



Lesbian Motherhood: Negotiating Marginal-Mainstream Identities

Amy L. Hequembourg; Michael P. Farrell

Gender and Society, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Aug., 1999), 540-557.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0891-2432%28199908%2913%3A4%3C540%3ALMNMI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>

Gender and Society is currently published by Sage Publications, Inc..

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/sage.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

LESBIAN MOTHERHOOD

Negotiating Marginal-Mainstream Identities

AMY L. HEQUEMBOURG

MICHAEL P. FARRELL

State University of New York at Buffalo

The identity of lesbian-mother combines a marginalized identity (lesbian) with one of the most revered mainstream identities (mother). With data collected through exploratory in-depth interviews from nine lesbian-mothers, the authors use symbolic interaction framework to explore the strategies that lesbian birth mothers and comothers employ to gain acceptance for their marginal-mainstream identities in their family networks. Respondents experienced varying levels of resistance from their social networks, with comothers being especially vulnerable due to their lack of both biological and legal substantiation. The authors explore the process of identity negotiation in three realms of everyday experience: in relationships with extended families, in relations within the nuclear family, and in lesbian relationships that have ended.

Although a number of social critics have raised questions about the viability of lesbian-headed families (e.g., Carpenter McMillan 1996), lesbian-headed families are becoming more visible in American society (Arsenault 1996). Researchers (Gottman 1990; Hoeffler 1981) have estimated that there are between 1.5 million and 5.0 million lesbian-mothers residing with their children as a family unit. Despite these estimates, a recent review of research-oriented family journals revealed a surprising lack of attention to this family form among academics (Allen and Demo 1995).

Using symbolic interaction theory, we examine the strains (Goffman 1963) that occur among a small sample of lesbian-mothers as they construct lesbian-mother identities in their kinship networks and within their own families. Symbolic interaction theory posits that identities are socially constructed (Gubrium and Holstein 1990). Although an actor may stake out an identity claim, such as "mother," the validity of the claim usually depends on the responses of significant others in the

AUTHORS' NOTE: *The authors would like to extend thanks to Dr. Anne Kasper and Sara Brallier for their support during earlier revisions of this article. Comments from Beth Schneider, Barrie Thorne, Arlene Stein, and other anonymous reviewers were also most helpful in bringing this article to fruition. Most important, we would like to extend our gratitude to those lesbian-mothers who shared their stories and made this article possible.*

REPRINT REQUESTS: Amy L. Hequembourg, Sociology Department, 430 Park Hall, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY 14260; e-mail: alh5@acsu.buffalo.edu.

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 13 No. 4, August 1999 540-557

© 1999 Sociologists for Women in Society

actor's networks. For the lesbian-mother, these significant others may include her child(ren), those who compose her children's networks of association (e.g., child care personnel, the children's friends, health care providers, and teachers), her kinship network, her employer, and the legal system. The difficulties of constructing and presenting the self varies depending on whether the lesbian-mother is the biological mother of the child.

Lesbian motherhood is often depicted as an oxymoron. In part, the incompatibility of the lesbian and mother identities is a consequence of positions taken by radical, second-wave feminists who initially rejected motherhood because of its association with heterosexual procreation and the patriarchal family (Wald 1997). But a more important source of the dissonance caused by the identity claims of lesbian-mothers stems from the linking of a culturally legitimate "natural" identity with a less socially accepted one. Lewin states:

Just as motherhood is viewed as the most natural expression of women's essential being, lesbianism is associated with violations of the natural order in the popular imagination. Lesbian sexuality is transgressive both because it seems to make lesbians independent of men and because it is, by definition, nonprocreative. (1995, 106)

Even after many lesbians began embracing motherhood, mainstream society continued to stress the incommensurability of the two identities. This resistance to lesbians' claims to motherhood forces them to negotiate an identity within a sociocultural space bounded by their claims to both a marginal identity and a mainstream identity.

Goffman refers to idealized, mainstream roles, such as mother, as the "general identity-values of a society." These identity-values "may be fully entrenched nowhere, and yet they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters [. . .] in daily living" (1963, 128-29). Societal expectations concerning motherhood result in "general identity-values" that portray mothers as self-sacrificing, nurturing, and feminine.¹ Lesbianism is not associated with these traits in most mainstream family ideologies; therefore, lesbian-mothers must struggle to achieve the identity of "good mother." By combining these identities, they take on a "marginal-mainstream" identity: "marginal" because lesbianism is still seen as an unconventional lifestyle choice, and "mainstream" because motherhood is still revered as a role vital to the maintenance of society. The dissonance created by this identity becomes apparent when lesbian-mothers interact with representatives of their mainstream social networks, such as teachers, coworkers, legal officials, and medical providers. These agents often express doubt about the ability of a lesbian woman to fulfill the role of "good mother."

