'.

Fumia (1998) confirms the plethora of literature that vies to codify the form, appearance and behaviour required to lay claim to legitimate families. "Academic critiques

on the 'family' and 'motherhood' refer to them as institutions steeped in hetero-normativity, racism and classism" (p. 42). Fumia presents these versions of 'family' and 'motherhood' as merely "mythical constructions that evoke invented nostalgia" (p. 43). Fumia states:

Those positioned as more marginal have to work harder in order to gain benefits than those who sit closer to the centre. The struggle of those furthest from the centre often carves the space for those who sit closer to the centre to comfortably slide into. Middle-class, white lesbians with children sit close enough to the heteronormative centre to be able to grab a 'toehold' with relative ease—at the expense of the more marginalized. (p. 44).

Lesbian families are challenged with invisibility and social exclusion. "Lesbians are difficult to see" (Laird, 1994, p. 263) As surely as heterosexual families receive social validation, inclusion and support through systems that are heterocentric; lesbian families are powerfully excluded from society (Parezo & Robbins, 1999; Saffron, 1998; Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997) through a lack of cultural acceptance and appropriate language to name their experiences. Lesbian families are also rendered invisible by an absence of scholarly attention. What is available traditionally focuses on deficits, custody battles, or in defensive comparison to the heterosexist 'norm'. To be identified as a 'childless lesbian' or as the 'non-biological parent' is to be identified in and through a sense of lack (Muzio, 1993). Lesbians are the antithesis of the heterosexual, defined by what they are not, or what they reject (Parezo & Robbins, 1999).

Epstein (1996) writes about the diversity within lesbian family experiences. She believes that "lesbians may attribute different meanings to motherhood and set different priorities in the organization and definition of their families" (p. 60). Epstein focuses on the role negotiation that happens between the biological and non-biological parents because it is their existence and experiences that challenges the entrenched notions of 'parent', 'mother' and 'family':

Lesbian parents live in a constant negotiation with the 'inside/outside' nature of lesbian parenting and contend daily with both the strength of the ideological practices surrounding the institution of motherhood and with the individual and systemic homophobia and heterosexism (p. 61).

Epstein (1996) claims that lesbian families are on the edge of a larger challenge to the hegemonic concept of 'family'. She cites the fact that partners of lesbian mothers parent children with whom they have no 'biological relationship', without social recognition *and* face additional emotional, social and political factors involved in the decisions lesbian parents make regarding the defining and shaping of the non-biological parent's role.

Slater and Mencher (1991) broaden the literature on families with their significant contribution of the lesbian family life cycle. They describe ritual as an important function that serves to generate momentum for families to develop through life, and note the detrimental impact the lack of ritual has on lesbian families. Though times are evolving through the sporadic sanctification of gay and lesbian marriage, it is still a struggle through which lesbian families have not fully transcended—indeed the path is has only been named and not yet forged. Slater and Mencher cite Wolin and Bennett (1984) and their work on family rituals:

Through ritual, both public and private, the culture sends a message of connection and validation, of 'we recognize ourselves in you' to the individual family. Such validation can bestow a sense of legitimacy in the world. Even at times when the family feels unformed or fragmented, the power of ritual is so strong that it can, for better or worse, substitute for internal cohesion. (p. 374).

Epstein (1996) implores us to become familiar with the daily ways lesbian mothers are living their lives and with the ways that class, race, age, ability and personal and political history intersect with and influence the experience of lesbian mothers.

DiLapi (1989) wrote about the 'motherhood hierarchy', indicative of cultural norms and social values, and how this reflects the range of motherhood options valued differentially

as “appropriate motherhood” or ‘inappropriate motherhood’. Sexual orientation and family form are the primary criteria for placement on the hierarchy and affect the judgment of who is appropriate for motherhood. The motherhood hierarchy operates through formal and informal social policy. The inappropriate mother stereotype is one of deviance. Lesbian families, outside of the traditional family form, are found at this bottom rung of the motherhood hierarchy, with birth mothers occupying a higher privilege than their partners.

Fumia (1998) presents an interesting article about ‘once married mother-lesbians’. Fumia makes a compelling argument for stretching the boundaries of the definition of motherhood, by adding her own classification: ‘mother-lesbians’ to describe women who were once mothers in a heterosexual context, but then enter relationships with other women. Fumia’s article is grounded in her belief that “paying attention to some of the many layers of how any one woman is positioned reveals how women are regulated and resist being regulated socially, legally and politically” (p. 41). Fumia’s arguments for increasing the classifications for motherhood is based on the usefulness of “expanding the possible ways in which individual mothers can legitimate their identities”, but notes that it can also be limiting because these categories “do little to address the systems of oppression which restrict legitimizing identities in the first place”; further “each new category deployed for the purpose of destabilizing the boundedness of motherhood will always exclude those who remain outside the newly expanded category”, though Fumia adds a quote from Judith Butler, “categories always leak” (p. 41).

Role Negotiations with Mothers and Children

Role negotiations for lesbians are invented from ‘scratch’; all aspects of partnered roles, distribution and redistribution of power and responsibilities are based upon factors

other than gender differences (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997). Bialeschki & Pearce (1997) found that role negotiations were based upon personal interests, skill and preference. Interestingly, Bialeschki and Pearce found that women utilized both time and money as economic resources, if one partner had more time, negotiations would be based upon that highly valued commodity. If neither partner had time or interest for a particular task or role, the task would be 'hired' out if financially viable, for example, childcare or housework. Bialeschki & Pearce found that lesbian partners used both structured agreements—where clear communication was critical, as well as unstructured agreements—where a partner would 'do what needed to be done', especially in the essence of time, which was viewed as a precious commodity. Inequalities inevitably exist as a result of class, financial and personality differences, but it is not common for lesbian couples with children to collude with heterosexual divisions of labour. Usually both partners in a lesbian partnership share the tasks of earning a living, caring for children and sharing household chores (Saffron, 1998, p. 42).

Research has shown that there are few if any disadvantages for children being raised by lesbian parents, in fact, Saffron (1998) reports no meaningful or significant differences. Saffron's research, taken from interviews with British teenagers and adult children of lesbian mothers suggest distinct advantages, including "more accepting and broad-minded attitudes towards homosexuality, women's independence, the concept of family and social diversity than children from families which conform more closely to the norm" (p. 37). Saffron (1998) contends that these attitudes and outcomes transcend heterosexual parent's ability to transmit progressive values because of the immediacy and relevance of living in a diverse family constellation. "Heterosexual parents are not modelling acceptance and pride in a stigmatized identity" (p. 37). Saffron's (1998) study showed that children of lesbian parents suggested a

“greater acceptance of differences in lifestyles, types of families, cultures, religious beliefs, political views and values” (p. 45).

Saffron (1998) cites research that shows lesbian couples were more aware of the skill needed for effective parenting than heterosexual couples. They were better able to recognize problems in parenting and to create solutions for them. Saffron states “the fact that there are lesbians with strong parental relationships to children despite their lack of legal and biological connections is a key development in the evolving conceptualization of ‘the family’ and kinship” (p. 43). Saffron contends that parenting is about caring and commitment and implores society not to dismiss these important relationships forged in the everyday reality of caring and loving.

Previous Studies on Lesbian Families

Hall & Kitson (2000) examine lesbian stepfamilies and found that many lesbian mothers formed committed, cohabitative relationships with women in which the mother’s new partner faced a role similar to that of a heterosexual stepparent. However, unlike our knowledge about heterosexual stepfamilies, the parent-child relationship is the least investigated relationship in lesbian stepfamilies. It is the presence of children which complicates the mother-partner relationship. They contend that “heterosexism and homophobia play an important part in the lack of institutionalization for lesbian families and the partner within these families” (p. 32). Harkening to Rich’s (2003) assertion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, Hall and Kitson affirm that families that fall outside of the social prescription of heterosexual constellations “are devalued and negatively sanctioned by society” (p. 34).

Tasker & Golombok (1998) researched the roles of co-parents [they referred to them as 'co-mothers'] in lesbian led families and found that co-parents "played a more active role in daily care-giving than did most fathers in heterosexual families" (p. 63). Reports from the birth mothers and children confirmed closeness, warmth and affection.

A study by Nations (1997) on lesbian mothers found "88% of the mothers rated their lesbian partners high in sharing emotional responsibility for the children, 63% rated their partners high in sharing financial responsibility and 92% rated adjustment problems with the children and partner as low or moderate" (p. 40).

Allen & Burrell (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of literature on sexual orientation and children. "The results demonstrate no differences on any measures between the heterosexual and homosexual parents regarding parenting styles, emotional adjustment, and sexual orientation of the children" (p. 19). Importantly, "whether the data¹ was measured from the perspective of the parent, teacher or child, no differences exist between heterosexual and homosexual parents" (p. 30).

Parks (1998) conducted a review of 17 academic studies done between 1980 and 1996 on lesbian families. The research describes characteristics and challenges faced by lesbian families in the context of heterosexist and homophobic societal attitudes. In examining the literature, Parks cites "some have documented similarities and differences between lesbian and heterosexual families, while others have worked to challenge myths surrounding lesbian parenthood" (p. 376). The lesbian stepparent is the least discussed role within the body of literature as studied by Parks (1998) in her meta-analysis. Parks cites the

¹ Data included adult ratings of the quality of parent-child relationship, attitude of the parent on sex roles and development, parental rating of child satisfaction, teacher rating of child's behaviour at school; and children's ratings on sexual orientation, satisfaction with life, cognitive and moral development. (Allen & Burrell, 1996, p. 25).

lesbian co-parent as a role that lacks acknowledgement and validation from both outside and inside the couple's relationship. Significant to Park's analysis of the literature is:

Lesbian couples do not differ significantly from other couples in either the quality of their relationships or the challenges they face in forming a family unit. What sets them apart are three salient characteristics: 1) both partners are women; 2) they are not a socially sanctioned family unit; and 3) full commitment by both partners to the couple requires acceptance of a stigmatized identity. (p. 382).

Tully (1995) summarizes research done on lesbians over the past forty years. She divides the research into five areas including etiology which began in the 1950's and was carried out primarily by men; psychological functioning, studied during the 1960's to 1980's; social functioning which began in the 1970's in tandem with the advent of second wave feminism; life span development which began in the 1980's and continues today; and clinical intervention. Rather than focusing on clinical issues that separate lesbians from their heterosexual counterparts (as did the studies of the 1960s and 1970s) research of the 1980's and 1990's has examined intervention from the standpoint of assessment, specific therapeutic issues and ethics. The current focus has changed from one of pathology to one of fostering healthy psychological lives for lesbians living an alternative lifestyle (Tully, 1995, Morrow, 2001).

Golombok et al (2003) performed a community research study on children with lesbian parents. Golombok et al's study included parental measures of parent-child relationships, children's socio-emotional development and parent's psychological state; child measures of conflict, supervision, play and partner-child relationships; as well as teacher reports on child behaviour. Their findings align very closely to earlier investigations showing positive mother-child relationships and well-adjusted children:

No significant differences were identified between lesbian mothers and heterosexual mothers for most of the parenting variables, although lesbian mothers reported smacking their children less and engaged more frequently in imaginative and domestic play with their children than

did heterosexual mothers. Regarding the children, a child psychologist who was unaware of family type or by mothers or teachers using the SDQ² identified no significant differences in psychiatric disorders. Although there was a non-significant trend toward greater peer problems among children in lesbian mother families as rated by mothers on the SDQ, the children themselves did not report greater problems with peers. With respect to gender development, there were no differences in gender-typed behaviour between the children of lesbian parents and the children of heterosexual parents for either boys or girls. (p. 16).

In a study done on lesbian families who adopted children internationally, Bennett (2003) found that 12 of the 15 couples studied agreed that their child demonstrated a preferential bond to one of the mothers during the first 18 months post-adoption, despite the finding that the couples shared parenting and reported an egalitarian division of labour. In the families where there was a clear agreement that the child chose one parent for a primary bond, the behavioural indicators of primary attachment were typical of those reported by previous researchers on the topic of attachment. The parents were able to recall a time when the child primarily preferred one parent for comfort when frightened, hurt, stressed, and sad or asked for a parent in the middle of the night. A number of the mothers admitted they felt some hurt or jealousy when they realized they were not the preferred parent.

Bennett refers to one variable that she connoted as “consistently important to the establishment of a primary bond—the quality of the caregiving, influenced by the preferred mother’s personality and the parenting she received as a child” (p. 170). Also, among the women Bennett studied “personal parental views about what it means to be a woman and perform as ‘mother’ seemed influential in the family dynamics and may have contributed to the establishment of a attachment hierarchy (p. 170).

McNair, Dempsey, Wise and Perlesz, in their 2002 study of lesbian parents, state that their review of the relevant literature suggested, “that community support for families,

² SDQ: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: Goodman, R., 1994, 1997.

including access to support, health and welfare services, is predictive of family functioning”

(p. 46). McNair et al found:

The major strength identified by lesbian-led families was their pride in successfully raising well-adjusted, happy children despite the constraints and challenges of living within what they considered to be a homophobic society. Participants identified a variety of strengths and described their families as: thoughtfully planned, tolerant and accepting of diversity, having flexible gender roles, and having interesting, supportive, extended kinship networks that included a wide range of positive role models for children (p. 47).

The Canadian Salute to Lesbian Families

The Canadian *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* presented as their second publication, an entire journal devoted to “Lesbian Mothering” (Winter, 1999). Among the articles are “Lesbian Second Mothering” (Dundas), “Lesbian Non-biological Mothering: Negotiating an (Un)familiar Existence” (Comeau), “Imag(in)ing the Queer Lesbian Family” (Gabb), and “Queer Maternity” (Chandler). Beginning with Dundas (1999), her article is a personal reflection as both a biological and non-biological parent in a lesbian family. Dundas rounds out her social location by stating that she is a child and infant psychiatrist and has been with her partner for 14 years. Dundas focuses on the challenges she experiences in the ‘non-biological parent’ role, stating that she “had no references or mirrors to view” her reflection, and her “sense of separateness and confusion” about her “role” in her son’s life from the very beginning (p. 37). Dundas discusses how her role as a the non-biological parent lacked descriptors, and the shared awkwardness felt by her and her partner facilitated their resignation to people’s assumptions rather than flaying with inadequate language to correct them. Even though Dundas and her partner shared the pregnancy, she noted the primary attachment to the biological mother was clear from the outset, leaving Dundas often feeling more like an “observer than a participant” (p. 38).

Comeau (1999) looks at lesbian non-biological mother by beginning with a historical perspective of lesbian motherhood coming into visibility in the early 1970's as a result of lesbian mother's fight for custody of children conceived in prior heterosexual unions.

Comeau states that most of the research on lesbian motherhood is focused on shifting the current patriarchal order and neglects to cast adequate 'gaze' upon the role and identity of the non-biological mother. The few extant studies inclusive of the non-biological mother's perspective lack a race and class analysis, focusing on white, middle-class, educated lesbians (Comeau, 1999). Comeau poses two research questions "how does the non-biological co-mother in a lesbian family develop and build a solid foundation from which to negotiate her role in the public realm?" and "How does her role shift when she returns home to the private sphere?" Among Comeau's significant research findings are:

No matter how strong the presence of the non-biological parent in the lesbian family, it is she who bears the brunt of invisibility. It is she who disappears; it is she who is disenfranchised. This lack of recognition and language to describe a lesbian family can permeate and damage the relationship between the parents. The rules of hetero-patriarchy are embedded even in the minds of lesbians who choose to parent equally together. (p. 46).

Gabb (1999) begins by stating "motherhood and lesbian sexuality are antithetical to each other within Western culture" (p. 9). Gabb asserts that a consequence of this dichotomy is that lesbian parents are "constantly denied any fixity of identity; always *being* in a state of flux and caught in a continual state of *becoming*. Gabb cites how difficult it is to counter the notion that 'blood is thicker than water' in a society that is still based upon biological family inheritance, thus negating the quality of 'choice' in lesbian family constellations. Gabb confirms the often stated obvious, that living outside the biologically determined paradigm often relegates lesbian families to social exclusion but also one of "linguistic absence" (p. 12). The 'unnatural' status of lesbian mothers—the disruption of the reproductive narrative—is what poses a threat to heterosexual society (Gabb, 1999).

