

Better One's Own Path

The Experience of Lesbian Grandmothers in Canada

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Cette expérience est le fruit d'une étude sur quatorze grands-mères et belles-mères lesbiennes qui se sont manifestées vers l'adolescence de leurs enfants ou un peu plus tard, ce qui a précipité des conflits ou un éloignement temporaire. Plusieurs ont rapporté des liens familiaux très forts, toutes ont exprimé leur plaisir dans leur rôle de grandparentalité homosexuelle et l'ont intégré avec fierté et intégrité.

Better one's own path, though imperfect, than the path of another well made.

—Participant's email footnote

There is a growing body of research on contemporary lesbian families. In Canada, significant changes since the mid 1990s in the application of family law have helped lesbian parents to be more secure and integrated into mainstream society (Arnup). While these families continue to experience marginalization and stigma (King and Black), economic difficulties (Black, Makar and Sunders), and negative initial reactions of children in response to mothers adopting a lesbian identity (Van Voorhis and McClain), the general consensus of studies is that lesbian families tend to be effective in negotiating the challenges of parenting, in spite of the hardships (Parks).

Very little is known, however,

about lesbian grandmothers; those lesbians who negotiated parenting in the less accepting decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Dana Rosenfeld calls this era "post-Stonewall," in reference to the early years of the gay liberation movement. In urban centers, newly "out" gay and lesbian people built a rich and diverse culture, free from much of the restrictions of the 1950s. However, there was a world of separation between urban "gaybourhoods" and the suburban and rural neighbourhoods where families and children dwelt. Courts were not generous with lesbian mothers, and loss of custody was a strong deterrent to "coming out" as a lesbian mother (Arnup). Many women in such circumstances coped by living either as a mother (suppressing or denying lesbian inclinations) or as a lesbian (accepting childlessness as the price of lesbianism). As children grew up and left home, and as the social and financial barriers to living without male patronage relaxed, many mothers came out in midlife as lesbians, and now identify as lesbian grandmothers.

Study Method

In May of 2004 I contacted lesbian grandmothers to participate in an informal study. Using a snowball technique, where participants

received a questionnaire and were then invited to forward it to others that they knew, I received completed questionnaires from 14 women, ages 41 through 73, with most between the ages of 55 and 65. Most lived on Vancouver Island, or in the greater Vancouver or Toronto areas. Eleven were grandmothers through their biological children. Three became step-grandmothers through the children of a lesbian partner.¹ One of the biological grandmothers claimed step-grandchildren through her partner's children as well. Nine of the 14 were in committed or common-law lesbian relationship, and all except one shared the grandparent role with their partner. Among them, the 14 participants had 29 biological children, 11 stepchildren and 55 grandchildren and step-grandchildren.

Participants returned the questionnaire by email (12), postal mail (one), or in person (one). Nine wished to be named; five remain anonymous. When quoting anonymous participants, I have used single initials; otherwise, I have identified participants by first name in the article text, and have listed full names in the acknowledgements. It is not possible to say whether or to what degree these women are representative of lesbian grandmothers in Canada.

Emergence of Identities as Mothers and as Lesbians

The most striking thing about these women's identities as mothers and as lesbians is that lesbian identity came much later in their lives. The one mother who acknowledged to herself her lesbian identity at an early age (17) kept it a secret until her husband's death 40 years later. In contrast, the three women who claimed grandmother identity through stepchildren had not expected to become mothers, but had known of their lesbian identity relatively early. The average age of coming out to others as a lesbian was 51 for the biological grandmothers, and 31 for the step-grandmothers.

Most of the grandmothers came out when their children were grown and/or their marriages ended. Of 29 children, only nine belonging to three mothers were under the age of 18 when their mothers revealed their lesbian identity. Only three children were under 14, and these belonged to one mother (who had six children, came out to herself at 30, and to her children ten years later).

