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LESBIAN MOTHER FAMILIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT

By

Lucy Renee Mercier

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ABSTRACT

LESBIAN MOTHER FAMILIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT

By

Lucy Renee Mercier

Social and political discourse on gay and lesbian families, increased public knowledge of single-parent and same-sex families, and the notoriety of a few lesbians in popular culture recently have focused attention on lesbian mother families. In response, social science researchers have begun to examine some of the conditions and circumstances of lesbian mother families. This project attempted to provide an in-depth exploration of the interactions within lesbian mother families and between these families and the social environment.

This study used a modified snowball sampling technique to recruit 125 self-identified lesbian mothers living in Michigan. Respondents completed questionnaires that gathered information on demographics, relationship status, family composition, and level of support for sexual orientation. In addition, descriptive data on respondents' children were gathered. While the questionnaire data provided important information about the sample of lesbian mother families, the focus of the study was on face-to-face interviews with a sub-sample of 21 volunteers selected from the questionnaire sample. Interviews centered on the completion of genograms and eco maps for respondent families. Data were collected on types of relationships, satisfaction with relationships,

relationship strengths and relationship stressors for interactions within families and between families and their environments.

Analysis of interview data for partner-partner, parent-child, sibling, household-children's schools, and household-mothers' work relationships revealed that the lesbian mothers in this study were strongly committed to caring for their children and to maintaining their families. Respondents were open about sexual orientation, were highly involved in their children's schools, and used creative strategies for balancing work and family. Areas of stress as well as strategies for responding to challenges to family survival and success were highlighted.

Implications of the study for policy, practice, and research are discussed.

For my partner, Linda, and our son, Robert, because of their endless patience,

sustenance and humor throughout this process. Also, for the women and men

who preceded us with courage and dignity, preparing a place for our family to

thrive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

disclosure of the conditions of their lives has resulted in a gold mine of data. More than that, though, they have modeled determination and dedication to families and children. I have felt privileged to know each of them.

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INTRODUCTION

While families headed by lesbian mothers do not represent a new family form, recent publicity about lesbian mothers may make it seem so. Significant social and political discourse on gay and lesbian family policy, increased public knowledge about alternative fertilization, and the notoriety of a few lesbians in popular culture have focused attention on same-sex couples as parents. While gay and lesbian parenting has been debated by legislative and judicial bodies and the media for the past few years, social scientists have been collecting data about families headed by lesbian and gay adults since the 1980's. For the past two decades, psychologists, sociologists, social workers and cultural anthropologists have reported on lesbian mother families, and have begun to describe the particular challenges faced by lesbians and their children in the United States and other western cultures (Parks, 1998).

The profession of social work is uniquely concerned with the intersection between human beings and the social environment. Social workers are also charged with a responsibility to understand and assist members of disadvantaged groups, especially those for whom oppression is the result of social conditions (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). Thus, the study of lesbian mother families is relevant to social work in that it directly responds to the profession's charge to "promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity" (p. 5)

Most social scientists agree that lesbians are increasingly involved in motherhood (e.g. Arnup, 1995; Lewin, 1993; Weston, 1991). In the past, most

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lesbian mothers were involved in parenting the children born to them through heterosexual partnerings (Lewin, 1993). Changes in reproductive technology and in interpretation of family law seem to have resulted in greater overall numbers of actively parenting lesbians (Patterson, 1995), as more women choose to have children within the context of a primary relationship with another woman or within the social environment of the lesbian community (Martin, 1993). The experiences of these women suggest a number of special issues and problems that are properly the focus of social work research and analysis.

Contemporary lesbian parenting is influenced by social, economic, interpersonal and individual factors. That is, the visibility and viability of lesbian-headed families are influenced by definitions of sexual orientation and deviance, availability of wage labor, and social support for women living independently from men (Laird & Green, 1996). Oppression, as well as opportunity to overcome discriminatory practices and conditions, shapes the context in which lesbian mothers create and nurture their families (Hartman, 1996). Such factors influence the individual experiences and outcomes of lesbian mothers, while they help to frame the social conditions that impact all American families.

The topic of sexual orientation in social work and family theory is important because of its relationship to issues as diverse as gender roles in family life, understanding of family structure and function, the impact of social support and social policy on family life, and the role of individual experience in the success of families. Descriptive research that uses demographic data to explore the relevance of sexual orientation with respect to oppression is difficult to

accomplish because of the reluctance of research subjects to identify themselves. However, anecdotal evidence and several national surveys reveal that gay men and lesbians experience significant problems in daily life: rejection by families of origin and important sources of interpersonal support; employment discrimination; denial of certain employment-related benefits (e.g. domestic partner programs and family leave); barriers to legally-recognized marriage (and thus all the federal and state benefits that marriage allows); threats to child custody; and increased risk of anti-gay violence (Harvard Law Review, 1990). In addition to these rather concrete issues, lesbians and gay men report that social stigmatization, and the fear of subtler forms of discrimination or rejection, negatively impact the quality of their lives (Steinhorn, 1985).

A major theme of contemporary family research is its increasing recognition of diverse families (Berardo, 1991). As definitions of family move away from conventional gender constraints, new knowledge emerges that emphasizes an understanding of family as a complex and changeable arena for working through interpersonal, economic, political and other relations (Ferree, 1991). While important research on mainstream families continues, sociological understanding of non-traditional families is vital to the continuing development of knowledge in the field. Lesbian mother families "provide a fertile testing ground for family theories and simultaneously pose ... challenges for dominant family theories" (Demo & Allen, 1996. p. 423).

In addition, lesbian mother families share important commonalties with many contemporary families, so exploration of the experiences of lesbian

mothers also has important implications for many parents outside of the lesbian community. Research on lesbian mother families helps to illuminate the larger questions asked by social scientists trying to understand alternative family forms and increases understanding of the relationships between gender, sexuality and family. Single heterosexual mothers or fathers, gay men who parent, unmarried cohabiting heterosexual parents, and grandparents who raise grandchildren may experience many of the conditions impacting lesbian-mother families.

This project proceeded from earlier studies of lesbian mothers, with a particular emphasis on the exploration of institutional and interpersonal support and obstacles in the social environments of lesbian mother families. It rested on the assumption that lesbians are challenged by social, economic, and interpersonal factors and that these conditions influence their experiences as members of families. Rather than focusing on problems, however, I hoped that the nature of this research design would yield data that reflect both obstacles and opportunities in the respondents' families and social interactions.

While demographic data were collected and quantitatively analyzed, the primary focus of this study was on rich descriptions of relationships within the family and between the family and systems in the social environment. By using face-to-face interviews in a qualitative research format, I hoped to bring the voices of lesbian mothers more directly into the academic conversation about their lives and experiences.

Chapter 1

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature on lesbian mothers is surprisingly abundant. Most of the social science research on lesbian mother families is found in the disciplines of sociology and psychology. In addition, social workers have written about this population from both social policy and clinical perspectives, while Lewin (1993) and Weston (1991) offer two notable anthropological perspectives. I have also included in this review important works from the lesbian press. Pies' (1988) and Martin's (1993) books are widely read and cited as source books for lesbian mothers and are included here in order to more directly reflect the experiences and concerns of lesbian mother families.

Much of the research on lesbian mother families has been conducted without evidence of a formal connection to a larger research agenda. While a few of the studies reviewed here included references to theoretical or conceptual foundations for research activities, the majority of the studies were exploratory or descriptive in nature. The condition of research on lesbian mother families, then, seems to parallel that of research on other types of families. Knowledge building about lesbian mothers has not always followed the conventions of theory building (Sprey, 1991). Because the research on lesbian mothers is interdisciplinary and issue-driven, its theoretical development has been uneven. For example, studies influenced by liberal feminist concern about equal access to resources (e.g., Martin, 1993) occur side-by-side with increasing numbers of projects influenced

by feminist standpoint theory and intersectionist analyses (e.g., Mitchell, 1996). While the diverse theory bases are not necessarily exclusive, they may rely on completely different world-views, and thus the conclusions drawn from the studies do not always complement each other.

The following section is an overview and critical analysis of the research on lesbian mother families. Throughout, I have attempted to provide context for various approaches to studying lesbian mothers. As Sprey (1991) pointed out, research on the family is subject to trends and currents, many of which provide opportunities for enhancing the quality of the research, as well as the relevance of the knowledge gathered. Recently, researchers seem to agree that lesbian mother families are unique, diverse, and impacted by a wide range of influences and factors. Dahlheimer and Feigal (1991), for example, emphasized the interplay of individual, relational, social, political, economic and other factors in the lives of lesbian mothers. While the research on lesbian mother families has often failed to follow a coherent research agenda, it is beginning to address the wide range of factors impacting these families.

The topic of lesbian mothers is embedded in the development of knowledge about women and their experiences, and in the consideration of the ways in which women, as members of a distinct social group, experience and manage diverse circumstances. Traditional social science research has often ignored women's experiences, misinterpreted women's responses, or dismissed women's issues as unimportant (Stacey & Thorne, 1985). Even when women's concerns have been addressed in research and practice, the limitations of

conventional social science epistemology have impaired researchers' chances of producing results that are relevant for women (Harding, 1991). Similarly, in the unique circumstances under which social scientists adequately address issues of gender, frameworks for knowledge often have failed to account for variance in women's experience in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and other axes of difference (Smith, 1990). These epistemological shortcomings limit the usefulness of conventional research. More importantly, restrictive frameworks for knowledge produce a climate of false knowledge, leading practitioners and researchers alike to accept the false assumptions upon which conventional social research is often based.

In this chapter, I will review the existing literature on lesbian mothers and their families. The review begins with an overview of four major research summaries that provide a foundation for the detailed examination of studies covered in subsequent sections. Literature on legal issues is surveyed in order to provide background on policy issues and to explore the historical significance of child custody issues with lesbian mothers. Writing about clinical intervention with lesbian mother families, and studies of lesbians' decisions about parenting provide knowledge about practice concerns with lesbian mothers. Research that compares lesbian mothers with other populations, as well as more recent studies that consider lesbian parenting as a unique experience, are reviewed for their relevance for knowledge development in the field of family studies. The chapter concludes with the research questions that provided the basis for this study.

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Research Summaries

Scholarly and systematic research about lesbians has been conducted for approximately the past 40 years (Tully, 1995). In contrast to the large body of literature that explores sex roles, female psychosocial development and various attitudes and behaviors of heterosexual women, the research on lesbians has been relatively circumscribed. Specific studies of lesbian mothers are even more limited in number and scope. Since the 1980's however, researchers have begun to acknowledge lesbian parenting with greater attention to the characteristics of lesbian mother families, as well as to the processes by which these families are built and maintained (Parks, 1998).

The writing on research and research trends in the study of lesbian mothers reflects a self-consciousness about the ways in which knowledge development occurs in the social context. Research summaries serve to place the study of lesbian mothers into a cultural and epistemological perspective, clarifying the significance of specific research questions as well as the selection of research subjects. The research summaries reviewed here place the contemporary study of lesbian mothers into an historical framework.

The research on lesbian mothers tends to fall into general categories based on the focus of the researchers. The categories themselves are instructive, insofar as they reflect the general viewpoint of the research community and the state of knowledge development in relation to lesbians as mothers. Four recent works reviewed and analyzed trends in research related to lesbian mothers. These authors used the implicit categories suggested by

research questions and outcomes to examine trends in research on lesbians overall. The research summaries also projected future trends and suggested frameworks appropriate for the study of lesbians and lesbian families. The following is a review of those summaries.

Joan Laird (1994) examined the major themes and trends in research on lesbians with an emphasis on the ways in which the positivist paradigm restricts understanding about the unique strengths of lesbian families. Laird identified the major research themes related to lesbians as: causation of homosexuality; gay and lesbian mental health; coming out; gay and lesbian couple relationships; and children of lesbian parents. She noted that these themes reflect the research community's "deficit-based stance" (p. 268) and its emphasis on individual, psychological and cognitive constructs. Laird argued for a re-vision of lesbian life as one in which women move from one cultural context to another with relative ease.

Carol Tully (1995) examined the major historic themes in research about lesbians in detail. She found that, beginning in the 1950's, research on lesbians focused on the etiology of lesbianism, especially the role of childhood experiences, family relationships, and genetics. A review of the data collected over four decades of study on the 'causes' of lesbianism exposed the research as inconclusive. Like Laird, Tully noted that, between the 1960's and 1980's, researchers shifted from focusing on lesbianism as pathology to an exploration of lesbian identity development, and social integration. Since the 1970's, research has emphasized the strengths of lesbian respondents by examining their social

behavior, intimate relationships, political and occupational roles, sexual norms, and families of origin. Since the 1980's, studies that focus on adolescence, adulthood, midlife, and aging have collected data on the spectrum of experiences and issues encountered by lesbians across the life span. Tully described a final trend in research about lesbians, namely, the focus on clinical intervention with lesbians and their families. In contrast to the early deficit-driven research on etiology and psychological functioning, these studies focus on the role of the helping professional in assisting lesbians to manage the unique stressors of living as an oppressed minority.

Allen and Demo (1995) reviewed the research on lesbians by examining the ways in which the family relations of lesbians and gay men have been described in the social science literature. They reviewed articles published in nine professional journals, concluding that the published research on these families remains limited. However, they noted that gays and lesbians have gained a modest visibility in the literature since 1980. Nevertheless, Allen and Demo insisted that this trend toward greater visibility is generally superficial. "For the most part, lesbians and gay men, as individuals or couples, but rarely as members of families, are mentioned at the beginning or end of an article in a list of examples of diverse experience" (p. 17).

The most recent review of the literature on lesbian mothers (Parks, 1998) called for research that explores the ways in which lesbian mother families develop and function outside of traditional social support systems. Parks emphasized the heterogeneity of lesbian mother families, with particular attention

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to each lesbian mother's "parenthood history" (p. 387), and to the unique

structures and relationships formed in various lesbian mother families.

The exclusionary methods and practices of family researchers are

highlighted by each of the preceding research summaries. Allen and Demo

(1995) challenged the use of large, demographic data sets in which information

about sexual orientation has not been collected and decried the practice of

assuming that marital status or parenting role is a valid indicator of heterosexual

orientation. Parks (1998) pointed out the limitations of small sample sizes and

the continued concentration of white, middle class women as both researchers

and respondents in this area. Continued integration of lesbian and gay

standpoints into the family studies research paradigm is suggested through non-

traditional frameworks such as biculturalism, life course perspective, social

ecology and feminist theory (Allen & Demo, 1995) and ethnographic and feminist

research methods (Laird, 1994; Tully, 1995).

Legal Concerns

Research and writing about lesbian mothers has long been associated

with issues of family and civil law, such as child custody and inheritance rights.

While much of the writing on legal aspects of lesbian motherhood is oriented

toward the legal community, several authors provide summary material relevant

to this review and so are mentioned here.

A fundamental issue for lesbian mother families is the way in which

lesbians' access to socially- and legally-sanctioned family forms is restricted by

traditional definitions of family. The implications of exclusion from the institution

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of family are especially profound for lesbian couples. Since same-sex couples are not offered the option of legally recognized marriage, even strongly committed, long-term lesbian relationships are marked by the absence of legal protections automatically afforded heterosexual couples. Death benefits, inheritance laws, and the protections normally provided by trusts and wills are not ensured for surviving members of lesbian couples, and may limit ability to provide for children (Harvard Law Review, 1990). Similarly, state laws systematically discriminate against gay and lesbian families in other arenas such as housing, workers' compensation benefits and tort actions where the plaintiff is a same-sex partner of a victim (Harvard Law Review, 1990). Some lesbian couples attempt to subvert these legal realities by drawing up legal documents, such as powers of attorney, wills, and trusts, but even then, few have the assurance of well-established legal precedent in support of their families. In the event that one member of a lesbian couple dies or becomes incapacitated, biological relatives can and do challenge the claim of the remaining partner over children and property.

Legal concerns around child custody and parenting rights/obligations are complex and evolving issues for lesbian mothers (Martin, 1993). In Western culture, parental obligation for the support and care of minor children is regarded as one of the primary functions of family life. In addition to the obligations of acting as guardians of their children, parents have important privileges, including the right to associate with and live with their children, and to make innumerable

decisions regarding their children's health, education, activities and other functions (Curry, Clifford & Leonard, 1994).

Besides these everyday obligations and advantages, parental status offers some powerful legal protections, especially when questions arise over the competence of parents to take care of their children. Thus, in cases where the custody of a child is disputed in court, the law generally favors the biological/legal parent(s), except when remaining with the parent would not be in the "best interests of the child" (Harvard Law Review, 1990). Historically, discovery of a custodial parent's homosexuality has been sufficient cause to legally challenge child custody arrangements. Today, while most courts no longer award custody to the heterosexual parent solely based on sexual orientation, such considerations are legal and are applied (Rivera, 1987; Harvard Law Review, 1990).

Arguments against lesbian mothers in custody suits traditionally have invoked stereotypes about lesbians as emotionally immature, unstable, non-maternal, and likely to expose children to sexual abuse (Falk, 1989). Alternatively, the courts have heard arguments suggesting that children of lesbian mothers are likely to be teased by peers, that the mother's romantic/sexual relationships will not allow adequate time for parenting, and that children will become mentally ill by exposure to their mothers' lifestyle (Kleber, Howell and Tibbits-Kleber, 1986). The most common argument against awarding custody to a lesbian mother, however, has been the assumption that children

raised by lesbians are more likely to become homosexual themselves (Falk, 1989).

Beyond the obvious and debatable assumption that heterosexual parents and children are more desirable than homosexuals are, the implications of such legal arguments in separating mothers and children are enormous. As early as three decades ago, studies investigating these assumptions about lesbian mothers found them to be unsubstantiated by empirical data (e.g., Browne & Giampetro, 1985; Rand, Graham & Rawlings, 1982). A review of research on lesbian mothers and child custody reveals that "research regarding lesbian motherhood has consistently failed to provide any evidence for necessarily inferior parenting styles" (Kleber, Howell & Tibbits-Kleber, 1986, p. 86). In spite of consistent social science evidence that lesbian mothers are often indistinguishable from their heterosexual counterparts, judges and family court referees continue to consider such arguments in hearings for custody, visitation and parental rights (Harvard Law Review, 1990: Polikoff, 1986; Robson, 1994).

Law and custom act simultaneously as protection and hazard for lesbian parents. Lesbians who are the biological mothers of their children are often favored in child custody disputes because of traditions which privilege birth mothers over all others in determining the "best interests of the child" (Polikoff, 1986). Thus, even in cases where neglect or abuse is alleged, legal precedent exists which steers the court toward continued placement with the mother until / unless gross endangerment to the child is substantiated. Even in cases where the sexual orientation of the mother is considered, more and more courts are

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deciding in favor of the biological mother of the child (ren), not because the court accepts or supports diversity in family structure, but because the rights of biological parents are considered preponderant in such cases (Harvard Law Review, 1990).

On the other hand, the law disadvantages lesbian mothers who are not the birth mothers of their children. Non-biological mothers are often unable to obtain legal custody or guardianship of children they have supported and raised since birth, even after the death of the child's birth mother. Similarly, even when the birth mother or adoptive mother desires a co-parent to be legally recognized so that support obligations, insurance coverage and others benefits can be assured, the courts may not allow the action (Hitchens, 1979; 1988).

In lesbian mother families, the non-biological /non-adoptive co-parent lives in "a legal as well as social and emotional netherworld" (Muzio, 1993, p. 225). The implication of invisibility for this sub-group of lesbian mothers is important in exploring the formation and maintenance of lesbian mother families. The planned two-parent lesbian mother family, in particular, challenges the assumption that there can be no more than one mother at a time in a family.

Some states are beginning to test provisions for two unrelated people to adopt the same child by allowing lesbian co-parents to carry out second-parent adoptions. Some second-parent adoptions use precedents set by step parent adoptions (Harvard Law Review, 1990). Others rely on recent adoption reforms to re-interpret adoption law. In second-parent adoptions, legal parents may chose adoptive parents for their children. In some courts, by naming themselves

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and their female partners as these new adoptive parents, mothers have been able to legally affirm the existing co-parenting relationship. The procedure is not without risk and expense. A home study must be completed by a licensed social service agency. Mothers must voluntarily relinquish their legal rights to the children, if only for a brief time. Social service and court fees run into thousands of dollars in most cases. Finally, many judges simply refuse to grant second-parent adoptions. As of April 1997, courts in the District of Columbia and 21 states had approved second-parent adoptions by lesbian and gay couples, but the process is not universally available even in those areas (Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1997).

Clinical Perspectives

Although writing about legal concerns was an early focus in the lesbian mother literature, the contemporary focus in the field is on writing by and for clinicians who encounter lesbians as individuals and members of families in distress. Literature in this category emphasizes the professional obligation of therapists, educators, and social service practitioners to familiarize themselves with sexual minorities and to use realistic and empowering strategies in their clinical work with lesbians and their families. The presence of these articles in the social science literature speaks to the authors' continued perception that sub-standard service is provided to lesbian mother families. In addition, as with other populations, clinical literature impacts problem definition and the construction of knowledge about a population (Ganong & Coleman, 1994).

Marny Hall (1978) introduced a number of themes about lesbian motherhood that have echoed through the literature for nearly 20 years. Using anecdotal data, she described the stressors experienced by lesbians who must deal with disclosure of their sexual orientation and a changing socio-political climate, including threats to child custody, ambivalence about the role of the co-parent in the family, concerns about gender socialization for male children, and disclosure of parental sexual orientation to children. Since Hall's initial work, several authors have restated the problems encountered by lesbian mothers. Child support and child custody litigation (Erlichman, 1988; Steinhorn, 1985), problems in social relationships and communication with children (Patterson, 1994; Steinhorn, 1985), and heterosexism in the practice community (Crawford, 1987; Markowitz, 1991) are frequently reviewed and discussed as common experiences for lesbian mother families.

Therapists and other human service professionals continue to struggle in their relationships with lesbian mother families. Evidence of this struggle is found in nearly all of the clinical literature on lesbian mother families, which continues to include exhortations to: acknowledge the existence of lesbian mother families; to confront individual and institutional heterosexism; to increase education about lesbian mothers' special needs and resources; and to increase advocacy for lesbian mother families in the judicial system, treatment context and professional community (Dahlheimer & Feigal, 1991; Erlichman, 1988; Hall,1978; Kirkpatrick,1987; Steinhorn, 1985).

A few writers have addressed clinical issues relevant to lesbian mother families more specifically. Markowitz (1991) discussed the emerging importance of ritual in gay and lesbian families. Joanna Rorhbaugh (1992) addressed issues unique to lesbian mother families, including maternal competition over providing and receiving nurturing, benefits discrimination, acceptance by extended family and lesbian friendship networks. Chambers (1998) and Morton (1998) focused on the emotional, legal and social implications of lesbian family dissolution.

The writing on general practice issues is essential for the naive or uninformed practitioner and helps to inform the development of research questions. However, a small body of literature exists that addresses more specialized practice arenas or discusses application of social science theory to practice principles or techniques. Clinical intervention with lesbian mother families is beginning to gain recognition as a legitimate focus for the practice community. Specific family therapy practice techniques such as genograms, sociograms and family sculpting (Shernoff, 1984), behavioral change tasks (Baptiste, 1987) and adaptation of conventional couples and family therapy for lesbian mother families (Ussher, 1991) are important contemporary currents in the clinical literature. Although most of this clinical writing continues to be focused on stable and articulate family members who are voluntarily seeking treatment, other types of lesbian mother families are beginning to be recognized as well. Faria (1994), for example, wrote about family preservation with severely dysfunctional lesbian mother families.

Clinical perspectives on lesbian mother families reflect both changing social realities and remarkably stable attitudes toward lesbian mother families. In a recent, brief review of clinical issues with gay and lesbian families, Charlotte Patterson (1994) summarized aspects of gay and lesbian family life identified as clinically relevant in the practice literature. Her discussion echoed previous authors' work that dealt with family relationships, legal and economic issues, social support and psychological well-being. This relatively recent publication is noteworthy in that its introduction includes nearly the same discussion of the way in which "the concept of gay and lesbian families is viewed as an oxymoron" (p. 62) as articles published nearly 20 years earlier.

While relative ignorance about lesbian mother families remains, social realities seem to be in transition. For example, Pies' (1987) discussion of social group work for lesbians contemplating parenting emphasized the relative isolation in which these families existed. In contrast, Sears (1994) emphasized the power of institutional policies in creating nurturing environments for these families and for educating the public about the positive aspects of alternative family forms. His work outlined anti-harassment guidelines, ideas for developing curriculum about gay and lesbian families, and proposals for including appropriate role models in the school environment. As more rigorous and theory-directed studies of lesbian mothers become common, the literature on clinical work with these families is likely to become more sophisticated as well as increasingly useful.

The Decision to Parent

In contemporary mainstream family research, decisions about whether or not to become a parent are often relegated to studies of adolescent sexual behavior (e.g., Miller & Moore, 1991). In contrast, the writing that examines decisions made by lesbian individuals and couples to parent constitutes a significant category in the research on lesbian mother families. Pies' (1988) landmark book on pathways to lesbian parenting, although written for a lay audience and published by the lesbian press, heralded an important trend in social science research on lesbian mother families. Early works included material on options for becoming a parent, legal issues for lesbian mothers, dynamics of co-parenting, and family-of-origin reactions to lesbian mother families. In addition, both Pies (1988, 1989) and Martin (1993) addressed topics like diversity in family structure, the role of employment and money in parenting decisions, the impact of children on adult intimate relationships and the role of gender in lesbians' decisions to parent.

While few of these studies used conventional research to support their assertions, many theorized about important issues such as how lesbians make decisions about methods of becoming parents, the interaction between parenting and lesbian partnerships, and the implications of work and money for parenting decisions. Written from a lesbian feminist perspective, Pies' (1988) work, in particular, includes material throughout on single lesbians, lesbians of color and lesbians with disabilities, and has acted as an important catalyst for subsequent inclusive social science research. Similarly, Weston (1991) skillfully integrated

interview narratives with her own observations and insights to describe the complex of relationships that are understood to constitute 'family' as a created phenomenon within the lesbian and gay community. Weston successfully articulated the unique unimportance of biology in defining lesbian and gay families. "Biological relatedness appeared to be a subsidiary option ranged alongside adoption, co-parenting, and so on, within the dominant framework of choice that constituted families we create" (p.189). Although limited by both its methodology and its broad focus, Weston's research significantly focused on understanding the meanings of lesbians' experiences of parenting, from the importance of the appearances of their children to the ideology of choice in the decision to parent.

Kenney and Tash (1992) further developed many of the anecdotal themes from the early writing on pathways to parenting. Their work culminated in a four-stage model of the lesbian childbearing experience. In their view, lesbians first must deal with their own projections of the impact of children on their identity, community relationships and family of origin. Once the decision to conceive is made, women must explore options for conception, including choices between using a known or anonymous donor, clinic or home insemination and the use of assisted insemination or intercourse with a man. Once pregnancy occurs, many lesbian's primary dilemmas involve deciding whether to deliver the child in the hospital or in an alternative location, such as at home. In addition, locating a supportive health care provider who is sensitive to the concerns of the emerging lesbian family is important. Finally, post-delivery concerns such as co-parenting,

partner adoption, and community acceptance are cited as important dilemmas experienced by lesbians who decide to parent.

The literature on lesbians' decisions to become mothers outlines several areas of potential difficulty for these families. Rohrbaugh (1989) noted three themes common to the parenting decisions of lesbians: lesbian identity, relationships with parents and couples issues. Related to these issues are problems such as the legal "invisibility" of the co-parent, the role of the donor in the life of the child, and decisions about coming out to extended family and employers.

Very recently, studies that explore lesbians' parenting decisions have begun to focus on more specific aspects of the decision-making process. Muzio (1996) explored the ways in which narrative therapy can influence lesbian mother's experience of becoming a family. McCrohan's (1996) analysis of lesbians' attitudes toward becoming parents, for example, concluded that, while nearly one half of her lesbian respondents had seriously considered methods for becoming parents, partnered lesbians and lesbians who affiliate with lesbian mothers are more likely to choose to become mothers themselves. Not surprisingly, in this study, community support for lesbian mothers, such as support groups and information on parenting options, was found to encourage lesbians to consider parenting.

Research on lesbians' decisions to become parents reveals the complexity and the potentially painful dilemmas that these decisions can bring. Each author reviewed here emphasized that these decisions do not occur in a vacuum and

that helping professionals play important roles as advocates, advisors, educators and enablers. Gaps in the research are evident, with the likely result that social science research and social service provision will continue to be less than relevant for many lesbian mother families.

Comparative Studies

One way to study lesbian mothers is to contrast them with other parents. The practice of comparing lesbian mothers with other groups is usually one that concedes the dominant paradigm. That is, this comparison accepts heterosexual parenting as normal and, therefore, preferred. Even researchers who acknowledge the oppressed status of lesbians (Pagelow, 1980) or the stereotypes reflected in problem-oriented research (Harris & Turner, 1985) use the measure-and-compare design, often in response to justice system concerns about lesbians' ability to parent. These studies are limited by their focus on the heterosexual-parenting model. They are included here because they do provide (sometimes incidentally) relevant information on lesbian mother families.

Most studies that compare lesbian mother families with other family types find that the families are remarkably similar. Like heterosexual single mothers, lesbians are preoccupied with child custody, housing and employment (Pagelow, 1980). In addition, lesbian mothers have been found to be similar to heterosexual mothers in terms of: marital history, financial status and level of stress (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986); sex role attitudes and interactions with children (Harris & Turner, 1985); and, parenting skills and couples' relationships (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua & Joseph, 1995). Like gay

fathers, lesbians reported high levels of satisfaction, communication, cooperation and enjoyment of their children (Harris & Turner, 1985). In a study of African American mothers (Hill, 1987), lesbian mothers were found to respond to the development of independence in their children in much the same way as their heterosexual counterparts. Neither lesbian nor heterosexual mothers tended to interfere with the relationships between their children and the children's fathers. A notable exception to this parade of similarities is that heterosexual single mothers sometimes make more of an effort to provide an opposite-sex model for their children (Harris and Turner, 1985).