Chandler (2001) begins with 'a brief introduction to the problem' as she sees it:

It is, in part, through a repudiation of the maternal within the self, forced by a paternal despotism which permeates our civilization and reproduces itself within and throughout dominant familial structures that maternal forms of selfhood continue to be degraded, mocked and reviled. The liberation of women has meant the near-complete eradication of the maternal. Daughters have donned the symbolic penis and joined the brotherhood. Although the call to separate an impetus to domination from masculinity has gained a certain popular appeal, a much larger social transformation has seen femininity embrace the ethics of domination. It is my belief that we are witnessing a silent spreading of the subjugation, repudiation, longing for and desiring of the maternal (p. 21).

Nelson's (1996) study is based on over thirty interviews with lesbian mothers in Alberta, Canada. "Lesbian women in lesbian relationships will never accidentally find themselves pregnant. They have to make the choice" (Nelson, 1996, p. 133). In blended lesbian families, the "second woman is sometimes a type of step-parent, but she is rarely allowed, by either her partner or her partner's children, to be any type of 'mother'" (Nelson, 1996, p. 134). There is no name for the role she plays. In Nelson's study, each woman had to struggle to find a place and a role for herself within the blended family.

The women fall into two distinct groups, those who are raising children who had been conceived in prior heterosexual relationships and those raising children who had been conceived within lesbian relationships. Nelson finds that their experiences are strikingly different. In focusing on the former group of Nelson's study, she notes that lesbian mothers in this group are in simultaneous, though different processes. "The biological mothers were discovering the *lesbian* aspect of lesbian motherhood, whereas the previously childless women were discovering the *motherhood* aspect of it" (p. 65). The women in Nelson's study (in this particular group) believed that they would face at least some of the same challenges as those in blended heterosexual families, they also experienced obstacles that only lesbian women faced in the blended-family context; primarily the "absence of an accepted set of labels for key activities and roles"(p. 66). Nelson revealed that 'step-mother' did not

accurately describe lesbian partners of lesbian mothers, nor did 'step-family' accurately describe their family configuration. While Nelson acknowledges this, in the absence of a more apt title, she refers to these women as 'step-mothers'. Nelson describes some of the experiences of the non-biological mothers:

They were very aware of the danger of allowing themselves to become emotionally involved with children with whom they might lose all contact if the relationship between the two women ended (p. 67).

Nelson described the biological mothers as cautious, often unwilling to ask a woman to play a major role in their children's lives if they believed there was a chance the relationship would dissolve after the children formed attachments to the newcomer (p. 67).

Among the step parenting issues that Nelson (1996) addresses was the fact that all the women stated that at least some of the issues they had to deal with would have been the same if they had been in a heterosexual relationship. Though, one area that often generated an unexpected amount of disagreement between partners was that of "parenting styles and priorities" (p. 70):

Women who were already mothers had an established style of mothering that, of course, no other woman could match exactly. Those who were new to mothering were sometimes surprised to find that they also had strong ideas about mothering and did not always agree with what their partners did. Women who had not previously been involved with children were frequently surprised, even distraught, at the central role that the children played in their mother's lives (p. 70).

Nelson (1996) found that "many of the previously childless women had accepted the idea of parenthood, but were shocked when faced with the multitude of tasks that parenting involves" (p. 71). Additionally, Nelson found that as difficult as it was for the newcomers to 'rock the boat', by commenting on the biological mother's parenting if they viewed it as problematic, it was also difficult for the mothers to know that someone was watching them critically.

Nelson (1996) found that in most families “the biological mother retained primary authority over her children and had the final decision-making power” (p. 72). “It was thus necessary for the second adult to figure out where and how they could fit into the family” (p. 73). Some of the women in Nelson’s study found it very difficult to “relinquish authority over their children to another person who would handle critical situations differently than they would themselves” (p. 73). “The children themselves often firmly resisted the authority of the newcomer, and although their resistance generally abated over time, sometimes it did not” (p. 73). One of the factors that Nelson speculated to contribute to this, is that some of the mother’s had previously been single mothers, and the children were reluctant to ‘share’ their mothers with anyone. Nelson found the biological mother “could easily feel caught in the middle, as she tried to juggle everyone’s emotional needs” (p. 74). Biological mothers, especially those in relationships with childless women, “often felt overwhelmed by everyone’s demands on their time and energy” (p. 74). The co-parents in Nelson’s study were often surprised “by the lack of privacy in a household populated by children” (p. 76).

Lewin’s (1993) landmark study of lesbian mothers found similarities between lesbian and heterosexual single mothers. Lewin states that those similarities are born from the cultural imperative of motherhood that has little to do with sexual preference. Lewin overlooks the experience of co-parents in favour of the experience of birth mothers. Lewin amply demonstrates the correspondences and distinctions between straight and lesbian mothers, and illustrates how motherhood is a strategy that simultaneously delimits, expands and constrains. Both lesbian and single heterosexual women used motherhood as the overarching social category in their lives. Lewin found that both groups share similar feelings about ‘motherhood’ and celebrate this status. Lewin demonstrates that identities of both

lesbian and straight mothers permeate their lives by validating and defining their sense of self (Parezo & Robbins, 1999).

Lewin (1993) states that “being a mother eclipses and overshadows all other roles” (p. 111). Being a mother seems to release some lesbians from pressures to be a lesbian in that ‘correct’ way. “Other mothers locate the centrality of motherhood in the sheer quantity of obligations that having a child imposes on one’s life” (p. 112) and “the meaning of motherhood in the sheer intensity of feelings that exist between the mother and child” (p. 113).

Lewin (1993) posits that having a child anchors one socially, puts one in a world in a way that creates meaningful connections and that reinforces and is reinforced by continuity with other kin. Lewin states:

The paradox here is that children are the source of considerable difficulty and hardship at the same time that their ability to generate feelings of intimacy and links to the ineffable constitute the apparent solution to the very problems they generate (p. 114).

Wright (1998) wrote about lesbian step-families, a constellation that fits best with this research. She states that within lesbian step families, there is a mother and an ‘unmother’, blurring the duality and challenging the Western European concept of paternal ownership of children. In some manner, possession is seen to precede and predicate the kind of unconditional love which child development experts have deemed necessary for the development of self-esteem. Lesbian families challenge the myth of exclusivity in motherhood. Wright states that embedded in the definitions of possession are two key concepts: one is the idea of having power over something—to have as property, to hold or to occupy, to have belonging to one. This control over one’s children has been a crucial factor in the patriarchal nuclear family. In a world where many women feel powerless, this concept of possession of (power and control) of children is difficult to relinquish. Wright asserts that

within the lesbian step family, in order to share mothering, the biological mother must also share her 'mother power' with the step mother. The second, different meaning of possession may illuminate how this can be done. Possession means also 'to have knowledge of, to familiarize'. As the step mother becomes more intimately familiar with the child, the biological mother may also become able or willing to share mothering.

Wright (1998) suggests we redefine power to move from dominance to effective interaction. She clarifies:

We have power with specific children (or people) because of our ability to interact effectively with them, based on our knowledge of them, or familiarity with them. Thus, possession of a child becomes reliant on one's commitment to spend consistent time with the child and one's quality of interactions and caretaking abilities. As an adult takes more responsibility with the child, she/he also gains more power with the child (p. 6).

Wright states because the step mother is an 'outsider', integrating her into a pre-existing family unit, she may also offer the child and biological mother her outsider perspective on the child's needs and challenges; if this perspective is offered with a 'loving gaze', it can contribute to the child's well-being and growth. The outsider role is painful for the step mother especially. It creates "excruciating vulnerability" for the step mother:

Certainly the vulnerability of a step mother is intensified in a lesbian step family. In the first place, not only are the children there to question your authenticity as a parent, but the biological mother is right there with you, too—watching, feeling, approving or disapproving of your daily interactions with the child. (p. 115). She is unnamed—and therefore erased. Surely the job of lesbian step mother is not for the faint of heart (p. 116).

Wright (1998) found the tasks of integration of the step mother into the pre-existing family to be a long term project: taking six to seven years to complete. The necessary integration tasks include:

The biological mother making space for the step-mother, however, the family works out what that space will look like. In addition, the step mother must determine how to take the child or children into her life, and the children must do the same with the step mother. These tasks are on-going and overlapping. They do not necessarily proceed at the same rate. They do not necessarily lead to the same definition. This unevenness can create pain and misunderstanding, but it may also force growth (p. 116).

Wright (1998) cited that step mothers in her study developed several unique roles with their step children, which facilitated the bonding process. She found that the roles would be primarily based upon the “special strengths and characteristics of the step parent, the interests of the child, and/or the needs of the biological parent” (p. 122).

Wright (1998) in her study cites the work of McMahon (1995) who performed a study on Canadian mothers of small children, and found that “it was having the ultimate responsibility for a child that transformed women to mothers” (p. 127). “It is the feelings of responsibility for children, therefore, that also endow motherhood with much of its sacred character” (McMahon, 1995, p. 273). Wright then applies McMahon’s findings to the co-parent’s stance in her own research, stating:

The co-parent [is] a helper and supporter of and consultant to the biological mother, an active parent of the children (although this is contested at times) and a dedicated and committed family member. The co-parent takes more of a traditional fathering role in these families—providing for, protecting and playing with the children, and helping the mother with the daily routines and nurturing. The co-parent spends less time with the children than the biological mother” (p. 128).

Lesbian Parenting and Social Work

Developing an identity as a parent is not contingent upon one’s sexual orientation (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002), however, lesbian parents lack cultural capital in that our society is systemically heterosexist and patriarchal. This creates opportunities for social workers, whose professional ethics include meeting clients in their environments, to challenge the heteronormative paradigm and structures; to validate and provide hospitable space for lesbian families through culturally competent and ethical practice, particularly the lesbian co-parent rendered invisible and powerless by the lack of language or rituals to include her; and to contribute academically, thus widening the knowledge on this particular family constellation.

Social Work Practice

A very dated article by Hall (1978) makes a suggestion which remains currently relevant and valid: "effective social work with lesbian couples and families must include cultural as well as clinical work" (p. 380). In a more current and relevant study of lesbian step-families by Hall & Kitson (2002), they make several recommendations for social work practice including integrating the co-parent slowly and from a strength-based perspective, building upon her successes; nurturing the co-parent-child relationship; assisting in working contextually with wider systems than just the family, including extended family, community and society; working to widen the definitions of family; not treating lesbian families homogeneously; and understanding that the lesbian co-parent is among the most marginalized people in society, who must be given adequate space and encouragement to validate, problem solve with and eventually empower.

Social Work Theory & Knowledge

Van Voorhis & Wagner (2002) conducted content analysis on four major social work publications in the US (*Child Welfare*, *Families in Society*, *Social Work & Social Work Review*). Their analysis spanned a ten year period (1988-1997). Articles were selected if they addressed the subject's sexual orientation, homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexuality or homosexual people with AIDS. The review found 77 articles that addressed homosexuality which represented 3.92 percent of the 1964 articles published during the decade of the study. Ninety percent of the articles on homosexuality were published in two journals: *Social Work* and *Families in Society*. Less than 35 percent of the total articles addressed aspects of practice with lesbian and gay clients other than HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, more than half of the articles that addressed HIV/AIDS were published in four special issues of *Social Work*

and *Families in Society* that dealt either exclusively or primarily with HIV/AIDS. The number of articles on gay men with AIDS masks the paucity of articles on other aspects of gay and lesbian life.

The articles in Van Voorhis & Wagner's study (2002) "overwhelmingly focused on individual intervention to help homosexual clients adapt to their heterosexist environments" or "addressed deficits in social workers to help practitioners become sensitive in their work with lesbian and gay clients" (p. 351). As Van Voorhis & Wagner point out, there are benefits to increasing social workers sensitivity and assisting gay clients in understanding themselves in their social contexts, there are only 'first steps' in addressing the heterosexism that permeates both US and Canadian culture. Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) note "although thousands of clients that receive social work services each year are homosexual, the silence in these journals preserves the pretence that such clients do not exist or do not matter" (p. 353).

Social Work Research

Hall & Kitson (2002) also make insightful commentary on academic researchers. They suggest that researchers must confront their assumptions that lesbians families are monolithic as this obscures the rich diversity to be found in this group; research must consider the how other forms of oppression and privilege interconnect with sexual orientation, for example how would race and class impact a lesbian co-parent in an bi-racial, bi-working class family, to this end, they suggest:

That researchers design studies that enable the examination of lesbian families of various races, ethnicities, and social classes so that the diversity of the population can be analyzed and understood (p. 43).

Social Work Policy

Policy struggles over the meaning of family and attacks on lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered (LGBT) communities and civil rights have gone hand in hand (Lind, 2004). Institutionalized heterosexuality is central to some of the key motivations behind the designs of public policy frameworks in the United States (p. 23), and similarly in Canada as LGBT and queer families are still regarded as deviant or abnormal. Heterosexist biases in social welfare policy frameworks exist in at least three ways: through policies that explicitly target LGBT individuals as abnormal or deviant, such as policies that defend the institution of heterosexual marriage; through federal definitions that assume all families are heterosexual, thereby implicitly leaving out LGBT individuals and families; and through policies that overlook LGBT poverty and social needs due to stereotyping about LGBT communities being affluent HINKS (High Income, No KidS) or DINKS (Double Income, No KidS). These stereotypes tend to reproduce the invisibility of LGB families in social welfare policy and in research on poverty; they also completely overlook the experiences of transgendered individuals. Lesbian, gay and bisexual often remain invisible in studies on poverty because they are viewed as 'family-less' (Lind, 2004, p. 29). There is a need to re-envision the notion of social welfare itself; central to social welfare policy frameworks is a heterosexist understanding of families, individuals and citizenship. Rather than being a natural, essential aspect of our society, "the institution of heterosexuality is socially constructed and has been produced through these very policies and laws that establish hierarchies and power relations in our society" (p. 32).

Summary

While the research on lesbian families is growing, what exists continues to be 'problem-saturated', often based upon antiquated notions of 'pathology' or 'abnormalacy' and does not consider the unique position of the lesbian co-parent, nor her experience of negotiating parenting within micro and/or macro systems. The issue of 'lack of language' is a convincing one, as the bounds of language contain primarily the standards of heterosexuality and patriarchy. Lesbians in relationships with mothers have real challenges in not only naming their role, but in negotiating a role that is traditionally held by men. There are many barriers to meaningful communication in lesbian families, including the lack of rituals—though this is changing in the present Canadian political climate with the ratification of gay marriages in some provinces. The lack of societal role models for lesbian families creates gaps and silences in everyday communications for partners, but also for the children who lack words to describe their mother's partner and models for how to interact with them. While there is a comparative paucity of research on lesbian families, there is even less in Canadian literature that is specific to the field of social work. Future research endeavours ought to include Canadian experiences, especially in the changing political climate and evolving social systems. The International field of social work is slowly beginning to change in the areas of practice, theory, research and policy with regard to lesbian families, as the notions of patriarchy and heteronormativity continue to be challenged. It would be an interesting opportunity for Canadians, given the recent laws sanctioning same-sex marriages in some provinces, to be on the forefront of continuing research on this important topic, thus legitimizing and making visible important members of the diverse Canadian landscape.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

As the aim of this study is to increase understanding and/or knowledge that may assist in making change in social work practice and to lessen the oppression and marginalization of women in intimate relationships with mothers, it required a certain level of understanding and is expressly why I chose the method of phenomenology; a potent vehicle to voice the authentic, unique and valid experiences of the co-researchers. The co-researchers speak to their circumstances as the experts; I am merely an instrument through which their stories can be made visible. It is my belief that their words are powerful enough to evoke deep understanding.

Co-Researchers

In order to create an atmosphere of equality, the women who participated in this research were considered and referred to as co-researcher throughout. In keeping with post-modern feminist ideals, I approached the research with the intention that the women were the keepers of their own stories, knowledge and experience based on the presumption that they are the experts in my field of study.

Four co-researchers participated in this study. I will introduce the women and their families through pseudonyms.

