

Lesbian Parenting

Grounding Our Theory

by Rachel Epstein

Cet article parle de l'importance de la documentation du vécu des lesbiennes qui sont mères pour développer des

Lesbian mothers have different racial, class, and historical experiences, they attribute meaning to motherhood in different ways, and set different priorities in the definition of their families.

théories familiales sensibles et adaptées à leurs besoins.

Last week I attended a feminist conference on "The Family." Discussion focussed on contested definitions of family posed in the context of neo-conservative upholding of "family values." At the break some of us long-time feminists were musing about the feminist analysis of the nuclear family prevalent in the '70s and '80s and about our attempts back then to dismantle or challenge that model by rearranging our personal lives: we lived communally, took responsibility for each other's children, were supportive and/or personally committed to non-monogamy. Why aren't we doing these things now, we asked. The answer to this question is, of course, multi-faceted and complex and involves political and economic factors as well as analysis of the difficulties and contradictions of living one's life against the dominant grain.

Critiques of the family have also been significantly changed due to critical response from Black women who argued that the white, middle class feminist critique of the family overlooked the experience of many women for whom the family has and can be a site of political and cultural

resistance and personal support. From this perspective, "smashing the nuclear family" could be lethal to survival.

In a similar vein I would argue that our analysis of lesbian families needs to consider diversity in lesbian experience. Lesbian mothers have different racial, class, and historical experiences, they attribute meaning to motherhood in different ways, and set

different priorities in the organization and definition of their families. In this article I focus particularly on lesbian couples who have become parents as "out" lesbians, and on the negotiation that often goes on regarding the roles of biological and non-biological parent. I recognize, of course, that lesbian mothers have always existed and have created widely diverse family structures.

Motherhood in this society is both a powerful social institution and a highly personal experience. Discussion of lesbian mothering needs to recognize and allow for emotional, social, and political complexity. Perhaps another piece of the answer as to why our analysis and practices regarding the family have changed is that, within a limited and culturally specific framework, we did not take seriously enough or understand deeply enough the personal and emotional challenges we were posing to ourselves and our friends and families. How do you deal with or support someone else to deal with the jealousy born of non-monogamy? What is it like for kids to be put to bed each night by someone different as part of a chore roster? What needs to be in place in order to make a realistic long-term living commitment to someone who is your friend but not your lover?

Now, in the 1990s, I am a lesbian parent. I gave birth almost four years ago to a daughter who I am co-parenting with my partner of nine years. As well, since the time I was pregnant I have been doing research on lesbian parenting, trying to understand the significance of the challenge lesbian parenting poses to conventional notions of the nuclear family and to the institution of motherhood.¹

It is clear to me that lesbian families are on the edge of a larger challenge to the hegemonic concept of "family." Lesbian mothers² engage in a struggle for control of their reproductive powers by developing alternative methods of conception, they parent outside of dependent economic, social, and/or sexual relations with men, they parent children with whom they have no biological relationship, there is no paternal genealogy or property transfer, no carrying on of the male name. And because dominant culture sees lesbians as essentially sexual beings, lesbian mothers contradict the whore/madonna dichotomy. They are sexual beings *and* mothers. As Laura Benkov says:

... they challenge that model at its core, raising fundamental questions about the relation between gender and parenting, the significance of biological *versus* social connections, and the role of the state in family life.

However, lesbians grow up in a culture that simultaneously idealizes and devalues motherhood as the ultimately fulfilling and natural role for women. They are not immune to the culture of "compulsory motherhood."³ As Nancy Polikoff so clearly puts it:

We were girls before we were aware lesbians, and we were raised by families that expected

us to become mothers. We read the same books and saw the same movies as our heterosexual sisters. And today we live in the same world, one which purports to value motherhood above anything else a woman can do.... Motherhood is an institution. It functions as an integral part of patriarchal society to maintain and promote patriarchy. Our lesbianism does not negate or transform the institution of motherhood. Motherhood, like marriage, is too loaded with this patriarchal history and function to be an entirely different phenomenon just because lesbians are doing it. (49, 54)

Ellen Lewin elaborates this point further when she describes the contradictory nature of lesbian mothering, lesbian mothers as both "inside" and "outside" the institution of motherhood, as both resisting and accommodating it:

From this perspective, we might interpret lesbians' decisions to become mothers as transgressive on two counts. First, lesbians are choosing to be mothers without accepting the patriarchal conventions of marriage. Second, their choice implies a refusal to be excluded from the intrinsic benefits of motherhood, a demand that lesbians are entitled to the same personal rewards as heterosexual women and, further, that they are entitled to be counted as women on the same basis.