Some comparative studies have attempted to highlight the difficulties encountered by lesbian mothers in their daily lives. When compared with heterosexual single mothers, for example, lesbians perceived higher levels of oppression in terms of housing, employment, and child custody (Pagelow, 1980). Not surprisingly, lesbian mothers have been found to have smaller incomes than their gay male counterparts (Harris & Turner, 1985; Turner, Scadden & Harris, 1990). Relationships with ex-spouses and reconciling homosexual identity with status as parent have been found to be significantly more problematic for lesbian mothers than for gay fathers (Turner, Scadden & Harris, 1990). In all, though, comparative studies that emphasize the challenges to lesbian mother families have been relatively rare.

Comparative studies seem to focus on revealing strengths and skills in lesbian mother families. Pagelow (1980) concluded that the lesbian mothers she studied used more positive and creative coping strategies than heterosexual

mothers did when coping with obstacles to self-sufficiency and child custody. In her sample, lesbian mothers more often showed independence in their work and social lives by seeking self-employment opportunities. Lesbian mothers also have been found to be more politically active, to exhibit more self-confidence, and to seek leadership roles and attention from others more frequently than heterosexual mothers (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986).

Lesbian mothers have also been found to use more flexible child-socialization practices. In Harris & Turner's (1985) survey, lesbian mothers were less likely to encourage sex-stereotyped play and were more likely to perceive that exposure to the mothers' lesbianism could benefit their children by increasing the children's empathy, tolerance and open-mindedness. Hill's (1987) comparison of African American heterosexual and lesbian mothers found the lesbian mothers to be more flexible in their parenting style, more accepting of their children's sexuality and more likely to minimize gender differences between their male and female children.

Importantly, several of the studies that compared lesbian mothers with other groups did not consider the relationship status of the lesbian mothers in analyzing the data. Pagelow (1980) apparently never asked about the relationship status of her lesbian mother subjects. Harris and Turner (1985) and Green and colleagues (1986) compared samples of gay and lesbian parents with heterosexual single parents, even though their demographic profiles indicated that more than half of the homosexual parents lived with a same-sex partner. For the most part, all three studies attempted to compare lesbian mothers who

were previously heterosexually married to divorced heterosexual women. While these researchers do address the potential effects of divorce as a life event for mothers and their children, they effectively ignore the existence of lesbian family structures and support systems that exist outside of the heterosexual model.

Most recently, comparative studies have begun to address the design limitations of the early studies. For example, Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua and Joseph (1995) examined lesbians parenting as couples by focusing exclusively on lesbian couples with children born to them through donor insemination, using a matched group of heterosexual couples for comparison purposes. The planned lesbian-couple families were found to be remarkably similar to their heterosexual counterparts on variables like parents' relationship quality and parenting skill. Interestingly, the lesbian couples were found to be more aware of parenting skills than their heterosexual counterparts. Since women in this study scored higher than men on this variable regardless of sexual orientation, the authors attribute the finding to gender rather than to sexual orientation.

Studies of Lesbian Family Life

A substantial body of literature addresses the family circumstances experienced by lesbians in general, but few studies specifically focused on the experiences of lesbian mother families until recently. Throughout the past decade, studies of lesbian mother families have acknowledged that, whether their children join the family in heterosexual or lesbian contexts, lesbian mother families exhibit unique family structures and processes. As was seen in the review of comparative studies, recent research marks a significant departure

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from early studies of lesbian mother families by acknowledging the partner status of lesbian co-parents and by avoiding the potential confounding variables of divorce, step parenting, and custody arrangements through sampling methods. This section summarizes social science literature that addresses family structures and processes, family blending, satisfaction, and the impact of ecological variables on lesbian mother families.

Becoming a parent can have substantial impact on the lives of lesbians, whether single or coupled. McCandlish (1987) reported on the shifting patterns of child caring in lesbians couples with newborn babies. She noted that birth mothers in her study were more likely to assume primary care in early months, while non-biological mothers' roles increased when the children reached their first birthdays. McCandlish also reported on the reduction in sexual intimacy experienced by new mothers in her sample. In another study of early parenting, Stiglitz (1990) found that, like heterosexual couples, lesbian birth mothers reported dissatisfaction with increased dependency in the relationship. In Stiglitz' sample, non-biological mothers complained of being left out of early mother-child bonding. Again, both partners reported significant decreases in sexual contact and emotional intimacy. Stiglitz highlighted the inadequacy of the heterosexual model for predicting the impact of parenting in lesbian mother families, citing important differences in the relationship dynamics of lesbian couples and heterosexual pairs.

Several studies have addressed relationship satisfaction, division of household labor, and attitudes toward parenting in lesbian mother couples.

Patterson's (1995) work explored the relationship between childbearing and allocation of household responsibilities and between division of labor and satisfaction of lesbian mother couples. Unlike similar heterosexual couples, lesbian couples shared household tasks and decision making almost equally, although lesbian biological mothers were more involved in childcare while lesbian co-parents worked more hours outside the home. The couples reported relatively high levels of relationship satisfaction. Lesbian couples who shared child care tasks more evenly showed particular benefits, including greater satisfaction for the biological mothers and better psychosocial adjustment for the children. Patterson's results confirmed other studies (Hand, 1991; Osterweil, 1991) in which relationship satisfaction and chore equality were quite high in parenting lesbian couples.

Several studies grounded in feminist theory have examined the impact of the social environment on lesbian mother families. These studies suggest that the oppressive and threatening circumstances surrounding lesbian mother families induce many women to challenge the dominant culture through purposive individual and group behaviors. For example, Ainslie and Feltey (1991) found that lesbian mothers encouraged their children to recognize and explore options to conventional gender roles and ways of relating to others in the children's environments. Similarly, Lott-Whitehead and Tully's (1993) respondents reported that their efforts to maintain the integrity of their non-traditional family form is a vital function of the lesbian parenting role. Lesbian mothers in their sample were highly conscious of threats to child custody,

inequity in parental rights, and the need for discretion in self-disclosure about their lesbianism.

Lack of recognition as a family is a major source of stress for lesbian mothers (Hare, 1994). Lott-Whitehead and Tully (1993) found that lesbian mothers experienced the highest degree of stress in those parts of their environments over which they had little control (e.g. schools). Lesbian mothers who were comfortably out of the closet, who received the support of extended family, and who lived in environments perceived as socially liberal reported lower levels of family stress.

Data about the impact of race on lesbian mother families is very rare. Greene (1990) proposed that the high levels of stress experienced by African American lesbian mothers may increase isolation and decrease the effectiveness of their child-rearing activities. She summarized the difficult and contradictory context in which African American lesbians rear their children. "In addition to the challenges that all Black mothers face in child-rearing, Black lesbian mothers must manage the additional stress of coping with the Black and White communities' homophobia, which is intensified by the heterosexual and homosexual communities' expressions of racism" (p. 211). Greene highlighted the powerful contradictory messages of heterosexism and racism in American culture. Because of exposure to such messages, African American lesbian mothers may worry that they will confirm stereotypes about non-white mothers, or losing custody of their children if they admit to parent-child conflict or ambivalence about parenting.

As Greene pointed out, lesbian mother families are impacted by the lesbian community, as well as by mainstream culture and expectations. For white lesbians, the impact of motherhood may be segregation within their own communities. For example, respondents in Lott-Whitehead and Tully's (1993) study reported experiencing a lack of support from within the lesbian community. They attributed the lack of support to a segment of women who they described as "anti-family, anti-children" (p. 276). Actions and perceptions of the lesbian community were important themes in family life. Ainslie and Feltey (1991) found that lesbian mothers were impacted by the role of a friendship network, which provided instrumental and emotional support. Their study also highlighted by ways in which political beliefs, especially feminism, structured lesbian family and community interactions. Ainslie and Feltey's study, in particular, transcended the individualism that marked many related studies because it translated information about lesbian mothers into data about lesbian mother communities.

Lott-Whitehead and Tully (1993) used an ecological perspective when examining the reciprocal relationships between lesbian mothers and their environments. Their work revealed several significant strengths in the lesbian families they studied, including openness about differences, importance of nurturing and respect for children, and commitment to the family. Hare's (1994) interviews of lesbian mothers reinforced the notion that lesbians are committed to their families. Interestingly, parenting lesbian couples in Hare's study revealed that they identified more strongly with heterosexual parenting couples than with child-free lesbians.

Each of the studies mentioned in this review provides a glimpse into the individual, family, and community experiences of lesbians and their children. None, however, provides a comprehensive look at these families. Ethnographic research is unique in its ability to provide a more vivid impression of the realities of lesbian mother families. Weston's (1991) groundbreaking ethnographic study of lesbian and gay families used the narratives of her respondents to define her research. In this way, she opened the door to a deeper understanding of complex relationships within lesbian mother families and between lesbian mothers and the social environment. Although lesbian mothering was not the focus of her book, Weston discussed cultural expectations for parenting, gender in lesbian mother families, the role of non-biological mothers, and the reactions of families of origin to parenting by lesbians.

Lewin (1993) used a comparative model, embedded in an ethnographic design, to examine the themes and images of lesbian motherhood. The result is a detailed picture of the meaning of motherhood in these families. As with previous comparative studies, similarities between lesbian mother families and single heterosexual-mother families were evident, including financial worries, managing a household, finding child care, and dealing with pressures from family, friends and the work place. Beyond the pragmatics of daily life, though, Lewin concluded that lesbian mothers share an essential quality with other mothers in American culture. "My findings show ... not that lesbian mothers resemble heterosexual mothers in a way that minimizes the importance of their lesbianism but that lesbian mothers, like other mothers, share in the system of

meaning that envelopes motherhood in our culture" (p. 182). With its focus on "the ambiguities, areas of overlap, and occasional blurring of boundaries between gay/lesbian and heterosexual experience" (p. 181), Lewin's work stands as a model of qualitative research with lesbian mothers.

The most recent book-length work on lesbian mother families goes even further to explore the complexities of same-sex parenting. Wright (1998) intensively interviewed five lesbian step families to uncover how they negotiate the intersections of sexual orientation, parenting and family blending. Wright noted that lesbian step families confront gendered models of parenting by successfully carrying out roles traditionally labeled 'mothering' and 'fathering' without respect to the gender of the parents, and by modeling egalitarianism to their children. In addition, Wright concluded that chronic, subtle acts of 'erasure,' such as being left out of extended family activities, constitute a powerful stressor for lesbian mother families. Although a small study, her work addresses some of the deficits of larger studies that failed to acknowledge the heterosexist gestalt in which the respondents lived. Her work heralds a new wave of research that acknowledges both the variability and the complexity of lesbian mother families.

Much of the literature on lesbian family life remains descriptive, and methodology and sampling strategies restrict the generalizeability of results. Nevertheless, these studies reveal the rich and unique nature of this particular family form. In general, the literature reviewed here hinted at the strengths and successes of lesbian mothers, while emphasizing that social, legal, economic and other factors distinguished these families from other, more mainstream

family configurations. Besides providing information on family structure and processes, these studies highlight the ambiguities experienced by non-biological mothers, the role of family of origin and community in ongoing support of the lesbian mother family, and the unique ways in which the presence of children impacts the lesbian couple's relationship.

Research Questions

This review of the literature reveals that research about lesbian mothers has begun to shift from a focus on deviance and pathology to the identification of unique structures and strengths. The deficit model used in the past several decades engendered research that highlighted potential individual, interpersonal, institutional and socio-cultural obstacles for lesbian mothers. More recently, researchers have suggested ways in which lesbian mothers share traits with heterosexual parents. Although a general outline of lesbian family life is suggested by the research, the ways in which lesbian mothers frame their interactions with their families and communities in light of their unique circumstances are just beginning to be explored. Relatively little is known about how lesbian mothers cope with their responsibilities as parents, partners, workers, and community members. Still less is known about the particular innovations, successes and potentials of lesbian mother families in the contexts of their own communities.

Because researchers have only recently adopted a strengths perspective with this population, potential research questions abound. The field of social work is fundamentally oriented toward research that is relevant to practice and

policy applications, particularly where such applications deal with the intersection between individuals and their environments. The intent of this study, then, is to produce knowledge that is both consistent with the mission of social work and relevant to the lives of the respondents themselves.

This study is fundamentally rooted in a strengths perspective and rests on the assumption that diversity of family type may lead to unique and positive family experiences. The following questions provide the foundation for this study:

- What are the characteristics of relationships within lesbian mother families?

- What are the characteristics of relationships between lesbian mother families and institutions in the social environment?

Chapter 2

METHODS

This study was a systematic, in-depth exploration of lesbian mother families' relationships. Throughout the study, data collection focused on current interactions, the impact of noteworthy events in the past, and perceptions of everyday or routine exchanges within lesbian mother families and between families and their social environments.

A qualitative research design provided the foundation of this study. The intent of this study was to emphasize differences and similarities among respondents and to provide a glimpse of reality as experienced by a particular group of women (Reinharz, 1992). This study aimed for complex and detailed understanding of the perceived stressors and supports experienced by a particular group of women in a unique geographic, socio-political and historic location, as articulated by the women themselves. In reporting the data, themes and issues derived from the analysis were illustrated by direct quotes and paraphrases. Where quantitative data were collected, descriptive analyses were used to summarize the characteristics of the respondent sample in order to provide a context for the interview data. No attempt was made to generalize the results of the analysis, nor were comparisons attempted between these respondents and other groups. The following sections detail the process by which this project was accomplished.

<u>Human Subjects Clearance</u>

The University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRHIS) approved this study. All respondents were asked to read and sign a written statement of informed consent before completing either a survey questionnaire or a face-to-face interview. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, the project's purpose, confidentiality protections, and the researcher's contact information. See Appendix A for UCRIHS documents.

In order to assure that no one except the researcher had access to the identities of the interview participants, questionnaire respondents were assigned identification numbers and interview participants were given pseudonyms. Quantitative data from this study are presented in aggregate form. Qualitative data were carefully edited for identifying information before direct quotations were used in the final report.

<u>Recruitment and Sampling Procedures</u>

Respondents for this study were recruited using a modified snowball sampling method. That is, potential clusters of participants were identified and contacted for the purpose of completing questionnaires. Women who were approached in this way were also encouraged to contact other lesbian mothers known to them and to distribute additional questionnaires.

Outreach and questionnaire distribution began in December 1998. In-depth qualitative interviews took place between March and June 1999. Initial attempts to engage respondents for this study consisted of direct distribution of

survey questionnaires to lesbian mother support groups, advertisement in a statewide publication aimed at the lesbian community and recruitment by word of mouth. The initial response to questionnaire distribution was very low (return rate less than 10%), probably because the timing of the initial effort coincided with the winter holidays. Shortly after the New Year, I renewed distribution efforts by making telephone and/or email contact with lesbian community centers, lesbian and lesbian mother support organizations, women's bookstores, and religious communities identified as welcoming to lesbians. These initial contacts were focused on distributing information about the study, explaining its purpose and requesting permission to send questionnaires for distribution to potential respondents. A packet of questionnaires was then sent to each organization, with a cover letter describing the researcher and the project. Organizations then distributed the questionnaires directly to lesbian mothers. (See Appendix B for sample cover letter.)

In addition to telephone, electronic, and regular mail contact, I attempted to distribute questionnaire through more traditional methods within the women's community. For example, I set up a table to distribute questionnaires at a women's music concert, and I wrote a brief newsletter article focusing on lesbian mothers for an organization working for civil rights for lesbians and gay men. Approximately two hundred questionnaires were distributed in participant packets at a conference for lesbian and gay activists sponsored by a major university. In addition, an advertisement was placed in a major metropolitan alternative newspaper's on-line classified section. Appendix C contains a sample press

release. Each of these activities generated respondents directly and through word-of-mouth following the events. Telephone and email requests for information about the project and for questionnaires increased after each effort at recruitment.

All distribution efforts included attention to recruitment of single mothers, racial / ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged lesbians. To this end, I made outreach to agencies and organizations in both metropolitan and rural areas where groups of poor women and women of color were likely to be found. In addition, I worded recruitment and outreach literature to include women who were single. These attempts were not always successful. Multiple efforts to partner with the state's largest gay and lesbian community center, for example, were met with disinterest and reluctance. On the other hand, I successfully coordinated questionnaire distribution with a large metropolitan university's annual conference on lesbian and gay rights with a significant attendance by African American women.

I did not expect or intend to secure a truly representative sample by race, ethnicity, class, or any other variable. Nearly all studies of lesbian mothers are characterized by respondent samples that are disproportionately white and middle-class (Parks, 1998). While representative studies are needed, the resource constraints of this project prevented me from successfully pursuing respondents who are less likely to volunteer for the study.

All questionnaires, except those distributed at the concert and conference, had stamped, return-addressed envelopes attached. For the concert and

conference, a sealed box was provided for return of completed questionnaires, and stamped envelopes were available for potential respondents to pick up from the return table. In all, approximately 530 questionnaires were distributed. A total of 125 (23.8%) questionnaires were returned. All were usable for this study.

In all, 102 (81.6%) included contact information indicating the respondent was willing to participate in a face-to-face interview. Potential interviewees were sorted into groups according to the age of the oldest child living in the home, then 21 women were selected for contact based on family type (for example, intact vs. blended or adoptive vs. birth), location of primary residence, class, and race / ethnicity of mother(s) and children. All of the women contacted were willing to be interviewed, and every interview attempted was completed.

A detailed description of the sample and of the interview sub-sample is provided in Chapter 3.

Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire distributed to respondents gathered demographic data about the individual respondent and her family. The questionnaire asked about race / ethnicity, age, income, occupation, education, religious affiliation, partnering and living arrangement with partner, and geographic location of the respondent's primary residence. In addition, data about respondents' children were collected, including sex, age, race / ethnicity, grade in school, childcare and living arrangements. In addition, information on how each child became a member of the lesbian mother family (e.g. birth, adoption) was collected. Appendix D contains the questionnaire.

Each individual completing a questionnaire was given the opportunity to volunteer for a face-to-face interview by indicating her interest and furnishing contact information on the returned questionnaire. Each volunteer wrote her name, address, and telephone number on the final page of the questionnaire, which was numbered and separated from the questionnaire upon receipt to preserve the anonymity of respondents.

Interview Procedures

A sub-sample of 21 women participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Each interview followed a protocol which focused on the completion of a family / support system eco map for the respondent (Figure 1). Appendix E contains the protocol. The eco map and interview protocol were adapted from a study of heterosexual–parent families (Harold, Mercier & Colarossi, 1997), in which parents were interviewed for information on their relationships with environmental supports.

For this study, a list of interview questions and probes were developed from the literature and revised based on initial questionnaire responses. Interview topics included:

- A description of the relationships between the respondent and her primary family (partner and child/children)

- Respondent's reactions to or feelings about the relationships within the family, including relationship satisfaction

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- A description of the relationship between the respondent's family and each of several identified social systems (family of origin, work place, school, religion, medical, court / justice, social services, child care, friends)

- A description of the relationship between the respondent's family and any other social systems identified by the respondent, including relationship satisfaction

- Respondent's reaction to or feelings about the relationships with social systems and institutions, including relationship satisfaction

Interviewees were asked to focus on both sources of stress and sources of support in the relationships described during the interviews.

Dr. Rena Harold and I conducted all of the interviews for this study. At the outset, we were familiar with the methodology employed for this study because we participated in an earlier study with heterosexual-parent families that used an eco-map interview methodology very similar to the one utilized here (Harold, Mercier & Colarossi, 1997). For that study, we participated in extensive research and training related to qualitative interviewing, completed exercises designed to increase skills in conducting interviews, and received peer feedback on interviews conducted in the field. Such experience has resulted in our familiarity with the fundamentals of qualitative research techniques, including the use of rapport-building, open-ended questions, directed probing of core material, and flexibility in interview style. When the lesbian mother research project was conceptualized, we jointly revised the eco-map and interview protocol to improve its relevance for the lesbian mother population.

All interviews were face-to-face. Interviewer – participant matches were primarily made on the basis of geographic proximity and schedule. In a few cases, an interviewer – participant match was made in order to avoid a dual relationship, as when one of the participants had a pre-existing instructor/ student relationship with the researcher. Most of the participants elected to be interviewed in their homes or work places, although five of the 21 (23.8%) volunteered to be interviewed at the university for reasons of convenience or confidentiality.

Typically, interview respondents were highly motivated to participate and easy to engage, so rapport building was simple. In about half of the cases, participants offered a tour of the family home. Such tours usually included a look at all rooms of the house, including bedrooms and bathrooms. Most also included an explanation of the family's home improvement projects; painting, furniture refinishing, and organizational projects were common with these families. In addition, most participants showed the interviewers photographs of their children if the children were not present. Several participants asked if the interviewer was a lesbian mother (both interviewers answered in the affirmative), and this area of common experience was used to build rapport in the interview process.

For interviews that took place at the university, care was taken to include a rapport-building phase into the process. Participants were offered coffee or soft drinks. In every case, a period of informal conversation preceded the recorded interview.

After initial introductions and rapport building, the interviews moved into a more formalized phase. The interviewer and participant sat at a table, most often in the dining room or kitchen of the participant's home. At the university, interviews took place in a private office. In most cases, interviewer and participant sat relatively close together, sometimes side-by-side, so that the participant could see the eco map and other materials as she spoke. Interviews lasted between one hour and three hours, with an average length of nearly two hours. Breaks were taken as requested by the participants.

Before beginning each interview, the participant was asked to read and sign a statement of informed consent. A separate, additional signature indicated her consent to be audio taped. All respondents signed consent forms.

During each interview, the respondent completed an eco map by selecting and drawing a series of lines, chosen from a key printed on the eco map. The lines, which depicted the primary characteristics of the interactions in the respondent's relationships, are labeled 'relationship types' throughout this study.

The interviewer began each eco map by drawing a genogram of the respondent's family in the 'household' circle on the eco map. For the genogram, lines selected by the participant connected each member of the household with all other members. No interviewee had more than four children, so the maximum number of relationships within the household circle was 15. For the remainder of the eco map, lines depicting relationship type connected the household with each system in the social environment. Some respondents did not have relationships with every type of system printed on the eco map, and so did not indicate line

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types for those systems. Similarly, some respondents added systems to the eco map and so indicated additional lines.

In addition to naming types of relationships, each interview participant was asked to choose a number on a 7-point anchored scale to reflect their current satisfaction with each relationship described. Scale values ranged from one (very dissatisfied) to seven (perfectly satisfied); the number four was labeled 'moderately satisfied' on the interview materials. Throughout the remainder of this study, numbers selected by the respondents in this way are labeled 'satisfaction levels.'

Each eco map, then, yielded a concise summary of perceived relationships within and around the respondent's family. In addition to simplified measures of relationship type and satisfaction levels, in-depth information about the respondents' relationships was explored. Data from the interviews were documented directly onto the eco maps, as well as by the interviewer's notes and audio tape recordings. Written notes of the interview focused on themes articulated by the respondents, examples of stress or support in the environment and rich descriptions of relationships within and around the families. Interviewers' notes included content summaries, verbatim recording of statements, notes on non-verbal communication, and key words or phrases used during the interviews. These notes were checked with and verified by the respondents during the interviews, and in one instance, by telephone after the interview.

As expected with any qualitative study, some refinement of the interview questions and probes occurred during the interview phase of the project. In addition, because of the qualitative nature of the study, the protocol guided the interviews but many other topics and issues arose and were addressed with respondents. For example, many participants provided historical data, particularly about coming out as lesbian, which was peripherally related to the study, but not directly covered in the protocol. The flexibility of this approach conformed to feminist research methods that privilege interviewees' determinations of relevant material and emphasizes respondents' guidance of the research process (Reinharz, 1992).

Data Analysis

This entire research project, from the design of the questionnaire to the analysis plan, was guided by principles of feminist epistemology. Such principles address issues important to an understanding of women in the social world, and then to move from understanding to planning for social change as an integral part of the research process (Fonow & Cook, 1991). Data analysis emphasized material that has meaning in the everyday world. Conclusions are focused on applications of new knowledge for the benefit of the respondents themselves.

Data were analyzed in two phases. First, data from the questionnaire were encoded and entered into a computerized database program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 8.0.0 for Windows 95) to facilitate reporting aggregate demographic information for the entire sample of questionnaire respondents. When analyzing family-level data, it was necessary to control for

duplication of responses by partners in families where both members of a couple had completed surveys. Family-level analysis was performed on data from one member of each couple who had been randomly selected to represent the family. The results of quantitative analyses are reported in Chapter 3.

Although the demographic data reveal important information about the questionnaire respondents, the focus of this study was on the rich descriptive material gathered during the 21 intensive individual interviews. The second phase of data analysis was qualitative, and focused on organizing and understanding this information. The first part of the qualitative analysis involved analyzing the diagrammed eco maps. For the sub-sample of interview respondents, the relationship types and satisfaction levels selected by respondents for the eco maps were coded and entered into a database program (SPSS). Frequencies and means provide an overview of selected areas of the interviews, and are presented in both Chapters 4 and 5.

The plan for analyzing the narrative data in this study replicated a process developed in a similar study with heterosexual-parent families (Harold, Palmiter, Lynch, Freedman-Doan & Eccles, under contract). This process utilized an interactive model of analysis, in which deductive and inductive approaches to analysis work together to produce richly detailed descriptive data, as well as new concepts and hypotheses (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initially, interview data were coded into classifications determined by the major divisions on the eco maps (e.g. relationships between respondents and their partners, or relationships between households and school systems). Categories, or sub-classifications,

were then derived from the content of the material within each classification. The categories were based on the comments of the respondents themselves, as well as on themes suggested by the social science literature. Finally, themes within categories were identified by examining the meanings of interviewees' responses.

For example, all data related to relationships within the household circle were coded into the family classification. Categories within family data were then determined by examination of the data and by review of the social science literature. One such category in this study was the relationship between the respondent and her partner. Themes between partners included the women's focus on communication and the perceived importance of couples' shared interest the family.

Because of the volume and complexity of the qualitative data gathered in the interviews, in-depth analysis of selected relationships within and around respondent families was limited. Following initial examination of the data, I identified three classifications on which to focus analysis of the qualitative data. The classifications included the intra-family relationships and two types of relationships between the respondent households and their social environments (children's schools and parents' work). These classifications were selected for their relevance to social work practice and policy, and because of my interest in the areas. Several other classifications of data would have yielded important results as well.

Results from the qualitative analysis of the intra-family data are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 describes the results of the analysis on the relationships between lesbian mother families and the social environment.

Chapter 3

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

The lesbian mothers who responded to the survey questionnaire provided a great deal of information about their personal identities, family compositions, and personal backgrounds. They shared a variety of important characteristics, as well as having divergent histories, resources and personal circumstances. This summary highlights participants' individual diversity, as well as trends in the data that suggest group characteristics and sample limitations. In general, the following sections summarize the descriptive data so as to provide a framework for the interview data presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

<u>General Overview of the Respondents</u>

The 125 women who returned questionnaires for this study ranged in age from 24 to 58 years, with a mean age of 41.5 years (<u>SD</u>=7.18). All had children, although not all respondents had children currently living in their homes. Some of the women who returned questionnaires were partnered with each other (n=70); thus the number of families represented in these data is 90.

Nearly all of the women (99.2%, n=122) reported their sexual orientations as mostly or exclusively lesbian on a seven-point anchored scale. (One respondent reported her orientation as closest to bisexual. She was included in this analysis because she also reported being in a partnered relationship with a woman for more than ten years.) Similarly, nearly all of the respondents (97 %, n=121) reported that they did <u>not</u> consider themselves to be transgendered.

(One respondent identified as transgendered and was included in the analysis because she described herself as exclusively lesbian and was actively parenting with her female partner of several years.)

<u>Race, Education and Income</u>

While most women in this sample were Caucasian, ten percent (n=13) of the respondents were women of color. Racial / ethnic minority respondents included women who were African American (5.6%), biracial (4.0%), and Asian American (0.8%). Most respondents had very high levels of education and household income. Table 1 summarizes data on race, household income and highest level of education achieved for the overall sample. It also highlights these demographics for the interview sub-sample discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Closer examination of their social demographics highlights the unique characteristics of the survey sample. For example, while less than 20% of adults in Michigan have completed a four year college degree (State of Michigan Office of Management and Budget, 1990), nearly three-quarters (74.4%, n=93) of women completing questionnaires reported education at the Bachelor degree level or higher. Of those with college degrees, 54 women (43.2%) had graduate degrees.

Similarly, household income data reveal that these respondents enjoyed higher levels of household income than the state median of around $31,000 per household (State of Michigan Office of Management and Budget, 1990). In the survey sample, 31 families (34.8%) had household incomes ranging from less

than $12,000 to $50,000 per year, while 58 families (65.2%) had incomes over $50,000. Most of the families represented in these data (70.0%, n=63) had two or more sources of income. Only a quarter of the families (25.6%, n=23) received child support, and less than 7% (n=6) received any type of public assistance.

Occupation

The majority of the women who responded to the questionnaire worked full-time outside of the home, although a sizeable minority (29.0%, n=36) reported work schedules that diverged from the standard 40 hour per week job. Only 10 women (8.1%) described themselves as stay-at-home mothers. Table 2 summarizes the data on participation in the work force and career fields for questionnaire respondents and interview subjects.

Respondents reported their current primary occupations or their career fields if they were students or were not currently employed. Occupations varied considerably within the group. Fields of employment included those considered to be 'traditional' for women, such as nursing and clerical work, as well as fields thought to be 'non-traditional' for women, such as construction and law enforcement. In addition, as might be expected with such an educated group, professional and managerial work careers were well represented.

Analysis of occupation data included sorting reported occupations into categories by career field. While meaningful categorization of occupations could have occurred in a number of ways, all methods of sorting used in this analysis resulted in high numbers of women in the human services or social services field.