Table 1: Co-Researchers and their families

| Co-Researcher | Birth Mother | Child(ren) & Age | Child & Age | Child & Age |
|---------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Marie | Devi | Seth- Teenager | | |
| E | Wyca | 4 Grown daughters | | |
| Oshun | Liberty | Luke 7 | Lila 3 | |
| Nuna | Lamia | Caleb Twin-10 | Jacob Twin-10 | Ruth- Teenager |

Marie is a professional woman in the human service field who spoke about a past relationship with Devi that lasted more than a decade. Marie talked about Devi and Devi's son Seth. Marie met Devi when Seth was in his last year of high school.

E is a professional woman in the service industry who spoke about her current relationship with Wyca and Wyca's four grown daughters. One of Wyca's daughters lived with her and E for a brief time, before going away to college, but the others were grown and gone when they moved in together.

Oshun spoke primarily about her current relationship with her partner Liberty and her children; Luke and Lila. Oshun's profession is unknown to me and she is the only co-researcher that was unknown to me prior to this research. Oshun also spoke briefly about a past long-term relationship with a woman who had two young children and two teenagers.

Nuna spoke about a past relationship with Lamia and her children Caleb, Jacob and Ruth. Caleb and Jacob turned 8 the year Nuna moved in, while Ruth was entering her early teenage years. Nuna has had several different careers throughout her lifetime; currently she is writing for newspapers.

As a group, these women referred to as co-researchers are anonymous to each other. Identifying characteristics and family configurations have been altered appropriately to protect anonymity. It was made clear to the co-researchers prior to the interviews that although every measure would be taken to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, neither could be guaranteed, and that they had the option to preview what was written about them in order to remove any information that they did not wish to have shared.

Recruitment

I chose to sample among the rural lesbian community of which I am a member. The co-researchers were recruited through snow ball sampling, also known as third party inquiry.

Through the recruitment technique of snowball sampling; women known to the researcher were asked to identify potential participants based on their knowledge of their eligibility. The participants were chosen to meet the following criteria: the women must be over 19 and capable of giving informed consent. They must also be childless lesbian women who are or have been in relationships with partners who have biological children. Another criteria to be met was that the women participating would be willing to discuss their intimate relationships with their partners and their partner's children. Lesbian's who have biological children were not included in the study.

The women I interviewed contacted me with interest after a third party told them of my research. I obtained informed consent prior to beginning of each first interview. The co-researchers were given more than 24 hours to decide if they chose to participate, in order for their decision to be based on careful thought, rather than impulse.

Theory

My feminist theoretical and phenomenological orientations inform and guide my everyday experience of the world, so too, did they inform my research study. As a post-modernist feminist I believe there are many interpretations of the 'truth'. Specifically, I resonate with feminist standpoint theory which emphasizes the need to focus on women's experiences in everyday life as it is familiar to them; those experiences which are constantly shaped, created and re-created by women (Madriz, 2003, p. 369). Swigonski (1993) defines

‘standpoint’ as a social location—a particular social position from which each of us views our own experiences (p. 172).

Post-modernist feminist theory is central to my understanding of the world; I filter every experience through this lens in a critical way. Australian scholar Dale Spender is quoted by Shulamit Reinharz in her seminal text *Feminist Methods in Social Research* as saying:

At the core of feminist ideas is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, and no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge. Feminist knowledge is based on the premise that the experience of all human beings is valid and must not be excluded from our understandings” (1992, p7).

The belief that all experience is valid is the basis for both my choice of feminist theory and the methodology of phenomenology.

Feminist phenomenological interviewing requires interviewer skills of restraint and listening as well as interviewees who are verbal and reflective (Reinharz, 1992). Each of the co-researchers was skillful at clearly articulating the experiences of their everyday life. Additionally, the co-researchers were also able to give clear indication of their internal and emotional experiences in a way that will allow readers to gain a deeper understanding, and potentially experience the data in an elemental way.

Feminist researchers who interview women frequently discuss topics that are not part of typical public or academic discourse and therefore ‘have no name’ (Reinharz, 1992p. 23). No language exists for the particular family constellation that was being investigated.

I chose to use phenomenology as a method of inquiry because of my resonance with the assertions of Garko (1999) that phenomenology is compatible with post-modernist feminist theory because it is conducive to investigating unexplored and misinterpreted experiences such as that of lesbians in relationship with mothers. The methods of

phenomenology compel a respectful attunement of the researcher to listen naively, openly and reverently to the participant, bracketing their own biases and assumptions. The researcher and the researched are dialogical collaborators who are intersubjectively and dialectically linked. In phenomenological inquiry, the researched become co-researchers to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at a collaborative understanding of the essences of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The task of the researcher is to let the world of the describer (the co-researcher) reveal itself through their description (Garko, 1999).

Ontologically, I believe that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions are meaningful aspects of the social reality. To generate this situated knowledge, the unique and everyday experiences of lesbians in relationships with mothers, our discussions focused on lived experiences rather than on scenarios or hypothetical situations (Mason, 2002).

Procedure

Each co-researcher was interviewed by me for at least one hour. In retrospect I am grateful as I believe that individual interviewing offered the opportunity for us to be fully co-present; for the women and I to build intimate conversational partnerships. Some interviews lasted as long as two hours, depending on the co-researchers interests and needs for debriefing their experience with telling their stories. The interviews were loosely structured using a guide which was shown to each co-researcher at the beginning of the interview. The interview guide is attached as Appendix I. All individual interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by myself with consent from the co-researchers. Second interviews were recorded by tape or note-taking with informed verbal consent of the co-researcher. Individual

interviews allowed for acquiring in-depth information in a safe and private environment of the woman's choosing. After each co-researcher was encouraged to read the draft of their transcripts, there were given the opportunity for a second interview to clarify data, make corrections or for general discussion with regard to the experience; 2 of the women were reinterviewed.

Interviewing is consistent with women's interest in avoiding control over others and developing a sense of connectedness with other people. Specifically, I used a phenomenological interviewing style, which Reinharz (1992) explains as an interviewee-guided investigation of a lived experience that asks almost no prepared questions. The purpose of the second interviews was to clarify and validate data from the initial interviews and took place within two to four months of the first interview. All initial interviews were conducted in the participant's homes, with one exception; Nuna preferred an outdoor café as a venue for both the first and second interview. The second interview with Nuna was 2 hours in length. The second interview with Oshun and Liberty took place at a public park, was one and a half hours in length, tape recorded and transcribed.

The interviews were conducted in a manner that invites what Reinharz (1992) refers to as "true dialogue" rather than an "interrogation". As "true dialogue" implies reciprocity and equanimity, I used self-disclosure where appropriate, welcoming the participants to become "co-researchers" (p.33).

Reliability, Credibility and Validity

Reliability of the research was member checked by the co-researchers who offered feedback with regard to accuracy in transcription and analysis. Each co-researcher was provided with a copy of the transcription of their initial interview and a copy of the results

chapter. Each co-researcher was given the opportunity to review, clarify and edit their own transcripts. Two of the co-researchers actively engaged in review of the results chapter. In fact Nuna engaged in a two hour second interview where she detailed corrections for the transcription, clarified the portions of the transcription that were unclear, raised concerns that emerged from her reading of the results chapter and responded to the questions raised by me in the letter that accompanied the results chapter.

Women were considered the experts of their own experiences, therefore and in accordance with a post-modern feminist standpoint theoretical perspective, their reports were accepted as credible.

Validity in qualitative research is intrinsically based on my belief in subjective and multiple realities. Additionally, marginalized groups—such as the co-researchers in this study—have epistemic privilege: a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their experience than people who are non-members of this group (Narayan, 1988, Mason, 2003). Another criterion of validity is the co-researchers ability to ‘recognize’ themselves in the research (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). The two co-researchers who engaged in the review of their own transcripts and the results chapter confirmed that they did recognize themselves in the research.

Each co-researcher’s clarifications of their transcripts and the results chapter were included to increase the accuracy to present a more clear and full experience. Co-researchers were also made aware that they could receive a copy of the final report upon request.

Data Analysis

The analysis began with the first interview in my thinking in terms of emergent themes for each woman and the group as a whole. I also approached each interview with curiosity and consistently thought about both the data and the process of analyzing it. Analysis emerges as suggested by Kirby & McKenna (1989) from the information at hand through this reflexive approach. The other dynamic was created by moving back and forth between data and concepts, and between individual ideas and research explanations in order to fully describe and explain the data. I analyzed each co-researchers data independently, and I searched for echoes within the data as a whole.

I made notes upon the completion of each interview, in order to crystallize the essence of each interview process, content and my own internal experience. I kept a research diary where I recorded thoughts as they arose, whether that was during work on the project, or work that was otherwise unrelated, in an effort to keep the analysis of the data on-going, reflexive and prominent.

Each co-researcher's data was analyzed in the same way; by pulling significant pieces of the text out and categorizing the material. Material was considered significant when it illustrated the co-researchers lived experiences of parenting and those that illuminated their internal experience and meaning-making of their world. Loose categories emerged, and the co-researcher's own words were used as themes to the greatest extent possible.

My first step in coding the data was to re-read the transcripts in their entirety. Then, I printed the transcripts on the left half of the page, and on the right pulled out what I interpreted as salient quotes; words or phrases that either provided me with evidence of themes or were clear illustrations of the co-researchers meaning-making. I could often

confirm this by their use of body language and speech qualifiers; words like “totally”, “absolutely”, “yes” and “um hmm”. I also chose examples of their experiences to highlight the essence of their realities.

I decided to transcribe each utterance of the interviews, with all the ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ and pauses. This allowed me to infer themes, speculate hypotheses and puzzle upon where women hesitated, and where they spoke with authority, where they may have been unclear about my meaning, and vice versa.

Though the co-researchers experiences were unique and individual, themes did emerge from the data. In order to decipher themes in phenomenological terms, I followed the suggestions for phenomenological analysis of the data suggested by Moustakas (1994) that includes *horizontalizing* the data; regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value. Horizontalization illustrates the importance of being receptive to every statement of the co-researcher’s experience, which encouraged a rhythmical flow between the co-researcher and myself, and thus inspired comprehensive disclosure of their experiences.

Ethics

Voluntary participation was ensured through the use of snowball sampling. Women were given letters of initial contact that outlined the research sufficiently for them to freely make a decision whether to participate or not. The women contacted the researcher if they chose to participate. It was made clear to the potential participants that if they chose not to become co-researchers, it would in no way impact their relationship with the woman who introduced them to the research, or with myself if I was known to them.

The co-researchers were offered up to twenty-five dollars (\$25) reimbursement for travel and/or child care if required, otherwise, no one benefited financially from this study. Reimbursement for travel and childcare was thought to ensure that participation in this study would not cause any financial hardship, however, no co-researchers required this reimbursement. Money was not offered outright to co-researchers to avoid being misconstrued as coercion.

The data was stored in a locked filing cabinet and all computer files were password protected. All co-researchers signed an informed consent document at the outset agreeing to participate in the research.

Only myself and my faculty advisor Dr. Mary Russell had access to all data. Upon completion, the audio tape(s), computer disc and hard copy of interview transcripts and field notes will be stored apart from identifying information for a minimum of 5 years at a UBC locked facility. No tangible personal benefit will be received by the investigators involved in this project.

Every attempt has been made to ensure the co-researcher's privacy, including the use of pseudonyms for the co-researchers and their families, changing of identifying characteristics of people or family configurations, disguising or generalizing the co-researchers occupation and or status, and member-checking with each co-researcher for any detail that they believed might identify themselves or their families. Special care was taken to ensure that no child/ren could be identified through the reading of this project.

In debriefing the research process with these women, they expressed benefit in discussing their experiences in a therapeutic atmosphere of compassion, support and philanthropic curiosity. The co-researchers commented on their desire to see a 'greater good'

as an end result of their sharing and expressed their interest in the project completion and outcomes.

As this project was potentially sensitive in nature procedural consent was employed. If the participant appeared to become distressed by the interview, then the process was temporarily halted to ensure that the participant was comfortable with continuing. In the interview with Marie, I chose to turn off the tape recorder at one point when Marie became visibly and audibly upset. Marie was afforded the space to explore her feelings at her own pace, and then she invited me to turn the tape recorder back on when she was ready. The co-researchers were reminded that they could discontinue the interview at any point, and were repeatedly invited to discuss only what they felt comfortable with sharing in a public forum. Two of the interviews were laden with evident emotionality. The interview with Marie and the second interview of Nuna saw both co-researchers in tears and visibly shaken through the discussion of their experiences. In both cases, I reiterated procedural consent, in fact, invited both co-researchers to consider carefully if they wanted to continue.

Reflexivity

I approached this research project as I approach my counselling practice: that I am the instrument through which I process, perform, experience and understand the world. This research is founded in my own perceptions and interpretations of the world, which I work consistently at questioning through the process of reflexivity. Through the process of both my own reflexivity and making arguments evocatively and reflexively, my intent is to show both a wide range of experiences and voices as valid, and to evoke emotionality in the reader through meaningful illustrations. I held myself accountable to my own critique, as well as invited the critique of the co-researchers throughout the life of the project.

Mason (2002) does an eloquent job in explaining reflexive and interpretive readings of research data, both of which are positions I took in this research. She states that reflexive readings locate the researcher as part of the data generated by the co-researchers, and supports researchers seeking to explore their roles and perspective in the process of generation and interpretation of the data. As such, I involved the co-researchers in co-constructing a version of what they thought the data meant or represented, or possibly what might be inferred by the data in the dialectical process of co-researcher's checking of transcripts and chapter drafts.

My aim was to be somewhat dislocated from the data during the interview process, in keeping with phenomenological inquiry that begs me to bracket my own experiences, as much as I could and still be fully present for the co-researchers dialectically. Hence, this dislocation provided me with opportunities to be reflexive and thus revealed a myriad of possibilities to examine, while being interpretive helped me to understand the context of the women's experiences, especially during second interviews when the co-researchers were clarifying the chapters and I was able to use my own meaning-makings as a measure of their perspectives.

I feel that I have changed in many ways as a result of this project. Initially, I was aware of a major bias that I held. My primary identity is that of 'mother', and I entered this research with the assumption that lesbian partners of mothers would want to share the title of 'mother' or 'co-mother'. When I discovered this not to be the case, I had to then be incredibly reflexive otherwise there was a danger that I'd become reactive.

I worked through the interviews and analysis of the data reflexively by keeping an active research diary. The process of reflection and questioning my own biases consistently

was a spiritual and personal growth experience for me as a person, professional and researcher. As a member of the lesbian community, I felt a special affinity to the position of other members in this rural community. I was both liberal and yet cautious with self-disclosure. My disclosures were almost entirely presented as a demonstration of my own meaning-making and an invitation for the co-researcher to share her own. I began this research as a fairly active member of the community, but found as the research progressed, that it became ethically impossible for me to continue participating socially with women whose lives I was examining. My profession is as a counsellor, and so much of my way of being demonstrates my vocation. It felt like a boundary crossing to participate socially with women whom I now held inordinate amounts of intimate details of their lives and the lives of the partners. I became concerned that this knowledge would create unease in social settings for both the co-researchers and myself. I found that I began to treat the co-researchers somewhat like clients in that I kept an arms length other than meetings around the project. This may have actually backfired, as women may have interpreted my withdrawal as some form of judgment. In actuality, I'm incredibly cognizant of my role as 'keeper of the stories' of the co-researchers lives. I found that this reverence that I believed the information deserved took energy and effort on my part to contain safely. The awe that I continue to feel towards these women for trusting me with such intimate details and their privacy is astounding.

Summary

Post-modern feminist theory and a phenomenological method of qualitative inquiry are among the most cogent and tangible ways to conduct ethical and reflexive research with the goal of inviting and elucidating the genuine experiences of a marginalized population—such as lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers—thus creating space for their authentic voices.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The results of this study illustrate many negotiation processes that lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers engage in the everyday living experience of parenting: within the family, with mothers and their children, and also with larger society. The results include both the explicit and implicit negotiations that happened within the context of daily family life in a diverse family constellation. There are apt to be similar issues and concerns for any kind of 'blended family', but when looking at lesbians who enter intimate relationships with lesbians who have children, unique negotiations become apparent. 'Negotiating Parenting' was revealed as the meta-theme of the research; the themes that emerged within this rubric were negotiating with the mother, negotiating with the child/ren, and negotiating with society. Under the theme *Negotiating with the Mother* are the sub-themes of *The Primacy of the Mother*, *Problematizing Parenting* and *Working Together*. Within the theme of *Negotiating with the Child/ren* are the sub-themes *Invitations to Bond*, *Naming the Role of the Co-Parent* and *Experiencing the Joys and Pains of Parenting*. The theme of *Negotiating with Society* indicates the women's experience of understanding their locations within larger systems and the sub-theme of *Seeking Visibility and Legitimacy*.