But, at the same time that lesbian claims to legitimacy require the overthrow of longstanding constraints on who may be a mother, they also may be seen to be grounded in an acceptance of the very boundaries they seek to breach. As I

have shown, lesbian mothers validate and intensify the longstanding division of women into mothers and nonmothers that has been one of the sources of their exclusion from the category of "woman." (117)

Lesbian parents live in constant negotiation with the "inside/outside" nature of lesbian parenting and contend daily with both the strength of the ideological practices surrounding the institution of motherhood and with individual and systemic homophobia and heterosexism. In this context I want to examine, by way of two case studies, some of the additional emotional, social, and political factors involved in the decisions lesbian parents make regarding the defining and shaping of the nonbiological parent's role. I believe some of these factors to be: the meanings each woman gives to biological relationships and notions of motherhood; each woman's desire or lack of desire to be pregnant and/or to parent; financial constraints and labour force issues; the relationship to a sperm donor or father; the implications of the nonbiological parent's insecure

logical relationship, without the benefits (with few exceptions) of legal or social recognition.⁴ She and her partner are forging new ground as they figure out how to name themselves (two moms? a mom and a co-parent? a mom and an ima? no moms, just parents?...) and how to live their parenting roles (who does what? who feeds? who makes decisions? who disciplines? who nurtures?) The decisions women make regarding these things are different and, I would argue, the result of living within existing definitions and cultural norms at the same time as confronting and challenging them.

The examples below come from a series of interviews conducted with nonbiological mothers in 1994. My interest in this research was motivated by a desire to understand more deeply the experience of the nonbiological parent, but also, on a personal level, from having witnessed my partner being denied access to a 2 1/2 year old boy whom she had parented since birth (as his nonbiological mother). Watching her go through this experience (which has been resolved as well as could be expected) reinforced for me the cou-

Lesbian parents contend daily with both the strength of the ideological practices surrounding the institution of motherhood and with individual and systemic homophobia and heterosexism.

legal status; and each woman's personal history, personality, and parenting style.

I focus on the role of the nonbiological lesbian parent because it is her existence and experience that particularly challenges traditional concepts of "parent," "mother," and "family"; she is parenting a child or children with whom she has no bio-

rageous act it is to commit oneself financially, practically and, above all, emotionally to a child with whom one has such insecure legal status. I was impressed and inspired also by my partner's willingness to put herself for the second time in the role of nonbiological parent and by the generosity of spirit which allowed her to stand by while I, for the first years of

our daughter's life, in many ways enacted the role of primary parent (at home for seven months, working part-time, breastfeeding for over three years, etc.) Although not described in as much detail, our own story is as strongly influenced by a multiplicity of factors as the "case studies" below. In the following descriptions all names and identifying information have been changed.

Anna and Sonia

Anna and Sonia were 45 and 38 respectively, when Sonia gave birth to their daughter Katya. Both women are long-time feminist activists and hold strong beliefs about the ideological and potentially oppressive nature of motherhood. Both women had also come into the relationship with an enormous desire to be pregnant and give birth to a child. Each was pursuing her own avenues towards pregnancy; Anna through a sperm bank, Sonia with a man she knew who was expected to have some involvement with the child. Shortly after they got involved, Anna got pregnant and miscarried for the fourth time in three years. Shortly after, Sonia got pregnant, miscarried, and then got pregnant again. By this time Anna was in the process of giving up her attempts to get pregnant. For Anna the time of Sonia's pregnancy was unbearable. She was grieving her own infertility, and was angry and resentful about Sonia's ability to bear a child. She had also recently left a long relationship in which she was a stepmother to her partner's children. She had found this arrangement "wildly unsatisfying" and her status as parent/not parent, extremely frustrating. She was upset about Sonia's choice to have a known and involved father on the scene, because she felt this made it that much more difficult for her to be a "real" parent and eliminated possibilities of her gaining some legal status in relation to her daughter.

Both women were determined to equalize their parenting roles with Katya, and to challenge dominant

ideas about "mother" as primary parent. They decided not to refer to either of themselves as "Mommy" and to consider themselves two parents. When the staff at their daughter's daycare started referring to them both as "Mommy," they went along with it because they felt it was positive that *both* women were being referred to in this way. The benefits of this recognition outweighed their original desires. Now Katya calls them both by their first names or Mommy, interchangeably.

Both women were home with Katya until she went to daycare at six months. Sonia nursed her for four months, but stopped sooner than she might have in an attempt to equalize the relationships. Although Anna has felt competitive at times with Sonia for time with Katya, for the most part Katya does not indicate a clear preference for one parent over the other, and they share responsibility for feeding, bedtime, nighttime, and caring for her when she is sick. Anna feels that they demonstrated very clearly from the beginning that they were not going to support the "mother as primary parent" model, and that their balanced division of labour and the fact that the world Katya inhabits has so far supported them, has meant that they have been able to carry this out. However, she still feels insecure as Katya's parent because of her lack of legal status, and is considering adopting a second child as a way to balance things out.