In fact, more than half of the 115 women who reported their occupations could be considered to be involved or interested in careers associated with helping others, regardless of their levels of education or professional training. A total of 75 women (65.2%) reported occupations in the human services, health, education and law fields, areas that require high levels of interpersonal interaction and often involve special skills in providing client support. Further discussion of respondents' employment and occupation data is covered in Chapter 5.

Geographic Distribution

Respondents' primary residences were located throughout 22 different counties in Michigan. Figure 2 shows primary residence of respondent families by county. While geographic distribution of the sample was primarily in the southern half of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, respondent families lived in diverse community environments. That is, lesbian mothers from urban, suburban and rural areas responded to the questionnaire and volunteered to be interviewed. In general, most respondents were in urban or suburban areas, although many families lived in areas with no formal or organized lesbian community. As indicated in Figure 2, more than 40 percent of respondents (n=52) lived outside of the Ann Arbor, Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Detroit metropolitan areas, and thus had limited access to the bulk of gay and lesbian resources in the state. For some families, such as those living in Schoolcraft and Clare Counties, there are no services within county borders targeted specifically to lesbians.

Religion

The lesbian mothers who participated in this study reported diverse religious affiliations. Table 3 summarizes data related to respondents' religious affiliations and levels of participation in churches, synagogues, and other religious organizations. While about a quarter of the women (n=32) cited no religious affiliation, more than half identified as Protestant. Catholic and Jewish women also responded to the survey questionnaire. Interestingly, six respondents (4.9%) identified with pagan/Wiccan, earth-centered or Native American traditions and three others mentioned these spiritual traditions as secondary affiliations.

Level of religious participation also highlighted respondent diversity. Approximately one third of the respondents (n=40) reported attendance at religious activities once or twice per year or less, one third (n=41) participated once per week or oftener, and one third (n=42) fell in between these extremes.

Relationship status

Nearly all of the women in this sample (n = 115, 92.0%) were currently in relationships with female partners. Figure 3 summarizes length of relationship as reported by partnered respondents. The reported lengths of relationships ranged from 6 months to 20 years, with the mean length of relationship around 8 years (M=7.89, SD=5.50). Variance across this variable was high, and reflected the respondents' diverse ages, as well as suggesting variability in life histories and relationships. Forty percent (n=32) of partnered couples reported being together

five years or less, 30% (n=24) had been together between five and ten years, and 30% (n=24) reported relationships over ten years in length.

Most of the 117 partnered women responding to the questionnaires (n = 109, 87.2%) lived with their partners. Table 4 summarizes data on relationship status for respondents and the interview sub sample. Two of the eight women listed as 'partnered but living separately' explained that they had lived with their female partners for several years in the past, but now lived separately out of necessity; one respondent's partner took care of an elderly mother during the week, and another respondent's partner was away at school. Finally, one woman described herself as a widow, since her female partner had died after many years in a committed relationship.

Level of Support for Respondent Sexual Orientation

The women responding to the questionnaire were asked to mark categories of people representing those who knew about the respondent's identity as lesbian or bisexual. Table 5 shows categories of people to whom respondents had disclosed sexual orientation. Overall, respondents reported being quite open about sexual orientation. In fact, all respondents indicated that they were out about their sexual orientation in at least three areas of their social environments (or to at least three categories of people). Most women (84.8%) named 10 or more categories of people. The mean number of categories named was 12.5 (SD=3.13).

In order to measure the extent to which respondents had access to social support, as well as the potential for discrimination based on sexual orientation, I

analyzed data on persons to who knew that respondents were lesbian. A composite index of 'outness' was created for each respondent. Only those categories applicable to each respondent were counted in the analysis of survey data. For example, if a woman indicated that she did not have a brother to come out to, that woman was not included in the category-specific analysis for brothers. For each woman, I determined the proportion of her applicable social network to whom she was out as lesbian. The composite value was a mean proportion for the sample of 69.5%, with proportions ranging from 15% to 89%.

For each category, more than 65% of the respondents indicated that someone in that role knew that the respondent was lesbian or bisexual. Friends, children, sisters and mothers were particularly likely to be named as categories of people to whom the respondents had come out.

Respondents also were asked to indicate which people in their social environments were most supportive and least supportive regarding their sexual orientation. The respondents indicated that they received support and acceptance about sexual orientation from many people in their environments. All but one respondent reported at least one person who was supportive; the number of categories of supportive people ranged up to 16. The mean number of 'most supportive' people reported was close to five ($\underline{M}$=4.78, $\underline{SD}$=3.94). Several women noted on the questionnaires that they felt supported by everyone to whom they were out of the closet. Friends, sisters, mothers, religious leaders, and children were most often named as 'most supportive' by the respondents.

Interestingly, friends, sisters, mothers and children were also named as most often aware on the respondents' sexual orientation.

The data on 'most supportive' people contrasted with results on categories of people who were identified as 'least supportive.' The mean number of 'least supportive' categories was close to one (M=1.25, SD=1.12). The total number of 'least supportive' categories of people cited ranged up to five. Thirty respondents indicated that no one in their environments was unsupportive enough to be named on the questionnaire. Children's fathers and respondents' fathers were chosen most frequently as 'least supportive' (28.6% and 25.0% respectively). Table 5 summarizes data on 'most supportive' and 'least supportive' persons selected by the respondents.

Overview of Respondents' Children

The women responding to the questionnaire reported a total of 197 children. Males represented 53.1% of the sample and females represented 46.9%. Table 6 shows sex, age and grade in school for all children reported by respondents. The children ranged in age from 2 weeks to 40 years old. The greatest numbers of children were in the youngest age groups, and nearly three quarters of the children reported (n=144) were age 18 or younger. Figure 4 shows the age distribution of the respondents' children.

The interview portion of this study sought to identify families with children in three age ranges corresponding with early childhood (0-5 years), elementary or middle childhood (6-12 years), and adolescence (13-18 years). Substantial numbers of children were reported for each of these age groups. About half

(n=92) of the children were enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade. Nearly a quarter (n=48) were not yet enrolled in school, while the rest either attended college (n=15) or were adults and no longer in school (n=39).

<u>Children's Race</u>

Data on children's racial and ethnic identities provided an interesting glimpse into issues of family composition for this sample of respondents. Table 7 summarizes the racial / ethnic data reported for respondents' children. As a group, the children were more racially diverse than were the lesbians raising them. That is, questionnaire data showed a larger proportion of children of color (27.9%) as compared with adult respondents of color (10.4%). Specifically, much higher percentages of African American (10.7%) and biracial (12.2%) children were reported than were found in the sample of mothers (5.6% and 4.0% respectively). In addition, seven children were identified as Hispanic and Native American, although none of their mothers identified themselves as members of these racial / ethnic groups.

The unexpected and disproportionate ethnic / racial diversity in the sample of children prompted several questions for analysis. More than half (57.1%) of the 21 couples who described themselves as 'white' reported raising children belonging to racial / ethnic groups other than 'white. An additional four families (19%) that were raising children of color were headed by mixed race / ethnicity couples in which only one of the women was identified as white. Partners who were both women of color headed five families (24%) that were raising children of color

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Respondent Family Size and Living Arrangements

The lesbian mothers in the survey sample reported raising from one to seven children in their families. The average number of children reported per family was two. Overall, family size was moderate, although household size for the sample ranged from one to eight individuals. More than 40 % of the families in the sample reported that a total of three people lived in their home at the time of the survey.

Children's living arrangements varied widely, as is suggested by their age range and the data on household size. Table 8 details living arrangements for all children in the sample. Each respondent reported on the number of her children who lived in various arrangements at home and away from home. Most households (81%, n=73) reported at least one child living with the lesbian mother full time, thus accounting for a total of 123 children (62.4%) who lived with their lesbian mothers full time. Markedly fewer families reported children who lived out of the respondents' homes. Eleven percent (n=10) of families reported at least one child who lived with someone else half time. These 10 families included 12 children who lived half time with their lesbian mothers and half time with their (children's) fathers. Also included in this group is the grandchild of a lesbian grandmother who is cared for half of the time by her grandmother and half of the time by the child's father (the respondent's son). Six families (7%) reported having children who lived with them less than half time. These families included six children with a variety of living arrangements, including shared custody with former female partners. Twenty-five families (27.8%) included children who did

not live with the respondents at all. These 52 children were mostly adults, but the group also included five children who lived with their fathers full time, and one child living in an out-of-home treatment facility.

Child Care Arrangements

Respondents reported using a variety of methods to assure care for their children (see Table 9). Not surprisingly for this mostly middle and upper-middle class group of mothers, access to child care did not appear to be a challenge. Of the 101 children reported to need child care, 43.6% (n=44) were in some form of group care, such as preschool or commercial day care. More surprising is the number of children who were cared for by the mothers themselves. One fifth of the children who needed care received it primarily from the respondent or her partner, often because one of the partners was voluntarily unemployed, was able to work at home, or had fixed her schedule in order to be home before and after school. In addition, written comments on the questionnaires revealed a variety of other child care arrangements. For example, one mother reported taking her infant to work with her each day. Another respondent wrote that she and her partner "split" their work schedules to be available to their son before and after school. A single mother mentioned that she relies on friends and neighbors for all of her child care.

Methods of Creating Family

Respondents reported that their children were introduced into their families in diverse ways. Table 10 summarizes data on timing and methods of family creation. More than half (n=113) of the children lived with either the

respondent or her partner before the respondent's current relationship. That is, 57% of the children reported in this survey have a lesbian step parent. The second-largest group of children were those who had always lived with one or more lesbian mothers. More than a third (n=74) of the children joined the family after the parenting couple's relationship began. The remainder of the children (n=10) lived in single parent families.

Data on the various methods used by respondents to add children to their families suggest that the respondents' histories were complex and diverse. More than half of the children reported by respondents (n=109) were the products of heterosexual marriages or liaisons, while 45 children (23.2%) were conceived through donor insemination. Other pathways to parenthood cited by respondents included adoption, foster parenting and guardianship.

The uniqueness and intricacies of these families may not be adequately assessed by the questionnaire format, especially in families where previous lesbian relationships produced children currently parented by a respondent. For example, one couple, whose child is reported as "birth child by donor insemination," reported they were raising the biological child of a third woman, who conceived while in a relationship with one of the currently parenting women. Another respondent reported a child not living with her who she raised from infancy with a former partner, and now has no access to as a non-biological parent.

Children's Responses to Mothers' Orientation

As noted in the earlier discussion of data on level of support for respondents' sexual orientation, these women were open about their lesbianism with their children. As Table 5 shows, 91.9 % (n=113) of the respondents said that their children knew about their sexual orientation and, of these, nearly half (46.9%) said that their children were supportive of them. Other data support the notion that the respondents were quite open with their children. Nearly all of the women completing questionnaires (92.8%, n=116) reported that they display affection toward their partners, such as hugging and kissing, in front of their children. About three-quarters (76.5%, n=91) reported that they had discussed their sexual orientation with their children, and a sizable minority (41.9%, n=49) reported that others had discussed their sexual orientation with their children.

Children's reactions to their mother's disclosure of sexual orientation were overwhelmingly positive. Of those respondents who were out to their children and had children old enough to react, 94% (n=94) reported that their children's reactions were neutral or positive (M=5.9, SD=1.4). Children's reactions were reported on a 7-point scale, where '1' indicated 'very upset / rejecting,' '4' was 'neutral / no response,' and '7' meant 'very accepting / supportive.' Written comments on the questionnaires supported this finding, and indicated that reactions varied over time and by developmental age of the child.

Interview Participant Descriptions

As the above analyses indicate, lesbian mothers who responded to the questionnaire shared a number of important characteristics. In general, they

were well educated, well employed, and most were financially well off. Most were in relationships of five years or longer. They were quite open about sexual orientation within their immediate and extended families and with others in the social environment. Most indicated that they experienced support from several people regarding their sexual orientation, and nearly all of the women indicated that their children's reactions to their lesbian identify were either neutral or positive.

In many ways, however, these women exhibited considerable diversity. They lived in many areas of the state, worked at various occupations and reported diverse religious affiliations and practices. Their children were of all ages and diverse racial / ethnic backgrounds. The lesbian mothers reported that children were added to their families in a variety of ways and lived in various, sometimes-complex arrangements with the mothers.

The sub-sample of interview participants reflected the larger sample's characteristics in terms of income, educational achievement, and participation in the workforce. They also highlighted respondent diversity in terms of age, religious affiliation, county of residence, and length of relationship. Since six partner-pairs were interviewed, the 21 women interviewed represented 15 families. All but one of the interview respondents were partnered, with relationships ranging in duration from a few months to 18 years. While most of the interview subjects were white, three of the women (14%) were African American. Their children, who were more racially diverse than they were, ranged in age from six months to 17 years old. All methods of family formation, including

heterosexual conception, donor insemination, adoption, foster care, and guardianship, were represented by the families. Table 11 provides a pseudonym for each interviewee, along with a synopsis of personal data for each woman interviewed.

As noted in Table 11, the interview sub sample was divided into three groups based on the age of the oldest child living in the home. For each group, seven women were interviewed. Thus, the sample includes five families in the early childhood category, six families in the middle childhood category, and four families in the adolescence category. Selecting interviewees into these categories was intended to increase diversity within the interview sub-sample by ensuring interview responses from mothers with a variety of experiences along the family / child development continuum.

Importantly, most families outside of those with their eldest child in the 0-6 year old category included children in more than one category. Because of this, data from the interviews often reflected experiences across a span of family and child development achievements. As the Chapters 4 and 5 show, differences between families were evident, as was variance within family categories.

For purposes of conveying the individual characteristics of the women who were interviewed in this study, the following section provides a brief sketch of each participant. The information included here was gleaned from interactions during the face-to-face interviews, and is meant to supplement the synopsis of information provided on each participant in Table 11.

Lisa: At 24, Lisa is one of the youngest of the interviewees. She was a casually dressed woman with a calm manner. Initially hesitant about her responses in the interview, she was eventually able to relax, and was quite articulate and enthusiastic in describing her family life.

Lisa lives in a duplex located in an urban center, with her partner of 18 months, her preschool-aged daughter, and an adult male friend who works with her partner. Lisa and her partner are white. Her daughter and the adult male friend are biracial (African American / white).

At the time of her interview, Lisa was enrolled full-time in a teacher education program at a major university. Her partner, an outreach worker for a local health promotion agency, has considerable flexibility in work schedule. Lisa and her partner share childcare responsibilities with their roommate and various friends. She described several gay male friends who provide significant support to her family.

During her interview, Lisa related that she had known that she was a lesbian as a teenager, but had experienced such a negative reaction to her sexual orientation that she had "tried to be straight." Her daughter is the product of a heterosexual liaison with an African American man, who dropped out of her life shortly after the baby was born. Before moving in with her partner, Lisa and her daughter lived with Lisa's parents and siblings. She was the only interviewee in the infant / early childhood group with a partner who joined the family after the child.

Amy: At 50, Amy is the oldest of the interviewees. She is white. Dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, she appeared younger than her stated age. She was quiet, serious, and thoughtful throughout the interview, taking time to carefully compose her answers before speaking.

Amy lives with her partner of 6 years and their four-year-old son in a rural mid-state area. Her home, in which the interview took place, was filled with photographs, drawings, toys and games belonging to her son.

Amy works as an administrator with a large non-profit social service agency, a position that gives her moderate flexibility in her schedule. She reported that she provides more than half of their son's financial and direct care needs, since her partner is a full-time graduate student. Amy is heavily involved in her church, serving on its board of directors and acting as an advocate for gay and lesbian issues within the congregation.

Amy is the non-biological parent of her son, and thus has no legal relationship to him. The couple have made efforts to pursue a second-parent adoption in another county, but postponed the effort because of time and financial constraints. Amy related that, although she became a parent late in life, and despite the financial burdens of parenthood, her experiences had been so positive that she would like to have another child.

Carolyn: Another older parent, Carolyn was 47 at the time of her interview. She is a stay-at-home mother, after working in skilled trades for many years. She was reserved, but welcoming, offering coffee and indicating a space on the dining table prepared for the interview.

Carolyn lives with her partner of 12 years. Both women are white. Their two pre-school aged daughters, both adopted internationally, are Asian. The family lives on the outskirts of an urban center with significant resources for lesbian mother families. Second parent adoptions have been completed for both girls.

Carolyn's partner, an attorney, provides almost entirely for the family's financial needs, while Carolyn provides the majority of child care. Carolyn indicated that she and her partner consider this arrangement ideal for their family.

Julie: Julie, 30, presented as gregarious, open and eager to participate. She was the first of the women to be interviewed and tolerated a few minor procedural problems, such as a too-short extension cord for the tape recorder, with humor and patience.

Julie lives with her partner of more than seven years, Joan, and their two-year-old son in a duplex in a conservative suburban area. She and her partner, both white, adopted their biracial (African American / white) son at birth. He is the birth child of her partner's relative, thus theirs was an open independent adoption.

Julie's son was born with a developmental disability. As primary caregiver and stay-at-home mom, Julie related considerable material about her son's special needs and reactions from service providers. She iterated that her son's race and ability were often more important than her sexual orientation in interactions in the community.

Joan: Joan, 31, is Julie's partner. She was a willing and articulate participant in the interview, often volunteering information beyond the topics covered in the protocol.

As noted above, Joan lives with her partner, Julie, and their two year old disabled son. She is the legal parent of their son, since they have not been able to complete a second-parent adoption in their county.

Joan works as a service provider with disabled adults, and so brings a great deal of knowledge and experience with resources for disabilities to her parenting. She expressed frustration with her rigid work schedule, however, complaining that she was unable to accompany her partner and son to evaluations and other appointments. This family is significantly involved with groups for families with developmentally disabled children, citing these groups as a major source of support. In addition, both Julie and Joan said that they experience considerable financial stress because of living on one income.

Bonnie: Bonnie, 40, presented as energetic and extroverted. She is a bright and articulate woman whose quick responses set the pace for her interview. Throughout her interview, Bonnie expressed wonder and joy with the notion of motherhood and with her role as parent.

Bonnie lives with her partner of 15 years, Connie, and their three daughters. The girls, a three-year-old and 18-month-old twins, are Bonnie's birth children by donor insemination. Bonnie, who is white, used a biracial donor (African American / white) to achieve her pregnancies. A biracial donor was

chosen because Bonnie and her partner wanted to have children whose racial / ethnic characteristics reflected both women's backgrounds.

This family lives in an urban area with substantial services for lesbian mother families. Second-parent adoptions have been completed for all three children.

An attorney, Bonnie provides the primary financial support for her family. She expressed some frustration with the necessity of being away from her family every day. She is looking forward to a new position at work, a change that means she will be able to begin telecommuting from home one day a week in the near future. Currently, Bonnie's partner is a stay-at-home mother who provides the majority of child care for the family.

Connie: Connie, 40, is the partner of Bonnie. Her communication style is deliberate and thoughtful; thus her interview had a markedly serious tone and an unhurried pace.

As noted above, Connie lives with Bonnie and their three young children in a liberal urban area. Connie is African American, Bonnie is white, and their daughters are biracial (African American / white). Although theirs was one of the most racially-mixed of the families interviewed, race and ethnicity were not considered a major factor in their interviews.

Connie gave up her position as a social worker to be a full-time, stay-at-home mother when the twins were born. She stated that she has enjoyed being at home, but is looking forward to returning to work, both for the salary and for the adult contact.

Although this couple's personal styles are very different, both are effective with their children. Connie and Bonnie seem to make a deliberate effort to be equal in their parenting roles, a value that is reflected in their interactions with each other and the children.

Chloe: The only single respondent to be interviewed, Chloe, 38, also has the smallest income. She was the most solemn of the interviewees, rarely smiling. Nevertheless, she was clearly invested in the research project, providing extensive personal information, and thoughtful reactions to each of the interview questions.

A full-time graduate student, Chloe lives with her 10-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son on the campus of a large university. All are white. Although her relationship with her ex-husband was described as extremely negative, her children visit their father, who lives in another state, each summer.

Chloe is involved with a support group for single parents on the campus of her university and described this a major source of her support. As the sole provider for her children's financial and direct care needs, she reported struggling with finding adequate time and energy for all of her responsibilities.

Jocelyn: Jocelyn, 31, is an outgoing woman who presented as youthful, enthusiastic, and engaging. Her responses were marked by a focus on her interest in holistic health and spirituality.

At the time of initial contact, Jocelyn identified herself as living separately from her partner. Shortly before her interview, she and her partner of 9 months

purchased a home, where they currently live with Jocelyn's 11½-year-old son. Jocelyn's relationship is the newest of any of the interviewees'.

Jocelyn noted that she continues to have friendly interactions with her son's father and his new wife. She described her ex-husband as one of the first people to whom she disclosed her sexual orientation and described his reaction as very supportive. Jocelyn also described her relationship with her son as close, describing shared interests in many issues and an ability to talk about many topics.

Sheila: Sheila, 39, was self-confident, articulate, and engaging in the interview. As did many of the participants, Sheila led the interviewer on a tour of her home and introduced her children before beginning the interview. During the second half of the interview, she held one of her sons in her arms, occasionally stopping to soothe him as he fell asleep.

Sheila lives with her partner of 12 years, Marla, who was also an interview participant. They share their two-story frame house with their four children, aged nine months through 7 ½ years. Both women are white. Three of their children were placed with them as infants and later adopted. Another child is Sheila's biological child by donor insemination. All the children are African American or biracial (African American / white). Second parent adoptions have been completed for the three older children, and the process is underway for the baby as well.

Sheila is employed as a teacher for a public school system. The family lives in an urban area with significant support for lesbian mother families, and belongs to a support group for same-sex couples with adopted children.

Marla: Marla, 36, is the partner of Sheila. Her presentation in the interview was marked by slight anxiety related to her desire to "get things right" in her responses. She was a willing participant, whose responses provided a unique perspective on her complex family.

As noted above, Marla lives with Sheila and their four children, who range in age from nine months to seven years. They live in a liberal urban center, where they are well connected with the women's community.

Marla is both a stay-at-home mom and an entrepreneur, since she runs a successful day care business out of her home. She is the primary caregiver for the two youngest children because of this arrangement.

Both Sheila and Marla reported significant involvement in their church, where they participate in workshops and seminars on feminist spirituality, in addition to attending regular services. In addition, they attend cultural and social activities in the community on a regular basis. They seemed to be among the most successful of the parents with young children in achieving a balance between child-related responsibilities and adult socialization.

Tamara: Tamara, 37, is the only foster parent interviewed for this project. She was talkative and direct in her responses, exhibiting considerable humor about her experiences with parenting.

Tamara lives in an urban area with her partner of 5 ½ years. Both women are white. Their three foster sons, all African American, are a modified sibling group, having lived with each other before being placed in Tamara's home. The children are nine, ten, and eleven years old.

A case manager for a medium-sized non-profit agency, Tamara was in the midst of reducing her work hours to half time at the time of the interview. Her partner, who works in a professional capacity for the state, has a flexible work schedule that sometimes takes her away on overnight trips. Both women provide direct care to their sons.

Tamara has been active in community athletics and her church choir, commitments that she has been trying to continue by organizing her time more efficiently. Although Tamara and her partner are fairly new to parenting, having had their sons for only 6 months, they are noticeably immersed in the experience. The couple hopes to adopt the boys if they are released by the courts for adoption.

Kerry: Circumspect and soft-spoken, Kerry, 34, provided a marked contrast to some of the more gregarious interviewees. Speaking in the kitchen of her rural farmhouse, she was reflective and displayed a quiet humor.

Kerry lives with her partner of three years and her partner's two biological children. All are white. Despite her relatively recent entry into this family, Kerry is now the primary care provider to the children, since her partner is enrolled in a full-time program at a local college as well as working full time. Her positive

relationships with her 10-year-old step son and 7 ½-year-old step daughter were evident when the children arrived home at the end of the interview.

Kerry's children live in her home half time and half time with their father, alternating weeks in each home. This arrangement provokes considerable frustration in Kerry, who spoke in detail about the logistical difficulties inherent in the arrangement.

Alyce: Alyce, 38, presented as one of the most self-assured of the participants, responding thoughtfully and directly to each interview question. Her attitudes seemed to reflect a remarkable comfort with her self and her values.

Alyce lives with her partner of 18 years, whom she met when both attended a local university. Also in their home are their two children, ages 11 and 2, and an adult female friend. All are white. The woman friend living in Alyce's home takes an active part in family life, and is responsible for child care at least one day each week.

Alyce is the birth mother of both children by donor insemination. A second-parent adoption has been completed on the older child, but Alyce stated that she resented the intrusiveness and expense of the home study process. She and her partner do not plan to pursue an adoption for their younger child "until the laws change."

The co-owner of a small retail business that caters to the women's community, Alyce is immersed in lesbian culture both personally and professionally. She reported, however, that her work is often difficult and

financially unprofitable. Her partner, a project manager for a technology company, provides the greatest part of the family income.

Kelsie: Kelsie, 39, is an emotional woman, who spoke with passion about her relationship with her partner and her recent divorce from her husband. Her affect, while intense, was appropriate to the content of her interview. She appeared to be quite invested in the research project, making considerable effort to arrange an interview around her unpredictable work schedule.

Kelsie lives in an apartment with her partner of 2 years, Candace, and her 13-year-old daughter. Her son, aged 11, lives with his father. All members of this family are white. They live in a suburb of one of the state's largest cities.

Kelsie's story is unique in that her relationship with Candace was "a surprise" to both women, who considered themselves heterosexual before meeting each other. Kelsie reported that her change in sexual orientation has been a major focus of her life in the past few years.

Candace: Candace, 24, is the partner of Kelsie. Along with Lisa, she was the youngest of the interviewees. She presented herself with considerable maturity, responding with poise to the interview questions. Her responses were thoughtful and direct throughout the interview.

As described above, Candace lives with Kelsie and Kelsie's 13-year-old daughter. Candace spoke at length about her role in the family as a new step parent and new partner. A part-time psychology student, she appeared to have very good understanding of the issues inherent in blended families.

A significant focus for both Kelsie and Candace at the time of their interviews was their age difference. The 15-year difference in their ages was not unique in the larger sample or in the sub-sample of interview participants. (For example, Terry's partner was 14 years younger, and Lynn and Cara had a 13 year age difference.) However, the difference in their developmental stages, along with criticism from friends and family, may have contributed to the perceived discrepancy.

Lynn: Lynn, 33, is an active, outgoing woman. She spoke at length on each of the topics presented, rarely requiring encouragement or input from the interviewer. Her infant daughter, who was present throughout the interview, provided frequent distraction.

Lynn lives with her partner of 10 years, Cara. Their six-month-old daughter, Lynn's biological daughter by a known donor, also lives with the couple full-time. Cara's two teenagers, whose physical custody is with their father, are in the home frequently. This family is white. They live in a double-wide mobile home set on a large lot in a mixed suburban-rural area.

Lynn works as a municipal department manager, a job that requires a great deal of outdoor activity and variable hours. She takes her infant to work with her every day. Her partner's hours are quite flexible, but Cara has been reluctant to provide direct care, an issue that has become a focus of negotiation for this couple.

Cara: Cara, 46, is the partner of Lynn. One of the most talkative of the participants, Cara provided ample background and detail for each of her responses.

As described above, Cara lives with her partner, Lynn, and their six-month-old daughter. Cara's son, 15, and daughter, 12, are frequently in the home as well, in spite of the fact that Cara reported that she voluntarily relinquished physical custody of her children when she came out as lesbian. Although difficult at the time, she commented that she feels she made the right decision for her family. Because of the custody arrangement, both Cara and Lynn have regular contact with the children's father, and Cara reported that she has developed a friendly relationship with her ex-husband's new wife.

Cara's work involves doing home visits with ill or homebound persons, so her schedule is often unpredictable. A talented amateur artist, she stated that she hopes to quit her job in order to work on her art full-time. Both Cara and Lynn are active members of a Wiccan spiritual circle, an affiliation that both provided segregation from the mainstream spiritual and social community, and assisted integration into a group of like-minded others. Cara described the pagan group as her 'family of choice.'

Terry: Reserved and pragmatic, Terry, 35, was the most taciturn of the participants. The interviewer used frequent probes in an effort to further explore the interview topics. In spite of her reserved presentation, Terry appeared to be fully willing to participate, as she completed the interview without hesitation.

Terry lives with her partner of six years, Joni, another interviewee. Terry's half-brother, 17, who is her legal ward, also lives in the household. She has parented him for more than six years, since she was appointed his legal guardian by the courts. In addition, Joni's eight-year-old son by donor insemination resides in the house. Terry and Joni are African American. Her brother and her partner's son are biracial (African American / Hispanic). They live in an elegant restored home in an historic district of a metropolitan area.

Terry works in the financial industry, a job that entails regular hours and a substantial salary. While she has limited flexibility in her work schedule, she does provide the majority of interaction with her brother's school and other systems. She reported that she has taken a minor role in parenting her partner's son, since she sees herself as his step parent rather than a primary care provider. Recently, she has expressed interest in pursuing second-parent adoption for the eight-year-old.

Joni: Joni, 41, is Terry's partner. With her direct, eloquent, and expressive speech, she possessed one of the more powerful personalities among the interview participants.

As noted above, Joni lives with her partner, Terry, and Terry's 17-year-old ward. Joni's eight-year-old son, conceived by donor insemination while Joni was in a prior lesbian relationship, also lives in the home. Joni's son has minimal contact with his 'other mother.'

A successful sales representative for a professional supplies company, Joni has considerable flexibility in her job. She reported that she is able to be

available whenever her son needs her to participate in his school, medical appointments, or other activities. Joni assumes primary care for her son, although Terry's full participation in his parenting is a goal for this family.

Joni described herself as an activist. She was instrumental in founding her church, which serves the African American gay and lesbian community in her area. In addition, she has held leadership positions in various mainstream and lesbian community organizations. At the time of her interview, she was involved in a court appeal for a second-parent adoption. If granted, her family's would be the first successful second-parent adoption case in her county.