Negotiating Parenting

The meta-theme of 'Negotiating Parenting' illustrates the central focus for this research, around which the other themes emerge. Lesbian women in intimate relationships with mothers were asked to discuss the quality of their lived experiences within the context of their families and to reflect upon the meaning-making that emerged for them as a result of

these experiences. For example, Nuna explained her meaning-making for 'parenting' in a way that did not apply gender prescriptions, stating:

When we think of mothering, we think of a more nurturing kind of role, whereas parenting in general, I think both parents need to adapt to both roles, whether its disciplinarian or nurturing, whether its providing for the needs of the children, all those needs need to be met by both parents and then the children develop more roundly.

In descending order, the experiences that related to negotiating parenting with the mother, with the children and finally with society were among those most cogent to the women.

Negotiating with the Mother

The types of negotiations that occurred with the mothers were around the primacy of the mother, co-parenting, and working together. The quality of these negotiations ranged from positive to negative as described by the co-researchers.

The Primacy of the Birth Mother

Each of the co-researcher's intimate partners had birthed the children they were rearing together, and the term 'mother' was treated both formally and as the 'birth rite' of their partners. This was evident in the negotiations around roles the women played in terms of parenting, and also the universal notion of the primacy of the mother's position in the family. Oshun stated that Liberty was "definitely the mother...when major decisions are to be made, she is the one to make them". In the follow up interview with Oshun and Liberty, Oshun stated again "No, she's the mother", then clarified "I'm just a good friend of theirs. I'm not a step-mom. They have a mom". Liberty's opinion on the title of 'mother' was clear: "I'm very protective of that title". Oshun added "if they didn't have parents it would be different but they have parents".

E's background in the human service field gave her the context to be affable with Wyca's parenting style, "Well, parenting is obviously an art. I have very little frustrations

with Wyca's parenting skills, having worked with so many parents". However, E's response made it clear that in blended lesbian families, the mother should retain primary status:

I get insulted when I see people...in relationships with lesbians with children and they feel that automatically they have the authority and they have the intimacy because they're seeing the other person and taking away from those young adults their time to adapt and their time to want to have another adult person's input. It's insulting; a feeling of familiarity is rude.

As the relationship that Nuna discussed was largely based upon an abusive one, her negotiations with her partner were either negligible or non-productive, and demonstrate the mother's superior position as primary parent and vanguard in the family. For example, Nuna shared "she [Lamia] had absolutely no qualms about fighting and being abusive in front of the children", illustrating Lamia's power position and patent disregard for her children's best interests.

The negotiations with the mothers included subjects that were avoided and/or conscientiously traversed in order to avoid emotional landmines. These included navigating the day to day experience of parenting, but also extended to include complex relationship dynamics as they related to the children.

Both Marie and Nuna experienced their partners as jealous of the relationship they had with their partner's children. Marie said "it became an issue for Devi in terms of feeling jealous and her feeling on the outside as the years went on". Marie indicated that as the bond between her and Seth grew, particularly when Seth would show a preference for sharing information, problems and questions with Marie, Devi's feelings of isolation impacted Marie's relationship with Seth. Marie tried to have Devi see that it was a good thing that Seth confided in someone, which Devi could sometimes see as a "gift", however her perceptions caused her to feel ultimately threatened to the point where Marie believed that Devi forced Seth to choose between her and Devi, and thus Marie lost the deeply bonded relationship she

had with Seth: “he had to pull back, and so, and so I’ve lost relationship with him now”.

Marie explained “it’s unfortunate and that it is a power thing and that’s her insecurity and it’s unfortunate that he has to choose”.

Marie experienced Devi being jealous and threatened by Marie’s own parenting ability and subsequent emotional connection to Seth and Devi’s extended family, which has continued even after her relationship ended:

Some of our struggle now in terms of being split up and my connection to the family and she’s really threatened by that because she doesn’t believe there is enough love for everyone. She sees their connection, including Seth’s connection to me means that they don’t love her, they’re not choosing her, their not loving her enough.

Nuna interpreted the tension between herself and her partner as sometimes motivated by “jealousy” because of the insecurity Lamia may have about her own perceived parenting deficits: “It hurts them to see someone else giving to their children what they should have seen...they don’t like to be reminded where they’ve fallen short”.

Oshun consistently deferred to Liberty for authority. When asked if the family would like an ice-cream after the interview, Oshun stated “I didn’t say yes, just in case she said no!” Another example of Oshun’s deference to Liberty occurred when she relayed an instance of the children asking her a question that she felt was outside of the range of her authority, such as a sleepover: “you need to be talking to your mother about this”. Liberty described a scenario where negotiations were implicit and the primacy of the mother was completely apparent:

Lila referred to her [Oshun] the other day... we were camping and Lila goes ‘Mom’ and I said ‘What’ and she says ‘No, not you, the mom with the yellow shirt’. And Oshun was wearing a yellow shirt. And Oshun said to her ‘I’m Water-bug’ [because that’s what she calls her] and Lila goes ‘Okay, Water-bug’.

In a prior relationship with a mother, Oshun experienced tension around her inability to exert influence in the domain of parenting:

I had several, several, several arguments with her, on the fact that, if I'm supporting these kids, if I'm going to help raise them, if I'm going to help feed them, clothe them, whatever it is, then I should have a say.

Both Marie and Nuna experienced the primacy of the mother's position in the family, whereby their partners would 'pull rank' at opportune times, leaving Marie and Nuna feeling powerless and sometimes defeated. Marie stated "its pulling that trump card. 'I'm the biological mother.' So that is the power structure and I think that happens a lot when the relationship ends".

Nuna described her position in the family as ultimately powerless; "no she had the authority to yea or nay or anything. I just basically had the responsibility of maintaining all their needs and taking them to all their events". Nuna saw this as the mother being dominant; willing to share responsibility yet unwilling to share authority. "They like to give up the responsibility, they like to hand that over to someone else, but they're not willing to hand over any authority".

Like Marie, this was especially true for Nuna when her relationship with Lamia ended. Lamia used this power position extensively to perpetrate her abuse against Nuna after their relationship ended. Nuna became even more painfully aware just how powerless she was in terms of rights and access to the children. Nuna also used a 'card game' reference to describe her partner's power position as the biological mother: "it a stopper card, really". Nuna's perception of her rights was "You don't have any rights; legally, socially or otherwise". She continued "I didn't have any authority. I didn't have any rights. Whether perceived or otherwise".

Nuna reported that after their relationship ended, her ex-partner continued to use her authority in an abusive manner, rather than to parent appropriately. For example, Lamia

pulled the children out of their extra-curricular activities; “all of those things stopped when I left. All of them”.

E also indicated the primacy of the mother position; however, her experience was qualitatively different from the other co-researchers. For E, it seemed that she was protecting this position for the child by conscientiously subordinating herself to the mother. E’s stated “I would not take that dignity from any child to assume that I had that power position in the family”.

The Problematicization of Co-Parenting

In listening for echoes in the data, among the most commonly shared positions in the research was the contestation of the term ‘co-mother’ and the negotiation of roles in the co-researchers families. While all the co-researchers were involved with children in some capacity, naming their capacity was problematized by the primacy of the mother, the ambiguity of language and the uncertainty of their positions in wider society.

Each of the co-researchers was given an opportunity to respond to the ‘fit’ of ‘co-mother’ to their experience. All of them rejected it flatly; some focusing on the ‘mother’ meaning of the term, and some by the term ‘co-mother’. Both E and Oshun clarified “I’m not the mother” and “She is definitely the mother” respectively. E focused on the ambiguity of language and the effects of impositional labels upon her: “I would like the opportunity to be known first, and to label myself. I don’t like to be labelled”. Nuna stated “I still haven’t really thought of myself as a being a co-mother... co-parent, yes.”

E expounded upon her experience of language: “Emotional attachment doesn’t come in a label, it doesn’t come in a job description, it doesn’t come in a name: mother, daughter, father, son”, further, E viewed any language that sought to describe her role as a label, which

she rejected as "...that's people's need for comfort and known. It's not people's actual being". E was so clear, again from a more global perspective: "My biggest complaint about life is that we need labels so that when we're insecure, we can identify. I don't want to label."

Marie further problematized the label or role of 'mother' and 'co-mother', stating she "was not mothering him" when discussing her role in the family and responding from an emotional domain, indicating the importance of appropriate use of language. When asked specifically about the term 'co-mother', Marie was clear about her meaning-making of the word; "I have a reaction when one of them is called the co-mother [women who choose to inseminate]...that's outrageous! I would be...livid! While Marie was responding to the term co-mother in a family constellation that was outside her experience, she was also very clear about the term inside of her own experience "I was really puzzled by the title "co-mother", what does that mean...it's not my experience. That doesn't fit". When asked what Marie thought her role was, she was unclear about the label or role, but agreed with E in that she did not want a label to be imposed:

I would like the opportunity to be known first, and to label myself. I don't like to be labelled what does he call me? It certainly wasn't the father's role, absolutely not. I think the role just hasn't been defined.

Each woman made an effort to describe or illustrate their 'place' in the family dynamic. Each co-researcher shared the experience of co-parenting; however, their experiences spread a wide ranging continuum from 'primary care-giver' to 'friend of the family' to plainly ineffective. Oshun defined herself as 'a good friend of the family' in her current relationship with Liberty. When asked if she participated in parenting roles such as tucking in, bath time and reading time with the children, she exclaimed, "oh the reading time! All that". However, Oshun made a clear distinction with corporal discipline, stating "I draw

my boundaries and ...I said, as far as scolding them or something, is okay, but as far as spanking them or something, I don't feel that's my job, that is for the mother or father to do...they're not my children." Oshun described the negotiation process with Liberty to be like this: "I won't spank your kids, that's not up to me; I'm not comfortable with that. She said 'that's fine'". However, Liberty was very quick to point out "That doesn't mean I don't share the title of co-parenting with Oshun, because she is totally a co-parent with me. She is better than their father as a co-parent". Oshun noted that her experience in another relationship with a mother rendered her ineffective, as the mother had not taught basic skills: "I would just walk in the house and just do circles, trying to teach her children, now who are... getting older, and they haven't been taught to do a lot of things. They haven't been taught how to clean".

Nuna has had multiple experiences of being in intimate relationships with mothers; however, she drew largely from one experience in her past, and discussed her role as follows:

I was their primary caregiver for five years. I took care of those children. I helped them with their school work. I helped them with their social interactions, I taught them in baseball, I got them enrolled in Cadets, gymnastics, music, I bought them musical instruments and got them lessons.

Nuna continued:

Christmases, birthdays, Easter, Valentines, all those things. I did them all, you know! Every year, all year, you know, taking them shopping for their school supplies and school clothes, I did those things, she didn't do those things. I was the one that saved the money for the special things that they needed, so far as going out shopping for their father's day presents and the father's birthday and at Christmas.

For Nuna, her place in this family was clear, she was responsible for much of the day to day living and family life, though as mentioned earlier, did *not* share authority.

E described her role of co-parent as motivated by a desire to not “see her partner in angst or upset because her children made an incorrect decision” if Wyca was not home. E stated:

If you are involved in a relationship with somebody who has children, you need to be able to function in their position and the child has a question and the mother or father, of which I am not, is not home. And to give the same kind of consistent direction that you would see exemplified by that parenting method so as to not to confuse the whole issue to that point that when your partner comes home, you are not...ohmigod, so and so asked me this, and I didn't know what to say, and so I just went rah rah rah rah rah!

E described her role as being “responsible as a co-parent to participate if I see them doing something hazardous, stupid, whatever”. E added “We all have a responsibility to every human being regardless of their age; if they have a question, or they need guidance or they need discipline, to be responsible as human beings, its not just a parent”.

Working Together

With the exception of Nuna, who was in a relationship marked by physical, emotional and financial abuse, the other co-researchers experienced some level of cooperation with the mothers in their families. Oshun was vocal about her negotiations with Liberty. For Oshun, it was a marked departure from her past relationship where the communication was often negative or dysfunctional, “it didn't happen that way (in the past). In my relationship now, we just totally work together”. Oshun stated “in lots of relationships there's no talking. And we both believe in talking... I think it should be 50-50, you know, work together”. When Oshun was asked how she worked out disagreements in her current relationship with Liberty, she stated “oh, we just agree to disagree... we discuss everything”.

Though Marie was clear about the distinction between her role and that of Seth's mother, she viewed her role as necessary and complimentary, and thus functioned collaboratively with Devi:

When he took up motorcycle riding and Devi was freaking, and I was concerned too, he wasn't making the best choices but I wasn't his mother ...I didn't need to, she was. And because I was also a motorcycle rider, I could play a different role, so I did. But if I there wasn't another mother, I would have played a different role. I would have been the protective one to *yada yada yada*; because I think kids need that, no matter what age they are, they need that. Devi and I did take on financial responsibility for him; we did share that...because we are so much alike, I am the one who ended up choosing the presents for him.

Marie and Devi's relationship was complex; despite the power struggles that existed, they also negotiated productively and collaboratively both in their relationship as well as afterward. Marie explained in a matter-of-fact way how she and Devi negotiated tasks based upon strengths and interests "...how we did household or how we did our lives together...there were things that I'm really good at that I did with Seth and there's things that Devi was really good at that she did with Seth, and it was different, so that's all". Specifically, Marie took charge of gifting Seth: "Like I just took it on. I determined every year what we did for his birthday, what we did for Christmas. I set the dollar amount". Marie went on to explain that Seth actually lived with her during her "breakup process" with Devi. She stated that "we had lots of opportunities to talk and we never, it was never a problem for us [Marie and Devi], we were really clear". However, sometime after their split Marie stated "...it seemed we had it all worked out, and we did, but then it seemed she needed something different" and then Marie's relationship shifted with both Devi and Seth.

E articulated what she felt was her responsibility to her partner and described it in terms of a 'contribution' to the family: "I have to be able to feel like I contribute. If I don't contribute, I'm not worth my partner. If I don't contribute, I'm not worth the time that her children give me to listen or ask questions, or advice or even general chat".

Negotiations with the Child/ren

The co-researchers experiences of negotiating with the children included developing emotional bonds, gaining acceptance and defining roles, and being separated from them after

the relationship ends. As anticipated in examining human experiences, the quality of the co-researchers negotiations with the children ranged from joyful to painful and profoundly impacted the quality of the co-researchers lives.

Invitations to Bond

An important area of negotiation for lesbians involved in intimate relationships with mothers is to develop emotional bonds with the children. E described her preferred process for developing emotional bonds with Wyca's grown children "I would like to invite them to be involved with me, really it is an invitation, because it is a forced thing on them since I'm seeing their mother. It's forced on them. So I would like to invite them to have an opportunity for an interaction." Further E believed that Wyca's youngest daughter deserved E making the effort to promote an emotional bond "She's entitled to an emotional investment by another human being. Entitled."

Marie relayed her early experience with Seth began tenuously:

It was a year before Seth even spoke my name. So I was in his life for a year before he ever called me Marie. This depth took a long time. We were both wary of each other initially. I remember clearly the day he called me by my name. He had come back from an overnight grad party. His mom had him change back into his tuxedo so that I could take pictures of them in the garden. It was funny because he looked so wrecked. I had gotten a card for him and I gave it to him then and he was really touched. And um, and he called me by my name and it was really interesting. I think it was the first time that I bridged and he bridged back.

Marie continued to reflect, illustrating the poignancy of emotional bonds over time:

What is fascinating is that years back we were talking about our relationship, we often talked about our relationship, and he talked about how close we were always close and I started laughing and said, "No Seth, we weren't". He doesn't remember.