Lynn and Rona

Lynn, another nonbiological parent, holds a very different view about the role of "mother." She and her partner Rona are the parents of an eighteen-month-old son, Robbie. Lynn had never really envisioned herself as a parent and certainly had no desire to be pregnant or to breastfeed. Rona, on the other hand, came into the relationship wanting to be a parent. The strength of Rona's desire, combined with Lynn's sense that it would be an adventure and would be "breaking new ground,"

eventually led Lynn to begin the process of researching alternative methods of conception. She located a clinic that agreed to alternatively inseminate Rona with sperm from an anonymous donor and she became pregnant after five months.

Lynn is very committed now to her role as co-parent, but has strong feelings about *not* wanting to redefine "Mom." To her "Mom" denotes a special and unique relationship, one that should be nurtured and not tampered with. Robbie has a nickname for her which he uses to address her. Lynn also feels strongly that one parent should stay home with a child for the first four or five years of her/his life. Their decisions as to who should stay home were based on financial and career considerations. Shortly after Robbie's birth a job opportunity came up for Rona and Lynn became the at-home parent, a situation she describes as ideal in terms of building her relationship with Robbie. Rona nursed Robbie for six or seven months, and Robbie still gravitates towards Rona for comfort although this varies depending on who has been spending more time with him. Lynn feels that Robbie's relationship with Rona is primary, but she expects and feels comfortable with this and is confident in her own strong parenting bonds with Robbie. She attributes her security as a parent to her own sense of self-worth, the solidness of her relationship with her partner, and the fact that she and her partner are "older" (41 and 40). Although she is aware of and positive about the ways that lesbian families are challenging cultural norms, and even though she has been the at-home parent for much of her son's life, she is content with her role as co-parent. She would like, however, to be able to officially adopt Robbie and worries about having her parental rights legally denied should anything happen to Rona.

Beliefs about the meaning and significance of biological relationships can have enormous influence on decisions regarding parenting roles. Even though they may view mothering as primarily a social not a biological

cal role, many women believe that biological ties are unique and the biological relationship between a mother and a child is qualitatively distinct. Some women hold this view before they become mothers, others only develop it after their children are born, especially during breastfeeding (Benkov 1994).

Clearly, for each of the couples described above, beliefs about biological relationships had a strong impact on the structure of their parenting relationships. Anna and Sonia do not accept the inevitability of biological mother as primary parent and have organized their lives and parenting relationships to equalize the time and intensity of their involvement with their daughter. Lynn and Rona, on the other hand, accept the notion of biological mother as special and unique, and have built this into their family structure.

Other factors also contribute to the parenting relationships these women have developed. Lynn had never desired to be pregnant and, though she took on the role with gusto, had never really conceived of herself as a parent. Anna, conversely, had come into her relationship with a personal history both of "unsatisfying" step-parenting and of her own miscarriages, and had a deep longing both to be pregnant and to be recognized as a legitimate parent. Her insecure status as "parent" was intensified by the existence of a known father, something which Lynn did not have to contend with and which probably added to her own feelings of security in her role. Anna and Sonia had the financial means to arrange a time of shared early parenting, whereas Lynn and Rona made decisions about who was to stay home based more on who could get work. As it turned out Lynn was the primary caregiver for much of their son's early years and this contributed also to her sense of having solidly bonded with him.

Both Anna and Lynn, despite their solid and consistent relationships with their children, continue to feel the insecurity borne of their lack of legal

status. Although it does not seem true for them, sometimes this lack of legal recognition can impede a nonbiological parent's ability to bond with her children. Sally Crawford recognizes this concern:

In any family formation, the co-parent's bonding process can be impeded by the fact of her nonlegal status. She is often painfully aware that if she and the mother part, she faces a potential double loss because she has no ultimate power over her relationship with the children. This reality can highlight emotional risks that affect her process of commitment and attachment. (206)

Related to this issue is the possibility that the nonbiological parent may internalize societal delegitimization of her role, making it difficult for her to think of herself as a "real" mother. Phyllis Burke articulates this experience:

"Jesse knew who I was, Cheryl (birth mother) knew who I was, even my parents knew. Yet the best I could do was refer to myself as his 'other' mother, sort of like a spare." (34)

These issues of legitimacy, of who is the "real" mom, change as children get older and relationships become more solidly established. Additional children also change dynamics. But the ways lesbian parents construct, define, and live within their families continue to be influenced by complex and intersecting factors.