In this article, we present results from an exploratory study of identity construction by nine lesbian-mothers. We examine the strategies that lesbian-mothers employ to manage their marginal-mainstream identities and how these strategies compare for birth mothers, stepmothers, and comothers. We also explore how their kinship networks respond to their marginal-mainstream identity claims. In this

article, *stepmothers* are partners who form relationships with birth mothers who have children from a prior relationship. *Comothers* are women who are partnered with birth mothers who conceived through alternative insemination.² The ambiguity of the copartner's role is illustrated by the lack of formal terminology to refer to her position in the family. Even in the academic literature, depending on her relationship to the children, the partner of the birth mother is referred to as a "co-parent" (Victor and Fish 1995), a "co-parent partner" (Hare 1994), a "non-biological mother" (Benkov 1994; Nelson 1996), a "non-biological parent" (Kenney and Tash 1992), a "co-mother" (Muzio 1993), a "stepmother" (Nelson 1996; Victor and Fish 1995), and the "invisible (m)other" (Muzio 1993). Unlike the birth mother who has a biological claim to motherhood, the partner's claim to motherhood is socially constructed and depends on the validation of significant others: her partner, the children, her own kin, and the legal authorities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Only in the last two decades have researchers treated lesbian families as viable alternative family forms. Prior to 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, lesbian identity was understood in terms of the medical model as an illness or disorder. Although some contemporary researchers (e.g., LeVay 1996) continue to explore the biological roots of homosexuality, most have abandoned this approach and now focus on the socially contingent nature of sexualities. Following this trend, therapists (e.g., Berzon 1988; Cass 1979) developed a "coming-out" model, which features a "highly patterned and supposedly stable sequence of stages in which individuals come to identify with social sexual categories" (Stein 1997, 10). Although this model recognizes the importance of family, friends, and coworkers in the coming-out process, it fails to recognize the differences in experience between and among gay men and lesbian women. In general, the coming-out model has been criticized as too rigidly linear and unable to incorporate difference into its framework (Rust 1993; Stein 1997).

Gays and lesbians have also criticized the legal system as being too rigid. As cases involving gay and lesbian civil rights issues were brought before the various state courts, it became evident that the law often overlooked diversity for the sake of ease of jurisprudence. Cases involving issues such as same-sex marriage and second-parent adoption have highlighted the limitations of legal rhetoric when confronted with emergent family forms (Christensen 1997). As a result, much research has emerged to address the inequities in the treatment of gays and lesbians by the legal system (e.g., Polikoff 1990; Sheppard 1992). Because the welfare of children in gay- and lesbian-headed families is a paramount concern of the courts, court personnel often rely on studies that explore the well-being of children raised by lesbian parents. A meta-analysis of this literature found "no differences on any measures between the heterosexual and homosexual parents regarding parenting styles,

emotional adjustment, and sexual orientation of the child(ren)" (Allen and Burrell 1996, 19).³ Researchers also find few indications that children raised in lesbian-headed homes suffer adversely from social stigma (Green et al. 1986; Hare 1994; Patterson 1995). However, these results should not be considered definitive until longitudinal studies can assess the long-term effects of children who mature in a lesbian-headed household (Kirkpatrick 1987; Patterson 1995; Wardle 1997). In addition, these studies are limited by small sample sizes, the infrequent use of control groups, and sample bias (Gottman 1990; Wardle 1997).

Researchers have also looked at other domains of family life among lesbians. For example, some have explored the division of household labor in lesbian-headed families (Kurdek 1993; Sullivan 1996), the use of leisure time by lesbian couples (Bialeschki and Pearce 1997), lesbian women's workplace experiences (Schachar and Gilbert 1983; Schneider 1984, 1986), and lesbian women's health care experiences (Harvey, Carr, and Bernheine 1989; Kenney and Tash 1992). However, in each of these domains, there have been few attempts to address the diversity of experience that exists among lesbian-mothers. Anthologies of gay and lesbian parenting speak of differences in experience among lesbian-mothers but fail to provide a systematic analysis of these differences (Ali 1996; Arnup 1995).

Lewin's (1993) groundbreaking study of lesbian-mothers found many similarities between lesbian and heterosexual single mothers. She argued that these similarities result from the cultural imperative of motherhood that has little to do with sexual preference. Nevertheless, although providing a rich comparative analysis, she overlooks the experiences of comothers and stepmothers in favor of the experiences of birth mothers. In a later study, Nelson (1996) explored a wide range of ways in which the reproductive ideologies of lesbian-mothers appear in personal and sociocultural contexts. In contrast to Lewin's (1993) work, Nelson recognizes the unique experiences of birth mothers, comothers, and stepmothers. Weston (1991) focused on kinship structure among gays and lesbians in San Francisco. Although her research on "chosen families" has been influential in deconstructing our understanding of "family" and "kinship," she does not explore the diversity of lesbian motherhood.

In general, this review indicates that previous research on lesbian-headed families has several limitations. There has been excellent research on child outcomes but little research on the internal processes of these families. Most important, available research on the roles of lesbian-mothers does not examine the differences in experience among mothers; namely, the experiences of birth mothers, stepmothers, and comothers.

METHOD

Because there is relatively little known about lesbian-mothers among family researchers, we found an exploratory qualitative study to be the most feasible means of capturing the details of everyday life for a small group of these women.

TABLE 1: Characteristics of Lesbian-Mothers

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Marital History</i>	<i>Income (annual)</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Employment Status</i>
Jodie	46	White	Never married	\$100,000 prior to illness	M.A.	Disabled
Becky	30	White	Divorced	\$20,000 prior to job loss	Two A.A. degrees	Unemployed
Ellen	24	White	Divorced	\$11,000	Currently pursuing B.A.	Student and part-time
Latasha	32	Black	Divorced	\$7,200	11th grade	Full-time
Leslie	34	White	Divorced	Currently none	Currently pursuing M.B.A.	Student
Cindy	41	White	Never married	\$49,000	Ph.D.	Full-time professional
Sally	37	White	Never married	\$35,000	B.F.A.	Full-time
Kelley	40	White	Never married	Currently none	Law degree	Unemployed but currently seeking public office
Linda	45	White	Divorced	\$20,000	A.A. degree	Full-time professional

Procedures

Nine lesbian-mothers were interviewed in late 1995 in a large city in the north-eastern United States. Among these women, there were six self-identified lesbian birth mothers, one adoptive mother, and two comothers (see Table 1). Two of the women in the study were contacted through community organizations; the remaining respondents were contacted using snowball sampling techniques. Interviews were conducted in two segments lasting approximately 1½ hours. Most were conducted in the respondent's homes. Two women specifically requested participation in the interview process with their partners, and the remaining seven were interviewed without their partners.⁴ Written consent was obtained from the respondents to allow for the recording and transcribing of the interview data. The women's names and identifying information have been changed.