Despite their beginnings, Marie and Seth ended up with a very close relationship "Seth and I bonded very deeply and emotionally". Marie discussed Seth's familiarity with her in his 'knowing' of her as compared to his 'knowing of his mother: "he bought the most awesome gifts for me. He was always dead on what he gave me. Sometimes he was on with his mom,

and sometimes he was off but he's never been off with me". Marie also took pride in the closeness of her relationship with Seth stating "You know, he would come to me and ask questions about sex" then Seth would state "I'm so glad that I can talk to you about this... I'm not going to talk to my mom...I want to talk about this with a woman and someone who is older." Marie believed he could do this because "He knew it was confidential".

Oshun had little success developing bonds with older children in a past relationship. Another complication was the mother sabotaging Oshun's efforts "...like me saying "you can't do that", then their mother saying 'yea' after I've said 'no'". However, in Oshun's relationship with Liberty, negotiations with her young children are quite different. Oshun is patient and has realistic expectations of this family "they need to get to know me. They need to trust me; they need to know that they can. So that's going to take time". Oshun described bonding from an active position as someone who is the process of bonding "They like to snuggle and stuff, they're very snuggly. It's good. It is very bonding." Oshun's descriptions of Luke were more evidence of her developing familiarity, which facilitates her ability to bond and parent him:

He likes to be on in his own. He likes alone time. He's kinda that way. He's just off on his own, he's good at that. He's into Pokeman right now. He loves the ocean. He's fascinated by the ocean. He wants to be an underwater veterinarian. That's what he wants to be when he grows up.

The issue of trust was significant in Nuna's development of bonds with Lamia's children, given the special circumstances and in the context of her abusive relationship. Nuna stated:

I...told them they could trust me, I wasn't going to call the authorities on their mother, which was much to their relief too, because what would have happened to them, they would have gone to their father. Much more dangerous. There are many kinds of abuse.

It was also important to Nuna that the children “learned that they could trust me with their adventures”.

Nuna “wanted to share with the kids the fun things” and endeavoured to reduce conflict in the family. To this end, “the first thing I purchased was a dishwasher so there would be no daily arguments over chores”. Next Nuna purchased “a mini-bike which represented freedom, escape, responsibility and opportunities to learn how to handle power”. By being so mindful of her choices, Nuna created a hospitable space for the children to bond with her. Like the other co-researchers, Nuna’s conscientious efforts can be interpreted as ‘invitations’ to the children to bond.

Naming the Role of the Co-Parent

When asked what the children call the co-researchers, what were created for their co-parenting roles in the family, all were most commonly referred to by their first names. E stated “I’ve been involved in two relationships where there’s been children. One was with a five and six year old (prior to the one she’s in now with young adult children); and I’ve always been called by my name.” E stated, in matter-of-fact tone “I am who I am; I participate because I choose to participate and my name exemplifies that”.

Marie talked about what Seth called her in terms of what was lacking in her experience “...he never had language for me either. I would be introduced as... “This is his mom and Marie”.

When Oshun was asked what the children call her, she stated “the two year old calls me Water-bug and so does the five year old, but he, he mainly calls me Oshun, but there’s a lot of Water-bug”. Oshun talked about what it was like for her when Lila referred to her as ‘the mother in the yellow shirt’. She stated “well, I was just a little shocked, because you’re

not expecting that to come out of a three year old's mouth and like where did she get that from?"

Nuna couched the development of her role in the family in the context of what she understood and believed all children need in a family:

I think if a child has the opportunity to know their parents, both their mother and their father, there are things to be benefited from those relationships, because there are strong differences between them. But if they don't have access to both those parents, somebody still needs to fill both those roles. You know, meet those needs of the children or that child, whether its nurturer or disciplinarian or an educator or whatever the case may be, whatever the child is lacking.

Nuna added that her "parenting experience with the children is very different than with the parent". Nuna intended for us to know that the positive quality of her experience with the children far exceeded that with the mother, yet despite the abuse she experienced, held on steadfast and in spite of her partner, to develop her role within this family.

Marie continued this consternation about roles and children getting their needs met somehow: "I don't know what role that is, but I thought that all kids need this. All kids need someone who is not a parent because I can't imagine some of the things he brought to me; I could never imagine bringing that to a parent". Marie did qualify that within the family, her role was as 'gift-giver and planner for Seth: "That's something that I took over in the relationship. I had power. Yea, that was my power. And I would say this is what I'm doing for him".

When Marie was asked to name her role; to describe how it was different than that of the 'mother', she responded:

Something that's different is that children often take care of there parents as much as children take care of their kids, and that didn't happen in our relationship. Seth didn't take care of me because we don't have that sort of bond, I'm not his mother. So it's different. There was a bit of caretaking in the break up process, but I was really conscious of that, and I was like, 'no, you take care of your mother. You take care of her and, but not me. So I think that's different, that's why I wasn't mothering.

E's approach to naming her role was to allow the adult children to come to their own conclusions: "it is their choice whether they accept it or not". She continued:

I'm not going to insult them by going 'you have to listen to me because I date your mother'. And a lot of couples to that. They assume they need to be as responsible for, and they take away a lot of the credibility of the child, as opposed to just being supportively helpful as a concerned adult, like a teacher in school.

E was aware of and avoided power struggles by not imposing a distinct role, but rather allowed one to unfold: "I really wouldn't do that, I'm not your mother, but..." because "you don't want that power thing".

Experiencing the Pains and Joys of Parenting

Contributing substantively to the pain for the co-researchers in terms of parenting, is the invisible—though powerful—experience of patriarchy. In a subtle, yet significant way, patriarchy positions fathers as the natural counterpart to mothers, and thus defines what 'should' and 'should not' happen in relationship roles. This translated for the co-researchers into constraints about what they felt they 'could' and 'could not' do within their families, as determined by not just the 'social norm' but specifically what men do and don't do.

An experience that Nuna and Marie shared was the loss of their bonds with the children when their relationships with the mothers ended. For Nuna, her relationship with the children was very intense, as she was the primary caregiver for five years. When talking about her separation from the children she states "It was really hard for me. I didn't get to see them until years later...I was again not allowed communication with them". Nuna described the pain that manifested from her exit from this abusive relationship and how this impacted her choices "Initially when I left I was in a very bad state and I didn't want to see the children". Her motivations were based upon the children's experience with their father's exit from the relationship:

When their father left, he was really in a bad emotional place, and he would see the children over time, and they had to experience the depth of his despair. It was really unfair to them.

Nuna continued “it was really important that I didn’t take those children through that emotional trauma with me... so that was really traumatic. But there was nothing I could do”. When asked what that was like for Nuna, she explained her profound sadness: “When I think about it, I feel frightened and wounded...my heart was broken”.

Marie had a very special relationship with Seth; “something unique happened with Seth and I”. Marie lamented “it’s very sad because when we do have contact; it’s not on the level it used to be and we used to be very intimate”. Marie explained that because her relationship with Devi ended, she now loses something that had become very important to her, “I don’t get to contribute to his life”. She continued:

My bond with Seth is probably about the sweetest bond I’ve ever experienced in my life. So, I miss out on that sweetness. I not only love Seth, I respect him tremendously and I really liked him. And I know he feels the same way about me. I just don’t get to have that delightfulness... I just don’t get to have this incredible human being in my life...I will grieve him for the rest of my life.

Marie expressed the pain that was attached to the change of the quality of her relationship and the unmet expectations that loomed in her future with Seth because of her break up with Devi:

When we were first breaking up and I was expressing grief to Seth about how I’d always expected we would be grandmothers together and I would be a grandmother to his children and I would be at his wedding and all that sort of stuff, and him saying at that time you will be and, he says you know this doesn’t change. And me still saying well it does change, I was expecting to be a grandmother with your mother, it does change. But he was very clear at that time ‘you will be the grandmother to my children. So will my mother’.

The positive that Marie takes away is outweighed by her grief:

His life has changed for the better, my life has changed for the better because we had that time and we had that relationship. I totally get that, but its like someone dying. I think, that doesn’t mean that every fucking day you’re not going to grieve that you don’t have that person. Like yes, you’re grateful for what you had, absolutely. And it’s changed our lives and I would never not do it. You know, ever, I mean my god, but...I will grieve for him for the rest of my life.

Marie explains the source of her grief:

I think it is because there's still this life building and developing, because he is a young life, so there's so much that's going to happen that you don't get to be a part of. He's still forming himself and I don't get to be a part of that, and I won't get to be a part of him forming his family...it's like a premature death.

Both Nuna and Marie talked about the pain that arose from sacrifices they made for the children. Marie gave up opportunities to 'unpack' or process her relationship with Seth after her break-up with his mother. She viewed this as responsible, though it cost her emotionally:

I've chosen not to process that with him, which is so not like me, or like the relationship he and I had. But I've done that because he has to choose. And to process that makes it a more difficult choice. And I'm not going to do that and so it's very, I'm so uncomfortable without processing, but I have to do that.

For Nuna, in the context of her abusive relationship, she drew upon experiences she had as a child to guide her in her interactions with her partner. Knowing that engaging in what Nuna called "adult fighting skills" would increase or exacerbate trauma that the children had in witnessing their conflict, she purposely chose to 'lose fights' rather than subject the children to more vicarious violence:

And because I understood the strange trauma that the children suffered in that, she got to maintain the upper hand through most of it, because I wasn't willing to use adult fighting skills in front of the children, so nine times out of ten, I was the one who got hurt, and appeared to be the loser in the situation where the children should not have seen, you know, me lose, because she was wrong, but I wasn't willing to... fight on her level, which was the only way to fight her, in front of the children.

Nuna explained an unusual sacrifice she made that ultimately served the children's safety; "sometimes I had to spank the children, because I couldn't let her do it".

Nuna discovered that Lamia's daughter Ruth, now a young adult, became drug involved and shared this habit with her mother. When Nuna was asked what that was like for her, she responded "you have no idea; you can't imagine how that makes me feel". Nuna spoke about the emotional pain in her relationship and how difficult it was for her to

ultimately exit the relationship, given her fear for the safety of the children she had bonded with. Nuna stated "I couldn't leave the children because they weren't safe, she was very abusive. She had an immense amount of control over me, it was terrible." Nuna at the same time felt impotent under her partner's abuse: "it was frustrating because I couldn't protect them". Nuna berates herself for leaving the relationship, despite the abuse that she suffered. She wonders aloud if she could have made a difference in the children's eventual involvement with drugs "isn't that what parent's do? Sacrifice for the kids? Shouldn't I have done that? I've been second guessing myself for 7-8 years now". When Nuna was asked what she felt upon spending time remembering this relationship, she encapsulated succinctly "lots of fear, fear, fear...terror, fear and humiliation".

Nuna affirmed that there are risks for lesbians entering intimate relationships with mothers:

Oh Yea! It's a risk for everybody. [For the] parent allowing someone to win the love and emotional dependence that the children are going to have on another individual, taking that risk that they could get hurt, the children, they've already lost a parent in some form or another, whether its complete permanent loss, or I think they're aware of that emotionally, whether they are intellectually aware of it or not, there's that risk, and as an adult you have the potential to become emotionally involved, to love these people and to lose them.

Yet, despite the risks, Nuna is clear about her desire for future relationships with mothers:

Yes, there's a huge level of fear about allowing myself to become involved with anyone else's children. You know, the most traumatic, hardest experience was definitely with Lamia, but she's not the first woman I've been with whose had children, or the last. Its not, children in the family dynamic is something that I really love and that I want. So, it's a risk I'm willing to take but also something that fills me with a great deal of anxiety.

Oshun noted how her relationship with Liberty's children was an evolution for her "...I had no patience for children before, especially small ones because they scare the crap out of me". Oshun mentioned this qualitatively positive and profound change for her, in becoming patient with Liberty's children and developing meaningful relationships with them several times through our interview.

Negotiations with Society

Negotiations with society take place on a higher level of abstraction. Any quest to understand how society, as a larger system than the family unit, negotiates parenting leads us to examine how 'parents' are legitimated or illegitimated, accepted or marginalized based upon the socially sanctioned standards, but also upon the codified sanctions within a society. Further, the women's ability to negotiate within the domain of parenting is largely impacted by societal prescriptions for family. The co-researchers in this study demonstrate a range of experiences of legitimation, marginalization and visibility. Additionally, the co-researchers have a range of feelings about those experiences.

Seeking Visibility and Legitimacy

Marie spoke about her feelings of 'invisibility' and how this contributed a sense of lack of legitimacy; "I would like more visibility...with that...it becomes legitimate. I'm definitely not legitimate". While she did enjoy some visibility when they were a family, attending functions like Seth's graduation, now that they no longer live together, Marie feels excluded from the family in a way that is qualitatively different from a straight family experience:

Think about a het couple...they break up...there's remarriages go on...the ex-step parent is present at a significant even...people might say 'oh George is here'...there is not the same level of invisibility.

Marie continued with what is like for her post-intimate-relationship with Devi in terms of her wish for a continued relationship with Seth, "and now it would be really nice to have a legitimate...", Marie's voice trailed off as though to underscore the frustration of her feelings of lack of legitimacy. When Marie continued, she sounded somewhat more hopeful:

Because of who Seth is, he will invite me to his wedding, but now it feels like I don't have a place there...really...so I'm going to be that woman attending and people wonder 'who is she'...and that's...wow...that's not what it feels like, but that will be what it is.

Marie's greatest regret is that "I don't get to be a family with him", and that loss is fuelled by society's inability to accept or create a legitimate place for her as someone who had a significant relationship with someone else's child; "there aren't any supports or recognition or there isn't any societal drive to support him in maintaining our relationship". Marie gave an example of being marginalized by the death of Seth's father:

Around Noah's death, we had a big issue how the obituary was being written, whether I was going to be included in the family and how I was going to be included and [Seth] saying then, 'you are family, you will always be family' but that's actually not true.

Marie discussed how society contributes to her feelings of invisibility and lack of legitimacy: "Although I know our structures are set up that way, and particularly, it become so apparent in terms of societal attitudes, it terms of being a lesbian...in particular, you see it when the relationship ends." Marie continues "We had a death in the family and a family emergency. I was the ex throughout all those, but still, the family has called, is calling me, they are saying get to the hospital. We don't have a problem with that, but boy the hospital did." Marie described how the family creatively dealt with the hospital situation:

What Devi ended up doing was saying she's my partner, which wasn't true, but she's my ex is not going to work for the hospital. And I can't say I'm Seth's mother either, because I'm not. And neither Seth nor I want that. It would be enough to say I'm family and you could leave it at that, but they [the hospital] actually need, wanted more definition.

When Marie was asked what would help, possibly permission from society to be a family, she stated "I'm not interested in your permission. Seth and I, we created our own space. And I don't want you to create it, just know I'm here".

Contributing to the invisibility that Marie felt was the lack of adequate language to describe their relationship or role in the family. Marie was vocal about it, stating several times expressly and explicitly that she didn't "know what language" to use, and "I don't think there was a word to describe what it was. I've not found one, I don't know". Marie also

stated that "...there were times it would have been really nice to have language". The lack of language may have also contributed to an experience at Seth's graduation that was significant in her role confusion:

I remember doing the picture thing...and how many pictures there where of Seth, Devi and me...there wasn't any pictures of just Seth and Devi, it was just the three of us, and that was Seth's choice. ...his close friends know our relationship, but certainly their families don't know, and I remember seeing their expressions on their faces and them just thinking what the fuck's going on... I mean they ...really...didn't...get it. And I don't think it was about the lesbian thing, that's easy, but they didn't understand Seth's relationship with me. My sense...they totally didn't get how he was bonded with me. Like, it's fine that his mother is a lesbian and this is her partner or lover or whatever, but what's this going on between Seth and this woman.

Marie lamented the lack of language, yet affirmed there is no ready solution for it:

I struggle with language to define something that hasn't been defined - doesn't have its space out there, and I personally have not needed to define it. I know how I feel about Seth, I know I contributed to him, and I knew he loved me deeply. I have always known how I feel about him thus when I'm emotional there isn't a language struggle, but to define the relationship, that is another matter.

Oshun stated "they're [society] gonna like you for who you are, not who you sleep with, so if they don't like you for who you sleep with, if you ask me, they never liked you in the first place" and "I told my girlfriend that all the time, I don't care what these people think. I don't know them. I care about what some people think, but society, that's their problem, not mine". Oshun continued "society is a funny thing. I, I just shake my head at people (laughs)"

Nuna described her disdain for society's need for the specific roles of 'mother' and 'father':

You need to meet them. Whereas when you refer to mothering, and fathering a child, those, I don't know, in my mind, it creates a particular image, a social image, that we have specific roles, and I don't think that's necessarily beneficial to the child.