Chandra: Chandra, 35, is an attractive and vivacious woman whose interview was marked by her extreme distress over perceived threats to custody of her children. Initial contact with Chandra was during a face-to-face interview. The immediacy of Chandra's worries at the time of this first interview resulted in partial coverage of some aspects of her relationships. Therefore, two additional contacts were made by phone in order to offer ongoing support and to augment interview data that were incompletely covered in the original contact.

Chandra lives with her partner of 3 ½ years and her three children, ages 13, 11, and six years. The family lives in a modest suburban home in a notoriously conservative area of the state. All members of the family are white.

Chandra works as classroom aide in a local school district. She reported that she quit her previous position to accept this one, in spite of substantial reductions in pay and benefits, because it offers her the ability to be available to

her children each day after school. Her partner, who works for a large corporation, is the primary breadwinner in the family.

As noted above, Chandra's interview was dominated by her anxiety over an impending court hearing, which Chandra perceived as a threat to her physical custody of the children. She reported that, although her relationship with her ex-husband was originally amicable, he is now suing for full custody of the children, and has introduced her sexual orientation into the case as an argument against her. Initial media coverage has already exposed her to her employer, co-workers and other associates. In addition, stress from the case has impacted Chandra's relationship with her partner and children, resulting in increased conflict in their home.

The following chapters report on the interviews with these participants. While the analyses of the interview data are necessarily fragmented, every effort has been made to retain the richness of the individual personalities of the women by inclusion of their own words in the discussion of themes revealed in the interviews about their experiences within their families and communities.

Chapter 4

RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN LESBIAN MOTHER FAMILIES

Feminist research is grounded in "an understanding that many aspects of women's experience have not yet been articulated or conceptualized within social science" (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991, p. 89). One way to understand women more accurately is to use research methods that integrate women's voices directly into the study of women's lives. In the case of lesbians, this re-conceptualization of methodology is even more important, since lesbians continue to be largely marginalized by the dominant culture and by the practices of mainstream science.

As noted in Chapter 2, qualitative analysis is particularly useful for exploration of conditions and experiences that are not easily accessed by conventional, quantitative research methods. In this study, qualitative analysis offered an opportunity to 'give voice' to lesbians whose experiences as women, as partners, and as mothers, may be overlooked, misunderstood, or misinterpreted without their own perspectives to guide understanding. The following is a qualitative analysis of lesbian mothers' comments about relationships within their own households. Table 12 summarizes relationship themes within respondents' households.

Relationships Between Co-parenting Lesbian Partners

Nearly all of the women interviewed for this study were partnered. Of the 20 partnered interviewees, all lived with their partners and one or more children.

All of the partnered interviewees characterized their relationships as 'strong / positive.' Satisfaction with partner relationships was quite high; satisfaction levels ranged from four, 'moderately satisfied,' to seven, 'perfectly satisfied.' The mean satisfaction level for all partnered interviewees was 6.20 on the 7-point scale (SD=.82).

Centrality and intensity. Respondents characterized their primary intimate relationships as friendships, partnerships and alliances. The most common theme in descriptions of the relationships concerned the influence and centrality of the relationship in the life of the respondent. While most respondents simply mentioned that they loved their partners, many also referred to the "best friend" status of the partner. Lisa, who lived with her partner of 18 months and their 4 year old daughter, described the partnership:

"(This is) a really good relationship … we support each other … (this is) a more equal power balance than any other relationship I've been in."

Kerry echoed this idea when she said that her relationship with her partner of three years was "the most equal … partnership I've ever had."

A few of the women interviewed implied that woman-to-woman relationships were 'naturally' more intimate. Like other couples in the study, Lynn and Cara described themselves as "each others' best friends." Cara reflected that this feeling of closeness was not uncommon among her coupled lesbian friends:

"I feel like we have a pretty honest … you know, in our relationship we pretty much tell each other everything pertinent. We don't have secrets

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from each other and, you know, I think that we think of each other as being really good friends. And I think that that's one of the reasons that this kind of relationship can work. That people of the same gender, especially women ... because you can be friends before you're lovers if you take the time to develop the friendship, and it makes your relationship stronger."

Some relationship descriptions suggested that the women experienced the interactions with their partners as deeply intense, or even spiritual. Jocelyn, whose relationship with her partner was less than a year old, described their time together as a mystical experience, even attributing the relationship to a force beyond her control:

"Fate took a big hand in this, in bringing us together. And we weren't necessarily seeking anything out, but it just happened and we knew – oh my gosh, this is so wonderful!"

Similarly, Candace, a 24 year old non-biological parent to two children, who was in her first intimate relationship with a woman, struggled to find words for the emotional intensity she experienced with her partner:

"It's the most important thing in my life and so ... its ... sensual, and um ... it's the love that I can't even describe ... It's hard to describe. I never felt this way before ... I need her and she needs me. It's almost like we're one."

When asked to elaborate on her perception of their oneness, Candace went on to say that:

"Our feelings for each other are so strong that its almost like we think the same, we feel the same, ...we cherish our relationship. It's like knowing that I'm always there for her and she's always there for me. (We are good at) making decisions, and, um, supporting each other ... just kind of like confiding in each other. We're very good at that and we're best friends."

Jocelyn's and Candace's sentiments were not unusual, even for women who were older, or who were partnered for much longer periods of time. Joni, for example, described her six year relationship with Lynn as the most meaningful she had ever experienced:

"(She) completes me ... I am better with her than with anyone else ... or by myself. We'll be together until the end of time."

Focus on communication. An important aspect of this friendship between partners seemed to be the women's persistence in focusing on communication. For example, Jocelyn said that her relationship with her partner was special and satisfying because of their ability to talk things out:

"We talk about everything, and when there is a problem...we could have problems ... we lay it right out on the table. Or if she doesn't want to lay it out on the table, I try to get her to talk it out ...but we talk a lot. I think probably that is our strongest trait."

Even couples who reported that such interactions were difficult, mentioned communication as a focus in their relationships. Julie and Joan identified verbal expression as the most important aspect of their bond with each other. Julie, who stayed home with their son, named "communication, compromise and

support" as the keys to her relationship with her partner, stressing that finding the time to talk, and communicating effectively, were not easy for them because they "spoke different languages." Her partner, Joan, echoed this theme by saying that the most important part of the relationship for her was "... (being) able to say what I need." Similarly, Kelsie, whose relationship with Candace was one of the newest in the study, reported that "learning to speak up about my ... you know, feelings and stuff..." was an important area of growth in that relationship.

Shared interest in the family. In specifying the positive attributes of their partnerships, respondents described values and interests that they shared with their partners as one of the strengths of the relationship. In particular, goals related to their children were cited as an important theme in the lives of these women. Carolyn, said that she and her partner generally agreed that:

> "Our mission statement ... is to raise the kids - I might include, uh ... a
>
> few other things but this (goal) is generally agreed."

Chandra, whose partner had never parented before joining Chandra's family, echoed this theme:

> "We have a kid-centered home ... the kids (are) the center of (our) life. I
>
> don't want an adult in the house who isn't going to help."

Echoing these sentiments, Joan mentioned that she and Julie share:

> "...similar values about what is a family...and we agree on what is ...a
>
> safe type of environment for (our son)."

Julie, in turn, mentioned that she and Joan have similar "ideas about ... (our

son's) needs and potential," a commonality that was particularly critical to their

efforts to provide a positive environment for their developmentally disabled child.

Complementary characteristics. Respondents who pointed out similarities

with their partners also contrasted their personalities, skills or backgrounds with

their partners' characteristics. Statements about differences often emphasized

the couple's complementarity as a source of strength in their interaction with

each other and their children. For example, Tamara, who was foster parenting

three0 boys with her partner of 6 years, said:

> " Having kids points out the differences between us. (I am) more ...
>
> emotional.. And (my partner) is ...like, structured and.. not emotional."

She went on to describe ways in which each of their styles worked with their boys

in various situations. Lynn, another mother of three, repeated the idea that

differences make for greater options in interacting with children. Lynn

characterized herself and her partner, Cara, as:

> "... opposites in a lot of ways ...Cara is artsy ... and I am ... I am, you
>
> know, what is it? Left or right brain? You know, I am intellectual, and I
>
> am athletic, and she is not [laughing] at all! So, that's okay with us, and
>
> with the kids we can each do stuff."

Similarly, Lisa, who was co-parenting with a woman 14 years younger, said that

her partner:

"Is much, much more patient than I am. And she plays things with (our son) that I don't want to, and she helps (our son) to understand his feelings."

Surviving adversity. An important theme regarding partner relationships concerned the respondent and her partner persevering through hardships together. Respondents who mentioned this theme described experiences that apparently served to forge a deeper commitment between partners, and enhanced their stability as couples. Several of the lesbian mothers described difficult or frightening episodes in their partnered lives, such as significant health or emotional problems, or stressful episodes with their children. For example, Amy and Connie both dealt with cancer diagnoses during the periods of time in which they were trying to start their families. Amy even underwent a mastectomy while her partner was pregnant. In addition, Connie and Marla both reported experiencing miscarriages. In separate interviews, these women talked about the support and commitment of their partners during those difficult times as beneficial to their relationships.

Similarly, Julie talked about the weeks of uncertainty and confusion immediately following the birth of their adopted child as a time when she felt that she and her partner were a strong team. She described in detail the multiple health problems, intrusive procedures and conflicting information that they received at their son's birth, when he was diagnosed with a developmental disability:

"I think that the stress that was generated through all those things didn't

really cause stress between my partner and myself. It was more like we felt stress at the medical community and the educational people but it was like we were feeling it together. It wasn't like, you know, one of us was saying, 'I'm so stressed out. You're just driving me crazy.'

Cara, who lost physical custody of her children when she came out, also spoke of the difficulties that she and her partner endured during that period. She described her 10-year relationship with Lynn as:

"... progressive. We have had lots of struggles together. And (there have been) times in the past we have almost broken up ... but became stronger ...and we learned from each event , you know, it's been an ongoing thing."

Roadblocks to intimacy. Finally, nearly half of the partnered lesbians interviewed mentioned difficulties with finding time for each other amidst the demands of parenthood. Carolyn expressed dissatisfaction with her family's nighttime routine, in which one or both of the children end up in the couple's bed to sleep:

"(My youngest daughter) was very traumatized (before the adoption), so she'd be back and forth, back and forth. I'd get her situated in her own room, and then something would happen and then she'd be back with us (in bed). I finally said, 'She's a well-adjusted, happy kid. I'm not going to mess her up by making her sleep in her own room.' You know, I just gave up. So that's my big thing I want to change. Which would allow us more time together and more ... I would just feel closer. I miss that closeness. I

think it's probably typical."

Similarly, Lynn admitted that, since the birth of her daughter, she and her partner have had "no time to be close – it's really getting to be a problem." Tamara, whose first experience with parenting began with the placement of her three foster children, also mentioned that she and her partner find that "not having enough time to process is definitely a stressor."

In the cases of Carolyn, Lynn and Tamara, lack of time for the couple was attributed to the pressing demands of parenting. In other cases, though roadblocks to intimacy were seen as coming from factors outside of the family unit. Lisa, for example, cited the hectic schedule of her partner, a full-time student as a barrier to intimacy. Alyce and her partner shared a house with another adult who was seen as a positive influence on the children, but "sometimes it's hard to get personal space as a couple" with a third adult in the house.

None of the respondents indicated that lack of intimacy resulted from reluctance to be affectionate in the presence of their children. In fact, Sheila described her 12-year relationship with Marla as a potential source of modeling for their children, despite the obstacles to integrating that intimacy in their lives:

"I think probably the thing that I notice the most is that we're probably not as affectionate or demonstrative with one another as we could be. And I think probably because we've grown so used to ... you know, ... in 95% of ... our lives (we are) not ... able to really be demonstrative. And it's just kind of been a carry over, and we haven't made a huge effort to make

sure that we continue to do that. I mean, it's not like we're void of that, and it's not like the kids never see us, you know, be affectionate with one another, but its probably not as much as I would like them to see us."

In summary, relationships between partnered lesbian mothers were highly positive, intense, and focused on communication. Whether respondents were describing similarities or differences, they focused on the ways in which these characteristics benefited the couple relationship as well as the ability to parent. Very few non-positive comments were found in the data on couple relationships.

Relationships Between Lesbian Mothers and their Children

In the interviews, each respondent was asked to provide information about her relationship with each child in her family. Each partnered respondent was also asked to provide information about how she perceived the relationships between her partner and each child in the family. Data collected in this way represented information on diverse mother-child relationships, since it included mothers and children of a variety of ages and lengths of relationship. Types of bonds were diverse as well; biological mothers, non-biological birth mothers (partners of donor inseminated women), adoptive mothers, step mothers, and a foster mother were included in the sample.

As with the data on partner relationships, the interviewees' characterizations of parent-child relationships were highly positive. In 12 of the 15 (80%) families, relationships between the lesbian mothers / step mothers and their children were described as exclusively 'strong / positive.' Like their descriptions of their adult partnerships, these women described their parenting

relationships as committed, meaningful and gratifying. Satisfaction level ranged from three to seven on the 7-point scale. The mean satisfaction level for parent-child relationships was 6.01 (SD=1.39).

Getting and keeping children. One theme relevant to the entire group of parents was the value that these mothers placed on having children and on retaining custody of their children. The way in which this theme was expressed varied according to the pathway to parenthood for each family. For example, Marla, who had been through three adoption proceedings and was awaiting a fourth, said that her four children were "her roots" because they provided focus and stability in her life. Carolyn, a 47-year-old adoptive mother, said of her daughter, "Adopting her was the happiest day of my life." Her partner's adoption of another baby girl a year later was "the second happiest day."

For non-adoptive mothers who conceived children while in lesbian relationships, a sense of gratitude for having children was more subtle, but still evident. Sometimes stories about the difficulties experienced in "getting" a child served to illustrate the point. Joni, an African American biological mother of an 8-year-old biracial boy conceived by donor insemination, described how she and her former partner approached a regional sperm bank for assistance. Joni was told that the bank did not have any African American donors, as they had never had a call for one in the past. Joni's persistence and flexibility in pursuing her goal eventually resulted in her son's conception and birth, and she seemed proud of her assertiveness and creativity. Respondents in five families mentioned having obstacles to getting pregnant through donor insemination, including cost,

locating supportive medical personnel, infertility and other health concerns. For example, Connie, who was mother to three daughters under four years old, described her struggles to become pregnant and carry a baby to term. When health circumstances prevented her from continuing, she and her partner resolved to have Bonnie carry the children.

Finally, most mothers whose custody was challenged by ex-husbands after the mothers came out as lesbian cited their struggle to retain custody as an important theme. Imbedded in these stories was a sense of powerlessness and frustration in the face of the legal system and an estranged former husband. The most immediate of these stories was told by Chandra, who, at the time of these interviews, was involved in a dispute with her former husband over the physical custody of their three children. Chandra reported that her attorney had told her:

> " 'You could lose your children. You could very well lose your children.' And I said, 'Why? What could be the grounds?' And I guess the grounds possibly could be all the accusations (my ex-husband) made (about her lesbianism). But (the court) never checked them out! And I don't know what witnesses he's going to pull, and I really can't think of anybody ... I mean, I really haven't been a very bad person. It's not like they're going to pull in somebody, 'Oh yeah, I've see her running around drunk and she's out every Friday night and she's been cheating on (her partner) for a year and a half.' There's nothing they could do because I haven't done anything. I don't know who those witnesses would be."

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When the prospect of shared custody with the children's father was raised, Chandra was adamant:

> "Then I'll appeal. I'll appeal. I have no intention of allowing my children ... They need more involvement with their father, by all means ... I want him to be (more involved) ... He doesn't parent them well as far as supervision and nutrition and personal hygiene issues and stuff like that. But he loves them and he's a Disney dad. When they're over there, he does fun stuff with them and they love him. He's their father. And, most certainly, he needs to be involved. I'm not trying to say 'I don't want you to be with your dad,' but they have all said ... the recommendations have said ... that the children want to live with their mother. "

While Chandra's statements reflected ambivalence about her children's relationship with their father, they were quite pointed concerning her connection to the children. In each of the families where custody was discussed, respondents expressed deep regard for the continuity of their parenting connection and strong conviction that ongoing connection to the lesbian mother family was beneficial to the children.

Desire for more time together. Some themes were specific to sub-groups of families represented by the interviewees. In the early childhood group families, for example, interviewees reported that mothers and children both wished for more time together. The focus on time as a commodity was often related to mothers being away from home for extended periods of time during the child's day. For example, in talking about her relationship with her 2-year-old

son, Joan, a full-time worker, reported that she particularly "look(s) forward to ... our time together. We get to play when I get home (from work)." Carolyn said that her three-year-old daughter looks forward to her partner's return home from work everyday as well. Lisa, who commuted back and forth to college four days a week and spent significant time at home studying, said that she "would like more time and energy to spend" with her four year old.

The expressed desire for more time together seemed to fade as children got older, as might be expected with children whose developmental needs changed with the transition to middle childhood and adolescence. Interestingly, the only respondent outside of the early childhood group who reported her children wishing for more time with the adults in the family was Tamara, whose three foster sons had been recently placed with her after living in an unpredictable environment. The children's desire for time with Tamara and her partner, then, seemed to be related to the children's history and need for remedial support, reassurance and nurturing.

Attempts to integrate a new mother. Nearly half (n=7) of the families represented in the interviews contained a step parent by virtue of a partner having joined a biological mother and her children after the birth of the children. In these families, regardless of the length of time the couple had been together, the evolving nature of the step parent / step child relationship was an important theme. The dynamics of attempting to integrate new mothers into blended families were expressed in various ways in these families.

Several interviewees attempted to characterize the child's relationship with the mother's partner by using creative descriptions of role combinations. Lisa, for example, described her four-year-old daughter's relationship to her partner of 1 ½ years as:

> "(She's) a 'mom-friend.' It's constantly evolving... Just recently (my daughter) accepted (my partner). Now she accepts her as the 'other mom' and as permanent. Six months ago, it was different. We were still settling in."

In most cases, the creation of hybrid names for step mothers reflected the families' recognition of the quasi-parental relationships that the mothers' partners developed from their positions as relative outsiders in the family. Kelsie, who described her partner, Candace's, role in the family as a "friend-mom" and a "co-parent-sister" to Kelsie's 13 year old daughter, explained that her daughter felt especially close to Candace:

> "Candace is one person that (my daughter) can disagree with ... and argue about things with and still feel okay. "

Candace also commented that:

> "(Kelsie's daughter) comes to me for advice kind of and, um, I think I make (her) feel good about (herself). She's changed a lot. ... She's actually told me that I make her feel good about herself. I think that I help her see that.... I help her with her relationships with her friends and family. She has a hard time with her father and her brother sometimes, and I help (with that)."

Non-positive interactions. Even families that characterized the stepparent relationship as 'strong / positive,' identified strain in the development of interactions within these dyads. Joni's description of her partner, Terry's, interaction with her son after six years together exemplifies these comments:

> "I think (my son) looks more on Terry like a step mother, and because I grew up in stepparent home, I know what that's about. I'm basically the one who put in his mind that she's like a step mother, you know. So there are those times when he will run up to her on his own and hug her, and there are other times I have to say 'Go give her a hug and a kiss.' There are times when he will say 'I'm sorry' on his own, so I don't have to say 'Apologize to her now.' And there are times when he has made her cry ... I think it's getting better ... It takes time to make a family ... and he is getting older."

While parent-child relationships in most families were generally positive, a sub-group of women in blended families described significant problems in these relationships. In three blended families, all the adults interviewed independently characterized the relationship between the non-biological parent and one of the children as 'tenuous / strained' or 'stressful / negative.' These non-positive relationships yielded some interesting comments about the interactions between biological / non-biological, lesbian / heterosexual and parent / stepparent relationships.

The specifics of the conflicts were unique to each family, but important similarities existed. All families that reported non-positive parent-child

relationships have oldest children in the 13-18 year-old range, although the identified child was not necessarily a teenager. A theme common to all three families was that the children and their fathers were described as wishing for their birth parents to reunite. Candace described their situation this way:

> "(Kelsie) has a really hard time with ... letting (her son) know exactly what I am to her. That I really am her partner. That bothers me. Like, for example, for Mothers' Day, ... he put a note in his Mother's Day card from his dad to his mom. And he gave Kelsie flowers. (Kelsie's ex-husband) had bought these flowers and (Kelsie's son) gave them to Kelsie. And I told Kelsie that I don't want her to be mean to (her son), but I want her to ... let (her son) know that I'm not going away. He needs to know that I'm in her life."

In addition, for two of the three families reporting conflict between stepparents and children, the non-biological mother was described as taking on a disciplinary role with the children. Chandra, whose partner joined the family very shortly after Chandra's separation from her husband, explained her partner's conflict with their oldest child this way:

> "(My partner) met me when (my son) was nine.. And he was already having some of those (negative) behaviors, (so) she didn't get the cute little two-year-old lovey-dovey stuff. She also takes the more disciplinary role with him ... 'cause a lot of times its so upsetting to me, and I lose my cool and he listens to her better. She demands respect. "You will not talk to your mother like that!" I just think that part of the reason that it is

'stressful / negative' is because she is put in the position of disciplinarian. Part of it is because she's so upset with his attitude lately. Although she cares deeply for him, I think that there's not a whole lot of positive.

Similarly, Lynn complained that Cara, the biological mother of their two older children, often did not take an active enough role in limit setting:

"I have to get mad about it before she'll do something (to discipline the children). It used to be always me. She wouldn't do it. She was afraid that, when she first got divorced, and actually she still does, that her kids won't like her as much if she does."

Lynn noted that the relationship with her 12-year-old step daughter had improved recently:

"I think when I started making Cara take responsibility for disciplining, particularly (this daughter), then she stopped looking at me as the ogre."

In all three of the families in which the respondents identified non-positive parent-child relationships, the family history related during the interviews stressed the disruptive nature of the biological mother's divorce from the children's father. That is, in each family, the biological mother was married to her children's father, realized her lesbian orientation, and initiated separation from her husband. In each of these cases, the children's father was described as reluctant to accept his wife's lesbianism and subsequent desire to end the marriage. In all three cases, too, the biological mother's current partner was 'in the picture' during or shortly after the parents' breakup, and thus was the first step parent known to the children. Finally, in all three families, the children spent

significant time with their fathers (and in one case lived with the father full-time), and thus were exposed to differences in household rules, values and dynamics on an ongoing basis.

Interestingly, Kerry's family fits this step family profile except that her oldest child is not yet a teenager. However, her family currently exhibits none of the non-positive dynamics cited by the other families, although Kerry is actively involved in every aspect of her children's lives, including discipline.

This brief description of major themes in the parent-child relationships of lesbian mother families highlights that parent-child relationships were highly regarded and valued. Respondents in all categories told stories about the hard work and sacrifices they made to have and keep their children. Most families seemed to enjoy each other, and mothers with young children especially expressed the desire for more time together. Blended families were concerned with the development of relationships between children and mother's partner and sometimes described ways in which this unique relationship was helpful to the children in the family. In a few families, the step parent-step child relationship seemed to be negatively impacted by the birth parents' history of separation and divorce.

Relationships Between Siblings in Lesbian Mother Families

In addition to providing data on relationships between adults and between parents and children, respondents in this study were asked to describe interactions between children in their households. Most of the families (n=11) represented by the respondents included sibling pairs or groups. Twenty-eight

children in this sample had siblings with whom they interacted. Four families - Lisa's, Amy's, Julie and Joan's and Jocelyn's - contained single children and so were not considered in this section.

Characterizations of sibling relationships by the mothers showed the greatest variability of any of the relationships described. Overall, however, these relationships were primarily positive. More than three quarters of the mothers described child-child relationships in the families as 'strong / positive.' In spite of the greater percentage of non-positive relationship characterizations made in the interviews, though, respondents indicated approximately the same level of satisfaction with sibling relationships as with adult or parent-child interactions. Respondent satisfaction levels for sibling relationships ranged from two to seven. The mean satisfaction level for sibling relationships was 6.14 on the 7-point scale ($\underline{SD}$=1.87).

Thematic content that related to sibling relationships was the least articulated of the data gathered during these interviews. Respondents seemed reluctant to make generalizations about these relationships. Their lack of specificity did not seem to be related to apathy or emotional distance on the part of the respondents, but rather was a reflection of mothers' perceptions that children's personalities determined the character of sibling interactions, and thus, were beyond the control of the interviewees.

Sibling rivalry. The most common theme expressed in the interviews about children's relationships with each other concerned sibling rivalry. Women described their children as competing with each other for their parents' attention,

for privileges and objects around the home, and for dominance in interpersonal exchanges. Rivalry often took the form of "yelling," "teasing," and "fighting." Only one family, Chandra's, reported a child who used physical aggression, "smacking his sister, " on a regular basis. Tamara's description of the interaction between her three foster sons is typical of most families with sibships:

"(Two of the boys) are very competitive. They're five months apart but they're really, really different. They enjoy different things, they have different friendship groups, you know. They have a lot of fights. They blame each other for everything. ...They will (physically fight) ...but not as much as one would think. It's funny because we told them they couldn't fight in the house. 'If you really need to fight, you have to go out in the yard, that way you can't hit your head on anything.' And then, just the idea of going outside, they cool down enough by that time. ..It just cools them down enough when they go outside, that it keeps them from hurting each other."

Candace described the rivalry between her step children:

"(Kelsie's daughter) gets very upset when her brother's around because Kelsie kind of makes it like she hasn't spent all that time with (her son), so instead of (Kelsie's daughter) going to the store with her, (her son) goes to the store with her. And so it's like a big (mess)... And then (Kelsie's daughter) will come running to me, 'Why does he get to go?'"

Sibling attachment. In contrast to competitive interactions like these, many siblings were also characterized as loving and deeply attached to each

other. Kerry noted that her 11 year-old son "would be lost without his little sister."

Carolyn described her two pre-schoolers as "best buddies." Chloe described the

relationship between her two children, ages 10 and 7 years old:

> "They fight a lot, but I've seen them pull together when they need to. (My
>
> son) split his head open at school and I was out at (a nearby community)
>
> that day. And (his sister) came in to the office and sat with him and held
>
> his hand and took care of him. He ended up with six stitches and I had to
>
> be out of town that day!"

And Tamara, who described two of her sons as very competitive, above, also

reported a strong and warm connection between a different pair of boys:

> "In a lot of ways, (the younger brother) is ahead of (the older brother),
>
> intellectually, and he's taller than him now, and ...you know, just in a lot of
>
> ways. But (the younger boy) never holds that over him. A lot of people
>
> put him ahead of (his older brother). "Oh, you're older. No, I'm not." But
>
> he'll always defer to (his older brother)."

Marla reported that her four children had positive relationships with each other for

the most part:

> "They are very much connected to one another. I think they have all
>
> wonderful relationships with one another. But ... it's just like how sibs get,
>
> you know they can boss (each other) around one second and the next
>
> second, they can be 'Oh, she hit me, she pushed me, this happened, that
>
> happened." But if I left right now and they were asleep, they'd be
>
> snuggling up right next to each other."

Finally, Cara described the relationship between her 15-year-old son and 12-year- old daughter:

> "You know, they have their own little sibling rivalry things going, but when it came right down to it, they would both, you know, be very sad if something happened to the other one. And when no one's around, they get along really well."

Opportunities to grow. A final theme related to sibling relationships was the idea that interactions between the children offered them opportunities to grow and learn. Mothers pointed out that their children's siblings offered important role modeling, communication training, and lessons in self-control. Joni noted that her 8-year-old biological son looked up to Terry's 17-year-old brother / ward because both are boys and both are biracial:

> "(Terry's brother) is his role model. And it's good he's around ...good for both of them."

In some cases mothers reported that their older children helped their younger children to manage living in a non-traditional family. For example, Kelsie reported that her 13-year-old daughter helped her 11-year-old son to deal with having a lesbian mother because her daughter is "more articulate and more comfortable with the whole thing."

Many of the comments about child-child relationships focused on the benefits of older siblings for younger children, but a few also implied that older children benefited from interacting with little brothers and sisters. In describing

her 12-year-old step daughter's relationship with the six-month-old baby, Lynn
noted that:

> "Recently they had a change in their relationship. (The older daughter)
> has always liked (the baby) but it's like she didn't know how to deal with
> her. (The older daughter) has no idea (of) the whole concept of how to
> relate to a baby. ... A couple weekends ago, she baby-sat (the baby) for
> an hour and fifteen minutes, and (the baby) actually had a fit and (the
> older daughter) did everything! She even got (the baby) to go to sleep by
> herself which is almost impossible to do! So, since that event happened
> where she had to take care of (the baby) she's much better at
> communicating with her and ... she's much better."

Sibling relationships in these families, then, were characterized as both
competitive and sustaining, and were marked by both conflict and cooperation.
Mothers stressed the ways in which living with brothers and sisters provided
opportunities for their children to mature and to learn interpersonal skills.
Perhaps because they were the least articulated of the household relationships,
the sibling interactions were the least complex in description and seemed to
reflect the least concern from the women interviewed.

On the whole, relationships within lesbian mother families were highly
likely to be characterized as positive. Satisfaction with relationships within the
household was very high as well. Themes related to family relationships were
diverse and reflected the wide variance of family type, family history,

developmental stages of children and families and other factors. The implications

of this analysis are discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LESBIAN MOTHER FAMILIES AND THE SOCIAL
ENVIRONMENT

In this study, each interview respondent was asked to identify and

describe relationships between her household and individuals / institutions

interacting with her family. In addition to naming relationship type and level of

satisfaction with each relationship, the participant was asked to describe how the

interaction was supportive of the family and / or how the relationship provided

stress for the family.

This chapter describes the results of analysis for two of the classifications

of social environment data derived from the interviews. These two

classifications, children's schools and lesbian mothers' work, were selected

because of my own interest in the areas, and because of their relevance to the

daily lives of lesbian mother families. Interaction between family and school and

between family and work place was universal in the respondent sample, despite

diversity in terms of children's ages and family incomes. School and work

illustrate two of the important systems experienced by families. They also

exemplify some of the most pervasive stressors in the lives of lesbian mother

families. Table 13 summarizes relationship themes for household-school and

household-work interactions.