An in-depth, open-ended interview schedule was employed to allow each respondent to relate her everyday experiences as both a lesbian and a mother. The questions focused on the formation of the respondent's family, her family's everyday activities, and the problems encountered by her family. As each interview was completed, it was transcribed and coded. Once the data were transcribed, each interview was read a minimum of six times in order to begin identifying various themes within the narratives. In this article, we examine the themes relevant to the difficulties in staging and maintaining a marginal-mainstream identity. Specifically, we examine the mothers' reports on identity negotiations with kin, within the family unit, and in the breakup of a relationship.

TABLE 2: Characteristics of Children

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Gender/Age (years)</i>	<i>Origins</i>
Jodie (legal mother via adoption)	Boy/17	Jodie legally adopted son during her relationship with ex-partner, Bobbie; son lives with Jodie but often visits Bobbie
Becky (birth mother)	Boy/8, girl/6	Previous marriage; Becky has sole custody
Ellen (birth mother)	Boy/4	Previous marriage; Ellen has sole custody
Latasha (birth mother)	Girl/14, girl/12, girl/9	Two oldest from prior heterosexual relationship and youngest from previous marriage (different father); middle child lives with father
Leslie (birth mother)	Boy/14, boy/5	Previous marriage; shares custody with ex-husband (one boy lives with Leslie, and one boy lives with his father)
Cindy (birth mother)	Girl/2	Alternative insemination; shares parenting with Sally
Sally (comother)	Girl/2	Alternative insemination; shares parenting with Cindy
Kelley (birth mother)	Boy/12, boy/5	Oldest son born to Kelley during a prior heterosexual relationship and youngest born by donor insemination with current partner
Linda (birth mother and comother)	Boy/6, boy/15, boy/18, boy/21, girl/6, girl/11	Three oldest sons from Linda's prior marriage, oldest daughter born by donor insemination with ex-partner (Linda is comother), and two youngest twins born by donor insemination with current partner (Linda is comother); all children reside with Linda

The Sample: Respondents and Their Children

The ages of the respondents ranged from 24 to 48 years, and all but one respondent was white. Five of the women had been previously married but were since divorced, and all but one had some level of post-high school education. Their annual salaries ranged from \$7,200 to \$100,000. The length of current relationships for these women ranged from several months to 14 years.

A total of 18 children—aged 2 to 21 years—were reported by the women in this study. One child was adopted through a formal adoption agency (see Table 2). Twelve of the children were born to the respondents or their partners during prior heterosexual relationships, and the remaining 5 were born to the respondent or her (current or ex-) partner through alternative insemination. Of the 18 children, all but 2 resided with the respondents.

Six of the women were in long-term relationships with their partners, one was dating her partner seriously for about a year, and two were dating casually. Within

TABLE 3: Description of Families

<i>Name</i>	<i>Current Partner</i>	<i>Description of Household</i>
Jodie	Cathy	Jodie resides with her adopted son. She recently separated from Bobbie after a 23-year relationship. Bobbie maintains active comothering status. Jodie is casually dating Cathy.
Becky	NA	Becky lives as a single mom with two children. She is casually dating with no comother sharing responsibilities.
Ellen	Beth	Ellen has been dating Beth for about six months. Although they do not "officially" live together, Beth spends most of her time at Ellen's house and assumes some limited comothering responsibilities.
Latasha	Lisa	Latasha resides with Lisa and two of Latasha's children (the third lives with child's father). The length of the current relationship is approximately two years. Latasha shares no parenting responsibilities with Lisa (stepmother).
Leslie	Nicole	Leslie resides with Nicole and one of her sons (the other son lives with his father). They have been together for about two years. Leslie shares parenting responsibilities equally with Nicole (stepmother).
Cindy	Sally	Cindy resides with Sally and their daughter. They have been together for about 16 years. Cindy shares her parenting responsibilities equally with Sally (comother).
Sally	Cindy	Sally resides with Cindy and their daughter. They have been together for about 16 years. Sally shares her parenting responsibilities equally with Cindy (birth mother).
Kelley	Laurie	Kelley resides with Laurie and two children. They have been together for about 10 years. Kelley shares her parenting responsibilities equally with Laurie (comother to one son and stepmother to the other).
Linda	Susan	Linda resides with six children, Susan, Bonnie (ex-partner), and Bonnie's partner (Wendy). The length of the current relationship with Susan is approximately seven years. Linda shares her parenting responsibilities equally with Susan (birth mother to twins) and Bonnie (birth mother to oldest daughter). Susan and Bonnie also share equally in caring for Linda's sons from a prior marriage. Wendy assumes no parenting responsibilities.

these families, there were also a variety of different parenting experiences that are depicted in greater detail in Table 3.