Nuna continued, discussing the insecurity created by her invisibility:

I'm referring to the second parent, the co-parent, but also there's a fear of rejection, there's the fear of denial of the basic powers that you should have. So, when dealing with situations,

there is always a level of trepidation I think, that's, that's just present, whether you want it to be or not.

Marie was clear about what she would like from society post-relationship:

I like to think that there's an opportunity to correct assumptions, to make things more visible. I don't think its possible, or even desirable to define roles. I don't even know about creating language because I think that experiences are so diverse. There may be some women who want to be called mother, but that's probably my own baggage around 'mothering', but I know I don't! But I would like more visibility. And, with that visibility then I think it become legitimate. And I'm definitely not legitimate.

When I asked if acceptance was a factor, Marie stated her opinion she with a mixture of emotions, yet with a distinct measure of grace:

"it's interesting that acceptance is less important to me than legitimacy. I see a difference in the two. I think because there is so much lesbophobia. I don't need your acceptance. You don't need to accept me, but you need to acknowledge that I'm here. Please know I'm here"

Summary

The results of this study demonstrate that while there are certain and decided joys to be found by lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers and children, the journey is fraught by barriers, ambiguities and a heavy entrenchment within societal structures, language and ideology of distinct hetero-normativity, including the primacy of the birth mother, that creates invisibility and a lack of legitimacy for this particular family constellation, and the lesbian partner specifically.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Results of this study show qualitatively how lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers negotiate in the domain of parenting. Their experiences until this point have been presented in the co-researchers own words. This section provides an opportunity for me to comment on my own biases, interpretations and musing of the co-researchers experiences, within the context of my own social location which admittedly differs from the co-researchers. The range of experiences expressed in this study highlight and confirm the available literature.

Few scholars have asked how it is that lesbian couples and children do as well as they do in spite of the presiding social climate that is often inhospitable to this family configuration. Often the research is deficit based and/or positioned in defensive comparison to the central or dominant discourse. Shifting the view to the margins as a starting point would serve to discover the experiences of lesbian families in a more authentic and respectful approach. This shift could move the present ‘problem-saturated’ discourse on lesbian culture to that of genuine inquiry, which could then excavate those special strengths inherent from this standpoint (Laird, 1993, 1994).

This research caused me to ponder how the lack of adequate language or role definition for lesbians in relationship with mothers creates an abyss—a chasm that is challenging to bridge, compelling academic rhetoric to reflect the dominant discourse; societal beliefs and political haranguing that ‘family’ must not include lesbians with children, and thus focusing on what may only be perceived as negative, given the lesbian family’s misfit with the dominant story. Another underlying concern is the analysis of power; and

how this relates to the topics of inclusion and intimacy. Power as a relationship dynamic was evident within most if not all of the co-researchers families, and was also identified as a significant element by co-researchers either at the time of interviewing and/or when commenting on their reading of the manuscript. Power was also identified as evident by the thesis committee members. To harken back to Comeau (1999) in the literature review, "The rules of hetero-patriarchy are embedded even in the minds of lesbians who choose to parent equally together" (p. 46).

Negotiating Parenting

In order to contextualize the experience of lesbians negotiating parenting in intimate relationships with mothers, I begin by locating the experience of lesbian parents on the social landscape. Understanding how they are marginalized accentuates the experience of the co-researchers. I also realized that I have so deeply internalized the social prescriptions for 'mother', 'parent' and 'family', that I had to coach myself to expand the aperture of my own lens; to hold steadfast and conscious in my intentionality in order to utilize intersubjectivity to understand and 'see' the experience of another through their own lens, without the privilege of ever having seen through that particular lens myself.

Existing literature has shown that it is motherhood, rather than sexual orientation that emerges as the dominant identity around which lesbian biological mothers organize their lives (Lewin, 1993; Parks, 1998; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002). Lesbian mothers are forced to negotiate an identity within a socio-cultural space bounded by their claims to both a marginal (lesbian) and a mainstream (mother) identity. It is easy to attest to this paradigm, as it is my own dynamic. I am a biological mother and 'mama' is my primary identity. However, being a lesbian mother is in other ways fundamentally and culturally different than

being a heterosexual mother. Straight motherhood is a socially sanctioned institution.

Childless lesbians are all but barred from entry, gated and pushed far back into the margins, rendering them practically invisible, as they do not fit social prescriptions for 'mother'.

Women who share parenting of another women's children face even more restrictive identity construction, given that their ability to identify as a legitimate parent is dependent upon the validation of significant others: her partner, the children, her own kin and the legal authorities (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999).

One of the surprises for me was that the co-researchers did not consider themselves 'mother', or what they were doing as mothering. My bias was to assume the women would desire to be 'mother', perhaps to 'co-mother' collaboratively with the birth mom. However, it does make sense that given the strict social prescriptions for 'mothers' (and 'fathers' for that matter), and all the burdens, accoutrement and emblems of motherhood, it is not surprising that these women struggled with that title. Marie, like the other women, made a clear distinction between her role and the role of the 'mother' in the family, stating "I wasn't mothering him".

In terms of meaning making these women had no other matrix within which to place themselves due to a language deficit. The term 'co-mother' does not fully convey or explain the co-researcher's role or their relationship to their partner's children (Shore, 1996). I found both a lack of language for women's family experiences, but also a resistance from these women to create language when invited, citing they don't want 'another box' to be defined or confined by.

Laird (2000) posits that because lesbians have no relational scripts, no parental or family role models they must continuously reinvent themselves and their family culture and

life cycles anew. Besides being aware of the parenting experience of other generations of lesbians, Jan Clausen (1987) implores us to examine how our own ideas about becoming parents and our daily experience of living with children differs according to our individual identities and backgrounds. Often demonstrating an uncommon insight into parenting, given her own experiences, Nuna exhibited great ability to create her family culture amid the chaos of an abusive partner. Nuna drew upon both what she had to work with presently, and from the best of her past. Nuna experienced an abusive father and a “mother who did not protect us from this man”, yet readily draws upon the strengths of her parents who taught her important elements such as justice, generosity and safety.

Nuna described this role and her ability to “pull it off”, though she also expressed regret that it was not shared with her partner at the time. What struck me as remarkable was Nuna’s willingness to enter future relationships where there are children present; given the intense emotional pain she suffered. Nuna demonstrated uncommon generosity, also acknowledging the emotional risks for the mother and the children.

E was the one co-researcher who insisted on having her partner present during the interview, even when I encouraged her otherwise. I made assumptions based upon their interactions that their negotiations extended beyond E’s strong sensibilities and opinions on parenting, her background education in the human service field, and included what I observed to be their well informed and familiar use of non-verbal exchanges in checking things out with each other.

When E spoke about her family, the ways that she supports Wyca, her belief systems and her motivations for her actions, her integrity and her enthusiasm for participation, along with Wyca’s equally emphatic confirmations through body language and expressions, I felt I

got a strong sense of their everyday essence just as E described it... rich. I have every reason to believe E, given that she is the kind of woman who extracts every ounce of juice from her everyday experience, regardless of what is on the menu. E also thinks very broadly at a macro level of civic responsibility to the planet. So for E, parenting is a natural extension of her belief that 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

The same was true for Oshun, who also had her partner present during the second interview. The chemistry between Oshun and Liberty and the ease with which they both engaged and were engaged by the children led me to believe that I was again caught up in the essence of Oshun's experience and the burgeoning rhythm of their relationship. For Oshun and Liberty, they translated 'parents' into 'family', sharing in delight of this vocabulary with the children. Liberty stated "they always say at home 'I love my family' and we'll cuddle up on the couch". Liberty qualified "It's a different type of family" while Oshun declared "I'm included in that".

While the reflections that Marie shared of being a family with Devi and Seth were painful at the time of the interview, there is a sense that their daily lives were filled with a rich range of emotions that contribute to a productive and positive experience. Marie was clear that she and Devi negotiated parenting both within the relationship but afterwards as well. Knowing that Marie and Devi, now years past their break-up, have reached a place of friendship that Marie considers sacred and integral to her inner circle of support. I suspect that Marie would agree that the pain she has relayed is only one aspect of the essence of her experiences.

Negotiating with the Mother

I endeavoured to be reflexive with the themes; particularly the theme of 'negotiating with the mother' which caused me to ponder how this theme interacted with my own meaning-making on 'power' and 'mothering'. I believe lesbians, especially partners of lesbian mothers, struggle to use language that was created for and by heterosexuals in the context of a society that exerts backlash against any threats to institutions of 'normalcy', namely lesbians intruding on *the family*. The biological role of 'mother' is so intensely tied to the social construct of the modern Western European family that it is extremely difficult to begin the process of untangling them (Wright, 1998). Wright has also pointed out how our understandings of 'power' are invested in notions of possession and ownership.

The Primacy of the Birth Mother

Each of the co-researchers identified the primacy of the mother in at least one aspect of their negotiations around parenting. By virtue of biology, birth mothers are declared the 'alpha' mothers of lesbian step-families, thus due to our collective heterosexist social ideology, the partners become something other than 'the mother', perhaps they become relegated as the 'un-mothers'. As Fiona Nelson's (1996) study showed, the biological mother retains authority over her children and has the final decision making power. It is thus necessary for the second woman to figure out where her place is in the family system. Nelson's study showed the systemic challenges for women moving into relationships with mothers and children; the new partner is not only moving into the family's emotional network, she is also moving into their physical family space, their structural configurations as well as their routines and traditions (p. 79).

Both Nuna and Marie spoke about the mothers in their families 'pulling rank' on them, not only usurping their decision making power with regards to the children and parenting, but also as a power ploy. Marie named this as the "power structure" within the family, and seemed resigned to its inevitability. Interestingly, Marie has not had relationships with other lesbian mothers since the breakup of her relationship with Devi years ago. Nuna echoed the results of Nelson (1996) stating "they [mothers] like to give up the responsibility, but they're not willing to hand over authority".

Though Nuna often described ways of being with Lamia's children that might have been welcomed by the biological parent, her experience was instead that she was resented and chided by Lamia. Nuna described Lamia as abusive to her and a poor role model to her children. Although Nuna admitted that sometimes her sardonic wit would cause her message to be too sarcastic to be productive, for the most part it seemed her objectivity was not accepted by her partner, no matter how Nuna neutrally presented it. When asked why she thought that mother's don't welcome that level of objectivity, that level of wisdom and insight, Nuna was convinced that jealousy motivated birth mothers to become defensive and thus deflect the opinions of their partners, whether valid or not.

Oshun and E had more positive interpretations of the primacy of the mother. In fact, E's deference to Wyca was presented as an honourable act, showing respect to her adult children. E believed that women who 'take over' in a mothering role in lesbian step-families are "rude", potentially not understanding the psychological impact on the children. Given that E holds a degree in the social sciences; she understands well the dynamics of both child and family development. Wright (1998) claims that the integration of a new parent

(regardless of gender) into an existing family will take time, and children who are accustomed to a single parent will naturally resist and possibly resent the new parent.

Oshun's ease with declaring "I'm not the mother" and "She's definitely the mother" may in part be due to the newness of her relationship with Liberty, and the fact that Oshun is Liberty's first lesbian partner. Nelson's (1996) study of lesbian mothers identifies specific issues for lesbian stepfamilies. Although the women believed that their issues were often not unlike straight stepfamilies, they express some issues unique to being lesbian families. Often the family formation occurs simultaneously with biological mothers 'coming out' as lesbian, while childless lesbians are for the first time experiencing mothering. Additionally, in blended families, the biological mother has an established and accepted identity as 'mother'.

Oshun treaded cautiously in her responses to interview questions, often looking to Liberty for non-verbal communication. When Lila referred to Oshun as the "mummy with the yellow shirt", she was instantly corrected by both Liberty and Oshun, and encouraged to refer to Oshun by her family term of endearment "Water-bug". I inquired what this was like for Oshun, to which she expressed some surprise. Given the loving and effusive nature with which Oshun speaks about her family, the children especially, I am curious if Oshun wouldn't have liked to be referred to as 'mummy'.

The Problematization of Co-Parenting

The problematization of co-parenting for the lesbian co-researchers in this study was underscored by the lack of roles, language and societal ideology to support their function in a family system or in the social fabric.

Each of the co-researchers had a degree of emotional reaction to the request to name what they were doing in their families.

Oshun was the least perturbed by the lack of a defined role, and was decidedly uninterested about being 'mother' to her partner's children. She was clear "...my boundaries are drawn...even though I'm in their life...I think that's her job". Again my bias struck me; I was puzzled and distracted that these women did not want the title of 'co-mother'. Clearly, if the co-researchers were 'pinned' for an answer, they allowed the term 'co-parent' to be applied, but my interpretation of this was that it was a begrudging concession.

Wright (1998) problematized the issue of roles within lesbian step-families by naming a series of stances that she observed in her research. The "co-parent stance" (p. 127) is characterized through the partner functioning as a helper, supporter and confident for the parent, as opposed to a collaborative endeavour, the power and responsibility for the children is still weighted on the biological parent. Wright also named the "step-parent stance" (p. 133) whereby the partner takes on more traditional mothering types of tasks, although the power remains with the birth mother. The "co-mother stance" (p. 138) is distinct in that both women share equal parenting rights and responsibilities. Only one family in Wright's study took this stance. If Wright's problematization formula is applied to the women in this study, E, Oshun and Marie all took on the 'co-parent stance' in their interactions in their families. Nuna's preferred title in the family was "co-parent", though she joked that she'd often been referred to as "the other mother".

Working Together

Despite the primacy of the mother in relation to parenting negotiations, each of the co-researchers experienced some level of cooperation with their partners. In order to understand lesbian partnerships more fully, apart from attachments to children and from a cultural perspective, I explored research that shows western heterosexual couples ascribe to

sexual divisions of labour that often leave women with the lion's share of housework, or in economic terms; the unpaid labour. There is accumulating evidence that shows lesbian couples are less likely to align themselves with gendered roles, but rather divide unpaid labour more equitably based on talent and interest, and have even less extreme differences in time spent at paid work (Saffron, 1998; Parks, 1998). Both Oshun and Marie described negotiations around clearly defined roles within their 'couplehood' that confirm this research. Oshun offered "I think it should be like 50/50, you know, work together".

When recalling Marie's negotiations with Devi, she was also clear, to reiterate:

...there is not as much power dynamic in a lesbian relationship and I think what happened in 'parenting' with Seth is the same thing that happened in how we did household or our lives together. That there were things that I'm really good at that I did with Seth, and there's things that Devi was really good at that she did with Seth, and it was different, that's all. So, they were all needed.

Though Marie believed that Devi did not believe there was enough love to go around, she did allow and support Seth living with Marie during their break up process, which in most people's frame of reference was amicable, though painful. While Devi may have sometimes felt threatened by Marie's close emotional bond with Seth, Marie felt complimentary to Devi and believed she provided something that "all kids need"; someone safe to confide in. Marie encouraged Devi to view this as a "good thing", and thus together they provided a collaborative atmosphere of trust and safety for Seth to develop in.

It seemed important to Oshun for me to know about some of the positive adaptations that had happened for her while being in relationship with Liberty. Oshun contrasted the conflict in her previous relationship with the harmony she experiences in her current relationship: "we got a pretty good connection".

Negotiating with the Children

The co-researchers in this study all shared positive relationships with the children in their families, and for the most part where either tacitly or overtly encouraged by their partners. The fact that lesbian co-mothers have strong familial relationships with children despite their lack of biological connections is a key development in the evolving conceptualizations of 'the family'. It is also a strong argument to make against society's ready yet erroneous dismissal of the co-parent's relationships with her partner's children (Saffron, 1998). Lesbian co-parents must navigate their relationships with their partner's children within wider systems that may not 'allow' her to participate fully. She may not be recognized by either the school or health care systems; both of which could negatively impact the lesbian co-parents relationship with the child. If systems are giving messages explicitly that these women do not have legitimate places in their families, the children are at risk for internalizing these messages and unconsciously rejecting the co-parent. This risk is even higher when the relationship between the children and the 'other' parent is not supported by early childhood bonding (Morrow, 2001).