<u>Relationships With Children's Schools</u>

Of the 15 families represented by the interviewees, 13 families had at

least one child who was enrolled in school at the time of the interviews. All

participant families are included in this analysis, though, because even the two families without students in their households had some interaction with school systems. Julie and Joan, whose son did not yet attend school, began negotiating with special education personnel around setting up an education plan for their son in the months preceding their interviews. Lisa's daughter was enrolled in a local preschool, until about one month before the interview. The girl began having problems at school when she moved to a new classroom, and so was withdrawn from school. At the time of the interview, Lisa's daughter was receiving home-based day care. In these two families, data on the interactions with school systems were considered in the qualitative analysis, even though relationship type and satisfaction levels were not recorded.

In all, at the time of the interviews, six of the respondents' children attended preschool, while 20 children were enrolled in kindergarten through grade 11. Five very young children did not attend school. This section includes data on family relationships with all levels of children's education, including preschools, elementary, middle, and high schools.

All respondents with children enrolled in school at the time of the interviews provided data on relationship type and satisfaction level. Two interviewees indicated more than one relationship type for the household –school system interaction, because they perceived significant differences between their children's schools. Eighty percent (n=16) of household-school system relationships were characterized as 'strong / positive.' Three relationships (15%) were reported as 'non-interactive.' The non-interactive relationships occurred

within two families: Joni reported that there is no interaction between her family and the school attended by her partner's ward, and both Lynn and Cara reported that their family has no interaction with Cara's children's school because the children's father has physical custody. Finally, one participant reported that the relationship between her household and her son's school was best characterized by 'a change in relationship': Marla reported that recent administrative changes in her son's preschool had produced significant changes that were perceived as "mostly good" by the family.

Satisfaction with the household-school relationship was quite high. Satisfaction levels ranged from five to seven on the 7-point scale, with a mean satisfaction level of 6.22 ($\underline{SD}$=.65). Despite these high marks, respondents reported various concerns about interacting with their children's schools. The following sections detail the concerns.

School milieu. A theme that was central to many participants' interviews was the mothers' focus on the school environment. Respondents mentioned concerns about the social climate and the physical surroundings of the schools, including interactions between teachers and students, level of support for student learning and development, and the quality of the curriculum. Most descriptions of relationships with schools centered on mothers' desires to ensure positive school experiences for their children

The interview data suggest that the respondents' had positive perceptions of their children's schools. Jocelyn called her son's school "wonderful" for it's team teaching approach. Chloe reported that her daughter's teachers "always

have something nice to say." Connie described her three-year-old's preschool as "very supportive." However, many interviewees seemed to suggest that their positive experiences were unrelated to or in spite of their identities as lesbian-mother families. For example, Alyce said:

> "I think that the teachers (my son) has had have all been great. In terms of dealing with us as a family and respecting each of us as parents, I don't think either of us have any real expectations that ... I don't think any of the classrooms did anything special to incorporate (his) family, but I didn't really push for that. But they've all been certainly respectful and supportive."

Only one respondent, Tamara, reported a positive experience directly related to her status as a lesbian mother:

> "It's just been wonderful. They've been really supportive. I think the neatest thing (was) the day I brought (the boys) into school, the school secretary was really excited. Her son's gay and she's the co-chair of PFLAG (a support group for parents of gays) and was very excited to have a gay family ...isn't that funny? We were having trouble getting records, obviously. She went and researched this with the state library.. and got all their records. She actually tracked down phone numbers that we had been wanting to get a hold of, and you know... I don't know, it just felt like somebody who was really committed to, you know, helping us as a family."

When mothers reported overtly negative experiences, they usually referred to the rationing of resources, rather than to conflict with individuals. None of the negative experiences reported were related to the respondents' sexual orientation. For example, Chandra related a story about moving to another community in order to access special education services for her son after attempts in her former district were frustrated by resource issues. Lisa related that she withdrew her preschooler from a classroom when the girl began to have behavioral problems. She said the teacher was "okay," but that the classroom was dreary and unfriendly. Resource issues were also a concern for Julie, who has been advocating for a comprehensive special education program for her son:

"We have to struggle and fight for every little scrap. You're guaranteed certain things by law, but unless you educate yourself, they're not going to tell you the things that you're guaranteed by law. They're going to try to slip through with as little as they can, and so you have to be just constantly educating yourself ... and even then, they still fight you about it."

In addition to availability of material resources for children's education, respondents commented on the value of an atmosphere of tolerance and respect for differences in schools. Many participants demonstrated a general concern about the availability of curriculum content and interpersonal experiences with racial / ethnic, cultural, and other forms of diversity. This theme was especially salient for white participants with children of color, but participants who did not fit this description talked about it as well. Julie, for example, reported that her son's

disability and race were more of an issue for the school (and other service providers) than was her sexual orientation.

Nearly everyone who mentioned diversity suggested that schools that value diversity of any type are more likely to respond well to lesbian mother families. In addition, a few participants mentioned that diversity in the school environment had a direct benefit to the development of their children. For example, Amy, who lived in a rural area with a homogeneous (white) population, reported that she drove her son 30 miles into the city to attend an integrated preschool so that:

"He won't grow up thinking that everyone is white. We want him to learn that there all kinds of people in the world and everyone has value. He won't ... he can't learn that unless he has the experience of playing with them and.. having friends (that are diverse). And kids who grow up with prejudice everyday, they can teach (my son) something about dealing with people who don't like us."

Carolyn also implied that school diversity was a benefit to her Asian daughters:

"They have all kinds of people (at the school) which is another reason we chose them. They have foreign families. They have back-to-work welfare moms. It's very multicultural. It truly is multicultural. It's the only place I found that wasn't white with a few others (added in). And I like that (because) our family is different and our kids are not white. (Experiencing a multicultural setting) is one of my values. It always has been. I've

always been in a work situation that is racially mixed and that is a high priority for me. I don't want to be in an all-white environment in anything."

Influencing attitudes toward lesbian mother families. Many of the women who mentioned school environment also described their active participation in the schools as a method of contributing to the schools. Involvement with their children's educational experiences included interactions with teachers, administrators, support staff, coaches, and children's peers. For example, Carolyn, whose two daughters attend preschool, reported that she tries to participate in all the girls' class field trips and that she interacts with the classroom teacher every day. Although parents in the middle childhood and adolescence groups were less involved in their children's schools, some reported impressive levels of involvement as well. Terry mentioned that her partner, Joni, was quite active in the school's parent teacher association and had served as the president of the organization in the past. Even Chloe, whose schedule was overcrowded with work, graduate school and other responsibilities of single parenting, complained, "I don't get to volunteer as much as I'd like."

The high level of parental involvement reported in these interviews had obvious potential benefits for these families. Some parents, of course, received satisfaction simply from contributing to their children's school experiences. Others hoped to directly influence the school milieu to be more welcoming to lesbian mother families. Kerry, for example, explained why she and her partner had invested in their children's elementary school even before the children began attending:

"Actually, we were involved in the school when it was (in) development stages. And we went to several of the meetings and they were working on the wording of some of the things, and we wanted to know if they would change (the language) from 'mother and father' to 'parents' or something else. At least (we had) some input."

Alyce's description of her family's strategy with the schools reflects remarkably similar goals. She described how she and her partner both found time to be active in her son's school:

" When (my son) was younger, we were both equally involved. I'd say we both went to school once a week for different things. And from first grade on, we were in the classroom. Kids, starting in the first grade knew that (our son) had two moms. That was just the way it was, and ... I'm really, really glad we did that. I think that was really important, and not only for our satisfaction, but also for (our son) to know that it wasn't anything that he had to hide or worry about ... because we were just there. As he's gotten older, there's less opportunities for parents in the classroom, so it's been harder. But actually I'd say it's still pretty equal."

The idea that these mothers participated in school life in order to increase the school's adaptation to lesbian mother families is supported by participants' statements that visibility of lesbian mother families contributed to a safer environment for their children. A few of the respondents mentioned that the schools already felt safe, in part because other lesbian mother families were already in evidence in the school. Connie for example, thought that her

daughter's school accepted her family because they "have had a lesbian family before." Marla also mentioned that the school's experience with gay and lesbian parents was a part of the appeal of her daughters' school:

> "We live in (a liberal urban area) and we go to the open school, and that makes a huge difference because we're not the only lesbian family. It's a very forward, more liberal, sort of thinking thing anyway, because it's not your regular, rigid sort of typical public school. And so I think we have some different ... all sorts of families that attend."

Managing disclosure about sexual orientation. As these comments suggest, most respondent comments indicated an overall positive experience with school. Nevertheless, many interviews revealed evidence of stress as well. Nearly all descriptions of interpersonal stressors in the school system dealt with parents coming out to school personnel in order to clarify their family structure, roles, division of labor, authority or other factors related to improved relationships with teachers and administrators. Struggling to come out as a 'two-mom family, ' gauging how open to be with each of the various individuals in the schools, and learning to find effective and socially appropriate arenas for educating and advocating on behalf of their families, were important issues for these women.

Managing disclosure about sexual orientation was a central issue for most parents. Participants described their rationales, strategies and feelings about self-disclosure with varying levels of emotion. Although coming out to the schools was not presented as a crisis in any case, it did seem to be a nearly universal stressor. The women interviewed here managed this issue in various

ways. Carolyn described how she directly approached the issue of her sexual orientation with a preschool:

"I said, 'We're a lesbian couple and what problems are you going to have.' I do it to fish – see what their reaction is. And I find that child care people are pretty devoted to children and they want to support the family of the children. They're a special kind of people I think.

Similarly, Alyce said that she has always been very open with the school. She described her family's strategy for getting her son into a classroom with a supportive teacher:

"At the beginning of each school year they have (a process) for choosing a teacher. We kind of felt that out, and looked for a teacher who we … anticipated to be a little more liberal and accepting. In the final paragraph of every single letter, (we wrote) We want (our son) to be in a classroom environment that will foster acceptance … for his family which is [laughing] and then we'd state it (that they are a lesbian mother family). And, you know, we've been pretty successful with teachers."

As stories like Carolyn's and Alyce's suggest, the lesbian mothers in this sample had a surprisingly high level of openness and assertiveness overall. It should be noted, though, that both Carolyn and Alyce live in a unique area of the state, in which socially liberal attitudes are paired with highly visible services for lesbians. Nevertheless, some women in other areas were also quite open about their sexual orientation as a matter of course. Kerry's response to a question about whether or not she was out to her children's teachers was:

" Well, we have to do that all the time. We just tell it like it is...you know...

'I am one of (the kids') mothers. I am one of (their) parents.'

In most cases, participant's openness with the schools interacted with partner status. That is, an interviewee often pointed to her partner's presence as evidence that she is lesbian. Thus attending to school business as a couple substituted for coming out for some of the women who were coupled. However, absence of a partner who interacted with the school system was seen as a hindrance to communicating about sexual orientation in the schools. As noted above, Kerry reported that she identified herself to school personnel as "one of the mothers" in her family. When asked if the school understood that her status as parent is the result of her relationship with the children's (biological) mother rather than with their father, Kerry noted that she depends on the presence of her partner to confirm her point:

> "We have meetings with the teachers ... and (my partner and I are) together, and we're talking about when (the children are) at <u>our</u> house, and then we're talking about when they're at their <u>father's</u> house."

In contrast, Jocelyn had not had a steady partner until recently, and was not sure if the school realized that she is lesbian. Interestingly, she also indicated that her partner's presence has contributed to efforts to be increasingly open at school:

> "(My partner) has attended a lot of extra-curricular activities – a lot of social functions (at school). I'll start bringing her more as her time permits and when she feels comfortable, and as (my son) feels comfortable. I'm comfortable with that.

<u>Invisibility of non-biological mothers</u>. While many of the interviewees

expressed a conviction that appearing in pairs at school-related meetings, social

events, and other activities was an effective way to communicate about their

lesbian identity, most were uncomfortable with announcing their sexual

orientation in interactions with the schools. Thus, most had never confirmed

face-to-face that their children's teachers or principals understood that they are

lesbian. In fact, a few respondents reported that school personnel sometimes

assumed that the lesbian couple had another (non-partner) relationships with

each other. In each of these cases, the non-biological parents were assumed to

have non-parental relationships with the children. For example, workers in her

son's preschool assumed that Amy was her son's grandmother, until she tried to

clarify that she was his parent. When that description seemed to cause

additional confusion, she "announced" that she is his mother's partner. Similarly,

Tamara, who was hoping that her foster children would be released for adoption

at an upcoming court date, described her ambivalence about being misidentified:

> "A lot of people assume we're sisters [laughing]. And at this point, until we
>
> get through this next court date, I don't' feel like we can address any of
>
> this (because it might impact our eligibility for adoption)."

While none of these misinterpretations appeared to be overtly malicious,

they were a source of considerable frustration to respondents. The underlying

sense of being misunderstood or invisible was plain.

In addition to the social invisibility of lesbian parenting, respondents who

were non-biological mothers described a sort of self-imposed invisibility as a way

of dealing with the social and legal ambivalence of their places in the family. Amy, the non-biological mother who was identified as her son's grandmother, and who has parented her child since his birth, stated:

"I feel like I have less legal rights ... because we haven't been able to do the (second-parent) adoption, I have no real rights. And so I feel like people want to deal with (my partner). You know, it's fine for me to pick him up and stuff, but I'm not the one who can sign things. Well, I can ... we have a legal document that gives me the right – a thing that has to be renewed every six months ... but it's, like, not as official."

In blended families, the theme of self-imposed segregation from the school was often entangled with concerns about displacing 'legitimate' parents. Three families included biological parents who were divorced but both actively involved with the schools. In two of these, Kelsie / Candace's and Lynn / Cara's, the new partner deferred to the child's biological parents in the 'formal' arena of the school system. Candace, the 'new' parent in her family, explained:

"Oh, I don't talk to the teachers! I feel that that's not my place because of (Kelsie's ex-husband). You know, he wouldn't like that ... (my daughter) has asked me before, 'Why don't you go to my parent-teacher conferences?' but ... [long pause] I'm sure (my son) is perfectly happy with the way it is, but I think that (my daughter) would like it (if I was more involved). But I don't feel it's my place."

Not every family with a history of parental divorce or separation had a non-biological mother who is invisible in the schools. Kerry is very actively involved in

all aspects of her children's school. (Interestingly, her family was also the exception in the trend for blended families to experience conflict in the step parent-step child relationship.) In other families, where the children's father has minimal involvement, the 'new' parent is active with the children's schools. Lisa and Chandra, for example, both described their partners as assuming significant responsibility for the children's school-related interactions. This involvement was invariably characterized as beneficial in the household-school relationship. Chandra described the teachers' positive response to her partner's involvement in the schools:

"They're really supportive ... I think its because they know we care. And it's blown them away. It's blown them away. ... and they knew (my ex-husband) and I, kind of, because we were together about a year when the kids started going there. But he's been such an ass that he's blown it. He's not shown the kind of support and interest that (my partner) and I have. You know, she's gone to the special ed. meetings, and she goes to the conferences. And, you know they see her reaction when she looks at the kids' schoolwork and she goes 'Oh look and giggles. And they can tell that she truly loves them, but he hasn't done that. I mean he hasn't ever shown that. I don't' mean that to be mean about him. It's just honestly truthful. Because he loves his children but he's not a responsible parent. He doesn't really care what they do in school. It's mom's job."

Impact on children. A final theme in the data on the household-school relationship was mothers' concerns about the impact of disclosure of the parents'

sexual orientation on their children. In general, participants indicated that they were least worried about the reactions of school faculty and administrator, and most concerned about the reactions of children's peers. Tamara's description of her family's level of openness is typical:

"But all the teachers have been real open, and, you know, we both went in for conferences. I don't know. If (the children are) getting any negativity on that, we're not aware at all."

Other parents mentioned that their children already experience some level of negative attention from peers because of the mothers' orientation. Kerry reported that peers have teased her son, a fifth grader:

"(My son) gets ribbed about his mother being a lesbian. He has to deal with that. It wasn't easy for him. It hasn't been ...it wasn't easy for him. It hasn't been as bad this year (because adults at school have intervened).

Alyce reported that she was suspicious of the reactions of a minority of her son's peers' parents:

"So, in terms of the other parents at school, again, nobody has ever – they're awfully polite over there – so nobody has ever said things. There are a few families, who I wonder. Who (my son has) never really connected with or gone over to their houses or anything. And, you know, of course I look at that a little more closely than he does. He doesn't really care because he's got plenty of friends. But I wonder if it really had more to do with us."

Although none of the participants reported that their children experienced severe harassment at school, most mothers continue to practice caution about coming out in situations where the children are likely to be impacted. Jocelyn is one participant for whom this issue is particularly salient. At the time of her interview, Jocelyn's partner was just beginning to be integrated into the public life of the family. She describes how she approached the issue with her son:

"I've already asked him questions, like '(my partner) would like to come watch you play (on a school sports team). Would that be okay? Would you feel uncomfortable if (partner) came with me?' And he said 'No! I would like that!' So, I don't know if he knew what level I was talking about. He might have thought I meant just 'Would that be okay?' instead of 'You might be getting added questions from your friends.' You know, 'Who is that woman with your mom?' We didn't go into detail and we should do that."

In spite of their caution, most participants acknowledged that at least some of their children's friends knew about the mothers' sexual orientation. In most cases, peers knew about the family because parents had come out to school personnel, and had integrated themselves into the life of the school. In other cases, the children themselves had disclosed the mother's orientation. Some children, like Chloe's 10-year-old daughter, told only their closest friends. Others had children who disclosed to groups of peers, or even entire classrooms. These disclosures seemed to happen 'naturally' in the context of the children's activities in the classroom and on the playground. Both Kelsie and Candace

described an incident in which their 13 year-old daughter tried to inscribe a woodworking project "To the best dyke mom in the world." Interestingly, Candace added that "they wouldn't let her put in on there ... because they didn't believe her (that her mother is lesbian)."

For Chandra, her child's ability to be open about her family was a sign of a healthy child, as well as a supportive school environment. In the midst of her interview, Chandra retrieved a mother's day card from a stack of children's artwork on a nearby table. She proudly showed the interviewer her older daughter's hand-drawn portraits of Chandra and her partner, and read the inscription aloud:

> "Isn't that neat? [showing the card to the interviewer] And then she wrote [reading from the card]: Goes roller blading with me – mom. Does my homework with me – (partner). Cheers me up when I am sad – mom. Buys me stuff when she goes away on a plane – (partner). Likes to go out and get me school clothes – mom. Makes me feel warm inside – (partner). Tucks me in at night – mom. Lets me work on the car with her – (partner). Doesn't care what I look like – mom. Isn't that cute? And, look, here's (partner) and here's me [laughing]. She worked so hard on it. Most of her drawings (at school) are mom and (partner). To have a joint Mother's Day card. [pause] She worked so hard on it."

Thinking about her older daughter's openness in the classroom prompted Chandra to add:

"(My six year old daughter) has got sharing, you know, every Monday and Wednesday. It's nothing profound, but, if they didn't share about our family, that would be sad. And, to be closeted, that would be really hard for my kids. Just like if I was closeted, it would be really hard for (my partner) and I."

Throughout the data on the household-school relationship, mothers reflected that they felt compelled to struggle with issues of milieu and self-disclosure in spite of their difficulty. The school experience was seen as central to children's emotional and social development, as well as to their academic achievement. Each parent interviewed was hopeful that her children would negotiate the school system with some success. Alyce summarized her attitude about her son's future experiences:

"People say, 'Wait 'til middle school. Wait 'til middle school.' I do anticipate some change but I'm still optimistic. Our approach isn't going to be any different. We're going to be as out as possible. I mean, we're not going to try and hide anything and I think that he feels fine with that. I just think it's really important to be out and to not feel like … and not have your kid feel like there's some skeleton in the closet that they can't talk about. And he knows there are some kids who are not going to accept it and he knows there are some who will."

As the data on relationships between lesbian mother families and schools indicate, mothers experienced some stress at the intersection of home and school. Mothers expressed concern about the quality of their children's

experiences, particularly related to 'being different.' Mothers' responses to these concerns were to select schools known for multiculturalism, and to increase direct contact with teachers, administrators and children's peers in order to promote acceptance of lesbian mother families as part of the school milieu. Managing disclosure about sexual orientation was a primary issue for many of the women interviewed, but issues of invisibility complicated coming out in the schools, especially for non-biological mothers.

Relationships With Parents' Work

Of the 15 households represented by interviewees, all contained at least one adult worker. Most (80%) of the families had two incomes, but only a third of the households had two full-time workers. The work lives of the participant families were complex. Family employment arrangements ranged from Chloe's (a single woman with a part-time job) to Terry and Joni's (two full-time workers). Household income level, of course, varied accordingly. Tables 1 and 2 summarize income and work status for the interview sub-sample.

Twelve (57%) of the women interviewed worked full-time. Six others (29%) identified themselves as part-time workers. Candace, Carolyn, Chloe, Chandra, Tamara and Jocelyn fit into the part-time employee category. In addition, Amy reported that her partner is a part-time worker, bringing the total number of families with part-time workers to seven. Three respondents do not receive any wages: Julie and Connie are full-time care givers to their children, while Lisa divides her time between care giving and college. Although their

unpaid work is important to the functioning of their families, because it occurred within the respondent households, it will not be considered in this analysis.

Participant families were unusually creative and enterprising regarding employment. Three of the women interviewed (14%) are self-employed or entrepreneurs: Carolyn teaches martial arts and manages investment property, Alyce owns a retail business and Marla operates a home-based daycare business. A total of seven families (47%) include adult students. Five of the participants and two of their partners were enrolled in bachelor, master or Ph.D. programs.

All respondents provided data on household-employment relationship type and satisfaction. Each interviewee who lived in a household with two incomes was asked to provide data on her own work and on her partner's work. Thus, most interviews yielded two relationship types and two satisfaction levels. In addition, four women indicated two relationship types for a single work situation because of complexity in the work environment.

Seventy percent (n=14) of household-employment relationships were characterized as 'strong / positive' for respondent's work. In addition, one respondent who identified the household-work relationship as 'a change in relationship' added that the changes were very positive. Two women labeled their household-employment relationship as 'stressful / negative.' Two others said that the relationship was 'tenuous / strained.' Only one respondent indicated that her employment was 'non-interactive' with her household. Satisfaction with

the household-respondent's work relationship ranged from two to seven on the 7-point scale. Mean satisfaction was 5.67 (SD=1.37).

Results for partner's work were remarkably similar. Sixty five percent (n=13) of partner's work relationships were labeled as 'strong / positive.' Again, a single respondent identified the household-work relationship as 'a change in relationship' and indicated that work was "getting more positive." One woman labeled the household-partner's work relationship as 'stressful / negative,' and two said it was 'tenuous / strained.' Another three respondents said that their households were 'non-interactive' with partners' work. Respondents' satisfaction with the relationship between their family and partners' work ranged from three to seven on the 7-point scale. The mean was 5.41 (SD=1.58).

Overall, employed respondents held jobs that were above average in salary and prestige, which may account for some of their positive perceptions of the interactions between households and work. Interestingly, all household-work relationships identified as 'stressful / negative' referred to respondents' or partners' jobs in the social service field. Household-work relationships characterized as 'tenuous / strained' were accompanied by descriptions of jobs that interfered with workers' time and energy for the family. 'Non-interactive' relationships occurred only in blended families. These patterns prompt a deeper examination of the relationships between work and family. The following sections provide details about the work-related themes expressed by lesbian mothers in their interviews.

Instrumental support. One theme central to relationships between lesbian mother households and mothers' work environments was the availability of instrumental support for the family of the worker. Although most respondents mentioned salary and benefits when asked to describe supports and stressors in the household-work relationship, their comments did not suggest that money was the only motivation for their work. Terry, the only interview respondent who described her work-household relationship as non-interactive, described her job as a finance professional:

"If I could get paid more money for doing something else, or the same amount of money, then I would do something else. But I like what I do. If it didn't require 40-45 hours a week, that would be even better. But if I didn't like it, I wouldn't be there."

Alyce was similarly ambivalent about her work as co-owner of a retail business. Her comments reveal her struggle to balance her independence and creativity with financial responsibilities:

"I think the work we do is really important and really great, and I think that retail can be kind of a burnout. And, um, we've been open (several) years. I thought we would be a little more financially stable by now and able to contribute a little more to personal income. ... and that affects my satisfaction for sure. It's getting to the point where I feel like something has to change."

Like Terry and Alyce, most respondents were clear that, while salary was important, other factors mattered as well. Thus, comments about compensation

were often tied to other concerns, such as the schedule of the full-time worker, or the ways in which one partner's salary allowed the other partner to be more available to the children. Alyce, whose partner provided the majority of income in her family, stated simply: "If (my partner) didn't have her job, I wouldn't be in my job." Chandra echoed this theme in describing her partner's work:

> "She's full time – she's eight to five – and she makes good money. That's part of the reason I got to go down to part time - because she had a job change and makes good money. She makes $18 an hour, and I make $8, so there's quite a difference. She's the primary breadwinner."

Carolyn, whose part time work supplements her partner's salary, also alluded to the interaction between her flexibility and her partner's work:

> "Right now it's very positive. It's only been a year (since I stopped working full time) and it's evolving. You know, it 's just evolving. I have the good fortune of not having to make the money. I mean, I need to make some money to pay for the kids to go to school, but my partner makes a lot of money, and I have that luxury.

> Non-salary benefits were of central importance to the relationships

between these families' and the work place, as well. Health insurance for partners and partners' children was most often mentioned as a desired, but unavailable, form of instrumental support. For most families, lack of benefits for family members meant that one partner, and sometimes the children, bought health insurance independently or had no health coverage. In all families, then,

health coverage was uneven, complex, and a source of some concern and

resentment. Lynn described her partner's work:

"(Cara) has <u>no</u> benefits. That's (a) big negative. I can't carry her on mine,

but I can carry (the baby) so (the baby) and I have full benefits. And

Cara's - I ... <u>we</u> have to pay for. I mean, she has no retirement. Nothing.

Similarly, Chandra, who worked 25 hours a week, had a partner whose full time

job offered excellent benefits, but not for Chandra or the children. Thus, Chandra

went without health coverage. She described what happened when she changed

jobs so that she could be available to her children after school:

"And I also lost medical insurance so the kids are on Medicaid. The kids

are on Medicaid, which I never have done, but what do you do?"

Although many respondents described themselves as open about their

sexual orientation at work, statements about benefits discrimination were often

accompanied by references to the heterosexism of the work environment. Overt

and subtle threats to job security, and concern about interruptions in

interpersonal relationships were issues for respondents who desired insurance

coverage for partner or dependents. Kerry's description is typical. When asked

to describe the supports and stressors of the work place, she replied simply:

"The benefit package is a stressor. Lack of benefits for my partner. (And)

there's always the threat of ... not spoken threat of ... being discriminated

against at work because of orientation."

The only one of the respondents ever to have had access to domestic

partner benefits in the work place was Carolyn, whose former employer was a

pioneer in offering health insurance and other benefits to same sex partners.

Carolyn laughed when the interviewer asked if she had taken advantage of the

domestic partner benefits in that job. Her description of her experience with that

employer contradicts its image as a supportive, liberal environment:

> 'I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Well it was a great job, but a
>
> combination of dysfunctional work place, anti-gay, right wing creeps. ...
>
> You know, I was adopting children and I was scared to tell anyone
>
> because I was afraid someone would stop it because I was (lesbian). ...
>
> (There were) some real anti-gay people there. The most wonderful
>
> experience of my life (adopting the girls) and I was scared to death, you
>
> know?"

In addition to comments about salary and health insurance, respondents

mentioned the value of job stability and security as forms of instrumental support

in the work place. These factors were particularly important to the nine families in

which income from one partner supported the rest of the family. Amy, whose

salary supported her partner's graduate education as well as household

expenses, mentioned that she disliked her job but chose to stay because:

> "I've been there so long, it would be hard to start somewhere new –
>
> somewhere where I wouldn't have any guarantees (of job security). ...
>
> And I couldn't really leave now anyway. How could we pay the bills?"

Carolyn also mentioned that her partner's job security was the foundation for

their family-work arrangement. Without her partner's salary, Carolyn would have

to return to full-time work and would no longer be available to their children during the day:

> "We hope that she stays there until she retires, but you never know. If that work situation changes, then everything changes for us."

A few women mentioned more serious concerns about job stability. Chandra, for example, mentioned that her partner worked under the supervision of someone who disliked her. As Chandra's ability to remain a part time worker hinges on her partner's wages, her ambivalence and anxiety about the situation are evident:

> "(My partner's) direct supervisor doesn't like her. She doesn't like him, which I don't (blame her for). It's very stressful for her. Well, it's secure because the guy above likes her, and he knows she's a dedicated employee and it's secure in that fact. (My partner's) a real employable person, (but) I worry that you aren't going to find that pay a lot of places. But she's a hard worker so I think she's ... I don't know. I wouldn't call it secure. Secure is a strong word to use for it, but I don't know. I can see this (supervisor) guy walking in one day and saying 'Guess what?' He's done that. I mean recently. It wouldn't be unique to that place."

Interpersonal support. A second central theme of the respondents' descriptions of household-work relationships was the availability of interpersonal support in the work place environment. Surprisingly, none of the interviewees made interpersonal relationships primary to their descriptions of their interactions with work. Nevertheless, most respondents mentioned co-workers or clients at

some time in the interviews. Nearly all respondents reported being out as lesbians at work, and most described interpersonal relationships that had a positive impact on the household-work interaction. Candace described her partner, Kelsie's work as positive almost entirely because of Kelsie's relationships with co-workers:

> "Kelsie's out at work. She talks about our relationship and ... it's very supportive, because she has people to talk to and that makes you feel good about yourself."

