

**THE ONGOING “COMING OUT” PROCESS
OF LESBIAN PARENTS**

by
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ABSTRACT

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Given the "invisible nature" (O'Connell, 1999) of lesbian-headed families, it is difficult to estimate their prevalence. O'Connell cited data estimating that there are between 1.3 and 3.3 million lesbian-headed families in the United States. These estimates are over ten years old, and with the increasing number of lesbians using artificial insemination as a means to procreate, the above estimate is likely to be much larger today. In order for lesbian-headed families to prosper, we need to understand their structure, strengths and needs in today's sometimes volatile and fearful, and at other times surprisingly gentle and accepting, society. The purpose of the present study is to explore and describe one fluid and constant aspect of lesbian-headed families, the process of "coming out."

Coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) is generally thought of as a fluid process within which one is always making decisions regarding whether s/he will communicate to those around them that s/he is LGBT. For many lesbians, perceptions of relative safety within a particular situation often influence whether they choose to come out (Spaulding, 1999). Within dual parent lesbian-headed families, coming out may not be a choice. There are several environments in which lesbian couples need to be out in order to adequately care for their child and participate in her or his life (e.g., at daycare or school, within medical environments, and perhaps the neighborhood park and grocery store). How does the coming out process change for women who are in lesbian relationships after they have a child? Does this process strengthen their identity as lesbians, as a couple, and/or as a family? Do parents feel concerned for their own safety and/or that of their child(ren)? If so, how do they cope with these concerns? These are areas that the current study explored through audiotaped interviews with three dual parent lesbian couples. It is anticipated that the results will add to the literature on lesbian-headed families as it relates to understanding the coming out process and its relationship to family strength and identity.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of the current study is to explore the coming out process of lesbian-headed families. Developing one's identity as a lesbian is seen by many as an important maturational process. Having a family adds to, and even complicates this process, and descriptive literature is needed to capture some of what this process means to those who are living in lesbian-headed families, and/or are thinking about beginning their own. In addition, for those who are extended family members of someone who is part of a lesbian-headed family, research such as this can serve to educate them in their own process of understanding and learning to accept their loved one. For society at large, we need to understand and learn to value differences if we are to become a group of people who can truly co-exist.

We live in a society that continues to experience hate crimes against many groups of people, including those who are lesbian. Fear of differentness motivates some people to harm others. How do lesbian-headed families cope, and even thrive, in a world that continues to operate in a manner that threatens their lives in many ways? We live in a high-tech, high-stress world, apart from the stress that exists when one is struggling to come to terms with an identity that is unacceptable to many around them, or trying to maintain the integrity of a family that happens to be parented by lesbians. Much of the research that has been conducted on LGBT individuals continues to use large samples, questionnaires and quantitative methods. We need research that advances a greater understanding of various aspects of lesbian-headed families in order for each of us, straight or gay, to make greater sense of the world around us. In order to sort out some of the complexities and individual differences associated with being a lesbian parent, the current study will explore in-depth the coming out stories of three families, one with a young child (eighteen months), one with a preschool age child, and one family who has at least one child who is school-age. This study is descriptive and exploratory in nature. The intent is to give the reader something to think about through the stories of those who are currently living their lives as lesbian parents.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary questions in the present study include the following: What are the coming out experiences of lesbians? How does becoming a parent alter these experiences? How does this process develop as the children grow? What complexities are inherent to the coming out process? What are these families' strengths? What are these families' challenges? How does having a child change and contribute to the lives of these families as they face issues of coming out?

DEFINITIONS

The following are definitions of terms that are important to understand and think about prior to reading the current study. These are terms that are generally relegated to literature that is focused on homosexual populations. Those who read this literature will be familiar with these terms. For others many of these terms will be somewhat familiar, while for some this may be new information.

LGBT. This acronym is used when referring to a group of people who identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender.

Lesbian. This term refers to women whose primary partners are, and whose primary emotional and sexual affection is towards, other women.

Coming Out. This concept is complex, and the definition can focus on several different aspects of the coming out process. For example, from a perceptual and behavioral perspective, coming out refers to the process of identifying oneself as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, which includes coming out to oneself and to others. In looking at the socialization of oneself as LGBT, Rust (1996) states:

Coming out means not only adopting a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity but also losing familiar social and cultural connections, finding a new community of people with similar sexual identities, and becoming resocialized to the norms, values, and traditions of that community. (p. 88)

This perspective begins to identify some of the struggles and challenges an LGBT person faces in establishing their identity. A therapeutic and strength-based perspective is provided by Laird (1994), a feminist who refers to coming out as the reconstruction of a lesbian self-story or couple narrative. This perspective puts a positive twist on what for many is a difficult and sometimes extremely painful process. Additionally, Laird’s perspective can give individuals who are beginning the coming out process a language for, and ownership of, their lives and stories.

Sexual Orientation. Sexual orientation refers to the emotional and sexual attraction one feels toward another human being which is limited to either heterosexual or LGB (the term transgender relates to one’s gender rather than orientation and therefore is not included in this definition). One might identify as straight or LGB, but may not be in a relationship that is congruent with that orientation. Hence, one’s sexual orientation is their true identity, regardless of who one is in a relationship with.

Lesbian-Headed Family. These are families in which the parents are lesbian identified.

Oppression. An oppressive behavior is one where an excessive use of power over another is demonstrated. The effect of oppression is that the recipient feels weighed down, or burdened, in mind and body.