Invitations to Bond

The quality of the relationships between the co-mothers in this study and the children were primarily positive. For example, during the second interview with Oshun and Liberty, when Luke approached the family at the picnic bench, Oshun asked "What about you little buddy?" making sure to include him with familiarity, and the use of terms of endearment. Although the words alone may not be evidence of emotional bonds, the fashion of their delivery demonstrated tenderness, comfort and ease that both Oshun and Luke appeared to feel with each other.

When asked what these experiences are like, Oshun replied “My heart is more open than its ever been”. This second interview demonstrated the bonding that had taken place since Oshun had moved in with the family, as she beamed with pride when talking about Lila as she gushed “she’s a sweetie. In some ways you don’t ever want her to grow up, but in other ways you do. But, you just don’t want her to grow up”.

Naming the Role of the Co-Parent

Slater and Mencher (1991) developed the lesbian family life cycle, an analogue to Carter and McGoldrick’s prominent *family life cycle* (1980). Slater and Mencher discuss the importance of ritual as a conduit of family’s integration into society; they declare ritual generates the momentum that moves a family through life. Family identity is in part created in the practice of ritual and it is through ritual, both public and private, the culture sends a message of connection and validation, of ‘we recognize ourselves in you’ (p. 374). Marie experienced this kind of confusion around their relationships with their families, and in particular the children. Marie described attending Seth’s graduation and experiencing this vague and uncomfortable ‘unrecognizability’ with Seth’s friends and families during the photo shoots. The ritual of Seth’s graduation will always be highlighted by the influence of other’s disorientation to Marie “it wasn’t about the lesbian thing...they didn’t understand Seth’s relationship with me”. Marie interpreted their expectations that her role be more of a supportive one, “they would have expected me to be taking the picture”. Marie thought that Seth’s friends accepted his mother’s sexual orientation “its fine if his mother is a lesbian and this is her partner” but interpreted Seth’s friends as confused and curious about her place as an integrated part of the family “what’s this going on between Seth and this woman...they didn’t get it”.

Marie was able to articulate a process with Seth where they found a comfortable place to be "...Seth and I, we create our own space. And I don't want you to create it". Marie was validly sensitive to paternalism; refusing someone outside her of experience to create definition for her. Marie saw Devi as already taking on the role of mother, so she "could play a different role". Though 'the role' was not defined, Marie was content with the description of 'family'. At one point she stated "*I was family*" but later tenderly challenged her own perception of 'family' when she sadly relayed Seth consoling her "you are family, you will always be family". Marie's voice quivered when she let me know "...that's not actually true", naming her present experience and underlining the adverse change in her relationship with Seth after she and Devi broke up.

When I examine Marie's speech patterns when she spoke about Seth, I was at once touched by the softness of her voice, but also by the care she took in choosing her words. When describing her grief, I watched her face and body language appear as though she was re-experiencing a trauma. She seemed to choose her words with utter intention. She'd try a word or phrase on, then discard it if it wasn't right, and then choose another until the fit matched the emotion. Her words seemed much more about conveying emotion than they did about experience. Perhaps this was the magical place where the two meet, where the emotion makes the experience so salient to another, they are compelled, drawn in; their own emotions are evoked.

I asked Oshun what the children called her, and she lit up revealing their term of endearment for her "Water-bug" (as her name is pronounced 'Ocean'). Oshun looked like she was melting with joy- her face expanded into a wide grin- "yea, it's cute...coming from a little one... in a teeny little voice". She was obviously happy with this title, announcing it

proudly and demonstrated expressions that illustrated her delight and pride in the term of endearment and sense of play that the children engaged in with her.

Pains and Joys of Parenting

Oshun referred to communication often and was specific about the importance of communication when her partner's had children "if there's children in there, they need to be talking, that's for sure". Oshun had two experiences to draw upon. Her present experience is positive, but her past experience was negative in terms of her values, especially around communication "I was beating my head against the wall with her". Oshun's experience with her ex-partner's children was similarly challenged by value differences "... if you have a 16 year old or a 17 year old, sitting around and doing nothing, and think its okay, and just racking up the bills, I have a problem with that". Oshun could be further frustrated by the compounded effect of miscommunication between her ex-partner and her children "you don't have, like me saying 'you can't do that', then their mother saying 'yea' after I've said 'no'".

However, Oshun affirmed twice that she gleaned positive learning experiences from her previous relationship that offered her the gifts of insight and patience into her present family dynamic.

Nuna shared many everyday aspects of life with the children she lived with, from tending to animals and household chores, to taking them to extra-curricular activities. Nuna often went that extra mile though, not only taking them to base-ball, but coaching their teams; not only taking them to music classes, but purchasing instruments for them; not only teaching them to cook, but creating gardens and teaching the children to plant and harvest what they cooked. She discussed this intense and grounded relationship with the children from both a pragmatic and emotionally invested point of view. However, she displayed the

most emotionality when discussing the issue of trust with the children. Trust transcended the 'typical' for this family as 'trust' was abused so readily by the children's mother, that it seemed as though 'trust' took on a very special meaning between Nuna and the children, particularly when Nuna finally exited the relationship.

My instincts tell me that Nuna's experience was somewhat tainted by the vigilance she must have held being in an abusive relationship. In terms of her experiences, while Nuna enjoyed positivistic aspects, there was also a heightened guardedness for her that the others in her family did not experience in the same way.

I had the opportunity to ask E directly what she thought the essence of her everyday experience was, to which she emphatically stated "Essence of everyday living experience? I would say it's no different than every other day, other than I'm four times richer. No difference in essence, just richer".

For Marie, grief was a predominant topic. Although she was able to speak with joy and humour at times, her grief was deep and enduring. When I asked her what this was like for her, she paused for a long time, while tears rolled quietly down her cheeks and onto her tightly clenched hands that were shoved deep into her lap. I turned off the tape to protect Marie's privacy however she invited me to turn it back on and articulated her deep wound: "I just don't get to have this incredible human being in my life...I will grieve him for the rest of my life".

I think about Marie so filled with sadness and a deep longing for the relationship that she once had with Seth, a relationship that was irrevocably changed by the actions of her ex-partner. It felt to me like there was a tear in this bond, one that could be repaired as they continue cordial contact, but one which scar tissue keeps them from ever getting as close as

they once were. Ironically, Marie's relationship with Devi and Seth was birthed in the everyday and lived experiences of caring and loving, yet what she experienced post-relationship was more like an abrupt ending that created a void. When reflecting on the specific loss of Seth in her life, Marie whispered "it's like a premature death".

Negotiating with Society

Lesbians have rarely had the opportunity fully to tell their own stories unburdened by the listener's prior understandings, which are likely to contain strong notions about gender and gender relations, sex and sexuality (Laird, 2000, p. 463). Throughout the interview with Oshun, I was moved by her self-assurance and measured this quality in different ways. What struck me initially was her use of emphatic speech qualifiers, such as "totally" or "absolutely". Oshun would affirm not only my statements with vehemence, but sometimes her own as well. Her body language was open and she looked me directly in the eyes; seldom wavering her gaze except occasionally tipping her head back in a hearty laugh. Oshun gesticulated with verve and edged closer to me in her chair illustrating increasing levels of engagement and enthusiasm. When we discussed the lack of lesbian family role models, Oshun retorted "the world is ignorant to them". I asked Oshun who her role model was; she promptly offered "myself". When I asked if she was aware of the roots of her self-assurance, she told me that she had to learn very early to depend on herself. I asked her if she valued societal acceptance to which she vigorously responded "that's society's problem, not mine". Oshun declared that she tells her "girlfriend all the time, I don't care what people think".

The growing community of lesbian mothers and their families, as well as other non-traditional parents and their children can be sustained only with the support of larger society as well as those who provide health and social services (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004).

The reader is invited to critically examine their own biases about diverse family constellations and how their ideology may contribute to the collusion with society in the oppression and marginalization of lesbian headed families or their empowerment. Even a carefully applied critical analysis of the oppression of lesbian families in this society goes a long way toward the validation and increased trust of lesbian co-parents and their partners.

Visibility and Legitimacy

Morrow (2001) states that the partner of lesbian mother's is 'illegitimate', not a real parent. She is understood as secondary and subordinate rather than as a co-parent sharing responsibility and authority with the birth mother. Morrow states:

Thus her "otherness", so conspicuously signalled by the common nomenclature of the 'other mother', connotes alterity and inauthenticity in heterosexist society (p. 70).

As previously mentioned, Morrow confirms that one of the most troubling consequences of marginalization and asymmetry in lesbian step-families is that it catalyzes within the family and increases the possibility that children may adopt heterosexist ideas about the 'other mother's' place.

In a similar illustration, yet with different features, Oshun suggests the marginalization felt by lesbians who choose to stay in the confines of heterosexual marriage "there's lots out there. Still hiding". Oshun told me that her current partner might have continued to participate in her marriage in part because she thought she was "the only one like this"; illustrating the lack of visible rituals or acceptance for lesbians. I suspect that lesbians hide in marriages in exchange for social inclusion and the right to participate in socially legitimate and family sanctioned rituals.

A cogent example of heterosexist dismissal was offered by Marie, when Devi's nephew was hospitalized in critical condition last summer. Marie recalled "the family's

called...they are saying ‘get to the hospital’... we don’t have a problem with that, but boy the hospital sure did”. She continued “it’s like, are you family? Yes, but then they wanted a name”. This example also confirms Marie’s feelings of lack of legitimacy. Devi’s family still considers her a part of the family, but societal structures make no room for her. The lack of one simple word to describe her position made the difference between participation or being dismissed to the sidelines.

Marie’s ability to be clear that lack of legitimacy and language for her role deeply affected my own processing of our time together. I was able to be reflexive with my own meaning-making; however I was striving for a deeper understanding, I was mining for the essence. I wanted to explore the issue of language from other angles. My desire for this research to be truly intersubjective and intentional inspired me to wonder if the examples Marie chose to share with me are of the nature of ‘values’ in order to more clearly give me guidance in understanding her experience. If I know what she values, if I really get that, perhaps I will be more true to her experience; this is getting underneath the skin, through the tissue and closer to the bone.

Marie’s expectations for the research were neither grand nor idealistic. She merely wished for people to “know I am here”. What an utter privilege, to practice phenomenology; a methodology that invites the co-researcher to claim space, and affirms: I know you are here. Marie was able to describe her position as one of being outside the dominant story. While I didn’t get a sense that Marie necessarily wanted to be within that dominant story, she was able to help me see that she wanted there to be room for her story, for her experience with Seth.

Limitations for the Study

Limitations to address in this study include the interview methodology itself and the small sample size. The snow-ball method of sampling can also be problematic, given that the lesbian community in my region is limited, and that there is a very good chance the co-researchers know each other.

It may be important to some readers to acknowledge that due to the small sample size, no generalization to the lesbian population should be inferred, yet the research did affirm what is available specifically on lesbians in relationships with mothers, and to some of the literature that was more global about lesbian families in general. However, it is fundamental to understand that qualitative inquiry was specifically chosen for the richness inherent within a data collection methodology that honours the person being interviewed for their uniqueness and considers every story valid. Qualitative inquiry is a true dialectic; an exchange between two people that is by its nature and intent *un*-standardized and *un*-generalizable.

There are some problems associated with small studies using an interview guide approach in qualitative research which include the risk that important and salient topics may be inadvertently omitted. Additionally, the informal conversational interview can generate dissimilar information collected from diverse people with different questions. This style of qualitative research can be less systematic and comprehensive if certain questions do not arise naturally.

Snow-ball sampling creates certain challenges because the individuals are not selected randomly. The process of recruiting through a known third party introduces selection bias, thus negating the potential to generalize to the wider public, or to make

appropriate predictions based on information gathered from a small group of women who potentially know each other.

The quality of the research data and the results are highly dependent on my own skills of interviewing and on the rigor of my analysis. Because all of these methods are dependent on interpersonal exchanges with co-researchers, any number of variables, including the dress, demeanor, and language used by myself or the co-researcher could potentially influence the quantity and quality of information shared. Co-researchers may try to ascertain and fulfill what they interpret or anticipate as my expectations of them.

Another limitation of this study may be the social location of the co-researchers. Given that they are part of a marginalized group, some co-researchers may tend to express views that are consistent with social standards and try not to present themselves negatively. This social desirability bias may lead respondents to self-censor their actual views, especially considering the possibility of the women's consideration of being recognized in the research. A corresponding limitation may be my own social location being different from the co-researchers. Ethnographic studies by lesbian co-parents would be more apt to provide even richer and more comprehensive accounts of their experience.

Another cultural implication or potential limitation to this study is the social location of the 'fathers'. Though the fathers were physically absent from the family constellations, they were ever present as ghosts who guided the co-researchers actions in varying degrees; from behaviours chosen to directly appease the fathers and their extended families, to behaviours chosen in *anticipation* of the father's expectations. This layered another factor of power within the already complex workings of these families; and might have been inquired about directly.

Implications for Social Work

The lack of academic literature on this topic adversely impacts policy and practice in the social work field, and indicates the need for more research, particularly research that focuses on the expansion of 'family' and the often stigmatized and silent childless lesbian. As the hegemony of the 'traditional family' norm pervades; that stigmatization of women generally, and lesbians specifically is exploited, causing public policies and clinical practices to minimize the threat to the social order by excluding education and family therapies that validate all sexual orientations, and favouring traditional nuclear family arrangements (DiLapi, 1989). Little is actually known about lesbian families in their social and cultural contexts including how they deal with the unique challenges they face because of their 'difference', and how they are redefining family (Laird, 1994). I believed that naming ever increasing categories of 'mother', such as co-mother, was useful to expand the ways that lesbians could legitimate their identities. However, I've since learned additive methods of increasing categories can also be limiting as they do little to address the systems of oppression which restrict legitimizing identities in the first place. Each 'added' category deployed for the purpose of destabilizing the boundlessness of 'motherhood' will always exclude those who remain outside the newly expanded category (Fumia, 1997).

Psychoanalytic, psychodynamic and family system theories have been criticized for their sexist and heterosexist biases, as well as their ethnocentrism, as the experiences of women, particularly women marginalized in the larger society, have been ignored and/or pathologized (Laird, 2000). The lack of adequate language was evident; thwarting their ability to claim space, participation or power (Muzio, 1993; Cantrell, 1994; Nelson, 1996;

Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997; Parks, 1998; Hall & Kitson, 2000), though signifying an opportunity to evolve the conceptualization of family.

Identities are juggled within heteronormative frameworks, forcing lesbians to negotiate multiple subjectivities in an effort to understand their 'positions', in the context of their location in the social world. Paying attention to some of the many layers of how any one woman is positioned reveals how women are regulated and resist being regulated, socially, legally and politically (Fumia, 1997).

Speziale & Gopalakrishna (2004) point out that on a micro level, nuclear families that are headed by lesbian couples function similarly in their daily lives to nuclear families that are headed by heterosexual couples. Both types of families contend competently with the same tasks and concerns, such as development, education and health care needs. However, nuclear families that are headed by heterosexual couples are secure within patriarchal society's organizations and institutions. Safeguarded by their status, they do not usually fear that they or their children will be treated negatively by persons with authority or power within neighbourhood schools, places of worship or health care settings. In contrast, lesbian parents are concerned about and experience rejection because of their sexual orientation, as was the case for Marie in visiting an ex-extended family member in the hospital.

As Marie expected that she and Devi would 'be grandmothers together'; the loss and grief aspect of lesbian 'divorce' needs to have space made for it therapeutically and without stigmatism for both the couple and children who were part of this family constellation, as is available for heterosexual couples and families. Normalizing the effects of lesbian separation might make it possible for women like Marie to continue to have 'a legitimate place in Seth's life'. Social work research, policy and practice are all interwoven and mutually influential.

As one shifts, the impacts affect all areas. By inviting lesbians to share their everyday experiences, it is possible to collapse the silence and invoke their voice; to cast the bones and flesh out their lives.

No matter how much empowerment is achieved by individual lesbian families, none can truly be empowered while heterosexist policies, practices and conditions exist. Social workers must not only be knowledgeable, they must be active in the dismantling of the heterosexism that permeates this culture (Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2002).