Similarly, Chandra, who works in an elementary school, described the person-to-person interaction as a highlight of her job:

> (The relationship type's) gotta be strong positive because I get along with everybody there. There's the pay, yeah, but what're you going to do? It's the one negative. It's actually a dream job, and I like working with the kids too – they crack me up. What job do you have that, when you walk in, everybody jumps up and hugs you? Everybody's happy to see you and they run down to me. You don't walk into the office (in most jobs) and have people do that. ... I get hugs and smiles and giggles."

Many participants imbedded content on interpersonal relationship in data on other work place issues. Here Bonnie described the way that her co-workers help her deal with a difficult supervisor:

> "We have five people in our (work place) and I get along well with them. (My supervisor) is, in my opinion, like - hyperactive attention deficit. [laughing] You can't ever ... he's like bouncing off the walls some days

and you just don't know what to expect with the boss. But the rest of us know it."

In a few cases, the value of adult interaction on the job was most evident in comments from and about women who were stay-at-home mothers. That is, interpersonal support as a benefit of employment was most evident in its absence. Julie described her reaction to staying home with her son:

"I think part of it is, because you know, this is really the first time that I haven't been working. And you get a lot of your self-esteem form working. So even though I <u>am</u> working, it's just not the same as working out in the public. You know, even though I get a lot of kudos for how well (my child) is doing, (it's not the same)."

Similarly, Bonnie described her partner, Connie's, experience with being an at-home mother:

"I think it's the only thing we can do right now, and so I really like it. But I do want – I would like within six months or something for her to start working part time because I'm just afraid that too long out of the workforce is not such a good thing (for her emotionally)."

In addition, to comments on the benefits of interpersonal relationships at work, a few respondents mentioned less-positive interactions with co-workers and supervisors. As noted above, Chandra mentioned that her partner's conflict with her supervisor could threaten her job security. Similarly, Bonnie, an attorney with a fairly prestigious job, commented that she felt little control in her relationship with her supervisor:

"My job right now... you know, I sit at a computer. I do research and writing. And then when the (supervisor) wants to take a sudden jaunt, I'm taking a sudden jaunt. And then I'm back, but I'm not in control of anything at all. It's like a little slave and slave master kind of situation. Just you and him."

Several women reported that anti-lesbian sentiment created noxious work environments. Carolyn reported on a past position in which she worked with "anti-gay right wing creeps." Amy revealed that, after coming out at work, her colleagues began to avoid her. Candace also mentioned that her partner has had some interruption in co-worker relationships since coming out as lesbian:

"She has received some grief from people. Just a lot of her closer friends let her go at work because of the divorce. They were friends with (Kelsie's ex-husband) and Kelsie. And she let (her ex-husband) go ... And then I think (it was) probably me ... being with a woman. I think that they (thought) 'How could she give up a man for a woman?'

Marla, too, reported that attitudes toward lesbian and gay issues in the work place has impacted her partner's interpersonal experiences at work:

"This work environment is so much better for her than her last work environment, where there was a principal who, just right in front of the whole school, was cutting down gays and everything. It was just the most awful environment. She was the only, that she knew of, gay person on the staff. Now, this is a much different working environment. She has open gay staff members and it feels much more supportive."

In Tamara's case, the interaction with her co-workers was a combination of support and frustration. Tamara described her relationships in an agency with a high percentage of gay and lesbian employees:

"In general, compared to a lot of jobs, it's been a really strong, supportive relationship. Well, part of it (is) just being able to be real out here. And you know, people knowing how much I wanted to have kids. And to be supportive of that. At the same time, there aren't a lot of people here with kids, so it's a real new area for some people."

As these statements suggest, the issue of interpersonal support in the work place was quite complex. Personality, work place culture and policies, job type and setting all interacted with respondents' styles of communication, degree of openness and myriad other factors with various outcomes.

Integration of work and family. Another major theme of household-work relationships was related to the ways that work place supports allowed respondents to be available for their children. This focus on integrating work and family was the theme expressed most often by the women interviewed.

One way that respondents measured the potential integration of work and family was in the flexibility offered by the work place. Allowance for variations in scheduled work hours, and schedules that paralleled school and day care were considered valuable perks to these mothers. For example, when explaining her decision to leave her former job's salary, benefits and security, Carolyn said:

"No schedule fits when you have kids. I don't care what it is. You know, you get a schedule, and then their naps change or their day care changes

because they get older. And then that doesn't work any more. I didn't want to have to be somewhere (away from the kids)."

Similarly, Chandra compared her previous job with her current position:

"It was eight to five, and now I do nine to two, so that allows me to drive the kids to school, and pick them up, and get dinner going, and make the doctor appointments. All my doctor appointments are, like, at three or four and I can take them myself. And talk to the teachers and whatever. Plus, I'm off. I teach so I'm off, too, the same holidays as the kids are."

Just as flexibility was noted as a benefit, any lack of availability for children's activities, appointments and other events was seen as a particular hardship by these mothers. Tamara reported on her partner's relatively new job:

"They've allowed her some flexibility in her scheduling. But it's tough. She has to travel more, so that can be more of a challenge."

Similarly, Julie commented on their son's weekly medical and therapy appointments, which her partner is unable to attend:

"It's hard when there's things going on that she should be a part of that she can't be a part of. I mean, she makes it to all of his major appointments, but you almost kind of feel resentful that she can't be there for, like, the therapy appointments and things like that. Just so she can see first-hand what's going on with him. Sometimes you just wish that she could also hear how wonderful he's doing, because I can tell her that but it's a lot different hearing me tell her second-hand what they're saying than it is for her to hear them say it."

Even workers with positions that seemed to promise a high degree of independence mentioned the desire to be more available for their children. Alyce, an entrepreneur, described her work:

"The fact that the work that I do is retail and you have to be there the hours when the store is open makes it kind of difficult. Working nights, a couple nights a week is hard. If the kids are sick, making sure that there's someone to cover the store. ... It makes it more difficult, where if I were working, even not as a business owner, I would have more flexibility that way."

Another way that respondents measured the intersection of work and family life was by co-workers' and bosses' expressions of acceptance of children. Generally, familiarity with the needs of children and families, whether in formal policy or in informal interaction, was considered an asset in the work place. Thus, several respondents mentioned that allowing partners and children to call the work place, including partners and children in work-related social activities, and other related behaviors contributed to positive household-work relationships.

A few families experienced work as an agent separating the employee from partner and children. Kerry described how her partner's supervisor required her partner to attend classes that take her away form the family nearly every evening of the week. Jocelyn complained that her partner's work hours were a serious impediment to their time together. Julie described trying to call her partner on the telephone:

"I always feel bad when I have to call (Joan) at work, because I'm afraid that she's gonna get in trouble. And so it's stressful for me when I have to call her. And if she has to take a day off, I'm always worried that she's gonna make somebody mad or get on somebody's list. And it seems like, just recently, she's had to take more time off than normal because there's things going on (with our son)."

Simple access to family members who were out of the home all day was a frequently-mentioned issue. Workplace policies that prohibited or discouraged family communication were attributed to employers who were "business-minded" or otherwise inhumane. In contrast, family-friendly practices in the work place were often credited to administrators who were parents, or who liked children. Julie continued:

"Joan's just transferred jobs within the same company. The supervisor that she had before was very supportive. He told her, 'If you need off, don't worry about it. Take it.' The supervisor that she has now has no children, and has no real understanding of, you know, when your child is sick or needs to go to the cardiologist. So it's a little more strained than it was before she transferred jobs."

Similarly, work-related social activities that included partners and children were mentioned as a support for families. Several respondents said that their partners were "invited" to staff parties and comparable events. Fewer interviewees mentioned that children were integrated into household-work relationships in this

way. Tamara described her childless co-workers' failure to include her children in an activity:

"I'll give you an example. I thought this was real funny. Our staff said, 'Let's plan a trip to (an amusement park) or something. And basically folks just said, 'Okay, we're all going to go, but just take partners, not kids.' Can you imagine saying to your kids: 'I'm sorry, I'm taking the day off, going to (the amusement park) with my grown-up friends and you can't go?' So, it's like, 'Have fun, you guys!'"

Descriptions of work schedules, opportunities for time away from work to attend to family business, and inclusion of partners and children in work-related social activities reflected respondents' desire to reconcile the need to work with the responsibilities of parenting and family life. Those with employment that allowed for integration of the two spheres invariably characterized their jobs as sources of support for their families. Interestingly, the three respondents who characterized household-work relationships as 'stressful / negative' on the interview eco maps identified lack of integration between work and family as primary stressors. These three families shared a number of characteristics: in each, the oldest child was a pre-schooler, only one partner worked full-time, the work place was a social service agency, and complaints centered around dislike for the stressful work or unpleasant co-workers. For example, Amy described her agency as rejecting her after she came out as lesbian. She described herself as "cut off from everyone there." Lisa's partner worked a flexible schedule, but she had serious concerns about the administrators in her agency and worried

that fiscal mismanagement would lead to agency closure. Joan's concerns, documented above, focused on lack of flexibility and fear of reprisal for needing / wanting time off to be with her son. Respondents descriptions in all three cases suggested that the combination of stressful work and noxious work environment led to a lack of home-work integration, and thus contributed to poor household-work relationships.

Strategies for balancing work and family. As the data on integrating work and family indicate, an important focus for the respondents was the stress that they experienced in their dual roles as mothers and providers. Bonnie described the problem:

"See, I feel like the ability to concentrate (at work) is way down because I know I gotta do the dishwasher, and the laundry, and I just have to keep going. And I have to fill up the car with gas on Friday and on Sunday and, you know, it's so much (that) it's hard to concentrate well."

Respondents and their partners used a variety of strategies to manage the stress of balancing work and home life. Many families chose to give up the benefits of two full time incomes in favor of greater flexibility and availability to children. Others located full time positions that offered greater freedom to schedule their work hours around their children's needs. A few families, especially those with older children, managed to maintain full-time work with little interruption.

A small portion of the sample reported keeping personal and family spheres as separate as possible. The disconnection between work and home

occurred only in families in which the worker was a step parent in the household. Beyond that commonality, the separation seemed to be unique in each of the families. Chandra's partner was described as a person who "just doesn't talk about things" in her corporate job. Candace described her part time work in an office where she is the only female employee:

"Well, I've not really told anyone (that I'm lesbian). I work with all men. ...I love my job. I just don't ... I keep my personal life, my personal life and my work life, my work life."

Terry's position about dissociating personal and professional roles was the most strongly stated. She explained why she does not pursue interpersonal relationships at work beyond those required to get her job done:

"Yeah I have people that are supportive, but it's not really required. For me, since I'm a manager at work, my whole philosophy since I started working, is that I've seen too many women, in particular, where no matter how supportive companies are, they tend to pick on personal issues for women. So what I do is, I do my job. I do it well. You know, I advance through my career but I don't bring the personal side into it, because I don't want that to be an influence. I've seen it happen too many times, with women in particular.

Terry's depiction of the work place as a place to "do my job (and) do it well" was not common in this sample. In truth, there was a remarkable lack of focus on ambition, professional accomplishment, or the details of careers, considering the level of education and expertise in the group of interviewees.

More frequently, respondents reported on ways that they worked to balance work and family without separating the two completely. In addition to choosing employment that allowed for increased flexibility in work hours, several respondents mentioned strategies for limiting the impact of work life in the home. Jocelyn, for example described her family's simple strategy for controlling the impact of her partner's work on the family:

"(My partner's) been going through a lot of changes at work with management. She's gone .. She works 12 hour days, five days a week. Usually, no less than 12 hours. Sometimes 14! Her schedule's always changing. She's stressed. Sometimes, you know, she brings home work, like we all do, and she's stressed about it for a while. And she gets a lot of calls, you know, because she's the chef and a lot of kitchen managers call with questions, you know, if there's a problem with an order. So she tends to get calls at home. Sometimes they're late night calls because the restaurant closes .. sometimes they're closing till 12 or 1 a.m. So we've got calls at midnight before. Now, we just don't answer (the phone). We just don't answer it."

Another, more common, strategy mentioned by respondents combined worker efficiency with work place flexibility. This approach often resulted in increased interaction between work place and home life, with the worker asserting control and independence in the relationship. Amy reported: "I take off as much time as I can get away with" to be available for her son. She sometimes flexes her schedule without consulting with anyone so that she can

provide transportation, after-school care and other needs. Lynn takes her infant to work with her nearly every day, sometimes even asking her supervisor to care for the child when she has to attend to business that cannot include the baby. Similarly, Bonnie described her philosophy regarding time spent at work:

"How much time do I go to work? As little as possible! [laughing] Literally, as little, to the limit, as possible! And, right now, I'm really fortunate in that I'm exclusively an employee of this (supervisor) and I don't answer to anybody but him. And if he's not physically in the office, ten minutes later I leave. Because I'm really efficient ... I do the minimum that I have to do, but I do it as well as I can. I don't overdo it and I work less than 40 hours, by far, right now. I'm supposed to work 40 hours, and if the judge stays till 10 p.m., I have to stay till 10. And he has done that, but it's very rare. ... I haven't worked a Friday in two months!"

Bonnie concluded with the announcement that she hopes to be able to telecommute from home one day a week in the near future.

In all, respondents described a wide variety of pragmatic and creative strategies for managing work and family. Throughout their interviews, these women were clear that family is important to them, and thus worth the stress and compromise of juggling dual roles. As with the comments on interactions with children's schools, respondents were quite optimistic about their ability to manage their work lives in such a way as to maximize their effectiveness as parents. The comments of Marla, who runs a child care business in her home, reflect the sentiments of many of the mothers interviewed:

"At first I was a little jealous of the time that the other kids took away from my own kids. The reason I was doing this (child care business) was that I wanted to be home with my own kids. It was me learning to put my own priorities ... that my own kids come first. These are my clients and my charges and they're very important too, but .... I've learned how to work that out and to balance it."

The data on household-work relationships revealed that lesbian mothers attend to both the instrumental and interpersonal aspects of employment. Benefits like salary, health insurance, and job security are highly valued. In the same way, personal support, friendly interactions and the inclusion of partners and children in the social aspects of the work culture are important. The need to be both mother and worker was a source of stress for most of the women interviewed. A few women coped with the pressure of the home-family interaction by separating the spheres, but, as their work profiles indicate, many of these women demonstrated willingness to take risks and to use creativity in the workplace by balancing pay and perks with flexibility in work schedules.

The relationships between lesbian mother families and their social environments are fairly complex, and these analyses only begin to reveal the experiences of this group of interviewees. The implications of these results and suggestions for further results are discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

These interviews with lesbian mothers provided deep and detailed data about their experiences and concerns as members of marginalized families. Because the 15 families in this study represented a range of family types, including planned two-parent lesbian mother families, step parent families, and a single parent family, the information gathered was both broad and complex. As a result, the conclusions presented here both support previous studies of lesbian mothers and suggest areas for future exploration. This final chapter attempts to examine themes drawn from the interview data in the context of the social science literature. The emphasis of this examination is on summarizing the relationship between this study and the existing literature on lesbian mothers. In addition, implications of this study for policy, practice and research are considered.

Summary of the Study

As Chapter 1 revealed, a substantial body of social science literature already exists on the intra-family relationships of lesbian mother families and on the interactions between these families and their social environments. Because so few of the studies completed in the last 30 years captured respondents' perspectives on the data collected, however, this project attempted to include highly individual and specific information from the women interviewed. Thus, although this study generally supported much of the research on lesbian mother

families, it also provided additional detail on the experiences and attitudes behind the results. This section summarizes the results of the study and identifies areas of congruence with and deviation from previous research on lesbian mothers.

As reported in Chapter 4, respondents reported mostly positive relationships within their families and indicated generally high levels of satisfaction with all types of relationships within their households. For the families represented in this study, the themes that characterize interactions between partners, between parents and children, and between siblings suggest strong commitments to maintenance of the family and to capitalizing on strengths and opportunities in interpersonal interactions. Other themes highlighted areas of stress, as well as strategies for coping with challenges to family survival and success.

Results from this research support several earlier studies that reported lesbian mothers are satisfied in their intimate relationships (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua & Joseph, 1995; Hand, 1991; Osterwiel, 1991; Patterson, 1995). Satisfaction levels for partner relationships were high, and respondents' comments on their relationships with partners included substantial focus on the intensity and commitment of the friend / lover relationships. Besides this general confirmation of the existence of positive relationships, though, the data collected here give hints about the tools used by lesbian parents to maintain satisfying partnerships in the household. Their emphasis on communication and shared interest in the family, both themes in the interview data, suggest that these women enjoyed strong emotional and social affiliation with their partners. In

addition, their characterization of differences between partners as complementary skills, and their stories of surviving adversity as a way of reinforcing partner bonds reveal the interviewees' focus on strengths. These examples of resiliency and optimism in interpersonal relationships parallel findings by Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray and Smith (1986) and by Pagelow (1980), in which lesbians were found to use creative and assertive methods of coping in the face of adversity.

A final theme of the data on relationships between partners, roadblocks to intimacy, support findings by McCandlish (1987) and Stiglitz (1990) in which lesbian mothers with infants reported decreases in sexual contact and emotional intimacy following the addition of a child to the household. In this study, respondents with children of all ages reported difficulty in finding time for the partner relationship, and several mentioned factors outside parent-child relationship that contribute to the problem. Although respondents commented in detail on their feelings of frustration about lack of time with their partners, this study did not measure the amount of time partners actually spent together or the frequency of partners' sexual contact. For this reason, it is not possible to identify if the felt lack of intimacy translated into true loss of physical or emotional contact.

High respondent satisfaction levels for parent-child and sibling relationships reveal that these lesbian mothers are content, in a more general way, with family relationships overall. Analysis of parent–child themes supported the notion that lesbian mothers are highly committed to parenting and family life.

For example, in the interview sample, methods of adding children to the family included domestic and international adoption, guardianship, heterosexual marriage and liaison, insemination by known and anonymous donors, and foster parenting. These data support earlier writing on lesbian family formation that characterized lesbians as innovative and unconventional in their notions of family (Kenney & Tash, 1992; Martin, 1993; Weston, 1991). They also support an understanding of these women as highly committed to their families, since, for them, getting pregnant, being approved for adoption, fighting for custody and other obstacles to parenting required substantial investments of time, emotion and money.

Although respondents reported positive parent-child relationships overall, concerns about some aspects of these relationships were evident in the data. Although only one of the women in this study was facing a challenge to child custody at the time of the interviews, four of the five families containing children with identifiable fathers reported some anxiety about challenges to maternal custody. Analyses of legal challenges facing lesbian parents suggest that courts are less likely than ever to rule against lesbians on the basis of sexual orientation (Harvard Law Review, 1990; Rivera, 1987), but mothers in this sample continue to express concern about their tenuous position in the courts. For some families, use of donor insemination and adoption seemed to bypass the complications of family dissolution and custody battles. For these families, though, locating supportive adoption agencies and living within the jurisdiction of courts that allow

second-parent adoption seemed to be more a matter of luck and resources than a reflection of changing legal attitudes.

In this study, blended or step parent families reported unique problems and concerns. Respondents' comments on integrating new mothers into existing families and of living with non-positive interactions between parents and children in lesbian step families support ideas recently introduced by Wright (1998). Wright identified three parenting stances that new mothers may assume in lesbian step families: co-parent, in which the new partner acts as a consultant and helper for the biological mother; step mother, in which she takes on the primary mothering role although power in the family remains fundamentally with the biological mother; and co-mother, in which responsibility and power are shared equally by the biological mother and her new partner. Families in the current study who reported non-positive interactions between parents and children seemed to fit best into the step parent model as defined by Wright.

This study identified four themes that are not addressed in the literature on lesbian mother families: desire for more time in parent-child interaction; sibling rivalry; sibling attachment; and sibling opportunities for growth. These themes may be most remarkable for their ordinariness. Issues such as children's developmentally appropriate demands for time and attention, mothers' desire for contact with their children, and sibling's intense interactions are universal family phenomena. Lewin (1993) commented that "lesbian mothers, like other mothers, share in the system of meaning that envelopes motherhood in our culture" (p.182). Similarly, in this study, family relationships and identity do seem to be

impacted by the sexual orientation of the mother(s), but they are not controlled by it to the extent that family and child development assume entirely unfamiliar characteristics.

The second major area of analysis in this study centered on relationships between lesbian mother families and their social environments. Most respondents reported positive relationships with children's schools and with mothers' work, although the frequency of positive relationships was lower in these relationships with the social environment than in within-household relationships. Important stressors were found in household-school and household-work relationships through analysis of the qualitative data. In general, results of this study support prior research on interactions between lesbian mother families and their communities. In addition, the data begin to iterate the strengths and stressors that characterize the complex relationships experienced by these families, as well as to clarify factors that impact success and frustration in lesbian mothers' interactions with systems outside the family.

Lesbian mothers in this study were particularly attentive to their children's school environments, frequently commenting on the importance of tolerance and respect for differences in the schools. The focus on diversity in the school milieu suggests that mothers in this sample see their families as part of a larger spectrum of diverse families that includes racial and ethnic minorities, as well as lesbian mother families. Drawing parallels between celebrating racial / ethnic differences and honoring non-traditional family forms is a common-sense approach to educating school personnel about the issues facing their children. In

addition, locating or creating socially liberal environments in which to immerse themselves is one way that lesbian mothers (and presumably their children) can experience a decrease in stress (Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993).

Respondents were often highly involved in their children's classrooms as well as participating in more general school matters. Their level of involvement parallels earlier research that characterizes lesbian mothers as politically involved, self-confident, and willing to assume leadership roles (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986). Earlier studies have suggested that lesbian mothers view children's exposure to non-traditional family forms as leading to the development of open and tolerant attitudes (Harris & Turner, 1985). These mothers' involvement in schools may be seen as purposive behavior aimed at affecting positive attitudes toward lesbian mother families in their children's general school environment. Coming out to teachers, administrators and children's peers can be seen as a deliberate act in which lesbian mothers simultaneously increase their visibility in the school environment in order to affiliate with other marginalized groups, and work to maintain the integrity of their family by asserting the parenting relationships of both members of a lesbian couple (Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993). The politicization of lesbian mothers (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991) is demonstrated in various important, if subtle, ways as they strive to ensure positive experiences for their children.

Detailed information on how lesbian mothers manage information about sexual orientation, family structure and the role of the non-biological lesbian mother is one of the principal contributions of these interviews. While others

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have written about the general invisibility of non-biological parents in lesbian mother families (Hare, 1994; Wright, 1998), these respondents brought an immediacy to the data not seen in more academic discussions of the issues. Their stories about trying to find the delicate balance between open, assertive discussion of information relevant to the education system, and socially inappropriate divulgence of "private business" clarify the profound stress experienced by these families, even when relationships with the social environment are amicable.

Neither step mothers' concerns about displacing biological fathers (e.g. through involvement in their children's schools) nor children 'coming out' as members of lesbian mother families have been fully addressed in the social science literature. Unlike the themes related to sibling relationships within families, these issues are unique aspects of the particular experience of living in a lesbian mother family and cannot be examined without further research with lesbian mothers and their children.

Information about the relationships between lesbian mother families and their children's schools supports conclusions drawn from data on relationships within lesbian mother families. That is, respondents' descriptions of their interactions with schools illustrate the mothers' commitments to their children and their partners. In addition, household-school interactions delineate some of the unique dilemmas experienced by lesbian mothers when they interact with institutions designed for heterosexual two-parent families.

Analysis of the data on relationships between lesbian mother families and mothers' work yielded several important themes. The women interviewed for this study were remarkably open about sexual orientation in their jobs. Most respondents enjoyed positive interpersonal relationships on the job, although a few women reported that disclosure of sexual orientation had negative consequences for them in terms of interpersonal relationships. Research in the 1980's indicated that the majority of lesbians feared losing their jobs if their sexual orientation were revealed to their employers (Levine & Leonard, 1984; Poverny & Finch, 1988). Although overt discrimination does not seem to be a primary concern for most, these data suggest that some lesbian mothers continue to deal with stigma in the workplace.

As might be expected in a sample with this level of commitment to family, most of the respondents described family work arrangements that allowed at least one parent to spend substantial time with her child or children. Entrepreneurship, part time jobs, use of flexible schedules, and choosing to live on a single income were strategies used by respondents in this study. These and other approaches to balancing work and family support the notion that lesbian mothers are creative and adaptable in their relationships with work (Pagelow, 1980), often placing accessibility to children above benefits, job security and salary.

The focus on integration of work and family can be seen as more evidence of lesbian mothers' commitment to maintaining the integrity of their families (Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993). Comments about the value placed on the inclusion of

partners and children in work-related social events support this interpretation, as do data on the negative impact of the lack of flexibility in workers' schedules. Gender socialization doubtless provides a parallel explanation for this finding. That is, families with two mothers may be likely to make decisions that favor interpersonal relationships and children's needs over financial achievement because women are socialized to value nurturing of partners and children above all other concerns. More research is needed to clarify this issue, and to examine the ways in which lesbian mothers make decisions about the work-family balance at various stages of family and child development.

The issue of health care benefits for partners and children was one area of the household-work relationship for which respondents were unable to devise creative solutions. Nearly all the women interviewed accepted lack of access to health insurance for family members as a fact of modern American life. Although some respondents mentioned the desire for domestic partner policies as a way to access benefits, most seemed to consider change in their benefits as an impossibility.

Overall, the results of this study support previous research on lesbian mothers and their children, although some of the intricacies of everyday relationships reported here have not been discussed before. This study's focus on relationship type, satisfaction level and detailed description of reactions and experiences yielded valuable information about the strengths, stressors and motivations of lesbian mother families.

Implications for Policy

Lesbian mother families exist outside of the mainstream of public life in many important ways. As the literature in Chapter 1 suggests, lack of legitimacy for lesbian relationships means that partners and children have little protection when couples separate or when families experience health, financial, legal and other problems. Attention must be given to policies that support these families as legitimate, contributing, responsible workers, community members and citizens.

Respondents in this study reported on the everyday relationships in their lives, and their comments were based on their experiences and beliefs rather than their ambitions. For this reason, perhaps, none of the women interviewed mentioned same-sex marriage as a potential solution to being denied access to the privileges of heterosexual marriage. Although legalization of same-sex marriage could assist some lesbian couples raising children together by improving access to benefits currently restricted to married heterosexual partners, respondents universally ignored this as a potential solution to perceived social needs. For some lesbians, marriage itself, as a heterosexual tradition steeped in religion and traditional definitions of gender roles, may be seen as undesirable. For others, the notion of marriage may seem irrelevant, since these couples are already living in committed relationships that are generally approved and acknowledged within their 'families of choice' (Weston, 1991). In any case, the federal Defense of Marriage Act and state legislation restricting marriage to opposite-sex partners renders same-sex marriage a distant and faint promise (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1996).

A more immediate and attainable solution may lie with changes in policies that more directly impact access to needed benefits. Work place family benefits are especially important to lesbian mothers because these women tend to use non-traditional work arrangements to balance work and family. Thus, one or both partners in a two-parent family may have difficulty accessing health insurance, disability and retirement plans if they work at jobs that are less than full-time, stay at home to raise children, or choose to be self-employed. Even in families where a parent is a full-time worker who enjoys excellent benefits, children may not have health insurance and other coverage if the worker is not the legal or biological parent of the children. Commitment to the family is socially desirable, and policies ought to support workers who take their parenting roles seriously. Greater availability of domestic partner benefits could create a sort of safety net for lesbian mother families by ensuring that access to work place benefits does not come at the price of decreased availability for children's needs.

Women who are responsible for supporting their children ought to be identified as mothers for the purposes of work place and other social benefits. Access to second-parent adoption can provide substantial protection for children and parents in some lesbian mother families. (Second-parent adoption is not generally considered applicable to families in which two biological or legal parents already exist.) In this study, most respondents who had access to second-parent adoption used it. In addition, some families who lived outside the single county in the state where second-parent adoption is available also pursued the legal procedure, although none were successful. Like domestic

partner benefits, women in this study seemed to see second-parent adoption as more realistic and more desirable than the option of same-sex marriage. Second-parent adoption is already a reality in Michigan, and many of the mothers interviewed in this study know someone (or know of someone) who has been through the process. In addition, second-parent adoption focuses on the needs of the children, rather than on the partner relationship, so may better reflect the goals of these women while avoiding the religious and social implications of marriage.

Besides benefits discrimination, lesbian mother families reported that their families 'become invisible' in the community because organizations continue to ignore diversity of family type. In the schools, evidence of this problem is abundant, including school records that identify parents as 'mother and father', teachers and administrators who ignore or question the role of non-biological parents even when the parents have explained the family, and tolerance of teasing, name-calling and other harassment related to sexual orientation in the classroom and on the playgrounds. Implicit in some of the complaints about household-school relationships was the idea that public institutions like the schools exclude non-biological parents via policies and practices that focus on the legal rather than the actual parental relationships within the family. Policies that support the inclusion of all responsible adults make better sense for the already-beleaguered school system. In order for this remedy to work, of course, information about meaningful steps toward inclusion must be available to all school personnel. Resources for opening a dialogue about lesbian and gay

parents and the schools have been developed and could be used to educate school communities about the issues facing lesbian mother families (Educational Advocacy Committee of Family Pride Coalition, 1998).

Federal and state protections for lesbians and gay men, and smaller-scale policy changes for domestic partner benefits and second-parent adoption have long been the arena of gay and lesbian activists. Social workers and others who are mandated to work for social justice must join the struggle to achieve equity for lesbian mother families. To do otherwise is to ignore a fundamental civil rights issue and social work opportunity of our era.

Implications for Practice

The sample of lesbian mother families interviewed for this research had remarkably few problems that might merit the intervention of a clinical social worker, psychologist or physician. By virtue of their need for services, lesbian mother families in clinical populations are likely to exhibit a variety of problems not mentioned here, and many may need intensive intervention. This study did not aim to search out potential pathologies in lesbian mother families. Nevertheless, the results of this research suggest principles of intervention that are particularly salient with lesbian mothers and their children.