Homophobia. Homophobia includes negative feelings, attitudes, behaviors, or actions toward those who are, or who are perceived to be, bisexuals, gay men, lesbians, or transgendered people (“biphobia” and “transphobia” are terms used when speaking specifically about bisexual and transgendered

populations). A related concept, heterosexism, refers to behaviors and actions which derive from a belief in the superiority of heterosexual orientation (GLC Action Council [GLCAC], 1993).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Lesbian family. This is a term that is becoming more familiar to many in our society. It was not long ago that it seemed to be a contradiction in terms. There was a time when a woman might identify as lesbian, or she might have a family, but surely the two did not co-exist. This perception is no longer as widely held as it once was. Prior to advances in reproductive technologies lesbian families were most often the result of a heterosexual union coming to an end, and the woman head of household coming out as lesbian. A subsequent partnership with another woman resulted in a lesbian-headed step-family. Through increasing utilization of alternative means of insemination, lesbian-headed families have proliferated through the 1990's. Some states include LGBT persons in their anti-discrimination laws, offering some protection against discrimination and loss of custody, based solely on sexual orientation. This has provided great comfort to many, but certainly not absolute protection from societal oppression and mistreatment of parents, families and children. A growing body of literature exists on the well-being of children in lesbian-headed families, comparing them to children in heterosexual families and finding that children in both family types are doing equally well socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Gottman, 1990). Additionally, researchers are beginning to explore the functioning and well being of lesbian-headed families in their own right, without comparing them to heterosexual families. How do these families function, what are their strengths, and what are their challenges?

The current paper will respond to these questions by exploring the coming out process of three dual parent lesbian-headed families with children, one with a young child (eighteen months), one with two preschool aged children, and one family with a child who is school-age. The generalizability of these women's stories is limited given the small and relatively homogeneous sample size. However, sharing stories is one of the best ways to get to know, and begin to understand, another human being, other populations, and perhaps a little more about oneself in the process. In the spirit of personal growth and understanding, the families in this study are sharing with the reader a little of themselves so as to add to a small but growing body of literature regarding the function and well being of lesbian-headed families. A review of the literature on coming out for individuals and families will be followed by a description of research design, participant stories, results, discussion, and conclusions.

Coming out is a term largely used by members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities to refer to the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation either to oneself or others. The one variable that remains constant for all members of the LGBT community is that coming out is an ongoing process, not a lone event (Healy, 1999). For those who are part of the lesbian community specifically, choices need to be made in every sector of their lives about whether, when, and

with whom to come out. In essence, being out is individual and situation specific. A woman may choose to be out in her community but not at work, and only with select members of her family of origin. Some women do not consider themselves to be out unless they are out in every aspect of their lives. One can see how being out is really a matter of individual interpretation. For lesbians who choose to have children, the challenges regarding whom to come out to and when become more complicated in the sense that new situations and contexts may trigger old issues, and the welfare of another human being needs to be taken into consideration when thinking about coming out as a parent who is lesbian.

The average age at which women tend to come out as lesbians varies, and appears to be influenced by environmental factors, including societal awareness of LGBT issues, social and legal policies, and so forth. Twenty years ago there were no legal protections for people who identified as LGBT in the areas of housing and employment (Morris, 1997). This has certainly changed, and the last decade has spawned numerous laws and policies that protect the rights of LGBT individuals. In addition, our language for, general understanding of, and literature attending to issues related to being LGBT have multiplied over the last decade. While there continue to be circumstances in which an adolescent would not dare come out to others as LGBT, adolescents do have sufficient language and information to begin coming out to themselves and perhaps a few select others. Literature published in the 1990's indicates that, on average, lesbians begin to identify that they have emotional/affectional feelings for other females between the ages of 14-16, and experience their first same-gender sexual experience between the ages of 20-22 (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). Other research, using samples of women who ranged in age from their early twenties to late forties, found that, on average, research subjects identified as lesbian by their mid-twenties (Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest, Ketzenberger, 1996; Kahn, 1991).

Several researchers have taken a developmental approach to describing the coming out process. One of the more widely used and analyzed approaches is that developed by Vivienne Cass (1979) through her clinical work with LGBT clients. Through Cass's six stage model, individuals move through a series of maturational stages in which they struggle to connect thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a self-defining way (i.e., identifying oneself as LGBT), through a process wherein internal maturation becomes congruent with how individuals portray themselves to others. In the first stage, Identity Confusion, the individual is generally struggling internally with thoughts and feelings about her or his LGBT orientation versus that which is considered normal by society (i.e., heterosexual). The second stage is called Identity Comparison and is one where individuals begin identifying what it means to be LGBT and how this differs from being heterosexual. Individuals in this stage often feel isolated and alienated from most of society. The third stage, Identity Tolerance is one in which the LGBT person begins to work through her or his isolation and begins to come to terms with their homosexuality. The fourth stage, Identity Acceptance, is met with ownership. The internal conflict that existed during the first three stages

regarding one's struggle between identifying as hetero- or homo-sexual is virtually resolved. In the fifth stage, Identity Pride, LGBT persons feel a combination of pride about their sexual orientation and indignation or even anger towards the heterosexist world. Political activism generally accompanies this stage. The final stage, Identity Synthesis, is one in which the individual's sexual identity becomes fully integrated as one aspect of themselves. According to Cass, individuals in this stage have generally moved beyond the anger and political activism that accompanied stage five.

While Cass's model, and other developmental stage models, have been effective in offering a language to describe important components of the coming out process, they have also been criticized for their linearity and inability to attend to individual differences (Kahn, 1991; Morris, 1997). Morris claims that such a "neat and orderly progression through stages seems implausible" (p. 6). In addition, she describes how definitional aspects of each stage may serve as barriers to reaching the final stage, synthesis. For example, Morris states that women who continue to see themselves as activists will remain in stage five and never reach stage six. In addition, those who are not politically active would be unable to attain the fifth stage of maturational development. Through distribution of questionnaires (n=81 lesbians) designed to assess the utility of Cass's model, Kahn concluded that progression through the six stages developed by Cass is neither linear nor universal (i.e., there were significant individual differences). These authors and others believe that a multidimensional, exploratory, and descriptive approach to analyzing the coming out process is most appropriate at the present time.