FINDINGS

Identity Negotiations with Extended Families

The lesbian-mothers in this study often turned to their extended families as important sources of support and validation. Some women faced resistance to their

claims to motherhood or couplehood by their kin; others found encouragement. The decisions of the four women (Cindy, Sally, Kelley, and Linda) who had chosen to have children through alternative insemination were not unequivocally accepted by the women's extended families. Because the comothers lacked both biological and legal ties to their children, their extended families were more resistant to their claims to motherhood than the birth mothers' families. Often, the resistance employed by extended family members compelled the comothers to employ various coping strategies to deal with the strain.

One factor that contributed to resistance by the respondents' kin was the lack of legal legitimization of the family ties between the nonbiological mothers and their children. Until recently, nonbiological mothers could not legally legitimate their relationship to their children. Even today, second-parent adoption rights are available on a limited basis in the United States and vary dramatically from state to state. Fortunately, for the women in our study, a New York State surrogate court judge set a legal precedent in 1992 when she granted second-parent adoption rights to the comother of a child named Evan (*In Re the Adoption of Evan* 1992). In the decision about this dual-custody case, the judge acknowledged that a child with two parents has access to important tangible benefits, such as financial assurances, practical benefits, and a continuity of life, that are unavailable to children with a single parent. This landmark case has been influential, as other comothers have sought similar parenting rights in family courts across the state.⁵ The legalization of second-parent custody rights represents an important public validation of the possibility that parenthood can move outside the bounds of biology. Although adoption by heterosexual stepparents has become the most common form of adoption in America (Christensen 1997), lesbian stepmothers and comothers must still rely on the court's discretion in validating their claims to parenthood. Among the nine respondents in this study, four (Sally, Cindy, Kelley, and Linda) had sought second-parent status for themselves or their partners. These women expressed a change in attitude by their kin once the ties between the nonbiological mother and her children were legally validated. Most important, second-parent adoption facilitated the negotiation of marginal-mainstream identity claims.

Kelley, the energetic mother of two sons, had encouraged her partner (Laurie) to seek second-parent adoption rights shortly after the birth of their youngest son. As a lawyer, she also recognized the importance of seeking legal means to validate her family's "normality," knowing this would allow them access to certain social resources. After seeking joint custody with her partner, Kelley saw a pronounced change in the way that Laurie's parents treated their grandchildren:

And then one of the things they said, and they were right—if Laurie and I had broke up and I had said to her that neither you or your parents will ever see these children again, there wasn't anybody that could do anything about it. Her parents were concerned about that. . . . But then when we adopted [. . .] Laurie's parents' attitudes began to change and they became much warmer toward their grandchildren.

In another case, Sally, a comother, reported on her mother's worry over the issue of biological and legal ties to her granddaughter:

When I told my mother that Cindy was going to have a baby, it was then that my mother said to my sister, "I wish that it was Sally having the baby." Because, for my mother, the fears came from the fact that Cindy might have the baby, then, because of the way that Cindy loves kids, she was just going to just leave with the baby.

Although Sally and Cindy had been together for 16 years through many difficult attempts at pregnancy by alternative insemination, they still recognized the validity of their parents' worries. Early in Cindy's pregnancy, they responded to their kin's concerns by formulating plans to seek second-parent adoption after the birth. Sally, the comother, felt this made a substantial difference in legitimating the kinship tie between her family and her daughter: "Now, my family knows that she is my daughter. They probably wouldn't have thought that if I hadn't adopted her—they would have, in the back of their minds, thought that I was not really tied to the baby in any legitimate way."

For another comother, the fear of disapproval by her partner's parents motivated her to seek second-parent adoption. According to Linda, "[Her partner's parents] were against everything. They were like these staunch New England Republicans. They were *real* thrilled with us! Oh, and I'm a real *winner* in their eyes. But, they're civil." Fearful that her partner's parents might attempt to terminate her ties to her children in the event of some misfortune to her partner, she had also recently sought legal parental rights.

As these examples illustrate, access to second-parent rights allowed some of the comothers in the study to legally validate their relationship with their child. This served two purposes: Second-parent adoption gave them tangible rights as a parent while it legitimated their relationship with their children. Subsequently, their parents often felt more willing to emotionally invest in their grandchildren. This strategy allowed these comothers to validate their marginal-mainstream identities both legally and emotionally.

For lesbian stepmothers who enter a relationship with someone who already has children, the process of identity construction is fraught with all the difficulties faced by heterosexual stepparents. However, it becomes further complicated by the lack of societal validation of the lesbian stepparent role. Stepmothers often entered a relationship with a woman who had children during a previous heterosexual marriage. Thus, they enter an already established family unit without any legal and biological ties to the children. Subsequently, stepmothers must often negotiate their role within the family amid familial ties that still exist between the fathers and their children and between the children and their paternal grandparents. In addition, they must negotiate their role as stepmother to those outside their family. This is an especially difficult process for the parents of the stepmother. Unlike the parents of comothers, a stepmother's parents lack the opportunity to forge their own sense of

identity as grandparents during the pregnancy and birth of their daughter's stepchildren. In their reluctance to embrace the children as their grandchildren, they threaten the validation of the stepmothering role of their daughter.

These complications are illustrated by the experiences of Nicole, a stepmother. When Nicole became a stepmother to Leslie's children, she disrupted an uneasy silence she had maintained with her mother with regard to her lesbianism. Nicole's loyalty to her new family became the deciding factor that led her to terminate ties to her mother. Toward the end of the interview with her partner, Nicole gave some insights into the difficulties she has had in trying to validate her role as stepmother. In this quote, she tells of her mother's resistance to her new family and how this has strengthened her feelings of loyalty to her stepchildren:

I used to cry about it; get hurt about it. . . . But then I realized that she's the only one that's losing. She's missing my kids. I tried . . . we tried. On Thanksgiving, we were together for dessert, and the way she treated the kids. . . . I mean, if you want to treat me like that, that's one thing, but you're not going to treat my kids like that. [. . .] And if you don't take all of us, you get none of us.