Before working with lesbian mothers, practitioners will benefit from increasing their understanding of the values, beliefs and behaviors that guide the mothers' interactions within the household and in the community. The sample of lesbians studied here, for example, displayed a remarkable commitment to their roles as mothers, even at the expense of financial prosperity or time for intimacy

with partners. In addition, interdependence was the rule in these families, as is seen particularly in the data on family work arrangements. Finally, communication was highly valued in interpersonal relationships, as was active participation in the lives of children.

Of course, just as the women interviewed here expressed these themes in different ways, clients will vary in their presentation of issues that have most meaning for them. A thorough and directed assessment is likely to be very useful with lesbian mother families. Important areas to consider include:

- Family history and family type, including methods and timing of adding children to the family.

- Roles of the biological mother and non-biological mother (if any) in the household and in the community.

- Levels of interaction and roles of other parents, including children's fathers and mothers' former female partners.

- Couples' concerns about lack of intimacy or sexual contact and the effects of such concerns on family relationships.

- Family work arrangements and related concerns, such as parental availability for children and lack of access to work place benefits.

- Mothers' perceptions of community attitudes, such as tolerance for racial / ethnic diversity.

- Visibility of other lesbian mother families in the community.

- Methods of managing disclosure of mothers' sexual orientation, including children's level of openness.

- Connection to social supports, including other lesbian mother families.

Once assessment is completed, planning for intervention should include consideration of clients' characteristic methods of approaching solution development. This study, for example, showed strong support for the notion that lesbian mothers use creative and flexible approaches to problem solving. Examination of the methods by which mothers' created their families or of the ways in which they manage disclosure about sexual orientation in children's' schools may provide a template for further problem solving. Although this process sounds simple, it may be quite difficult for some practitioners. While none of the mothers in this study could be characterized as highly deviant, practitioners who value safety and conformity might experience solutions developed in this way as non-traditional, unexpected, or even risky.

The results of this study clearly highlight intersections between individuals in lesbian mother families and institutions in the community as areas of particular strain. Understanding the meanings that members of families ascribe to instances of subtle bias or miscommunication is essential to effective intervention. Because much of the pressure experienced in household-community relationships amounts to institutionalized heterosexism, conscientious practitioners may need to act as advocates for their clients. For example, a practitioner might use the lesbian mothers' own analogy of respect for race / ethnicity to help school personnel better understand the value of including lesbian mother families in the school community.

In addition to advocacy, practice methods that empower lesbian mothers to develop their own systems of support and intervention should be considered. For example, a support group for lesbian parents of school-aged children would minimize the need for each family to discover the most effective ways of dealing with a local school district. Mothers who share common experiences or whose children attend the same schools could share information about compassionate teachers, methods of communicating with administrators, and effective modes of redressing grievances. A coalition of concerned lesbian mothers may be a formidable force in the community. Participation in support groups is also a way for lesbian mothers and children to meet and develop friendships, thereby increasing overall social support.

In addition to comprehensive and focused assessment, advocacy, and strategies for empowerment, practitioners need to increase awareness of community resources for lesbian mothers. In urban centers and liberal suburban communities these resources may include gay and lesbian centers and existing lesbian mother support groups, but since many lesbian mother families live outside of these areas, other sources of support should be considered as well. Welcoming religious communities, feminist women's organizations, Internet groups and lesbian publications can all be effective referrals for ongoing support, although each must be researched by the practitioner before being recommended.

Implications for Research

Qualitative research methods can be especially effective in increasing knowledge about the relationships experienced by lesbian mother families. Respondents in this study supported and clarified existing knowledge as well as indicating areas needing further exploration. Additional studies of lesbian mothers that use interviews and other qualitative techniques are needed, of course. Because the interviews conducted in this study provided so much detail, further analysis of the existing data may well provide additional insight into the experiences of lesbian mothers, as well.

Sample characteristics, sample size and methodology limited this study. Although additional efforts to recruit lesbians of color, low-income lesbians, single lesbian mothers, and others underrepresented in the current sample would be difficult, expensive and time-consuming, the results will be well worth the effort. Without the participation of such a diverse sample, important stories will not be told, themes will not be described, and improved services may not be offered. Another way to increase diversity in the data is to interview more of the existing sample. Since the variance within this relatively homogenous sample was large, additional participants will have important and unique perspectives to report, resulting in more complete coverage of existing themes and addition of new topics for analysis. Finally, although it was an excellent tool for deep exploration of the experiences of this sample, the interview methodology limited analysis of the data, since no comparisons or generalizations could be made. Limited use of

quantitative measurement may help to supplement continued use of the qualitative methodology.

This study has raised a considerable number of questions for further research. Some of the questions could be addressed by further analysis of the existing data. Others will require collection of additional data. An abbreviated list of these questions follows:

- What are the implications of mothering / being mothered in a cross-racial lesbian mother family?

- How do lesbian mothers retain their attitudes of resilience in the face of explicit and subtle threats to family coherence?

- How does the involvement of a third or fourth parent (e.g. father or mother's former female partner) impact the existing balance of roles in lesbian mother families?

- How does the completion of a second-parent adoption change relationships within lesbian mother families and between families and their social environments?

- How do families with different pathways to parenthood differ in terms of intra-family and household-environment relationships?

- What are the strengths and stressors of later-life parenting (a sub-group that was well represented in the interview sample)?

- How do children characterize relationship types and satisfaction levels within the family and between the family and the social environment?

Complete understanding of this research project and its implications is not possible without consideration of the experience of the research process itself. The foundation of this study was the relationships that developed between the interviewers and the participants. Although most lasted only a few hours, these interactions provided the context in which all subsequent data analysis occurred. Participants in this study were remarkably articulate, honest, patient and thoughtful. These characteristics came through in the data, as did their eagerness to contribute to a process that they perceived as beneficial to their families. In many cases, interview respondents invited the researchers into their homes, offered refreshments, gave a tour of the house and asked friendly questions about the researcher's family. The tone of nearly all interviews paralleled that of a friendly conversation.

Interaction with interview respondents on this level provided interesting detail that might not otherwise be apparent in the data. For example, although many of the interviewees reported incomes that placed them well into the middle class, large variances in indicators of social class other than income were evident. Respondents who reported annual family incomes over $75,000, for example, lived in housing that ranged from a double wide trailer to an historic home in an elegant urban district.

In-home and face-to-face interaction with the interviewees also helped to support the themes evident in the interviews. Observing interactions between mothers and children in their homes and seeing refrigerator doors covered with children's art work and school papers strongly reinforced themes related to

mothers' commitment to family and to reports of positive interactions between mothers and children. Seeing the resourcefulness and creativity these women used in remodeling and decorating their homes without outside help gave credence to the idea that they are creative and flexible in other aspects of their lives. Noticing that their neighborhoods were often racially integrated helped make their statements about valuing diversity ring true.

The status of the interviewers as lesbians and as mothers had particular importance for the research outcomes described here. From our positions as 'insiders' in the lesbian community, we brought significant knowledge of the participants' cultures and experiences to the interviews. Our status as 'insiders' likely increased our rapport with most participants, especially those who asked directly about our experiences and engaged us in discussions of our own families. In addition, our 'insider' perspective generally streamlined the research process by allowing for interviews to proceed without interruption when participants referred to individuals, institutions and events related to the lesbian community or to the common events of parenting. Finally, because each of the interviewers had a personal stake in the research, our 'insider' status also likely increased our attentiveness and energy in the interviews, since the project itself had important implications for our own families.

At the same time, identification with the respondents may have posed some problems for the project, particularly where similarities between interviewers and participants were overestimated by either of the parties. Such errors are most likely to have occurred wherever interviewer / participant rapport

was strongly based on identification as lesbians and mothers, rather than on more generic interpersonal connections. In such cases, assumptions about shared knowledge and experiences may have been made in error. For example, when mothers spoke of negative reactions from school personnel, extended family, or ministers, we may have failed to probe for details of those experiences when we believed that we already had adequate understanding of the nature of those common events. Similarly, participants may have failed to provide details about such experiences whenever they perceived that the interviewers understood or had experienced similar events. Thus, while common experiences streamlined conversations with participants, it is not possible to know how such 'efficiency' impacted the reliability and richness of the data.

While we shared some common experiences with the lesbian mothers we interviewed, there were important differences between interviewers and respondents, and between the two interviewers, that may have impacted the study. Both interviewers are white women with extensive university educations, stable, long-term relationships, good health, and above-average incomes. Such characteristics were also shared with some, but not all, participants, and may have resulted in differences among the interviews with women of color, single or recently-partnered lesbians, those with limited education, and those with numerous other traits not shared by the interviewers.

While identification as 'insiders' based on sexual orientation and parenting role was fundamental to the success of the interviews, other interviewer characteristics had significant impact. For example, both interviewers found that

shared knowledge about resources for lesbian mothers was related to geographic location of the interviewer's and respondent's place of residence, thus geographic location was an important variable in building rapport, streamlining the interview, and interpreting results. Similarly, age of children, number of children, method of family formation, religious affiliation, and friends-in-common were all found to be relevant to the interview process.

Conclusion

This study, although limited in many ways, examined several important aspects of life in lesbian mother families and yielded data that both supports existing research and contributes new knowledge to the growing collection of studies on lesbian mothers. Suggestions for improved practice, strategies for policy makers and reflections on the research process have been included in the hope that this project will have positive real-life implications for the women who volunteered to participate in the study. A substantial list of unanswered questions for additional study is provided, also in the hope that further defining the questions will lead to increased attention to this population on the parts of academics and practitioners.

The results of this study should lead to further consideration of the particular strengths and coping strategies evident in members of non-traditional families. Continued evaluation of such families is needed so that social scientists can better understand the ways in which marginalized communities are able to be successful. Without such understanding, further research and attempted intervention may grow increasingly irrelevant.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS APPLICATION AND APPROVAL

MICHIGAN STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y

November 20, 1998

TO: Dr. Rena Harold
        254 Baker Hall

        APPROVAL DATE: November 19, 1998

RE: **IRB # 98776 CATEGORY:** 1-C
        TITLE: LESBIAN MOTHER FAMILIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF
        PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT

The University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects' (UCRIHS) review of this project is complete and I am pleased to advise that the rights and welfare of the human subjects appear to be adequately protected and methods to obtain informed consent are appropriate. Therefore, the **UCRIHS approved this project.**
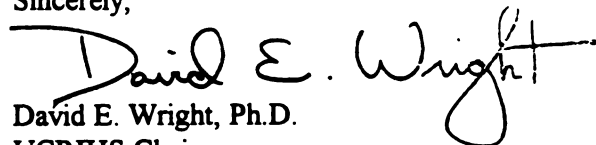
RENEWALS: UCRIHS approval is valid for one calendar year, beginning with the approval date shown above. Projects continuing beyond one year must be renewed with the green renewal form. A maximum of four such expedited renewals possible. Investigators wishing to continue a project beyond that time need to submit it again for a complete review.

REVISIONS: UCRIHS must review any changes in procedures involving human subjects, prior to initiation of the change. If this is done at the time of renewal, please use the green renewal form. To revise an approved protocol at any other time during the year, send your written request to the UCRIHS Chair, requesting revised approval and referencing the project's IRB# and title. Include in your request a description of the change and any revised instruments, consent forms or advertisements that are applicable.

PROBLEMS/CHANGES: Should either of the following arise during the course of the work, notify UCRIHS promptly: 1) problems (unexpected side effects, complaints, etc.) involving human subjects or 2) changes in the research environment or new information indicating greater risk to the human subjects than existed when the protocol was previously reviewed and approved.

If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 517 355-2180 or via email: UCRIHS@pilot.msu.edu. Please note that all UCRIHS forms and instruction are located via the web: http://www.msu.edu/unit/vprgs/UCRIHS/

Sincerely,

David E. Wright, Ph.D.
UCRIHS Chair

DEW: plw

cc: Lucy Mercier

**OFFICE OF
RESEARCH
AND
GRADUATE
STUDIES**

University Committee on
Research Involving
Human Subjects
(UCRIHS)

Michigan State University
246 Administration Building
East Lansing, Michigan
48824-1046

517/355-2180
FAX: 517/353-2976

Lesbian Mother Study
Survey Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study of lesbian mothers. We are interested in finding out more about lesbian mother families, especially about relationships within households, interactions with the community, and use of resources. If you would like to participate in this research, please **read the following information** carefully before beginning the survey.

- Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question on the survey and may stop participating at any time.

- This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

- This survey is anonymous. Information taken from your completed survey will be reported in a way that does not reveal your identity.

- If you would like information about the results of this study once it is completed, you may contact:

    Lucy Mercier
    Michigan State University
    School of Social Work
    254 Baker Hall
    E. Lansing, MI 48824
    (517) 353-8621
    lucy.mercier@ssc.msu.edu

- **You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate in this study by completing and returning the attached survey.**

- Remove this page from the questionnaire. You may want to keep this information in case you want to contact the researcher about the study.

Lesbian Mother Study
Interview Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study of lesbian mothers. We are interested in finding out more about lesbian mother families, especially about relationships within households, interactions with the community, and use of resources. If you would like to participate in this research, **read the following information** and indicate your understanding by signing at the bottom of this page.

- Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question during the interview and you may stop participating at any time.

- The interview will take approximately 90 minutes to complete.

- Information you give during the interview will be kept confidential. When we report the results of this study, your name will not be used. Any other information that could be used to identify you will be changed or removed.

- Your interview will be recorded on audio tape. Only the researchers will have access to the tapes.

- If you would like information about the results of this study once it is completed, you may contact: You should keep a copy of this consent form in case you have questions in the future.

Lucy Mercier
Michigan State University
School of Social Work
254 Baker Hall
E. Lansing, MI 48824
(517) 353-8621
lucy.mercier@ssc.msu.edu

UCRIHS APPROVAL FOR
THIS project EXPIRES:

NOV 2 0 1999 .

SUBMIT RENEWAL APPLICATION
ONE MONTH PRIOR TO
ABOVE DATE TO CONTINUE

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

- I consent to have my interview audio taped.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF A PROJECT INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS
INITIAL REVIEW (and 5 yr. renewal)
UCRIHS
University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects
David E. Wright, Ph.D., Chair
246 Administration Building   Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824-1046
PHONE (517) 355-2180   FAX (517) 432-1171   E-Mail - UCRIHS@pilot.msu.edu
http://pilot.msu.edu/unit/vprgs/ucrihs/
Office Hours: M-F (8:00 A.M.-Noon & 1:00-5:00 P.M.)

DIRECTIONS: Please complete questions on this application using the instructions and definitions found on the attached sheets. (revised 8/97)

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1. Responsible Project Investigator
(Faculty or staff supervisor)
Name: **Rena Harold**
Social Security #: **384-54-5851**

Department: **Social Work**
I believe the research can be safely completed without endangering human subjects. Further, I have read the enclosed proposal and I am willing to supervise any student investigators.

Signature: *Rena Harold*

Additional Investigator(s)

Name: **Lucy Mercier**
SS or Stu. ID#: **546-33-5133**

Name: _____
SS or Stu. ID#: _____

Name: _____
SS or Stu. ID#: _____

2. Address
 School of Social Work

 254 Baker Hall
 E. Lansing, MI 48824

Phone #: **(517) 432-3733**
Fax #: **(517) 353-3038**
E-mail: **haroldr@pilot.msu.edu**

Address
 School of Social Work

 254 Baker Hall

 E. Lansing, MI 48824
Phone #: **(517) 353-8621**
Fax #: **(517) 353-3038**
E-mail: **lucy.mercier@ssc.msu.edu**

3.   Title of Project **LESBIAN MOTHER FAMILIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT**

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY
Subcommittee _____   Agenda _____

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4.	Have you ever received **Preliminary Approval** for this project? No [XX]	Yes [ ]
	If yes, what IRB # was assigned to it? _____

5.	Funding (if any) _____
	MSU Contracts and Grants app. # _____ if applicable

6.	Does this project utilize an **Investigational Drug, Device or Procedure**?
	No [**XX**]	Yes [ ]	**If yes**, is there an IND #? No [ ]	Yes [ ] IND #
	_____

7.	Does this project involve the use of **Materials of Human Origin** (e.g., human blood or tissue)?
	No [**XX**]	Yes [ ]

8.	When would you **prefer** to begin data collection?
	December 1998_____
	Please remember **you may not begin data collection without UCRIHS approval.**

9.	Category (Circle A, B or C below. See instructions pp. 5 & 6)

	a.	This proposal is submitted as **EXEMPT** from full review.
		Specify category or categories. _1-C____
	b.	This proposal is submitted for **EXPEDITED** review.
		Specify category or categories. _____
	c.	This proposal is submitted for **FULL** sub-committee review.

10.	Is this a full review multi-site project?	No [**XX**]	Yes [ ]
	If yes, do the other sites have a Multiple Project Assurance IRB that will also review this project?
	[ ] No. Please contact the UCRIHS office for further information about meeting the
		PHS/NIH/OPPR regulations.
	[ ] Yes. Please supply a copy of that approval letter when obtained.

11.	Project Description (Abstract): Please limit your response to 200 words.

In the past 30 years, research about lesbian mothers has shifted from a focus on deviance and pathology to the study of unique structures and strengths. Studies have highlighted potential individual, interpersonal, institutional and socio-cultural obstacles for lesbian mothers, although little is known about the ways in which lesbian mothers frame their interactions with their families and communities in light of their unique circumstances. This study will focus on lesbian mothers' perceptions of relationships within and around their families. Lesbian mothers will be asked to participate in this study by completing a survey, participating in an interview, or both. Each individual completing a survey of demographic data will be given the opportunity to volunteer for a face-to-face interview by indicating her interest on the returned survey. Respondents in the interview sub-sample will be asked to describe their <u>interactions</u> within their families and between their families and social structures in their environments. In addition, respondents will be asked to describe their <u>responses to these interactions</u> in order to access information about the impact of both supports and barriers in their everyday lives.

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12.	Procedures:	Please describe all project activities to be used in collecting data from human subjects. This also includes procedures for collecting materials of human origin and analysis of existing data originally collected from human subjects.

The project consists of two phases of data collection: a survey of respondent demographics and intensive face-to-face interviews.

Survey instrument. **The survey instrument initially distributed to respondents will ask for demographic data about the individual respondent and her family. In addition, respondents will be asked about their sexual orientation (on a continuum from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual), level of openness regarding sexual orientation, pathway to parenthood for each child, and arrangements for childcare. A copy of the questionnaire is attached.**

Interview protocol. **A sub-sample of volunteers from the pool of survey respondents will be selected for face-to-face interviews. The researcher will contact and schedule an appointment with each selected respondent. The interviews will take place in the respondents' homes, at the university or in other locations by mutual agreement of the researcher and respondent. All interviews will be recorded on audio tape. The interviews will be semi-structured and will focus on the completion of a family / support system eco-map for each respondent (see Figure). A list of interview questions and probes will be developed from the literature and from the survey responses. An outline of interview topics is attached. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, this protocol will guide the interviews but other topics and issues may be addressed as they arise. In addition, the researchers expect to refine the interview questions and probes throughout the process of interviewing, as responses from the study's subjects shape the focus of the study.**

13.	Subject Population:	Describe your subject population. (e.g., high school athletes, women over 50 w/breast cancer, small business owners)

Lesbian mothers. The sub-sample of interview subjects will consist of lesbians with children aged 0-18 years residing in respondent's home at least half time. No minors will be interviewed.

a.	The study population may include (check each category where subjects may be included **by design or incidentally**):

Minors	[ ]
Pregnant Women	[X]
Women of Childbearing Age	[X]
Institutionalized Persons	[ ]
Students	[X]
Low Income Persons	[X]
Minorities	[X]
Incompetent Persons (or those with diminished capacity)	[ ]

b.	Number of subjects (including controls) __approximately 100__

c.	How will the subjects be recruited? (Attach appropriate number of copies of recruiting advertisement, if any. See p. 13 of UCRIHS instructions)

A combination of word-of-mouth / snowball sampling, advertisement in lesbian support organizations and other meeting places, and direct distribution of surveys. A sample advertisement is attached.

d. If you are associated with the subjects (e.g., they are your students, employees, patients), please explain the nature of the association.

N/A

e. If someone will receive payment for recruiting the subjects please explain the amount of payment, who pays it and who receives it.

N/A

f. Will the research subjects be compensated? [**X**] No [ ] Yes. **If yes**, details concerning payment, including the amount and schedule of payments, must be explained in the informed consent.

g. Will the subjects incur additional financial costs as a result of their participation in this study? [**X**] No [ ] Yes. **If yes**, please include an explanation in the informed consent.

h. Will this research be conducted with subjects who reside in another country or live in a cultural context different from mainstream US society? [**X**] No [ ] Yes.

    (1) **If yes**, will there be any corresponding complications in your ability to minimize risks to subjects, maintain their confidentiality and/or assure their right to voluntary informed consent as individuals? [**X**] No [ ] Yes.

    (2) **If your answer to h-1 is yes**, what are these complications and how will you resolve them?

N/A

14. How will the subjects' privacy be protected? (See Instructions p. 8.)

All survey responses will be anonymous and demographic data will be reported in aggregate form.

Contact information for those volunteering to participate in the interview portion of the study will be separated from the surveys immediately upon receipt. Interview participants will be assigned identification numbers and pseudonyms. No one except the interviewer will have access to the full identities of the interview participants. Individuals hired to transcribe the audio tapes will be trained in procedures to protect confidentiality and will be required to sign an agreement to ensure confidentiality. Transcripts of the interview audio tapes will have names and other identifiers deleted. Data containing participant identifiers will be kept in a locked location.

In the projects' final report, qualitative data will be presented in the form of direct quotes or paraphrases , but participant's confidentiality will be protected through use of pseudonyms and alteration of identifying details.

15.   Risks and Benefits for subjects: (See Instructions p. 8.)

Due to anti-lesbian attitudes in mainstream U.S. society, there does exist some risk to study respondents if their identity is revealed. The seriousness of the risk would vary considerably with participant identity, social and economic status, geographic location, and other factors. Potential risks might be social (e.g. rejection by peers), psychological (e.g. shame), or economic (e.g. loss of employment).

Survey respondents incur very minimal or no risk due to the anonymity of the survey method. Interviewees may face greater risk, although we expect the risk to be extremely slight due to measures made to protect confidentiality.

Potential benefits include increased social awareness of conditions for lesbian mothers, increased understanding of service needs (and possible resulting increase on actual services), and increased knowledge of unique aspects of lesbian mother families.

16.   Consent Procedures (See Instructions pp. 9-13.)

All respondents will be asked to read and sign a written statement of informed consent, which will include:
*   An explanation of the purpose of the research
*   An estimate of the time needed to complete the survey and / or interview
*   An explanation of the voluntary nature of the research and information about discontinuing participation without penalty
*   An explanation of procedures to ensure confidentiality
*   The name, address and phone number of the researchers
*   For interview participants, an explicit statement that the interviews will be audio taped and an explanation of procedures for ensuring confidentiality of the taped material

This project does not include any experimental procedures, treatments, deception, risk of physical injury, placebo, or economic costs to subjects. No minors will be interviewed.

Written consent will be required for both survey and interview participation. See attached.

CHECKLIST: Check off that you have included each of these items. If not applicable, state N/A:

[XX]   Completed application

[✓]   The correct number of copies of the application and instruments, according
        to the category of review (See instructions p. 13.)

[✓]   Consent form (or script for verbal consent), if applicable

[✓]   Advertisement, if applicable

[ ]   One complete copy of the methods chapter of the research proposal

---

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE COVER LETTER

January 22, 1999

Dear Potential Research Participant,

I am sending you this letter in hope that you or someone you know will be able to help me with a research project. I am a Ph.D. student in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. I am also a lesbian mom.

I am seeking women who are willing to participate in a study for my doctoral dissertation, which involves surveying (and later interviewing) lesbian mothers in Michigan. I am particularly interested in finding out about the types of experiences lesbian moms have with people, agencies and institutions, such as schools, religious organizations, extended families, employers and others. There is a real need for information about our families to be included in the training of human service professionals.

This research will directly benefit lesbian mothers in our area. As part of my project, I will be sharing the information that I gather with a variety of people. Your responses may help to change the way that social services, health care, education and other interactions are presented to lesbian mother families.

I am asking many people to help me find women to participate because it has been so difficult to recruit women who are willing to participate in such studies. Will you distribute the enclosed questionnaires to any one you know who might be willing to contribute to the project?

Any lesbian who is involved in parenting is eligible to participate in the project. The survey questionnaire takes most people about fifteen minutes to complete. If you volunteer for the interview portion of the project, just indicate so on the form and I will contact you. I have enclosed stamped, self-addressed envelopes for you to return the questionnaires directly to me.

Thank for considering this project. Let me know if you have any questions or want more questionnaires. I can be reached at (517) 353-8621 or by e-mail at **lucy.mercier@ssc.msu.edu.**

Lucy Mercier

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

Lesbian Mothers Needed for Research Project

Lesbian mothers are currently needed for a research project exploring relationships within lesbian mother households and between lesbian mother families and their communities. Participants are needed to complete surveys and participate in face-to-face interviews. Any lesbian or bisexual woman involved in parenting is eligible to participate.

For more information contact:

Lucy Mercier
Michigan State University
School of Social Work
254 Baker Hall
E. Lansing, MI 48824
(517) 353-8621
lucy.mercier@ssc.msu.edu

APPENDIX D

QUESTIONNAIRE

Lesbian Mother Survey

Please answer these questions by following the directions for each section. In general, we are interested in the answer that best describes you and / or your family. We are trying to survey a diverse group of women, so if any of the questions do not apply to you, write N/A or your comments in that section. For any of the questions about your children, **include any child that you consider to be part of your family.**

Surveys often fall short of representing the complexity of real life. We have tried to provide space on the questionnaire for your remarks or other details we have not covered. Feel free to write in these spaces (or anywhere else on the survey).

---

1) Number of children:
Indicate how many children (of any age) fit the following categories.

_____ Live with me full-time
_____ Live with me at least half-time
_____ Live with me less than half-time
_____ Do not live with me

_____
_____
_____

2a) Relationship status
Indicate the category that best fits your current status.

___ Single
___ Partnered, with a woman, living separately
___ Partnered, with a woman, living together
___ Other (please explain)

_____
_____
_____

2b) If partnered, how long have you been together? _____ years

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3a) Sexual Orientation
Circle the number that best describes your current **sexual orientation**.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Exclusively Heterosexual			Bisexual			Exclusively Lesbian

3b) Do you consider yourself transgendered? ____ Yes ____ No

3c) Place a mark next to **each person who knows that you are lesbian or bisexual.** If the category represents a group, make a mark if you are out to <u>anyone</u> in that group. Write N/A on the line if the category does not apply to you

____ My mother   ____ My father   ____ Therapists, case workers

____ My brothers   ____ My sisters   or other social service

____ My children   ____ Other relatives   providers

____ My children's father   ____ My children's   ____ Judges, attorneys,

____ My friends   friends   other court personnel

____ My employer   ____ My children's   ____ My rabbi, minister or other

____ My co-workers   friends'   religious leader

____ Medical providers   parents   ____ My neighbors

____ Other (explain)_____

____ No one knows that I am lesbian / bisexual.

3d) Look at the list above and consider only those who know you are lesbian / bisexual.
- Draw a **circle** around the person / people above who are **most supportive** of you in terms of your sexual orientation?
- Draw a **square** around the person / people above who are **least supportive** in terms of your sexual orientation?

_____

3e) Place a mark next to each sentence that is true for you.

____ My children see me being affectionate (hugging / kissing) with my partner.

____ I have discussed my sexual orientation with my children.

____ Others have discussed my sexual orientation with my children.

3f) If your children know that you are lesbian / bisexual, please circle the number that best reflects their reaction.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very upset Rejecting			Neutral No response			Very accepting Supportive

_____

_____

4) Description of Children. Starting with your oldest child, describe each of your children in the table below. Use the following keys to help you fill in the table. **Do not** write the names of your children. If you need more space, use extra paper.

Sex:
1=female
2=male

Age:
___ years

Race / Ethnicity
(as you perceive it):
1=Asian / Asian American
2=African American / Black
3=Hispanic / Chicano
4=Native American
5=Caucasian / White
6=Biracial (describe)
7=other (describe)

Family Status:
This child joined the family
1 =at the same time as my
    current partner
2=before my current partner
3=after my current partner
4=N/A, I don't have a
    partner

Grade: grade in which child is currently enrolled at school (Preschool –college)

Pathway to Parenthood:
1=Your birth child by heterosexual liaison/marriage
2=Your birth child by donor insemination / known donor
3=Your birth child by donor insemination / anonymous donor
4=Your partner's birth child by heterosexual liaison/marriage
5=Your partner's birth child by donor insemination / known donor
6=Your partner's birth child by donor insemination / anonymous donor
7=Adopted child
8=Foster child   10=Guardianship, informal (describe)
9=Guardianship, legal   11=Other (describe)

Sample: Jill is an 18-month old girl. My partner and I adopted her from China after we lived together for several years.
(See Sample Child in the chart below to see how to use keys to record child information.)

	Sex	Age	Grade in School	Race / Ethnicity	Family Status	Pathway to Parenthood
Sample Child	**1**	**1.5**	**N/A**	**1**	**3**	**7**
Child A						
Child B						
Child C						
Child D						
Child E						

As you did on the previous page, use the following keys to complete the table below. Again, start with your oldest child, but **do not** write the names of your children. **YOU MAY CHOOSE MORE THAN ONE ANSWER FOR THE ITEMS ON THIS PAGE.**

Living Arrangement:
1=in your home full time
2=half time with you / half with father
3=in father's home full time
4=in own home, apt., dorm
5=in group home, foster care, etc
6=other (explain)

Childcare Provider:
1=None / doesn't need supervision
2=Members of my household
3=Relatives not living in my household
4=Individual day care in sitter's home
5=School based day care / latch key
6=Group day care / preschool
7=Sitter / nanny in my home
8=Employment based day care
9=Other (explain)

Custody Decisions:
Custody for this child decided by
1=you
2=your partner
3= child's father
4=judge/court official
5=child
6=other (describe)
7=N/A

Satisfaction with Childcare:
1=not at all satisfied
2=slightly satisfied
3=moderately satisfied
4=well satisfied
5=extremely satisfied
6=N/A, does not use childcare

Responsibility for Childcare:
Who is primarily responsible for making childcare arrangements for this child?
1=you
2=your partner
3=both you and your partner
4=child's father
5=other (describe)
6=N/A , does not use childcare

	Living Arrangement	Custody Decisions	Child Care Provider	Childcare Satisfaction	Responsibility for Childcare
Child A					
Child B					
Child C					
Child D					
Child E					

The following questions will help to provide a profile of the women who have responded to this survey. Please write your answer in the space provided, or place a mark next to the category that best describes you. If applicable, please provide information about your partner as well.