Factors that influence a lesbian's coming out process are varied and specific to each woman's personal circumstances. In Kahn's (1991) study of 81 lesbians between the ages of 20 and 49, she found that women who held a feminist orientation were more likely than those who did not to be open about their sexual orientation, expect acceptance from others for who they are, and internalize less homophobia about being a lesbian. This researcher also explored communication dynamics between each subject and her family of origin and analyzed how one factor, intergenerational intimidation (i.e., little tolerance for differentness and differentiation), was related to being out as a lesbian and level of development according to Cass's stage model. Interestingly, when comparing women who hold feminist attitudes with those who do not, she found that a lack of intergenerational intimidation greatly enhanced feminist women's ability to be open about their sexual orientation. Additionally, Kahn found that feminists who experienced a great deal of intergenerational intimidation were at lower levels of Cass's developmental stage model than intimidated women who do not consider themselves feminists. Kahn speculated that it appears that an intimidating experience in one's family of origin may do more to hamper a woman's coming out process than an open family of origin can do to help facilitate the coming out process for women. Other factors that are described as influential in the coming out process for lesbians include: working for a lesbian organization, living in a liberal area of an urban environment, having a social

network of lesbian friends, attending a school (or living in a state) whose anti-discrimination policies include sexual orientation, and having privilege in society based on race or ethnic identity (Morris, 1997).

There are many positive aspects of coming out to others (Anderson & Mavis, 1996; Anderson & Randlet, 1994; Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 1998). In Anderson & Mavis' study on the relationship between self efficacy and "outness" amongst lesbians, they found that women who have higher levels of life satisfaction and feelings of self efficacy tend to be more out about their sexual orientation. Anderson and Randlet, using questionnaires with 155 lesbian, gay and bisexual subjects, studied the relationship between self monitoring, perceived control, and level of satisfaction with self-disclosure of sexual orientation. Results indicate that subjects who rated themselves as high self monitors (i.e., make decisions about whether to come out using environmental cues) were more satisfied with their coming out process than were low self monitors (i.e., make decisions about whether to come out based on internal cues and values, regardless of external cues). In addition, subjects who rated themselves as having more interpersonal control were also more satisfied with their coming out process. Hence, attentiveness to environmental cues, and an ability to be assertive and take charge interpersonally, may heighten one's level of satisfaction with the coming out process. Gender of subjects was not significant, meaning men and women did not score significantly differently from one another. A study comparing the quality of work experience with coming out for gay and lesbian employees found that the more open an employee was, the higher quality was their experience at work (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). Specifically, these researchers found that more open employees were more affectively committed to their employers, had higher job satisfaction, felt management was more supportive of their rights, had lower role ambiguity and role conflict, and felt less conflict between work and home lives. Jordan and Deluty (1998), through questionnaires received from 499 participants, found that women who were more open about their sexual orientation were less likely to be anxious, expressed more positive affect, and were found to have higher levels of self esteem than women who were less likely to be open about their sexual identity.

Clearly there are many reasons to come out, including the possibility to have a larger support system/network to interact with, more congruity between one's inner and outer life, and the opportunity to develop positive feelings about oneself through interactions with others. However, coming out is not always indicated, and great sensitivity and respect need to be offered to those who do not feel safe or comfortable to share their sexual orientation with others. In fact, assuming that it is always more healthy to come out than not come out can be a critical error, particularly for mental health professionals working with women who are struggling to come out in various areas of their lives (Healy, 1999). Women may choose not to come out due to fear or concerns about child custody issues, loss of job, their own physical safety, or simply because they are not ready (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). In essence, being lesbian and then

coming out to others violates social norms that in turn may result in punitive consequences to the individual and/or those whom she loves (Morris, 1997). As stated earlier, coming out is a life-long process, and a complex series of decisions (some quick, others more painstaking) are made in every new situation—or with every new person—that a lesbian comes in contact with before actually sharing that she is lesbian.

The above literature explored positive aspects of coming out for individuals, mostly lesbians. But what about lesbian couples who are parents? Are their coming out experiences likewise positive? Up to the point of becoming parents, lesbians have the freedom and ability to choose who they come out to and when. Beginning at the point a couple decides to have a child, many situations arise in which they are required to be out, regardless of their personal preferences (e.g., with medical personnel, day care providers, teachers, in the neighborhood, with the families of their child's friends, and so forth). Alternatively, as children grow, some parents may choose to not come out in certain contexts that they believe will negatively impact their child. How do these experiences affect the family? In what ways do the challenges of becoming a lesbian-headed family strengthen or weaken families?

Questions related to becoming parents are increasingly leading lesbian couples to seek out counseling services (Morningstar, 1999). Among lesbian couples, having a child is necessarily a very conscious decision (as simply getting pregnant is not an option) and one where important questions arise (e.g., Does each partner want a child? Will they adopt or conceive? If they choose to conceive, who will carry it? Will the non-legal parent adopt? How does each partner's experience in their family of origin impact this decision? How will having a child affect each partner's current coming out process at work or in other life areas?). Given the homophobic nature of society, and the relative lack of research (compared to other bodies of research literature) or examples of lesbian families to use as models, an objective third party may be able to help couples navigate through these difficult questions and concerns.

In their study utilizing mail-out questionnaires with 45 lesbian-headed families (single and dual parent), Lott-Whitehead & Tully (1999) found many strengths, including: an open climate for sexuality, a healthy respect for differences (including but not limited to sexual orientation), and an accepting nurturing environment important for emotional and physical growth. According to their responses, these families worked hard to attain and maintain their integrity. Many women chose to live in more liberal communities, and they sought out other lesbian-headed families with whom to interact and from whom to gain support. Yet, several women stated that they felt alienated from members of the lesbian community who did not have children. This finding highlights the need for lesbian families to find other like families. This is no small task given that the lesbian community by itself is small, and therefore locating other families with whom to spend time and interact can be difficult. All of the parents in this study were

cognizant of the impact that their identity had on their children, and did what they could to protect their children from negative societal messages.