The second striking feature about these women's lesbian identities is the sense that they represent an accomplishment or a gift of middle age. Dana Rosenfeld describes two very different orientations toward lesbian identity that he found among an elderly cohort. One group was concerned about stigma and with preserving the appearance of normality. The second group felt that to discredit or hide one's homosexuality was to behave with inauthenticity. This group tended to have come out "post-Stonewall," in the 1970s or 1980s, when gay and lesbian communities had formed and the gay pride subculture was active. The participants in my study mirrored Rosenfeld's second group: They had come out post-1970, and they tended to see the act of claiming their lesbian

status as important to their integrity, authenticity, and wholeness. None willingly hid their lesbianism from children or grandchildren, and, when they felt the need to do so, they were sad about it. At the same time, they did not stress, as Rosenfeld's subjects had, the narrative that they had always been lesbians or were born that way. Rather, they stressed the transfor-

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mation of their lives that followed coming out, and the accumulation of identities as mothers, lesbians, and grandmothers that followed.

Family Impact of Mothers' Disclosure of Lesbian Identity

When the women came out to children, there was often conflict. Three nearly lost contact altogether with children who refused to accept their lesbian identities; one of these is still estranged from her son. A time of tension was very common (ten reported this), particularly during children's adolescent years. Initial rejection of partners by children was also common. Enduring conflict or estrangement was rare, and only one of the 14 was currently prevented from seeing grandchildren because of her lesbi-

anism. Three, however, were not out to some of their grandchildren because of the parents' discomfort, and three had members of their extended family who did not know about their lesbian identity or relationship. Three reported that their lesbianism had a negative impact upon family gatherings. Where families failed to support and approve of the women's lesbianism or partners, the women experienced this as very sad and stressful.

Most, however, felt that their relationships with their children and extended families were thriving. Sharon reported a positive impact upon family gatherings (an extra woman improved the quality of the food), and all expressed pleasure in spending time with children and grandchildren. Donna told how she had disclosed to her daughter only when her daughter came out as a lesbian, and how later she was thrilled to share in her daughter's commitment ceremony to a female partner. These, and other stories, indicate that for some families the disclosure of a lesbian mother deepened intimacy and authenticity between the generations, particularly between mothers and daughters.

Identity as Grandmothers

Eight of the 14 reported that a grandchild's birth had improved their relationship with children or stepchildren. Nancy states,

I was so blessed to be able to act as my daughter's doula for both births and our relationship and my obvious love for her and her children has done much to heal many of the wounds suffered during a very difficult period in all our lives. My children and I have worked very hard to deal with the anger and hurt that was felt by all of us when I came out. This healing started before the grandchildren arrived, but has given us another wonderful connection and way to relate.

Jill comments,

We are both active in the lives of these two wonderful children. Zack has names for both of us and he is happy to have four grandmothers, one great grandmother and one grandpa. It's really an advantage to have two grandmothers on hand when the two children visit. Nobody feels slighted. We were all at the hospital minutes after Zack's birth and the very next morning with Alex. Our children accept us as partners and we feel close to all of them.

All of the women enjoyed their role as grandmothers, including the three who came to the role through stepchildren. Sharon states,

I guess that if I would not have come out as lesbian, I would be unlikely to have had grandchildren in my life at all.... Our granddaughter is so utterly accepting of all her grandmothers (she has many through various relationships). It is refreshing to see how children can learn about all the various kinds of relationships in the world before they have developed a bias.

Intersection of Identities as Lesbians and as Grandmothers

When asked whether being a grandmother affected the experience of being a lesbian, six said "no," five said "a little," and three said "a fair amount" or "very much." Mostly, the impact, where it was noted, was positive. Two mentioned that being grandmothers marked them as belonging to a certain generation of older lesbians: those who had grown up in very different times than younger lesbians. Donna comments, with some humour,

It just puts one into a different age bracket with being single, makes it harder to meet others of that generation as mostly they were

"closeted" and as one doesn't go around with the red "L" on their forehead, the gay radar isn't always working ... LOL!

Some mentioned shared pleasure in knowing other lesbians. Nancy started a monthly group for lesbian grandmothers:

We meet for dinner every other month and spend lots of time sharing stories and pictures of our grandchildren. I don't think such a group would be quite as significant if I were still in the straight world. Being a grandmother adds another dimension to my experience as a lesbian and another point of contact with other dykes.