There was a mixture of responses from the parents of the birth mothers in the study. Linda and Cindy spoke of the close ties between their children and the children's grandparents. Linda spoke lovingly of her father's acceptance of both her biological children and the children whom she comothered. Cindy shared stories of the naming ceremony that she and her partner had for their daughter on her first birthday and the important role that her mother had in the process. In contrast to Linda's and Cindy's harmonious relationships with their parents, Latasha's relationship with her parents was marred by tension and conflict.

Latasha, the daughter of an African American minister, had always been told that homosexuality was a sin according to the Bible. Understandably, she was very fearful of disclosing her lesbianism to her parents. During a visit by her mother two years before the interviews, she was "outed." When her mother arrived unexpectedly, Latasha's partner was asleep in her bed. As she talked with her mother in the living room, her mother became suspicious of her visible nervousness and pushed her way into the bedroom, where she found Latasha's partner asleep. Apparently, her mother had suspected her daughter's lesbianism, since she immediately assumed that the woman in Latasha's bed was her lover:

My mother ignored me and went in my bedroom and pulled back the covers, and [. . .] Lisa was asleep. If she had heard my mother, she would have hid or something. But she was asleep. My mother [. . .] told her to get up and get out. [. . .] That was the most embarrassing moment of my life. I hope that will never happen again.

Despite her parents' disapproval, Latasha and Lisa moved in together shortly thereafter and tried to create a family together. However, her parents' constant attempts to religiously cleanse Latasha of her lesbianism placed a huge strain on Latasha and

Lisa's relationship. Although Latasha neither lived with her parents nor was financially dependent on them, she still sought their approval. Despite the tensions over her lesbian relationship, Latasha and her children spent a great deal of time with her parents, but Lisa was excluded from these familial interactions. Latasha admitted that these emotional strains left her estranged from Lisa and prevented Lisa from establishing parental ties with Latasha's children. Latasha doubted that her and Lisa's relationship would last, and she looked forward to immersing herself in the church to seek forgiveness for her lesbianism:

I am not going to say [Lisa and I will be together] forever because I want to get into the church to get my life back to God, and I already know that this is a sin, what I'm doing, and I told her that when I go to church and get my life right, I still want to be friends.

As Latasha's situation poignantly illustrates, resistant kinship networks can play an integral part in creating barriers between a birth mother and her partner. When kin deny the parental status of the comother, they may undermine her ability to stabilize the delicate balance of a marginal and mainstream identity. The result is a conflation of mother and lesbian identities that is difficult to analytically separate. As Latasha's narrative suggests, interactions with resistant kin may result in the centering of a woman's lesbian identity and the silencing of her mothering identity.

The presentation of self by comothers and stepmothers varies substantially depending on their relationships with their kin, their partner's relationship with their kin, their level of openness about their lesbianism, and the coping resources available to them as they face these issues. Those women who are able to integrate their identities into their kinship networks using various strategies, such as second-parent adoption, presented a more integrated sense of self that incorporated motherhood into the more problematic lesbian identity. Whereas some of the stepmothers in the study lacked strategies to deal with these tensions, the comothers were able to use second-parent adoption as a means of legitimating their relationship to their children in the eyes of their kin.

Identity Negotiations within the Family: The Stress of Becoming a Parent

Doubts concerning "legitimate" ties to children in lesbian-headed families were not confined to relationships with extended kin; this dilemma also permeated the confines of the lesbian-headed family. Because conventional society has such a limited set of scripts for motherhood, the comothers in this study sometimes felt the stress of having to actively forge ties to their children. For example, breast-feeding is often viewed as an exclusive and definitive right of motherhood. Popular theories of "bonding" suggest that women who breast-feed establish an irrevocable bond with their child. For Sally, a comother, this lack of a physical connection through breast-feeding left her feeling emotionally distant from her newborn daughter:

I think because Cindy is nursing, our daughter wants to be with her more. There was a time when I felt like the baby didn't want to have anything to do with me. I got pretty upset. . . . I was really upset about it, but now I know she loves me just as much and she knows that I give her different things.

In two instances, the birth mothers (Cindy and Kelley) played active roles in shaping their partner's relationship to the children. In these instances, the birth mothers actively staged scenes with appropriate props that would best enhance and validate their partner's role as a parent to their children.

Because of their 16-year relationship, Cindy had confidence in Sally's ability to be a good comother, despite Sally's doubts. Cindy reports:

Sally and I have tried different things. We are new moms and each parent-child relationship is different. So we have had to just try different things—try to figure out how to give Sally time alone with the baby. Like . . . Sally gives the baby baths 99 percent of the time. Sally also takes her on walks with the dog. This gives me a break sometimes, too.

Kelley, a birth mother, is a busy political candidate and lawyer. As she and her partner, Laurie, negotiated a division of child care responsibilities, they concluded that Laurie was more suited to the daily mothering role. Kelley reports:

Laurie is very much into the daily maintenance. I'm much more laissez faire, laid back. And she's more ordered—she's the one who makes sure they do piano lessons and that they eat at approximately the same time every night. And I think she's just better at the mom stuff. [. . .] I think if we ever did break up, she would get custody as well, because she's just much, much better at helping them order their lives.