Laird (1994), using a cultural lens to describe lesbian families, focused on the importance of story and ritual when working with or researching topics related to lesbian families. She stated that lesbians struggle with invisibility in part because of gender, and in part due to sexual orientation. In order for lesbians and lesbian families to be seen, and recognized by society, we need to hear and understand their stories. In turn, lesbians need to share their stories and develop rituals that enhance the well being of their families. In this sense, coming out is a two-way street. In other words, society bears as much responsibility for "seeing" its marginalized members as these members do for showing themselves, or coming out, to others.

While we are beginning to see more literature on LGBT families, important sub-populations have been overlooked. Most notably, the unique experiences of LGBT families of color and those in low socioeconomic categories have been virtually ignored. Additionally, the coming out experiences of lesbian parents is only beginning to receive research attention. Given that one of the goals of research is to educate readers about important aspects of LGBT families and their functioning, it is important to recognize that we will fail to gain a comprehensive understanding until we include all types of LGBT families in our research.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This is a qualitative, exploratory study designed to examine the coming out experiences of lesbian parents. This study is taking a phenomenological approach to the current topic; it will therefore focus on participants' subjective experience of coming out, as well as their interpretations of their experiences (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). It is of great import to this researcher that the stories and meaning of these stories be heard and understood from the participant's perspective. As such, the data will be analyzed in a manner that, to the greatest degree possible, explicates and outlines stories from the participant's perspective, and not solely what this investigator interprets the meaning of each story to be.

A methodological approach that closely parallels that which is being used in the present study is that of narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe narrative inquiry as the study of the ways humans experience the world. Narrative inquiry is a mutual process between the researcher and research participant, to the point that each is involved in telling their own story. That is, the story of the participant is told first, but that of the researcher is told as well. The narrative is a mutual creation, and once the final product is written it is expected that the participant will be allowed to review and respond to the researcher's work and have input in the final draft of the paper. This approach is quite different from what is considered a more traditional approach to research, but signifies the importance of making room for each person's voice in the process of creating the narrative. In narrative inquiry the researcher is expected to hold a host of beliefs and values about the study. The researcher's perspective must be shared in order for the participant to develop a level of trust in the researcher that allows them to share their own story as fully as possible. In the present study, prior to beginning the interview the researcher shared with the respondents a little about what motivated her to undertake the present study. Following the writing of each couple's narrative, a copy was given to each couple for review, and their input will be incorporated into the final draft.

Qualitative research has been criticized for its lack of experimental rigor. Researchers who conduct qualitative studies run the risk of being accused of not thinking through their project ahead of time and instead proceeding under the auspices that it will just "unfold" over time. Lincoln and Guba (1985), in their discussion of naturalistic inquiry, argue that utilizing naturalistic and qualitative methods does indeed require planning ahead of time. Naturalistic inquiry sees the participant as the primary research instrument, and it expects the researcher to be thoroughly familiar with the field within which they are studying. Lincoln and Guba describe ten important elements of a naturalistic inquiry design, including: 1) Determine a focus for the inquiry; 2) determine the fit of the paradigm to the focus; 3) determine the fit of the inquiry paradigm to the substantive theory selected to guide the inquiry; 4) determine where and from

whom data will be collected; 5) determine successive phases of the inquiry; 6) determine instrumentation; 7) plan data collection and recording modes; 8) plan data analysis procedures; 9) plan the logistics; and 10) plan for trustworthiness. Several of these elements are discussed in other parts of this paper. For example, item one, determining a focus for the inquiry, is described in several areas above including the abstract and purpose of the study, as well as throughout the literature review. Items four (data collection), seven (planning data collection and recording modes), eight (data analysis), and ten (planning for trustworthiness) are discussed below. The remaining items (two, three, five, six, and nine) will be addressed here.

Item two, determining the fit of the paradigm to the focus, refers to the choice between utilizing a conventional versus naturalistic inquiry approach. Given that the nature of the present study is exploratory (rather than causal), and the participants are considered to be the primary instrument or source of information, utilizing a naturalistic paradigm is most appropriate. Item three, determining the fit of the inquiry paradigm to the substantive theory, is an important step if a theory is chosen a priori, which is not the case in the present study. Given that both feminist and intergenerational theories factored heavily in much of the research cited in the foregoing literature review, it is anticipated that these theories may be utilized to highlight aspects of respondent’s narratives in the present paper. However, there are sufficient methodological differences (e.g., questionnaires versus in-person interviews and large versus small sample sizes) between research reviewed herein and the present study to warrant caution in choosing a theory to describe research results before the study was completed.

Item five, determining successive phases of the inquiry, includes three phases: orientation and overview, focused exploration, and member check. The researcher’s posture in a pure naturalistic inquiry is one of “not knowing what is not known” (p. 235). Hence, in the orientation and overview phase, the researcher is asking the respondent what it is that they should—or need to—know about the inquiry at hand. In the present study, a thorough review of the research has been conducted, and a semi-structured interview (Appendix C) was created to explore the process of coming out. As such, participants were not looked to for answers to the above question. However, the interview included an opening for participants to share whatever they needed to about their coming out process that may not have been addressed during the interview. In phase two of the current study, focused exploration, in-depth interviews were conducted to ascertain each respondent’s process of coming out, how it has changed following having a child, and how each couple’s family has been both strengthened and challenged by their experiences. The final phase, member check, refers to checking back with each of the participants for their input after a draft of the report has been written.

Item six, determining instrumentation, assumes that the primary instrument will be the respondent, but allows for the possibility that other instrumentation will be utilized. In the present study, the primary instruments were both the interview and each respondent. No other instrumentation was utilized.