All thought that having a grandmother was a positive influence in a child's life, and ten believed that having a lesbian grandmother in particular was a special gift. In every case where the grandmothers commented on this gift, they stated their hope that having a lesbian grandmother would help the child be more open minded, appreciative of, and enriched by diversity. For example, L. wrote,

C. is being raised by a very open-minded woman and having a lesbian grandmother will open that door sooner. It will be easier for her to learn about homosexuality and how natural it is without having to face the barrage of homophobia before she is old enough to make her own decisions.

When asked whether having a lesbian grandmother was a burden to grandchildren, ten said "no," three said "maybe" and only one said "yes." All of the four who thought the grandchildren might have difficulty also believed that the difficulties would resolve into benefits as the child got older.

One woman reported conflict between her identities as lesbian and grandmother that stemmed not

from the reactions of adult children, but from the reaction that she perceived from the queer community. L. took her granddaughter to a Gay Pride parade, but felt marginalized, "pushed to the side," and concerned about the child's exposure to casual nudity. She expressed some dismay at the realization that the queer community was not completely supportive and embracing of children.

Happiness Stories

I asked participants to "please tell me a true story about being a lesbian grandparent." Twelve wrote stories that conveyed happiness with their lives and with their identities as lesbians and/or grandmothers. Three of these twelve also wrote about hardship and pain, but pride and happiness were the dominant themes.

The overwhelming tones of happiness and pride were somewhat unexpected, given the hardships that had been faced by this generation of lesbian mothers. For example, Nancy, who earlier wrote about the difficult healing work that her family had done, states,

Last Wednesday our Rainbow Breakfast Club was meeting as we have every week for the past four years. I looked up to see Zachary charging into the restaurant. He was followed by his Mum and Dad and little sister Alex who was in her baby seat. When Zack saw me his face just lit up. It was his second birthday and they were out celebrating and happened to pick the same restaurant. All the wimmin in our group were so responsive talking to Zack and playing with Alex so her Mum could eat her breakfast. I've found lesbian wimmin to be warm, affectionate friends and sharing the two new little people in my life with them made for a wonderful day.

And R., who wrote in heartfelt

tones of the rift between her and her son, added proudly as a footnote,

I thought you might be interested to know that there is a great age difference between my partner and me. I am 73 and N. is 55. Most people said it would never work but here we are 12 years later and very much in love.

was to risk not only custody, but also the respect and love of their children and families. Teenage culture of this era was rife with heterosexism and homophobia.

In addition, the most visible lesbian communities of these years were highly identified with feminism and with separatism. While some of these women would have resonated with the goals of femi-

take for granted that children would still love them, or that children who broke off from them would return. Indeed, a few children still have not returned. But the women were willing to gamble what probably meant the most to them—their children's love and their place as mother in the family—in order to claim a lesbian identity or live with a woman lover.

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Conclusions

Lesbian grandmothers are a unique cohort, having spanned three distinct historical periods in their lives. Early in their lives, if they knew about lesbianism at all, these women would almost certainly have been taught that it was something shameful, unhealthy, and/or dangerous. R. states,

When I first became aware that I was a lesbian it was still a criminal offence and a mental disorder so coming out was out of the question for me. I had a few lesbian experiences as a teenager but, because it was such a taboo, I retreated into the closet and stayed there for most of my life.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when most of these women were raising children, lesbianism had become more widely known and was no longer thought of in terms of disease or criminal behaviour. However, it was widely stigmatized as immoral or deviant, and it definitely was seen as not compatible with motherhood. These women would have almost certainly assumed during their childrearing years that to come out as a lesbian

nism, they may also have perceived separatism to be at odds with their family and child-centred values. Coming out with children in tow meant the very real possibility of being marginalized among mothers (as lesbians) and among lesbians (as mothers).