In negotiating identities within the family, birth mothers and comothers employ various strategies that allow the nonbiological mother to develop her "good" mother identity. In doing so, they de-emphasize her "marginal" lesbian identity and stress her "mainstream" mother identity. By routinizing the motherhood of the comother within the family, these couples prepare themselves to meet the scrutiny of social networks outside the family.

Maintaining Continuity in Relationship Management

Because same-sex marriage is still not a legal right, lesbian women must forge their own unique understanding of "family" that does not entirely rest on legal definitions. Consequently, when the lesbian family unit dissolves, each mother must deal with not only the pain of her loss but also the lack of clear scripts to guide her through this emotional upheaval. Two instances in this study illustrate the divergent processes involved.

Early in the course of a 25-year relationship with Bobbie, Jodie had legally adopted a newborn boy. This boy—now 17-years old—never had any legal or

biological ties to Bobbie yet had always viewed her as his other mother. Upon Jodie and Bobbie's separation, Bobbie continued her close relationship with Jodie's adopted son. Her son's lingering tie to her ex-partner was especially painful for Jodie. Jodie's kin, who continued to maintain close contact with Bobbie, further complicated this situation. As a consequence, Jodie felt insecure about her performance as a mother:

She [Bobbie] can come over any time she wants . . . however, he isn't going with her over there! This was absolutely not an agreement—no, it was just a statement that I made from the very beginning. [. . .] She—as the other parent—is going to make sure she comes out smelling like a rose. . . . So, I become the bad guy. . . . It hasn't been a bed of roses. I never wanted Bobbie to be a part of my son's life, but we had a little problem—the house was in Bobbie's name. . . . So, the agreement was that I would stay in the house and she would get to see my son—we worked it out through the lawyers . . . it certainly wasn't a compromise!

As this quote implies, Jodie felt conflicted about Bobbie's relationship to the boy. She referred to Bobbie as "the other parent" but later referred to the boy as "my son," thus downplaying Bobbie's parental status. Jodie's narrative illustrates the vulnerability of comothers who lack legal or biological ties to their children: Bobbie's continued relationship to Jodie's son was maintained through an agreement with a lawyer that, in essence, exchanged Jodie's continued use of Bobbie's home for Bobbie's continued contact with Jodie's son. This example suggests that the lack of institutional supports available for lesbian couples (e.g., the right to marry and the right to adopt a child as a couple) makes it especially difficult to sustain a marginal-mainstream identity when a relationship with a partner disintegrates.

In contrast to Jodie's volatile feelings about her separation, Linda provided a very different account of the relationship she maintained with her ex-partner. Linda had three children from a heterosexual marriage. After that marriage, she formed a lesbian relationship and became a comother through the insemination of her partner. When that relationship ended, she formed a third relationship and became a comother of twins conceived by her partner through alternative insemination. Linda now lives in an extended household with all of her children, her current partner, her ex-partner, and her ex-partner's current lover. While Linda openly admitted that there were some logistic problems associated with such an unusual mix of people under one roof, her sense of humor and her loyalty to her family enabled her to hold it all together.

Kelley also noted how she and her partner maintained ties with ex-partners. While discussing her current partner's close ties to her ex-partner, Kelley unintentionally echoed Weston's (1991) observation about gay and lesbian relationships with ex-lovers. Kelley said, "We laugh, as gay women—if we quit talking to our ex-lovers, the world just ain't that big—we wouldn't have any friends! So, it's not that unusual."

The marginal status of lesbian-mothers is illustrated by these cases of separation in which partners are forced to creatively engineer the details of the separation and

the role that the nonbiological mother will play in their child's life. In these cases, inadequacy of the law in dealing with these issues sometimes results in outcomes that rival divorce and child custody experiences associated with heterosexual divorce. In contrast, in many of these cases, although the couple's relationship is terminated, the partners retain their parental roles. The best interests of the child become the paramount concern in maintaining these ties. In these instances, lesbian-mothers continue to strive to be conventional "good" mothers while forging unconventional meanings of "family."

DISCUSSION AND AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

This study explores some of the diverse strategies employed by lesbian women and their families as they struggle to construct marginal-mainstream identities as lesbian-mothers. Lesbian-mothers must construct and receive validation for their identities in a variety of networks ranging from their nuclear and extended families to the health, education, and legal systems outside the family. In this study, we examined a variety of ways that comothers, stepmothers, and birth mothers cope with the stresses of constructing a balanced identity in their nuclear families and with their extended families.

Once the lesbian-mothers in this study took on their marginal-mainstream identities, they constantly reassessed feedback cues and readjusted the impressions they gave off so as to provide evidence of their ability to be both lesbians and "good" mothers (Goffman 1963). For some, the focus was on demonstrating their abilities to mother. For others, the focus was on neutralizing attacks on their claims to lesbian identities.

Most important, this exploratory study uncovered the diversity of experiences among lesbian-mothers. We found that the strategies employed by birth mothers differ in important ways from those employed by comothers and stepmothers. Based on the cases in this study, we found that the legal system plays an important role in the way that comothers stabilize their marginal identities. Second-parent custody laws allowed comothers in this study to legitimate their parental position for those around them, especially their parents. These findings suggest that a national effort to legalize second-parent adoption and same-sex marriages would help lesbian-mothers legitimate their marginal-mainstream identities.

The interviews in this study were of an exploratory nature and covered a wide range of issues. The importance of differentiating birth mothers from comothers only became apparent during the course of the data collection. Because of the small sample size, we acknowledge limitations to the generalizability of our findings. In addition, the sample is relatively homogeneous, consisting mostly of white, middle-class respondents living in urban or suburban settings. Despite the limitations of the sample, the findings from the in-depth interviews suggest that the manner in which lesbian-mothers negotiate their identities as lesbians and mothers depends on how

the family formed and whether the mother is a birth mother, stepmother, or comother.