Item nine, planning the logistics, encompasses five categories. In the first, logistical considerations for the project as a whole, attention is given to several areas, including: determining who will implement the study, what the schedule will be, what the budget is, who will be on an overseeing board, making arrangements for peer debriefing, and making arrangements for an external audit. In the present study, this researcher implemented the investigation; three interviews were scheduled at each family's convenience; a budget was not necessary; and both this researcher's academic advisor and her life partner (in a more informal role) served as overseer, debriefer, and external audit. The second category, logistics of field excursions prior to going into the field, refers to the process by which the researcher becomes acclimated to the field site prior to beginning the study. The site of the interviews for the present study was the participant homes, making the interviews more comfortable for the participants. The third category, logistics of field excursions while in the field, refers primarily to coordinating team efforts; this category is not applicable to the present study given this researcher worked alone. The fourth category, logistics of activities following field excursion, refers to debriefing, planning for future field trips, and planning for a member check. Plans for each of these areas were reviewed in a discussion of the first category above. The fifth category, logistics of closure and termination, refers to the role of the review committee, the member check, developing plans to redraft aspects of the report, carrying through auditing procedures, and so forth. Again, the present study was fairly simple logistically with this researcher's academic advisor and partner serving in many of these aforementioned roles.

RESEARCH POPULATION & SAMPLE

The population from which this sample could be drawn includes all two-parent lesbian-headed families that chose to create a family together, and that have at least one preschool- or school-aged child. Given the numerous differences between the process of conceiving and that of adopting a child, it was decided that this study would focus on couples who chose to conceive to create their family. Three families were chosen who have children ranging from less than two years to early grade school to offer the reader an opportunity to see if different issues present themselves at various ages and how parents cope with such challenges.

A snowball sampling method was utilized to identify the three families in this study. Snowball sampling is a method which utilizes referrals from the initial research participants until the needed sample size is met (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). Trust is an important aspect of any research study, particularly qualitative studies such as the present one where in-person interviewing is being conducted regarding a

fairly personal topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, it was determined by this researcher that a snowball sampling method would lend credibility to families that were asked to participate who otherwise might have been leary of an unknown researcher invading their privacy.

DATA COLLECTION

Candidates for this study were initially contacted by telephone to ascertain their interest in participating in the research. Qualified applicants were lesbian couples who decided to have children after becoming a couple, and who chose to conceive to do so. One family has a young child (eighteen months), a second family has at least one child who is preschool-age, and a third family has at least one child who is school-age. Interviews were scheduled with qualified candidates, at which time each completed a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) and gave informed consent (Appendix B). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Appendix C) were used to gather pertinent information relating to the research topic. Interviews were conducted in person rather than by telephone, due to the researcher's awareness of the real and perceived risks that may accompany self-disclosure for lesbian parents who are discussing a personal topic related to themselves and their family, and their need to develop a sense of trust in the researcher before discussing this topic. Interview length averaged one and a half hours.

All interviews took place in the family's home. Couples were asked where they were most comfortable to participate in the interview, and interviews were conducted at a time chosen by the family. Interviews were audiotaped using two recorders to insure each person's voice was captured clearly and to prevent having to stop the interview due to mechanical failure.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of data collected for this exploratory study was conducted following completion of the interviews. Interviews were taped and transcribed, and data was sorted according to relevant questions and subtopics. Tapes were destroyed following transcription. Written materials, forms, and notes taken during interviews were coded, and the identities of interviewees were kept strictly confidential throughout the study. Where names appear in this paper, pseudonyms have been used.

One avenue for sorting data in a manner that maximizes the possibility of understanding narratives from the respondent's perspective is that of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have modified this method to better fit naturalistic and qualitative research methods. Two components of this method include unitizing and categorizing. Unitizing refers to the process of splitting a respondent's narrative into units. Two guidelines may be used to define a unit: 1) the narrative is aimed at some understanding or some action that the inquirer needs to have or to take; and 2) the narrative must be the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself (i.e.,

interpretable without additional information). The unit may be as small as a sentence or as large as one or two paragraphs, depending on what is needed for the narrative to be defined as a unit. All units are coded differently for each respondent. Categorizing is a little more entailed than unitizing, and refers to the process of bringing units together that relate to the same content. As units begin to create categories, the researcher must devise rules that describe category properties which can subsequently be used to determine whether future units will be included in particular categories. Categories are then given a title that captures various properties. In the present study, it was found that the resulting units fit into categories generally covered by the interview questions. However, as seen below, several were collapsed as nineteen interview questions became fifteen categories for purposes of reviewing participant stories.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT STORIES

For purposes of confidentiality, each of the six participants has been given a pseudo-name and slight alterations in other demographic areas that are not seen as relevant to the theme of this paper. Each participant has read this and given feedback and final approval for her story to be shared. Each story is shared according to categories that were created during data analysis. All participants are Caucasian and middle to upper middle class socioeconomically.

Mary and Beth

Mary and Beth have been a couple for eighteen years and live in South Minneapolis. They had a commitment ceremony approximately five years after they became a couple and have a seven and a half year old daughter named Jessica. Both women are employed in professional occupations.

Participant’s coming out process before actively planning to have a child, and the advantages of coming out at this point

Prior to meeting Beth in the mid 1980’s, Mary had been married for two years, primarily dated men and had one brief relationship with a woman. Several years into their relationship Beth and Mary sought couples counseling to strengthen their relationship; they were pleased with their progress and began to plan their commitment ceremony. Prior to the ceremony, Mary had not shared with anyone in her family or at work that she is a lesbian. In fact, she made a conscious decision to not tell her family that she is a lesbian because she “knew what their belief system is...it would be terrible.”

At the time of the commitment ceremony in 1990, Mary chose to tell two close cousins about her relationship with Beth; both were, and continue to be, very supportive around issues related to her sexual orientation. She also invited a few trusted colleagues to the ceremony, which turned out to be a positive experience. However, an experience that Mary had following the ceremony was painful:

Right after our ceremony in 1990, I had shared information with somebody at work that I thought I could trust. There were a few people at work that came to our ceremony—it was not an open invitation on the wall. Afterwards I was sharing some pictures with somebody who had not attended

that I thought I could trust and I got outed at work and it was pretty devastating. And my manager, who at our ceremony supported us, had trouble dealing with the outing part. She pretty much shoved it under the carpet and said, "Let it go away."