These women understand their delay in coming out as a rational, if tragic, consequence of the times. There simply did not appear to be a way to integrate their identities as mothers and as lesbians prior to their children growing up and/or the times changing to accommodate their families. The degree to which this is true illustrates the interactive nature of coming out: Not only do lesbians need to have inner concepts and language to name their experience; they also need to live in a context where that language can be heard, accepted, and validated (Monitini). Without relationships to validate their lesbian identities, they could be mothers but not lesbian mothers.

It is remarkable that these women did come out to teenaged and adult children; some as early as the mid-1970s. Upon entering middle age, few had experienced either having women as lovers or being part of a lesbian community. They did not

Each of these women has, in varying degrees, won the gamble. The successful claiming of the grandmother role now seems to affirm to them the “rightness” of their life's journey, and their ability to be more complete within themselves than they at one time saw possible. They wrote of feeling “complete,” “whole,” “proud” and “happy,” of “healing wounds,” and of hope for a future shaped by children who would be more inclusive and kind than those of the past. Being close to grandchildren is validating; it reaffirms the full circle of belonging to family, without deception or compromise. As Nancy states,

Most of us came of age during a time when being a lesbian was considered sick, perverted, and quite dangerous. Even though some women (young and old) still choose to be closeted, my age-group and those older have had some incredible journeys which are still evolving. I feel so fortunate to have had children and now grandchildren and fortunate, also to have taken the big step to recognize and honour who I am.

The era of these women as grandmothers is not just post-Stonewall,

it is also post-Matthew Shepard.³ There has been a recent cultural shift toward integration and positive valuing of diversity within the mainstream of Canadian society, and these women see their families as being at the forefront of this. The healing that they speak of is not only personal, it is cultural. They look to the future positively. Deanna writes,

Last summer, I was visiting my older grandchildren. We went to an amusement park and when we had finally worked our way to the front of a line for tickets, my 16-year-old granddaughter for the third time that day (I ignored the first two times!) made a remark about somebody or something being "Sooo Gay!" Before I could stop myself, I took her by the shoulders, turned her around and in front of about 30 people, told her that her remark was offensive and that when she makes fun of gay people, she's making fun of her gay grandmother who loves her very much. She tried to tell me it's just a meaningless expression. I told her that it is obviously not any more meaningless than any other name-calling. It's being used as a derogatory term and I did not want to ever hear her say that again! She had tears in her eyes and mumbled, "I'm sorry." Then Colin, who is a six-foot-three bean-pole kind of kid, leaned over and wrapped his arms around me and said "I'm sorry, Grandma" in front of all those people! We went on to play mini golf and I can only hope that at least one of those people in the line, was affected by my words and therefore, treat the gay community better.

The times are changing for lesbians and their families.

Not all of the women received unequivocal support for their integrated lesbian grandmother identities. Two women were grieved by full or partial estrangement from

sons, who also separated them from some grandchildren. A third was grieved by her sense that her queer community did not welcome her granddaughter. These were difficult stories, and they illustrated clearly what is at stake for these women. Failure of either families or lesbian communities to validate and support the complex identity of lesbian grandmother makes it difficult for them to feel wholeness and belonging in the world.

While not all of the GLBT community feels so positively about assimilation into mainstream society, these women see the coming together of GLBT and straight communities as essential to their own integrity and to the health of their families. Within a world that accepts lesbian families, that honours and validates all of their relationships, they can feel at home as lesbian mothers and grandmothers.

Wholeness within ourselves depends upon the ability of our families, and our communities, to accept our complex and intersecting identities. The exciting thing is that for most of these women, acceptance was happening, and with it they are experiencing an exhilarating sense of possibility for themselves, their families and their world.

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I refer to these women as "step-grandmothers" for clarity's sake. This does not imply that these women are in any way less invested or involved as grandmothers than the biological grandmothers are. They do, how-

ever, form distinct groups in terms of different life experiences, as will become evident.

²LOL is email shorthand for "laugh out loud."

³A young gay college student killed in a brutal hate crime in Laramie Wyoming in 1998. Shepard's murder, along with subsequent trials, demonstrations and numerous memorials, captured media attention and helped to spur a movement against what had been acceptable prejudice against gay and lesbian people across North America at the turn of the new century.

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