The findings of this study suggest several promising areas of inquiry for future studies of lesbian motherhood. The exploratory design of lesbian motherhood research suggests that researchers should begin addressing the problem of design and sampling in future studies. Larger, more diverse samples, coupled with more systematic design protocol, would improve our ability to generalize these findings to other lesbian-mothers in the United States. For example, the findings of the current study suggest that we could learn more about the diversity of experiences among lesbian-mothers if we designed our research to systematically compare a larger sample of birth mothers, comothers, and stepmothers. Additionally, we suggest a need to explore the differences between single birth mothers and those who have partners. Among those who have partners, there are important differences between those who have comothers or stepmothers who actively participate in parenting and those who do not. Furthermore, longitudinal research studies would greatly contribute to our understanding of the experiences of lesbian-mothers over time.

Our findings also suggest the need to further explore the impact of second-parent legislation on the experiences of comothers. For example, how do the experiences of comothers who have legal second-parent custody of their children compare with those who do not? The implications of these rights could also be explored in the context of lesbian separations. How do the separations for couples who have legalized the comother's rights to the children differ from separations for those who have not?

Related areas of study might include the spillover effects of workplace stress on lesbian-mothers. During the interviews for this project, several respondents related experiences of workplace stress associated with the disclosure of their lesbianism. Future studies could explore the various ways that birth mothers, comothers, and stepmothers validate their roles as mothers in their workplace settings. Comparisons could be made between those who have and have not chosen to disclose their lesbianism to their coworkers to determine how disclosure hinders or facilitates their marginal-mainstream identity claims. In addition to family experiences, researchers could also explore the ways that lesbian-mothers forge a sense of self in their other social networks. For example, researchers might compare the various ways that birth mothers, comothers, and stepmothers strategically manage their interactions with their children's friends and teachers, as well as school officials.

In postmodern society, individuals are freer to construct identities that combine a wide range of unlikely combinations. Much can be learned about the stress and coping strategies of managing these complex identities by examining the experiences of lesbian-mothers in their families and in their larger networks.

NOTES

1. For a sustained discussion of the ways that ideologies of intensive mothering cast a shadow on encounters among working mothers, see Hays (1996). For a wider discussion of these issues, see Nakano Glenn, Chang, and Rennie Forcey (1994).

2. In differentiating between the two groups, we recognize that stepmothers could also be characterized as comothers when they share parenting responsibilities. These labels are not necessarily representative of how the respondents (and their partners) spoke of their relationships to their children. Of the six respondents who shared parenting responsibilities, most referred to the nonbiological mother in the relationship as a comother regardless of whether the children were from a prior heterosexual marriage or the result of alternative insemination. Five of the respondents indicated that they shared parenting responsibilities equally with their partners, and two of the respondents mentioned some pressure for one parent to have more primacy in some social contexts. For example, Linda and her family had recently moved to a new school district where they did not know anyone. When Linda attended the children's first teacher-parent conference, she and her partner decided not to disclose their family arrangement to the teachers or students so that their children could make their own choices when they were ready.

When asked what their children called the comothers and stepmothers in their families, the importance of naming was further validated. Among the women, there was a combination of responses, with some children referring to their comothers or stepmothers by their first name and others calling them "mom." In two cases, the child's middle name was the last name of his or her comother. For Sally and Cindy, their daughter's name was of such importance that they conducted a naming ceremony for her that included all of their kin and friends. These examples illustrate the importance that language and discursive constructions play in the marginal-mainstream identity claims for lesbian-mothers.

Readers should keep in mind that the motherhood labels used in this article are not universal or static categories, but merely representative of the women in this study.

3. See reviews of this literature in Victor and Fish (1995) and Patterson (1995). This growing body of literature includes Golombok, Spencer, and Rutter (1983), Gottman (1990), Green (1978), Green et al. (1986), Hoefler (1981), Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981), and Miller, Jacobsen, and Bigner (1981).

4. Due to the time constraints of the researchers and their lack of access to several of the respondents' partners, interviews with some of the respondents' partners were not conducted.

5. In the Matter of the Adoption of Caitlin and Another (1994), In the Matter of Dana (1996), In the Matter of an Adoption Pursuant to Article VII of the Domestic Relations Law by S.M.Y. of a Child Whose First Name Is Camilla (1994).

REFERENCES

- Ali, Turan. 1996. *We are family: Testimonies of lesbian and gay parents*. London: Cassell.
- Allen, Katherine, and David Demo. 1995. The families of lesbians and gay men: A new frontier in family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57:111-27.
- Allen, Mike, and Nancy Burrell. 1996. Comparing the impact of homosexual and heterosexual parents on children: Meta-analysis of existing research. *Journal of Homosexuality* 32 (2): 19-35.
- Arnup, Katherine. 1995. *Lesbian parenting: Living with pride and prejudice*. Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island: Gynergy Books.
- Arsenault, Joseph. 1996. "Family" but not "parent": The same-sex coupling jurisprudence of the New York Court of Appeals. *Albany Law Review* 58:813-42.
- Benkov, Laura. 1994. *Reinventing the family: Lesbian and gay parents*. New York: Crown.
- Berzon, Betty. 1988. *Permanent partners*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Bialeschki, Deborah, and Kimberly Pearce. 1997. "I don't want a lifestyle—I want a life": The effect of role negotiations on the leisure of lesbian mothers. *Journal of Leisure Research* 29:113-31.