Beth did not date in high school, but did date a young man for a couple years in college. After this relationship ended, while still in college, she began to date a woman and experienced a major epiphany:

I met this woman and thought, "Whoa, this is it, I get this now." So that was really very magical. I was in a small Catholic college and it was actually pretty horrible because people got on to it and there was a lot of talking about it. And so that was real tough coming out. It was wonderful to be with her and just her and I were great, but the people around us were not so great. I felt like I was being talked about when I walked into the cafeteria. But I got out of college and thought, "I really think I must be a lesbian," but I didn't really have any experience other than with her and we were only together for a year.

Following Beth's graduation from college, she began dating both men and women; during this time she met a woman with whom she began a five year relationship. While she was not out to her parents at this point, they knew her partner and treated her very well. She was out to a sister, brother-in-law, cousin, and her best friend, all of whom were and continue to be very supportive. Beth's experience of coming out to these important family members and friends was met with little surprise. For at least some of these people, it seemed they already knew that she is a lesbian and were simply waiting for Beth to be ready to share her story with them. Beth has fond memories of these experiences.

Both Mary and Beth talked about the advantages of coming out mostly in terms of family of origin. At the time of their ceremony Mary experienced unconditional support from a few close family members, friends, and colleagues at work. For Beth, the advantage of coming out were that she could share her life on a more complete level with members of her family. She wanted important others to know who she is.

Participant's coming out process from the time of planning to have a child to the present, and the advantages of coming out at this point

Mary came out to family members when Jessica was two years old (1994) because she could talk and say "mommy," referring to both Mary and Beth.

After Jessica was born I didn't want her to live a lie. I wrote them a letter and received a letter back which was written pretty much with what I thought would be in it. They don't understand and so of course it was Beth's fault, how could I do this to them. At first we weren't welcome there and then Jessica and I were welcome and not Beth. That's no choice for me. You make the choice and you either don't accept but see us or you don't see any of us. And that lasted about a year and a half.

The Oklahoma City bombing created a turning point. Upon seeing a newspaper photo of a skinny little girl (not unlike Jessica), Mary's mother began to soften and reprioritize her life. Mary expressed enormous relief that her family is now welcome at her parent's home. She shared that while there is a continued lack of support in terms of outward acceptance, she is grateful that they can once again spend time together.

During the process of conceiving (1991), Mary chose not to share this experience with any work colleagues. Given how some of her colleagues responded to the commitment ceremony, she feared being hurt again.

When we got pregnant I brought every single person in the department in my office and said, “This is what we did, this is how we did it, do you have any questions—let me hear them.” And it was a very positive thing. And it felt very empowering and it felt very positive. I got lots of support from work and I’m sure there were people that didn’t support me but it was a much better experience. Everybody rallied around me and even threw us a baby shower.

More recently, Mary changed jobs and felt even more comfortable sharing who she is, and who her family is. She believes that time, greater societal acceptance, and a burgeoning baby boom in the LGBT community may have assisted her in being more open about who she is in her current position.

By the time they became pregnant, Beth was already out to most people in her personal life and at work. She was out to both colleagues and supervisors about the pregnancy and received genuine support from everyone, with the exception of an eighteen year old nephew who was openly skeptical about their decision to become parents. Beth responded to his concerns by sharing with him what she considered to be the most important point—that their child will have two parents who love her.

Coming out took on a whole new meaning when having a baby. There were people in their lives that Mary and Beth felt obligated to come out to, as opposed when they were not parents and could choose to come out to whomever they wanted when they wanted. Medical personnel, day care providers, and teachers are the most prominent. For both Mary and Beth, first impressions were key. The first OBGYN that they visited questioned their desire to have a baby, and was immediately crossed off the list of possible medical providers. They found the person they were looking for on the second try, after they were pregnant. Mary stated:

So we walked into this doctor’s office and said this is who we are and what we did and we’re having a baby, and she said, “Well, hop on!” After 36 hours of labor they were wheeling me in for a c-section—she was there for Beth. She sat with her, explained everything and comforted her while I was getting prepped—she did what we needed her to do.

Beth added, “Yeah, those first responses are so important, aren’t they? Because we’re looking for openness and we need to see it in their behavior, not just in their words.”

Experiences at day care and school have proven extremely positive for Mary and Beth. They are open about who they are as a family and ask questions of personnel to ensure their daughter’s safety and well-being. They look not only for acceptance of their family, but are also interested in knowing how professionals within educational environments address difficult issues (e.g., when children publicly make homophobic comments), and what their views are on diversity. When they first began to use a daycare, Mary and Beth were pleased to discover that what daycare providers valued most was knowing that they love their child, that they pick her up on time, and that they pick her up promptly when she is sick—basically that they are good, responsible parents. Upon leaving her daycare position, one daycare provider

(whom their daughter adored) openly shared that she at first felt skeptical of a family with two moms but that they opened her eyes to alternative family structures. Mary stated, “It was really nice to hear that it changed somebody and gave them a different perspective.”

Given Jessica is still young, they have not yet had to deal with other children making homophobic comments around her or behaving in other overtly disrespectful ways. After all the planning has been done and safety measures taken, Mary stated, “You have to take a leap of faith and you have to trust...for us it’s just been great so far. I told Beth that in part we expect people to have a negative reaction and nobody is having it.”

Mary and Beth view the advantages of being out at this point in time primarily in relation to how it benefits Jessica. Mary’s perspective is related to being a role model for her daughter.