5) The zip code of your primary residence: _____
(We will use this information to find the approximate population statistics for your community.)

6a) Your age: _____ years   **6b) Partner's age:** _____ years

7a) Your race / ethnicity: **7b) Your partner's race / ethnicity:**
___ Asian / Asian American   ___ Asian / Asian American
___ African American / Black   ___ African American / Black
___ Hispanic / Chicana   ___ Hispanic / Chicana
___ Native American   ___ Native American
___ Caucasian / White   ___ Caucasian / White
___ Biracial / multi ethnic (describe) ___ Biracial / multi ethnic (describe)
___ Other (describe)   ___ Other (describe)

_____

_____

8a) Annual household income:
___ under $12,000   **8b) Total number of adults and**
___ $12,000 – $20,000   **children in household:** _____
___ $20,001 – $30,000
___ $30,001 – $40,000   **8c) Number of persons**
___ $40,001 – $50,000   **contributing to household**
___ $50,001 – $75,000   **income:** _____
___ over $75,000

8d) Does your family receive child support?   ___ Yes   ___ No
              public assistance (welfare)?   ___ Yes   ___ No

9a) Your education: **9b) Partner's education:**
___ less than high school grad   ___ less than high school grad
___ high school graduate / GED   ___ high school graduate / GED
___ technical / other training   ___ technical / other training
___ some college   ___ some college
___ Bachelors' degree   ___ Bachelors' degree
___ Master's degree   ___ Master's degree
___ PhD / MD / DO   ___ PhD / MD / DO

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10a) Your occupation / employment
___ Unemployed / looking for work
___ Stay at home mother / homemaker
___ Part-time employee
___ Full-time employee
___ Student

10b) What is your primary occupation?_____
(If you are currently not employed, please indicate your last position. If you are a student, indicate your field of study.)

10c) Your partner's occupation / employment
___ Unemployed / looking for work
___ Stay at home mother / homemaker
___ Part-time employee
___ Full-time employee
___ Student

10d) What is your partner's primary occupation?_____

11a) Your religious affiliation   **11b) Your partner's affiliation**

___ None	___ None
___ Catholic	___ Catholic
___ Jewish	___ Jewish
___ Muslim	___ Muslim
___ Hindu	___ Hindu
___ Buddhist	___ Buddhist
___ Pagan / Wicca	___ Pagan / Wicca
___ Protestant (specify)	___ Protestant (specify)
___ Other (please specify)	___ Other (please specify)

11c) Use this key to respond to the following set of questions.

1=never	4=once or twice a month
2=once or twice a year	5=about once per week
3=less than once per month	6=more than once per week

11d) _____ How often do you participate in religious activities?
11e) _____ How often does your partner participate in religious activities?
11f) _____ How often do your children participate in religious activities?

Another Opportunity to Participate ...

In addition to the survey that you just completed, we will be collecting information about lesbian mothers through interviews with women about their family relationships and about their experiences with people and institutions in their communities. These interviews will take about 90 minutes to complete and can be arranged to take place in or near your home. **Would you be willing to be contacted to participate in a face-to-face interview about your experiences as a lesbian mother?**

Often, the voices of lesbians are forgotten or ignored by mainstream social researchers. This research represents a real chance for our relationships and experiences to be documented and described in our own words. If you want to participate in the interview phase of this research, **please complete the form below and return it with your survey**. If you are selected for an interview, a researcher will contact you in the next few weeks.

Thank you!

I want to volunteer to be interviewed for the lesbian mother research project.

NAME
ADDRESS
CITY, STATE, ZIP
PHONE
E-MAIL
BEST TIME TO REACH ME

Please return completed surveys to: Lucy Mercier
Michigan State University
School of Social Work
254 Baker Hall
E. Lansing, MI 48824
lucy.mercier@ssc.msu.edu

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

ID # _____

DATE _____

INTERVIEWER _____

LESBIAN MOTHER STUDY
INTERVIEW RECORD

GREET PARTICIPANT

EXPLAIN CONSENT FORM AND OBTAIN SIGNATURE / BEGIN TAPING

INTRODUCE ROLE / DIVISION OF LABOR ITEMS
Most people identify themselves by naming one or more roles that they perform in their everyday lives. For example, you are participating in this study because you identified yourself as a parent. What roles do you have?

Mark each role mentioned by participant:

____ **Mother / parent**

____ **Step-mother / step-parent**

____ **Partner / lover / wife / spouse**

____ **Friend**

____ **Employee / worker / wage earner**

____ **Student**

____ **Volunteer (doing what?)**

____ **Other (what?)**

Parenting Role

When respondent mentions her parenting role, ask her:

What name do you use to refer to your parenting role?

What name does your partner use to refer to her role with the kids?

What name do your children use to refer to you?

What name do they use for your partner?

What names do you prefer?

How did you decide on names?

Worker Role

Amount of time spent at work?

Comments / Reactions?

Primary Role

What would you say your primary role is?

Why is this your primary role?

Dealing with various roles

What strategies do you use to keep up with your responsibilities?

Have you made compromises? What are they?

Division of Household Labor

Use the table to indicate the percentage of total labor supplied by each member of the household for the following tasks. When tasks are done by people outside the household (maid, gardener, etc), note that.

For each item, ask the participant to choose a number from the satisfaction scale.

	Respondent	Partner	Children	Other	Satisfaction
Cooking / preparing meals					
Cleaning					
Supervising children's play or free time					
Toileting children					
Feeding children					
Putting children to bed					
Bathing children					
Dressing children					
Punishing children					
Setting limits for the children					

	Respondent	Partner	Children	Other	Satisfaction
Helping children with personal/social problems					
Helping children with school work					
Responsible for finances / bill paying					
Maintaining cars					
Maintaining house					
Work outside / yard work					
Driving to appointments / school					

*Using the satisfaction scale, how satisfied are you with the **overall** current division of labor in your house?*

Satisfaction with division overall _____

INTRODUCE ECO MAP
Now, I'd like to show you this picture and complete it with you. This is called an Eco Map and it's a way of drawing a picture of the connections or relationships that family members have with one another, as well as with systems in their environment. The large circle in the center of the page represents your family and the circles around the edge of the paper represent people and institutions in the community. We'll be drawing different lines connecting you and your family to each other and to the other circles on the page. The type of line that you pick will depend on the type of relationship you experience with each one.

EXPLAIN KEY ON ECO MAP FIGURE
The key that explains the types of lines we will be drawing is here in the corner of the page. Let's start with your family. First tell me who is in your family. I'll draw symbols to represent each individual, then you can tell me what type of line to draw and I'll fill it in for you.

FOR EACH FAMILY MEMBER, ASK
Can you describe your relationship with (FAMILY MEMBER)?
What line best represents the relationship?
How does this relationship impact you?
How does it impact your family?

SHOW SATISFACTION SCALE
For each relationship in your family, use this scale to show how satisfied you are with the relationship. As the scale shows, one means that you are not at all satisfied and seven means that you are perfectly satisfied. (Write scale responses near each relationship line.)

FINISH THE HOUSEHOLD CIRCLE WITH THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:
Taken as a whole, how would you describe your family relationships?
In what ways are your family relationships stressful?
In what ways are your family relationships supportive?
What are the strengths of you family?
What are the weaknesses?

BEGIN OUTSIDE CIRCLES:
Now I'd like you to choose which lines connect you to each of the outside circles on the Eco Map.
How has this individual / group impacted you as a parent?
How have these relationships impacted your children?
In what way is this individual / group supportive to you and /or your family?
In what way is this individual / group stressful for you and /or your family?"

COMPLETE SATISFACTION SCALE FOR EACH OUTSIDE CIRCLE.

ADD ADDITONAL CIRCLES AS NEEDED.

FINAL QUESTIONS

Finally, I would like to ask you about your experiences in balancing your identity as a parent and as a lesbian. (Summarize the respondents experience if you know it, e.g. 'First you identified as a mother, right? And then you came out as a lesbian when the kids were 5 and 6.' OR ask the respondent to tell you which of the identities came first.)

What was it like for you to first think about being both a lesbian and a parent?

Did you have any pre-existing ideas about how the two identities would fit together? Were these messages positive or negative? Examples?

Did you have any models for being a lesbian mother? Who?

Is your experience of being a lesbian parent like you thought it would be? Why or why not?

Have you had any experiences in which you felt a conflict between being a lesbian and being a parent? Examples? How did you resolve it?

THANK PARTICIPANT.

Would you be willing to be contacted again for a chance to participate in additional research?" (Mark on form.)

QUESTIONS AND FEEDBACK

APPENDIX F

TABLES

Table 1. Respondents' race, household income, and level of education.

	f	%	# interviewed (total n=21)
Race / ethnicity (n=125)			
Caucasian / White	112	89.6	18
African American / Black	7	5.6	3
Biracial			
African American / White	1	.8	-
Other	4	3.2	-
Asian / Asian America	1	.8	-
Annual household income (n = 90)			
Under $12,000	2	2.2	1
$12,000-20,000	5	5.6	1
$20,001-30,000	7	7.9	3
$30,001-40,000	12	13.5	-
$40,001-50,000	5	5.6	1
$50,001-75,000	26	29.2	7
Over $75,000	32	36.0	8
Highest education level achieved (n=125)			
High school / GED	5	4.0	-
Some college / AA	27	21.6	7
BA / BS	39	31.2	8
MA / MS	39	31.2	5
PhD / MD / other professional	15	12.0	1

Table 2. Respondents' participation in the work force and fields of employment.

	f	%	# interviewed (total n=21)
Participation in the work force (n = 124)			
Full-time worker	87	70.2	12
Part-time worker	22	17.7	4
Stay-at-home mother	10	8.1	3
Unemployed / not looking for work	3	2.4	2
Unemployed / looking for work	1	.8	-
Retired	1	.8	-
Field of employment (n = 115)			
Human services	29	25.2	6
Health / medical services	23	20.0	5
Finance / business	17	14.8	3
Education	17	14.8	3
Trades / skilled labor	9	7.8	1
Service	8	7.0	1
Law	6	5.2	1
Civil Service	4	3.5	1
Fine Arts	2	1.7	-

Table 3. Respondents' religious affiliation and participation.

	f	%	# interviewed (total n=21)
Religious affiliation (n = 123)			
Protestant	66	53.6	8
None	32	26.0	9
Catholic	11	8.9	2
Jewish	8	6.5	-
Pagan / Wicca	6	4.9	2
Participation in religious activities (n = 123)			
Never	16	12.9	3
Once or twice a year	24	19.4	7
Less than once per month	16	12.9	-
Once or twice a month	26	21.0	4
About once per week	27	21.8	3
More than once per week	14	11.3	4

Table 4. Respondents' relationship status.

	f	%	# interviewed (total n=21)
Current relationship status (n = 125)			
Partnered, living together	109	87.2	19
Single	7	5.6	1
Partnered, living separately	8	6.4	1
Widowed	1	.8	-

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Table 5. Persons aware of respondents' sexual orientation.

	Number applicable	Knows		Is Supportive		Is Not Supportive	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
Friend	125	123	98.4	99	80.5	2	1.6
Children	123	113	91.9	53	46.9	5	4.4
Sister	111	102	91.9	59	57.8	9	8.8
Mother	111	100	90.1	48	48.0	19	19.0
Brother	104	90	86.5	27	30.0	17	18.9
Social service provider	105	91	86.7	36	39.6	-	-
Medical provider	124	106	85.5	31	29.2	4	3.8
Father	96	80	83.3	27	33.8	20	25.0
Co-worker	117	96	82.1	40	41.7	7	7.3
Neighbor	124	100	80.6	24	24.0	10	10.0
Other relative	123	96	78.0	21	21.9	13	13.5
Religious leader	100	75	75.0	36	48.0	3	4.0
Child's friend	116	85	73.3	14	16.5	6	7.1
Child's friend's parent	116	83	71.6	20	24.1	4	4.8
Employer	112	78	69.6	23	29.5	10	12.8
Court personnel	103	70	68.0	15	21.4	5	7.1
Child's father	85	56	65.9	12	21.4	16	28.6

Table 6. Sex, age, and grade in school for respondents' children.

	f	%
Sex (n = 196)		
Female	92	46.9
Male	104	53.1
Age (n=197)		
0-5 years	55	27.9
6-12 years	54	27.4
13-18 years	35	17.8
over 18 years	53	26.9
Grade in school (n = 194)		
Not in school – infant	30	15.5
Preschool	18	9.3
Elementary school (K-5)	51	26.3
Middle school (6-8)	15	7.7
High school (9-12)	26	13.4
College	15	7.7
Not in school – adult	39	20.1

Table 7. Race / ethnicity for respondents' children.

	f	%
Race / ethnicity (n = 197)		
Caucasian / White	142	72.1
African American / Black	21	10.7
Biracial –		
African American / White	15	7.6
Other	9	4.6
Hispanic / Chicano	5	2.5
Asian / Asian American	3	1.5
Native American	2	1.0

Table 8. Living arrangements for respondents' children.

	f	%
Living arrangement (n = 193)		
In respondent's home full time	123	63.7
In own home, apartment, dorm	46	23.8
Half time with respondent / half time with father	12	6.2
In father's home full time	5	2.6
With other mother	5	2.6
Other	2	1.0

Table 9. Child care arrangements for respondents' children.

	f	%
Child care provider (n = 101)		
Group day care / preschool	29	28.7
Respondent and/or partner	21	20.8
School based care / latch key	15	14.9
In sitter's home	15	14.9
Sitter / nanny in respondents home	5	5.0
Members of respondent's household	4	4.0
Relatives living separately	4	4.0
Other	8	7.9

Note. 96 children needed no child care.

Table 10. Timing and methods of creating families.

	f	%
Child joined family (n = 197)		
Before current partner (primary parents)	83	42.1
At same time as current partner (step parents)	30	15.2
After current partner (co-parents)	74	37.6
No partner / not applicable	10	5.1
Pathway to parenthood (n = 194)		
Birth child by heterosexual liaison	109	56.2
Birth child by anonymous donor	33	17.0
Birth child by known donor	12	6.2
Adopted child	24	12.4
Foster child	8	4.1
Legal guardian	6	3.1
Informal guardian	2	1.0

Table 11. Interview respondents.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Income	Partner status	Children	Child race	Pathway to parenthood
GROUP ONE: EARLY CHILDHOOD							
Lisa [a]	24	White	20-30K	Partnered 1 ½ years	Girl –3 ½	Biracial	Liaison
Amy	50	White	50-75 K	Partnered 6 years	Boy –4	White	Anonymous donor
Carolyn	47	White	Over 75K	Partnered 12 years	Girl –5 Girl –3 ½	Asian Asian	Adoption * Adoption *
Julie Joan	30 31	White White	20-30K	Partnered 7 ½ years	Boy -2	Biracial	Adoption
Connie Bonnie	40 40	Black White	50-75K	Partnered 15 years	Girl –3 Girl –1 ½ Girl –1 ½	Biracial Biracial Biracial	Anonymous donor* Anonymous donor* Anonymous donor*

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Table 11 continued.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Income	Partner Status	Children	Child race	Pathway to parenthood
GROUP TWO: MIDDLE CHILDHOOD							
Chloe [a]	38	White	> 12K	Single	Girl –10 Boy -7	White White	Marriage Marriage
Jocelyn [a]	31	White	12-20K	Partnered 9 months	Boy -11 ½	White	Marriage
Sheila Marla	39 36	White White	Over 75K	Partnered 12 years	Girl –7 ½ Girl –6 ½ Boy –3 ½ Boy –9 mos.	Black Biracial Biracial Black	Adoption * Adoption* Anonymous donor* Adoption
Tamara [b]	37	White	Over 75K	Partnered 5 ½ years	Boy –10 ½ Boy –10 Boy -9	Black Black Black	Foster Foster Foster
Kerry	34	White	50-75K	Partnered 3 years	Boy –10 Girl –7 ½	White White	Marriage Marriage
Alyce [b]	38	White	50-75K	Partnered 18 years	Boy –11 ½ Girl -2	White White	Anonymous donor* Anonymous donor

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Table 11 continued.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Income	Partner status	Children	Child race	Pathway to parenthood
GROUP THREE: ADOLESCENCE							
Kelsie [a]	39	White	50-75K	Partnered	Girl –13	White	Marriage
Candace [a]	24	White		2 years	Boy –11	White	Marriage
Lynn	33	White	Over 75K	Partnered	Boy –15	White	Marriage
Cara	46	White		10 years	Girl -12	White	Marriage
					Girl –6 mos.	White	Known donor
Terry	35	Black	Over 75K	Partnered	Boy –17	Biracial	Guardian
Joni	41	Black		6 years	Boy –8	Biracial	Anonymous donor
Chandra	35	White	40-50K	Partnered	Boy –13	White	Marriage
				3 ½ years	Girl –11	White	Marriage
					Girl -6	White	Marriage

Note. * denotes children for whom second parent adoptions have been completed. [a] denotes women interviewed at the university. [b] denotes women interviewed in their work places. [c] denotes women interviewed in their homes.

Table 12. Relationship themes within lesbian mother families.

Between Partners	Between Mothers and Children	Between Siblings
Centrality / intensity	Getting and keeping children	Sibling rivalry
Focus on communication	Desire for more time together	Sibling attachment
Shared interest in the family	(early childhood)	Opportunities to grow
Complementary characteristics	Attempts to integrate new mother	
Surviving adversity	(blended families)	
Roadblocks to intimacy	Non-positive interactions	
	(blended families, adolescence)	

Table 13. Relationship themes between lesbian mother families and the social environment.

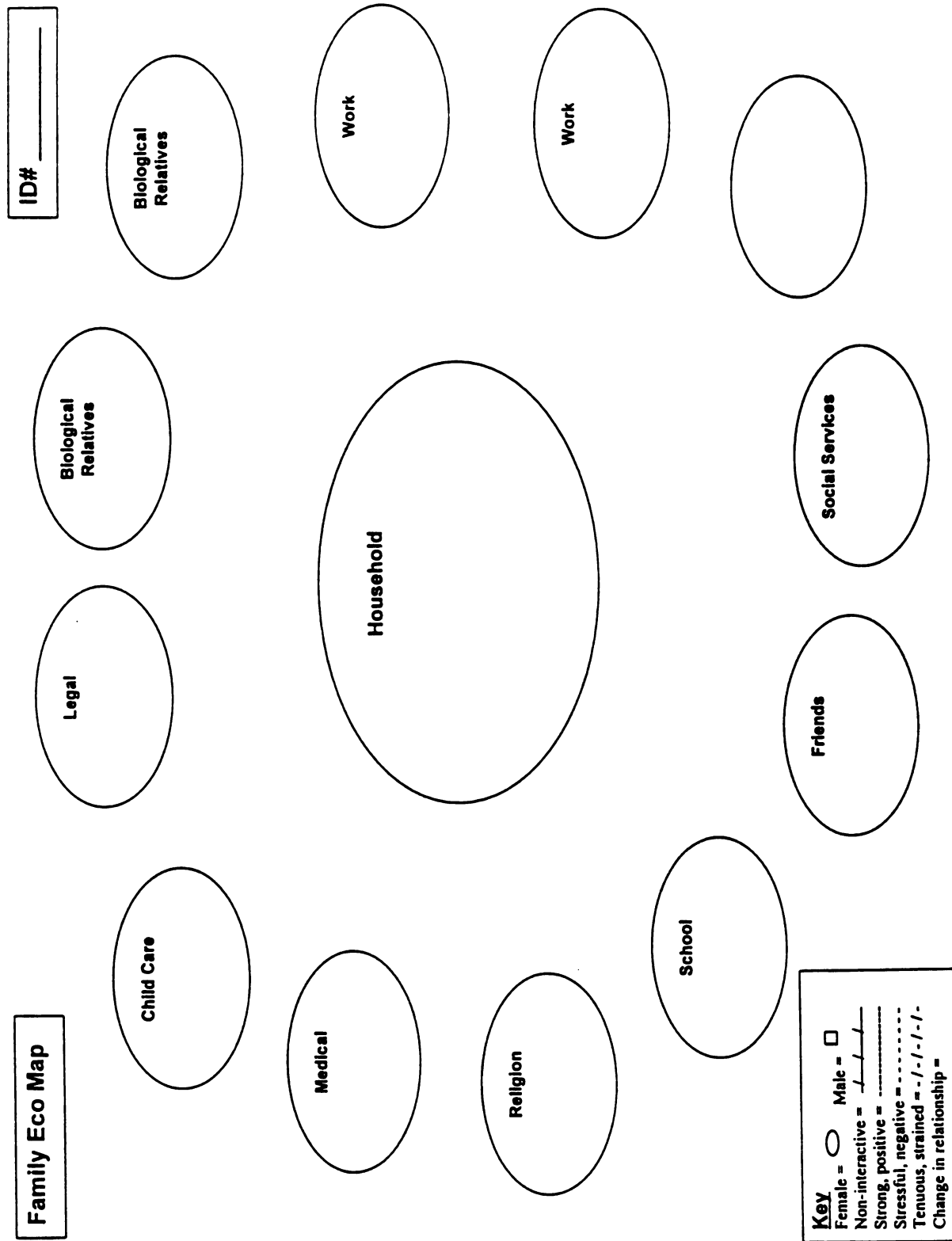| With Children's Schools	With Mothers' Work
School milieu	Instrumental Support
Influencing attitudes toward lesbian mother families	Interpersonal support
Managing disclosure about sexual orientation	Integration of work and family
Invisibility of non-biological mothers	Strategies for balancing work and family
Impact on children	

APPENDIX G

FIGURES

Figure 1. Family eco map.

Figure 2. Respondents' primary residence by county.

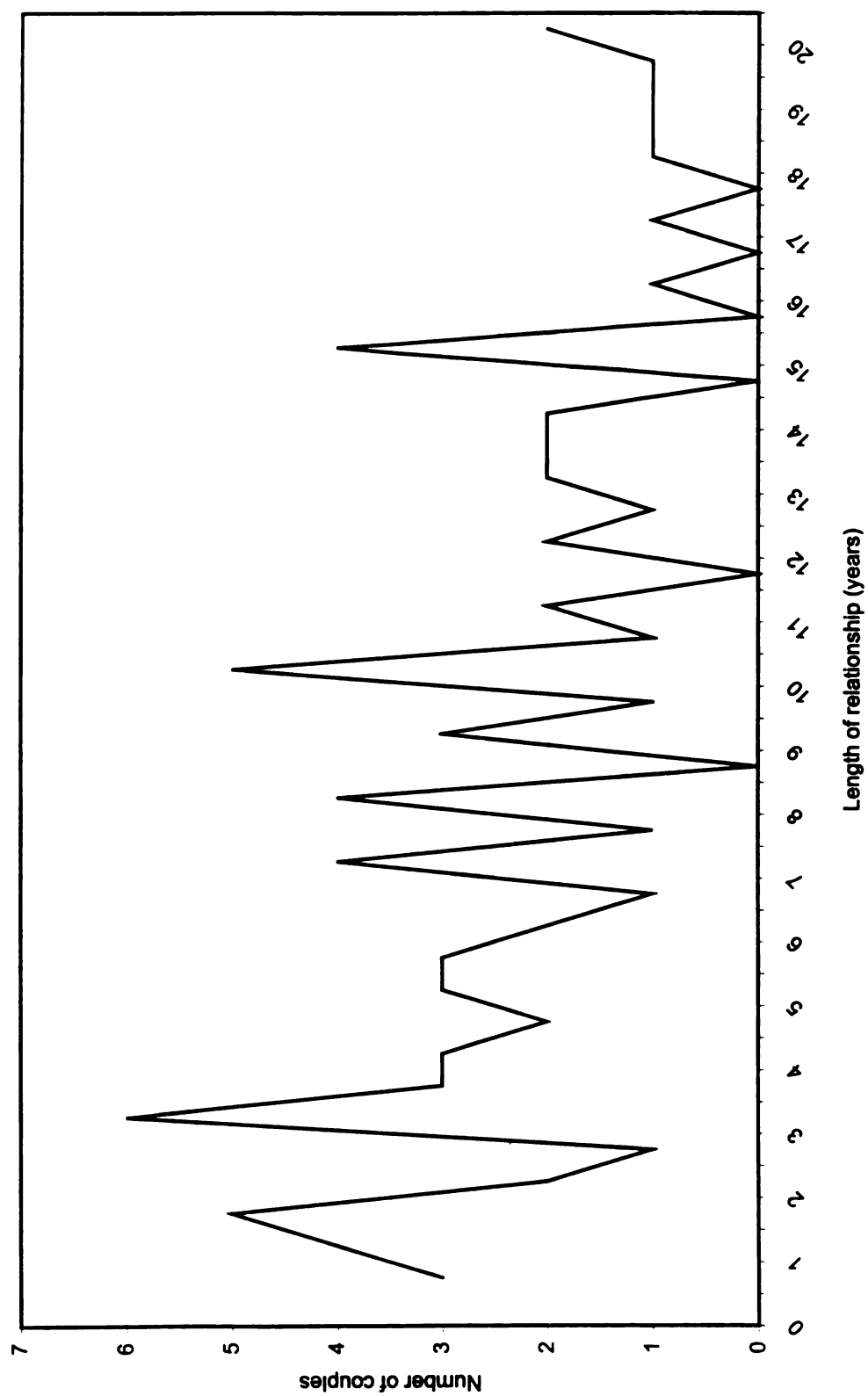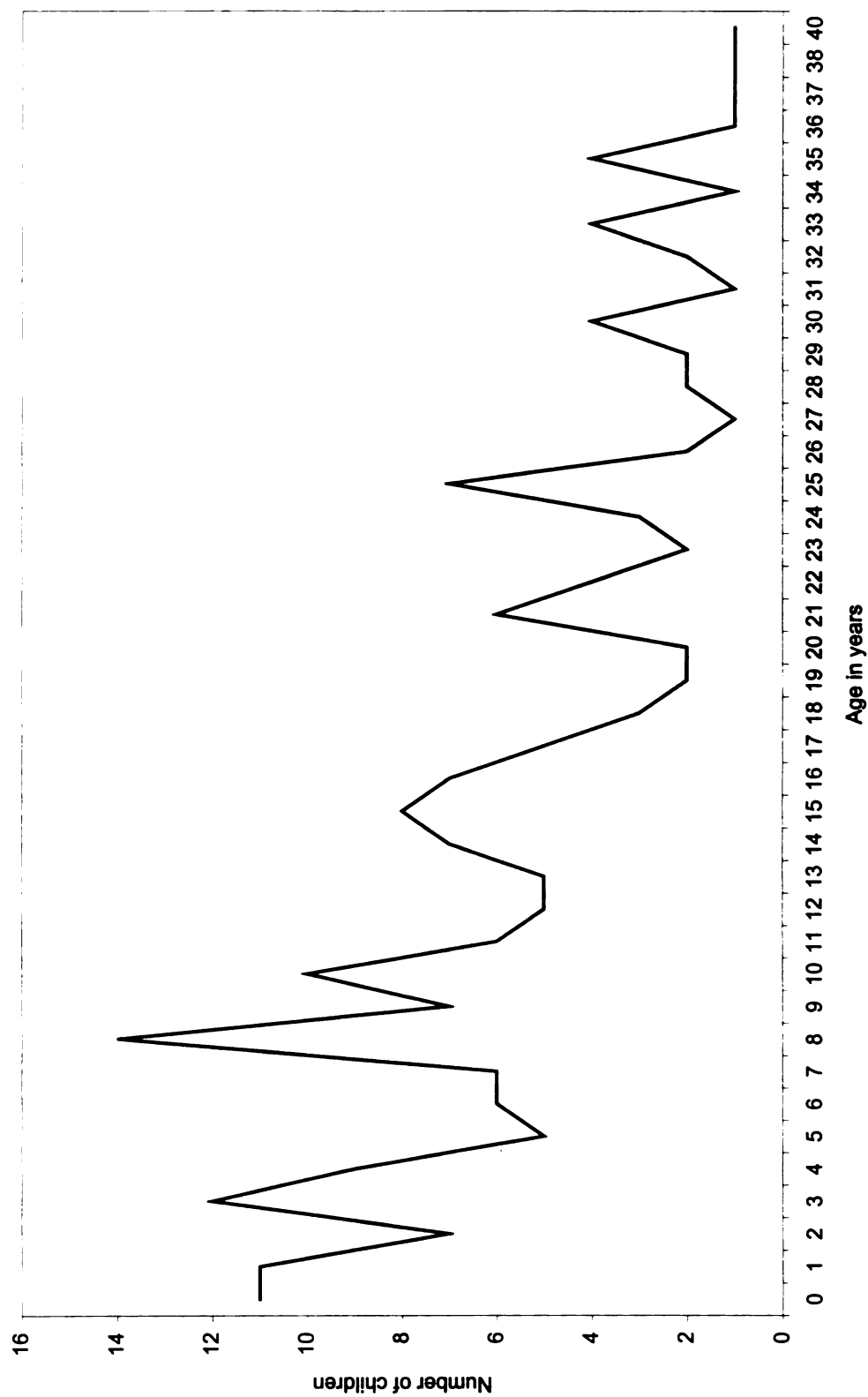Figure 3. Length of relationship for partnered respondents (n=80).

Figure 4. Age of respondents' children (n=197).

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