- Cass, Vivienne. 1979. Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality* 4:219-35.
- Christensen, Craig. 1997. Legal ordering of family values: The case of gay and lesbian families. *Cardozo Law Review* 18:1299-1416.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey. 1994. *Mothering: Ideology, experience and agency*. New York: Routledge.
- Golombok, Susan, Ann Spencer, and Michael Rutter. 1983. Children in lesbian and single-parent households: Psychosexual and psychiatric appraisal. *Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 24:551-72.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gottman, J. 1990. Children of gay and lesbian parents. In *Homosexuality and family relations*, edited by F. W. Bozett and M. B. Sussman. New York: Harrington Park.
- Green, R. 1978. Sexual identity of 37 children raised by homosexual or transsexual parents. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 135:692-97.
- Green, R., Jane Barclay Mandel, Mary Hotvedt, James Gray, and Laurel Smith. 1986. Lesbian mothers and their children: A comparison with solo parent heterosexual mothers and their children. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15:167-84.
- Gubrium, Jaber, and James A. Holstein. 1990. *What is family?* London: Mayfield.
- Hare, Jan. 1994. Concerns and issues faced by families headed by lesbian couples. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* 75 (1): 27-35.
- Harvey, S. Marie, Catherine Carr, and Sheryl Bernheine. 1989. Lesbian mothers: Health care experiences. *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery* 34:115-19.
- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hoeffler, B. 1981. Children's acquisition of sex role behavior in lesbian-mother families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 51:536-43.
- In Re the Adoption of Evan, 583 N.Y.S.2d 1002 (N.Y.Sur. 1992).
- In the Matter of the Adoption of Caitlin and Another (163 Misc.2d 999 Family Court, Monroe County 1994).
- In the Matter of Dana, G.M. (86 N.Y.2d 651 Court of Appeals of New York 1996).
- In the Matter of an Adoption Pursuant to Article VII of the Domestic Relations Law by S.M. Y. of a Child Whose First Name Is Camilla (163 Misc.2d 272 Family Court, Kings County 1994).
- Kennedy, Janet, and Donna T. Tash. 1992. Lesbian childbearing couples' dilemmas and decisions. *Health Care for Women International* 13:209-19.
- Kirkpatrick, Martha. 1987. Clinical implications of lesbian mothers studies. *Journal of Homosexuality* 14 (1-2): 201-11.
- Kirkpatrick, M., C. Smith, and R. Roy. 1981. Lesbian mothers and their children: A comparative survey. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 51:545-51.
- Kurdek, Lawrence. 1993. The allocation of household labor in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual married couples. *Journal of Social Issues* 49:127-39.
- LeVay, Simon. 1996. *Queer science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lewin, Ellen. 1993. *Lesbian mothers: Accounts of gender in American culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- . 1995. On the outside looking in: The politics of lesbian motherhood. In *Conceiving the new world order: The global politics of reproduction*, edited by Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McMillan, Susan Carpenter. 1996. Do gay partners and parents have a place in the family of values? *Los Angeles Times*, 26 December.
- Miller, Judith Ann, R. Brooke Jacobsen, and Jerry J. Bigner. 1981. The child's home environment for lesbian vs. heterosexual mothers: A neglected area of research. *Journal of Homosexuality* 7:49-56.
- Muzio, Cheryl. 1993. Lesbian co-parenting: On being/being with the invisible (m)other. *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 63:215-29.

- Nelson, Fiona. 1996. *Lesbian motherhood: An exploration of Canadian lesbian families*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Patterson, C. 1995. Lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and their children. In *Lesbian, gay and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives*, edited by Anthony R. D'Augelli and Charlotte Patterson. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Polikoff, N. D. 1990. This child does have two mothers: Redefining parenthood to meet the needs of children in lesbian-mother and other nontraditional families. *The Georgetown Law Journal* 78:459-575.
- Rust, Paula. 1993. "Coming out" in the age of social constructionism: Sexual identity formation among lesbian and bisexual women. *Gender & Society* 7 (1): 50-77.
- Schachar, Sandra, and Lucia Gilbert. 1983. Working lesbians: Role conflict and coping strategies. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 7:244-57.
- Schneider, Beth. 1984. Peril and promise: Lesbian's workplace participation. In *Women-identified women*, edited by Trudy Darty and Sandee Potter. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield.
- . 1986. Coming out at work: Bridging the private/public gap. *Work and Occupations* 13:463-87.
- Sheppard, Annamay. 1992. Lesbian mothers II: Long night's journey into day. *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 14 (2-3): 185-203.
- Stein, Arlene. 1997. *Sex and sensibility: Stories of a lesbian generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sullivan, Maureen. 1996. Rozzie and Harriet? Gender and family patterns of lesbian coparents. *Gender & Society* 10:747-67.
- Victor, Sherri, and Marian Fish. 1995. Lesbian mothers and their children: A review for school psychologists. *School Psychology Review* 24:456-79.
- Wald, Jenny. 1997. Outlaw mothers. *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 8:169-93.
- Wardle, Lynn. 1997. The potential impact of homosexual parenting on children. *University of Illinois Law Review* 3:833-920.
- Weston, Kath. 1991. *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Amy L. Hequembourg is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the State University of New York at Buffalo. She is currently working on a dissertation exploring everyday discourses and practices of lesbian-mothers.

Michael P. Farrell is a professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is currently carrying out a longitudinal study of the effects of family and friendship on adolescent development. His most recent work is focused on specifying factors that buffer the effects of single-mother families on adolescent outcomes.