You want your child to grow up to be an honest person, to be an accepting person, and how can you do that if you’re not honest about who you are and if you don’t accept yourself? If you’re not out, you have to deal with that piece all the time. And it’s enough to deal with having a relationship of many years and raising a child. We need to be out because we don’t have time for that.

Beth added, “It feels good to be able to say to her (Jessica), ‘This is who we are. We love our family.’ Some people don’t and that’s okay. Everybody gets to make their own decisions in life but we like who we are and it feels good to be in a place to be able to say that.”

The coming out process as a couple and how this affected their identity

For Mary, coming out as a couple coincided with her identification as a lesbian. She acknowledges that prior to entering her relationship with Beth she felt attracted to other women, but never put it in terms of being a lesbian. After she and Beth were in a relationship for several years, Mary went out with a friend and found herself noticing how attractive some of the women were, at which point she expressed to her friend, “I really am a lesbian!” Thus, for Mary, being in a relationship with a woman was not immediately synonymous with using the word lesbian to define herself.

For Beth, the hardest part of coming out as a couple was telling her best friend’s parents, whom she considered to be her surrogate parents when she was young.

Her parents are real strict Catholics, and I’ve called her “mom” since I was 11 years old. And she really just has not been able to deal with the lifestyle, and the fact that we have a kid is a huge, big deal to her because she just doesn’t think it’s right. Artificial insemination is a sin in the eyes of the Church. Homosexuality is a sin in the eyes of the Church. And I think she really fears for my soul. Her husband saw it coming way off—he was not surprised, but she was just knocked out by it. And it’s been five or six years since I’ve told them. They were my second family, and I learned so much at their table that influences our life here in this house. Because my family is kind of nuts. So that’s been a tough one.

How having a child affected the coming out process

Both Beth and Mary talked about how the process of becoming and being pregnant brought coming out back to the forefront of their lives. They were solid in their relationship with each other and felt secure in being open about being pregnant with anyone they knew or spent any amount of time with.

They came out to the neighbors, all of whom they assumed knew that they were gay, though prior to becoming pregnant the topic was never specifically discussed. In recounting this experience, Beth said, “They were excited. And there are some other lesbians in the neighborhood—our best friends live behind us and the people who live directly behind us were great. So yeah, we became much more visible in the neighborhood.”

Thus far, the coming out process has resulted in Mary and Beth’s feeling accepted as a family and feeling secure about their daughter’s safety and well-being.

Limits placed on the coming out process to protect child(ren) and/or family

Neither Beth nor Mary believe that there are extraordinary limits placed on them as they live their daily lives. Mary stated:

I’m a little concerned—we’re going to Spain this summer and I’m just a little bit concerned about that. I don’t think that being a lesbian couple would stop us from traveling, although there are probably some parts of the world that even if we were a straight couple we probably wouldn’t go to because we have children. Because you don’t want to go someplace where you’d endanger yourself. I’m a little concerned about the Spain thing, but Spain is very cosmopolitan and it should be no big deal. I’d be more concerned if we were going to the old East Berlin or some countries that were known for being repressive. So for the most part I think that we really don’t limit ourselves because we’re a gay family. We just expect that things will be okay.

Beth concurred and emphasized, “we think about where we’re going.”

The ways in which having a child affected identity as a family

Both Beth and Mary agreed that having a child affects everything, and that Jessica is the center of their universe. They now monitor basic safety issues more closely, including checking how hot the water temperature is set, and how fast they drive. They have also focused on improving their diets so as to be good role models for their daughter. Mary talked about the emphasis they place on parenting Jessica:

The world pretty much revolves around her. We have very high expectations of her behavior. She doesn’t have to question where the boundaries are—she knows. But that’s just how we’re raising our child. That’s not about being a lesbian household, that’s just who we are as parents.

Beth added how Jessica’s personality and behavior influence their parenting, stating:

She’s a great kid. She’s a happy kid. She’s very adaptable. I was so concerned about telling her that we were going to sell the house and she said, “Oh, good, I can make new friends.” And then I asked her, “Do you want to go to a new school?” And she responded, “Oh, yeah.” It makes me wonder, “How did you get to be so easy?”

Jessica is old enough that conversations related to her family structure have arisen. Mary shared her insights about how this process has evolved:

She asks questions. She knows that there was a man involved that helped create her because that’s what we’ve told her. She knows that there are a lot of kids that have a mom and a dad and she doesn’t. Sometimes she’s been sad about not having a dad, although not in a long time. She likes to hear about how she was born—her story. And we’ve read her, “Heather has Two Mommies” and “How Love Makes a Family” many times, because that’s pretty much how it was.

All in all, both Mary and Beth experience a great deal of love and happiness in their family, and Mary emphasized that Jessica is well aware of how much she is loved.

How having a child strengthened identity as an individual, couple, and/or family

Mary and Beth were together for approximately eleven years prior to Jessica’s birth. As a family, they believe that having a child solidified their family identity, totally changing their personal identities and identity as a couple in the process. Mary stated, “We’re so much more together. We still do most of our lives together as a family, but now that she’s seven we’re changing again. She’s much more independent. It (having a child) affects everything.”

For Beth, having a child has increased her role as spokesperson on behalf of lesbian parents in a local organization. These experiences helped her to sort out her thoughts about parenting issues related to being part of a lesbian-headed family:

I’ve had more opportunity to actually speak about being a lesbian family. I’ve spoken for a local organization that kind of forces you to crystallize what you think. I’ve been willing to sort of be a lesbian spokesperson as a mom in a number of different forums. So it’s made me just more out there. Because you have a child you really have to think about it more—think rather than have something take you by surprise. You already have kind of thought about this situation and what could happen in this situation.

Beth and Mary are involved with Jessica’s activities and spend an “enormous amount of time at her school, together and individually.” The school system in which Jessica participates has offered support in many ways. The administration and teachers have always been open to diversity, as have other parents. Mary shared input she received from one of the grade school teachers, who said, “I have very few mom and dad families anymore. You just can’t present it like that because it doesn’t happen in reality.”