So why go into all this? Because I am afraid, as with communal living and non-monogamy, that by moving too swiftly from political analysis to a blueprint for lesbian family life, we will set ourselves up for failure, leave a lot of lesbian mothers out of the picture, and lose an opportunity to creatively develop new family structures based on a deeper understanding of our needs and desires, both political and personal.

I was surprised to read recently in a newly-published lesbian parenting anthology Jane Bernstein and Laura Stephenson describing what they called the "Heather tyranny." They are referring to Leslea Newman's children's book, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, a book I have enormously appreciated being able to read to my daughter as it is one of the few that closely reflects her own experience. To these women, the book

reflects an orthodoxy in the way gay people are supposed to parent and underscores the fact that even gay-positive literature reinforces the ingrained notion of "mommy" and "daddy," leaving unchallenged the assumption that a parent must be one or the other.... It is always assumed that if a child has two female parents, they must both be "mommies." (11)

Interesting, I thought, and felt pushed to imagine other possibilities, other ways of naming and living our parenting arrangements. I agree with Karen Williams, another author in the same anthology, when she says:

Counter-accounts of lesbian mothering often present fairy tale versions of our lives in which we are all happy individuals, partners and family members; or they present an analysis which demands that we "evacuate motherhood" altogether. These accounts, I believe, have come to analysis too quickly—and as a result, are based primarily on political agendas rather than reflection about the daily life experiences of lesbians caring for children and children living with lesbians. (98-99)

The answer is not to unthinkingly accept everything we see or hear about lesbian mothering, to stop developing analysis or challenging ourselves and each other. But our analysis will bear more fruit if it is based on reflection of our lived experience.

We need to become familiar with the daily ways lesbian mothers are living their lives, and with the ways that class, race, age, ability, and personal and political history intersect with and influence the experience of lesbian mothers, if we want to more consciously create integrated, holistic, alternative visions of motherhood.

Rachel Epstein is a graduate student in sociology at York University in Toronto.

¹A term first used, as far as I know, by Adrienne Rich in her 1977 book, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam).

²I use the terms "lesbian mother" and "lesbian parent" interchangeably. Language is a powerful force in naming, defining, and resisting cultural norms. Existing conventions in the dominant culture do not adequately reflect lesbian and gay relationships, and underlying different choices regarding language are assumptions about how we define our families. Issues of naming are particularly significant for the nonbiological parent, as she is the parent who defies traditional categories and is more vulnerable to being delegitimized by language. Some nonbiological parents are absolutely clear that their identity is as a mother; others consider themselves parents but not mothers. Some biological mothers prefer to think of themselves as parents and not mothers. For the purposes of this article I used whatever rolled off the computer at the time I was writing, and my intention was not to make any particular link between language and biology.

³A term also first used by Rich.

⁴Although lesbian nonbiological parents have for the most part been denied legal status by the courts in both Canada and the United States, there are attempts being made by individuals to achieve some sort of legal recognition. If a biological mother does not contest a custody suit by the nonbiological parent, it is possible for the couple to be granted joint custody. Second parent adoptions have also been granted to sev-

eral lesbian nonbiological parents in Ontario. For a more detailed discussion of North American legal issues and precedents see the section on "Lesbian Parents and the Law" in Arnup, 1995.

References

- Arnup, K. *Lesbian Parenting: Living with Pride and Prejudice*. Charlottetown: gynergy books, 1995.
- Benkov, L. *Reinventing the Family: The Emerging Story of Lesbian and Gay Parents*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1994.
- Bernstein, J. and L. Stephenson. "Dykes, Donors and Dry Ice: Alternative Insemination." *Lesbian Parenting: Living with Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. K. Arnup. Charlottetown: gynergy books, 1995.
- Burke, P. *Family Values: Two Moms and Their Son*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Crawford, S. "Lesbian families:

- Psychosocial Stress and the Family-Building Process." *Lesbian Psychologies*. Ed. Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Lewin, E. "On the Outside Looking In: The Politics of Lesbian Motherhood." *Conceiving the New World Order*. Eds. F. Ginsburg and R. Rapp. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Newman, Leslea. *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1989.
- Polikoff, N. "Lesbians Choosing Children: The Personal is Political." *Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology*. Eds. S. Pollack and J. Vaughn. New York: Firebrand, 1987.
- Rich, A. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Bantam, 1977.
- Williams, Karen. "A Good Mother." *Lesbian Parenting: Living with Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. K. Arnup. Charlottetown: gynergy books, 1995.

RACHEL ZOLF

trompe l'o(r)eil(le)

how we swell with speech, your ululant tongue
burrowing furious through skinbag to raw,
my spiral mouth wound round leakages;
the ripeness is all.

how the black ink bits slip and slide;
how the ululant turns pustule;
how the w(ou)nd gapes, weeping

Rachel Zolf's poetry appears earlier in this volume.