Social Work Practice

The issue of social support is a significant one for lesbian headed families, particularly because it is crucial to the development and functioning of the children and adolescents and their psychosocial functioning as adults in society (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004). Faria (1994) implores social workers to convey acceptance to these families and to communicate the message that the lesbian-headed family is a viable alternative to patriarchy's traditional nuclear family. In this way, social workers can truly become allies to lesbian headed families. Laird (1994) describes an ally as "someone who brings lesbians into mainstream conversation" (p. 283).

Social Workers need to be aware of the partisan positions of lesbian groups in their communities and in society to make appropriate and viable referrals for their clients. Lesbian women and their families lack recognition not only from society at large, but some service agencies and the staff who provide services to them. As agents of social change, social workers can alleviate much unnecessary suffering that is inflicted at levels of social functioning (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004).

Hall & Kitson (2000) suggest that lesbian co-parents begin their integration into a family slowly and by parenting through monitoring and liaising with the birth mothers. Slowly, as they achieve success in the children's comfort level and their own self-confidence, they can increase the level of their intervention in the family system. Social workers must nurture the partner-child relationship on its own terms, rather than as a derivative in order to facilitate a better relationship between them and promote assisting the co-parent as an individual in lesbian step-families. Hall & Kitson state "practitioners must promote the integration of the partner into the family" (p. 40). They see the partner's role in disciplining the children as vital, having discovered in their research that:

There were fewer difficulties in lesbian families where there were clear rules of authority and discipline, the children were prepared for the new partner, and the partner did not impose her will upon them (p. 40).

Oshun's statements that "gayness was taboo...she blew the lid off and told her family who are *very religious, very religious*" when discussing Liberty's reluctance to tell her parents are indicative of the need for social workers to learn skills which create safe atmospheres for women like Oshun's partner to explore her options without fear of judgment. A statement that shocked and saddened me that Oshun made was this: "lots of gay women stay in relationships with men, if it's a good one". 'Good one' translated means the 'absence of abuse'. She furthered "they stay in spite of themselves, or because there are children involved, they will stay". Oshun speculated that her current partner might have stayed in her relationship with her husband longer had he not been an alcoholic, selfish and verbally abusive. Lesbians 'coming out' and 'staying in' both present implications for social workers in many fields, including hospitals, transition houses, child welfare, eating disorder and pregnancy clinics, as well as those in private practice.

Social Work Theory/Knowledge

Van Voorhis & Wagner (2002) found that lesbian and gay issues were barely visible in the four American social work journals, and what is available reflect a deficit-based and problem oriented view of gay and lesbian families. Further, they state that based on this paucity of research in professional social work journals, educators would be challenged to provide adequate curriculum content to train current and relevant social work practice with lesbian families in particular. Journals must increase the number of articles on lesbian families, and these articles should address interventions specifically on how to negotiate parenting within the heterosexist conditions that oppress them. Van Voorhis & Wagner state:

More literature is needed that focuses on strengths and addresses ways to achieve social justice and to establish environments that are supportive and affirming for lesbian women [and gay men] if individual well being for gay and lesbian people is to be achieved (p. 353).

Speziale & Gopalakrishna (2004) suggest:

Social workers who honour the bonds, loyalties, and commitments of these families can serve as their advocates in navigating potentially hostile and obstructive social environments. However, to enact this role competently and ethically, social workers must continue to educate themselves or participate in continuing education programs that revise and update their empirically based knowledge (p. 181).

Further they state that the application of current knowledge to practice is vital.

Social Work Research

Researchers must confront the assumptions that lesbians and their families are part of a monolithic community, realizing that there is no one lesbian reality, rather multiple realities. Researchers and practitioners alike must consider the ways in which other forms of oppression and privilege intersect with sexual orientation to affect relationships in lesbian families (Hall & Kitson, 2000). Guided by the findings of research, Speziale &

Gopalakrishna (2004) suggest that social workers must work to build social support for the empowerment of families that are headed by lesbian mothers and co-parents.

Van Voorhis & Wagner (2002) suggest that in order to prepare social work practitioners more research and publications are required on the full range of experiences of lesbian families, stating:

Although thousands of clients that receive social services are homosexual, the silence in the journals preserves the pretence that such clients do not exist, or do not matter (p. 353).

More research on lesbian families, where the focus or 'centre point' begins from the margins, might also expand the rubric of 'family', creating boundaries that are flexible enough to mitigate categories or hierarchies, thus influencing policy to reflect inclusion.

With changing laws around marriage in some provinces, research could be done with married lesbians to see how and/or if this formalization impacts the negotiations that lesbians have in intimate relationships with mothers.

Social Work Policy

It is not enough for social workers to provide ethical and competent services to lesbian headed families, they must be prepared to be public advocates and vie for policy changes that will serve to make these families viable, visible, legitimate and empowered.

Van Voorhis & Wagner (2002) declare that the present literature focuses primarily on raising social workers awareness or providing specific interventions for families, where they see the critical need for social workers to pursue institutional change and to challenge heterosexism in all its forms.

If policies and laws became wide enough to be inclusive, as with the recent legislative changes sanctioning same-sex marriages within Ontario and British Columbia as of 2003, then I suspect that practice shifts would likewise eradicate the need for lesbian families to

feel so isolated and marginalized. Sadly, with any developing social movement also comes certain backlash.

Conclusion

Until recently, families have been defined very narrowly, and our codification has excluded lesbian families. Patriarchal perspectives permeate our current ideology, social systems, and media creating an oppressive environment for lesbian headed families to attempt to function in. Lesbians in intimate relationships with mothers lack social acceptance, language to define and include them, and are until recently almost silent in social work professional literature. It is difficult to not be aware of the elements of power within our society; since it is structured hierarchically. I believe this awareness lends a proper context when analyzing the power elements within these lesbian-headed families. It is difficult to function within our society so far outside of the rules, prescriptions and expectations; to live wholly at the margins. The margin dwellers in the research have shown that they do indeed participate in the social morays of this epoch; including participating through power differentials, power struggles and power manipulation. However, this being said, the co-researchers in this study demonstrated their resilience, strength and courage to participate daily in the lives of families that they do not often have legal attachments, yet burgeon with emotional attachments, love and commitment. Their experiences are wide, rich and indeed, worth examination, consideration and inclusion on all levels.

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APPENDIX I
INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1) How would you define mothering?
- 2) Have you been more consciously aware of yourself as 'mother'? Explain.
- 3) How did you and your partner decide what the children would call you?
- 4) Is your mothering style different from your partners?
- 5) How do you decide what mothering tasks you will do? Your partner?
- 6) What mothering tasks do you never do? Why do you think that is?
- 7) As a couple, how do you decide how to discipline the children?
- 8) Did you learn anything from your own mother that helps you in this family?
- 9) Did you learn anything from your own mother that hinders you in this family?
- 10) Describe what might happen/has happened to your relationship with the children
if/when you and your partner were to break up?
- 11) Can you contrast 'play' and 'work' in this family? What is similar? What is different?
Is there a balance?
- 12) Do you have a significant 'mothering' story of your own you'd be willing to share?

INTERVIEW GUIDE 2
(Revised after 2 interviews)

- 1) I am seeking to understand the everyday experiences of childless lesbians who are partnered with women who have children. I began my research calling these women co-mothers. I've had some interesting feedback with that 'title'. Would you comment on if or how the term 'co-mother fits for you?
- 2) How would you describe your relationship with your partner's child/ren? What words do you use?
- 3) How do you and your partner negotiate roles and responsibilities that have to do with the child/ren; such as parenting, discipline, etc.
- 4) How was the decision made around what the child/ren would call you?
- 5) What is your experience like when you describe your relationship with your partner and her child/ren?
- 6) What is your experience with your partner's extended family?
- 7) What is your experience like in public with your partner and her child/ren?
- 8) Would you tell me about what it is like for you to be involved with children in an intimate relationship?
- 9) Would you describe the quality of your relationship with the child/ren?
- 10) In your experience, what is it like to be involved with a partner who has children as opposed to one who does not?
- 11) If I were to ask you what the essence of your experience is with this/these child/ren, what would you say?
- 12) Is there anything that you really want me to know about what it is like for you to be in a relationship with a woman who has children?

APPENDIX II

LITERATURE ILLUSTRATING CANADA'S LEGAL EVOLUTION TO INCLUDE LESBIAN AND GAY MARRIAGE AND THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS THAT SUPPORT THIS MOVE.

Valuing All Families

Professional Opinion

The prevailing professional opinion is that a parent's sexual orientation has nothing to do with his or her ability to be a good parent. All major research studies, including a 2001 meta-analysis of two decades of studies on the topic, show that the sexual orientation of a parent is irrelevant to the development of a child's mental health and social development and to the quality of a parent-child relationship. (See *(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?* by Judith Stacey and Tim Biblarz in the *American Sociological Review*, April 2001.)

The nation's leading child welfare, psychological and children's health organizations also have issued policy or position statements declaring that a parent's sexual orientation is irrelevant to his or her ability to raise a child. Many also have condemned discrimination based on sexual orientation in adoption, custody and other parenting situations and called for equal rights for all parents and children. Further, several of these organizations also have issued statements declaring that a parent's gender identity and/or physical appearance is irrelevant to his or her abilities as a parent.

National Association of Social Workers (2002)

The National Association of Social Workers approved the following policy statement at in August 2002 at the NASW Delegate Assembly.

"Legislation legitimizing second-parent adoptions in same-sex households should be supported. Legislation seeking to restrict foster care and adoption by gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people should be vigorously opposed."

- Source: Social Work Speaks: National Association of Social Workers Policy Statements, 2003-2006.

American Academy of Family Physicians (2002)

On gay and lesbian parenting. The American Academy of Family Physicians adopted the following position statement at its October 2002 meeting:

"RESOLVED, That the AAFP establish policy and be supportive of legislation which promotes a safe and nurturing environment, including psychological and legal security, for all children, including those of adoptive parents, regardless of the parents' sexual orientation."

American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (2004)

On same-sex unions. The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers adopted the following position statement at its November 2004 meeting:

"BE IT RESOLVED that the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers supports the legalization of marriage between same-sex couples and the extension to same-sex couples who marry and their children of all of the legal rights and obligations of spouses and children of spouses."

"BE IT RESOLVED that the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers encourages the United States Congress and the legislatures of all states to achieve the legalization of marriage between same-sex couples and the extension to same-sex couples who marry and their children of all of the legal rights and obligations of spouses and children of spouses."

- AAML Source Document

American Anthropological Association (2004)

On same-sex unions. The American Anthropological Association issued the following statement in February 2004:

"The results of more than a century of anthropological research on households, kinship relationships, and families, across cultures and through time, provide no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Rather, anthropological research supports the conclusion that a vast array of family types, including families built upon same-sex partnerships, can contribute to stable and humane societies.

The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association strongly opposes a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to heterosexual couples."

- AAA source document

American Medical Association

On gay and lesbian parenting. The American Medical Association adopted the following position statement at its June 2004 meeting:

"Whereas, Having two fully sanctioned and legally defined parents promotes a safe and nurturing environment for children, including psychological and legal security; and

"Whereas, Children born or adopted into families headed by partners who are of the same sex usually have only one biologic or adoptive legal parent; and

"Whereas, The legislative protection afforded to children of parents in homosexual relationships varies from state to state, with some states enacting or considering legislation sanctioning co-parent or second parent adoption by partners of the same sex, several states declining to consider legislation, and at least one state altogether banning adoption by the second parent; and

"Whereas, Co-parent or second parent adoption guarantees that the second parent's custody rights and responsibilities are protected if the first parent dies or becomes incapacitated; and

"Whereas, Co-parent or second parent adoption ensures the child's eligibility for health benefits from both parents and establishes the requirement for child support from both parents in the event of the parents' separation; and

"Whereas, Co-parent or second parent adoption establishes legal grounds to provide consent for medical care and to make health care decisions on behalf of the child and guarantees visitation rights if the child becomes hospitalized; and

"Whereas, The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychiatric Association have each issued statements supporting initiatives which allow same-sex couples to adopt and co-parent children; therefore be it

"RESOLVED, That our American Medical Association support legislative and other efforts to allow the adoption of a child by the same-sex partner, or opposite sex non-married partner, who functions as a second parent or co-parent to that child. (New HOD Policy)"

On parenting. The American Psychological Association Council of Representatives adopted this position statement July 28, 2004:

"WHEREAS APA supports policy and legislation that promote safe, secure and nurturing environments for all children (DeLeon, 1993, 1995; Fox, 1991; Levant, 2000);

“WHEREAS APA has a long-established policy to deplore ‘all public and private discrimination against gay men and lesbians’ and urges ‘the repeal of all discriminatory legislation against lesbians and gay men’ (Conger, 1975);

“WHEREAS the APA adopted the Resolution on Child Custody and Placement in 1976 (Conger, 1977, p. 432);

“WHEREAS Discrimination against lesbian and gay parents deprives their children of benefits, rights and privileges enjoyed by children of heterosexual married couples;

“WHEREAS Some jurisdictions prohibit gay and lesbian individuals and same-sex couples from adopting children, notwithstanding the great need for adoptive parents (Lofton v. Secretary, 2004);

“WHEREAS There is no scientific evidence that parenting effectiveness is related to parental sexual orientation: lesbian and gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive and healthy environments for their children (Patterson, 2000, 2004; Perrin, 2002; Tasker, 1999);

“WHEREAS Research has shown that the adjustment, development and psychological well-being of children is unrelated to parental sexual orientation and that the children of lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those of heterosexual parents to flourish (Patterson, 2004; Perrin, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001);

“THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED That the APA opposes any discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care and reproductive health services;”

“THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED That the APA believes that children reared by a same-sex couple benefit from legal ties to each parent;

“THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED That the APA supports the protection of parent-child relationships through the legalization of joint adoptions and second parent adoptions of children being reared by same-sex couples;

“THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED That APA shall take a leadership role in opposing all discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care and reproductive health services;

“THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED That APA encourages psychologists to act to eliminate all discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care, and reproductive health services in their practice, research, education and training (Ethical Principles, 2002, p. 1063);

“THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED That the APA shall provide scientific and educational resources that inform public discussion and public policy development regarding discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care and reproductive health services and that assist its members, divisions and affiliated state, provincial, and territorial psychological associations.”

- **APA source document**

<http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=Family>

British Columbia

May 18, 2004

NDP party defends gay marriage rights in BC

Last March, same-sex couples in B.C. almost lost the right to control the remains of a deceased partner. Thanks to the vigilance of the NDP opposition party, and Joy MacPhail, the slight-of-hand by the governing Liberal party was caught. The Liberals finally revised the definition of spouse, last week, in response to same-sex marriage. "It is just such a shame the Liberals chose to waffle for so long," MacPhail said.

June 30, 2004

The first registered gay marriage: Jan 14, '01

Canada has the distinction of recognizing and registering the earliest known gay and lesbian marriages in modern times: January 14, 2001. The marriages of Kevin Bourassa & Joe Varnell and Anne & Elaine Vautour were registered by Ontario after a June 10, 2003 order from the Court of Appeal for Ontario. A certificate of marriage finally arrived for presentation at MCC Toronto's Pride day service.

Status of Legal Challenges Equal Marriage arrives in Canada!

Three main court challenges were launched against both federal and provincial governments of British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec. The couples involved in these three cases won their right to choose marriage recognized in accordance with the principles of equality and freedom that all Canadians value.

Meanwhile, other provinces continue to discriminate, and in the absence of timely action from our national leaders, couples have gone to courts in the Yukon, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland / Labrador to obtain court orders to protect their right to marriage.

February 1, 2005

Bill C-38 reaches House of Commons Marriage equality now set for MP debates

Today marks the first reading of Bill C-38: legislation to introduce marriage equality nation-wide. The following is the text of the bill.

BILL C-38

An Act respecting certain aspects of legal capacity for marriage for civil purposes

Summary

This enactment extends the legal capacity for marriage for civil purposes to same-sex couples in order to reflect values of tolerance, respect and equality, consistent with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It also makes consequential amendments to other Acts to ensure equal access for same-sex couples to the civil effects of marriage and divorce.

<http://www.samesexmarriage.ca/legal/bill010205.htm>