Diversity, whether it is related to family structure (e.g., one parent, grandparent, blended, lesbian, gay), race or culture, predominates at Jessica’s current school. Time and experience have strengthened both Mary and Beth’s resolve to be who they are, to share with others who they are, and to share with their daughter the pride they feel as a family.

Sources of physical, emotional, and social support

Both Mary and Beth were eager to share information regarding their support systems and the ways in which these people meet their needs. Mary started by describing individuals who serve as support:

We have each other. And we have friends up here. When we moved up here we moved with two other people—I mean they moved up and then we moved up and that was sort of our nucleus. So two moms live behind us and our good friend and her partner live in Minneapolis and she has been part of our lives forever. An then we have other friends that we spend time with, such as this one couple who have a boy in Jessica’s class.

Beth went on to describe the ways in which the support that they receive is so vital:

That emotional support is not so much about being a couple of lesbians, it’s being a couple of parents dealing with the parent things. You know, this kid pushed Jessica down, or Jessica’s having a hard time with this. The support is there and for the most part, there’s not a lot of stuff that comes out about being two moms. We did an impromptu thing with Jessica’s best friend this summer when

Mary was working and we ran into her mom and dad. And it was really nice to have dad around because he was giving them piggy-back rides. And his kids are bigger, so when he picked up Jessica I said, “Don’t throw her through the roof,” because she’s so light. And he said, “Yeah, I could carry her all day.” So I think that for the most part the support that we get is just around being parents.

Beth and Mary also mentioned support and acceptance that they receive at work, and highlighted that they are pleased with the overall positive regard they have felt from most everyone every step of the way.

Experiences of stress since having a child

Both Beth and Mary stated that the experience of parenting creates additional stress, both positive and negative. Mary stated, “Parenting changes everything. I tend to fret a little more than Beth does.” “A lot more,” concurred Beth. Most stressful is any situation in which Jessica’s safety may be at risk, as illustrated through a story that Mary told:

The first day that she rides the school bus I have a terrible, terrible deal. I’m at one corner and the bus lets her off at the other corner and she comes home and runs in the door and I can’t find her, and I literally think she’s been abducted. The bus driver says, “I left her off there.” and I thought, “She’s not there, where did she go?” And she (Beth) is at the dentist and I’m wondering why she made her appointment for today. When I finally find Jessica, I’m sitting on the step and I’m thinking, “I have to be positive because she did the right thing.” She ran home, opened the door and went in the house. And she said, “It’s okay, it’s okay.” and I’m told her, “You did such a good job, honey.” Oh my god, it (having a child) affects everything.

Beth identified another source of stress: “Time is stress—having time for her, for work, for each other, for yourself. Time is hard. And all of that is just about being a parent.” In addition, they know that as Jessica gets older they will confront the reality that children make homophobic comments to each other, such as calling one another “gay” or “fag,” or teasing a child because their parents are lesbian. Their hope is that these experiences will become less common over time, given the burgeoning baby boom in the LGBT community and increased awareness and understanding on a societal level. In the mean time, they are ready to do their part to support and hold school systems, or any system their child is part of, accountable for creating a safe and respectful environment for all children.

Experiences of feeling energized since having a child

Both Mary and Beth noted an increase in their activity level. Mary stated, “We get a little more active—we ride our bikes more, and we go to more things that we perhaps wouldn’t.” Beth too talked about the family’s increased activity.

We’re certainly out in the yard more—we built a swing set and now she’s really into riding her bike. She’s ready to go around the block. But, yeah, we are more active and more outside and we have more kids over. We plan more things so she can have her pals over and have sleep overs.

Concerns about being a lesbian-headed family in our society and/or community

All of Mary and Beth’s concerns center around Jessica’s safety. Negative comments about sexual orientation concern Mary, but she also feels hopeful:

I'm more concerned as she gets older—as she gets into fourth, fifth, and sixth grade. And I think “lesbian” becomes more of a thing then—and “gay” becomes more of a slur at that point. As she gets older, kids are cruel and it's going to happen. But I don't foresee any major, big things that really worry me. I'm feeling pretty safe and I hope that that is realistic.

Beth agreed, adding that Jessica may be changing schools when they move and then again in middle school, which may make her more vulnerable to be the target of negative comments.

I'm a little more concerned as she grows older about how we deal with things, how people will treat her. I'm a little more concerned about middle school because here she's grown up with these kids who know she has two moms, and then in middle school she's going to have a whole new group of kids. I'm concerned about how the level of kids ability to be mean escalates as they become more sophisticated in language. So that would be my biggest concern at the moment as she gets a little older.

Safety and acceptance are two of Beth and Mary's greatest concerns as they look to buy a house in a suburban neighborhood in order decrease the size of their home and increase the size of their yard. Mary described their process of assessing issues related to safety and acceptance:

We knocked on doors before we signed a purchase agreement, and nobody that we met was taken aback and everybody talked to us when they found out why we were there and why we were asking questions. Again, I think it's a very diverse neighborhood. That's what people have been saying because there is so much diversity in the neighborhood from some of the teachers that work at the university and live in this neighborhood. We went to an open house and this salesperson who lived in the neighborhood for years said, “Oh, you guys are going to love it!”

Beth also stated that she and Mary wanted to know if anyone in the neighborhood would have any problems with a lesbian family. They were aware in advance that the specific area they were interested in is diverse in terms of race and sexual orientation, but still felt somewhat concerned about moving to a suburb given their belief that it may not be as accepting of their family structure.

Advantages and/or special experiences related to being a lesbian-headed family

Mary discussed her process of creating a family with Beth and how this process has strengthened her:

I think being different makes you look at things differently. I know it has for me. I kind of feel like I've lived in both straight and lesbian worlds. I've gotten strength from making our family strong. I don't think if I had had children in my marriage that I would have had as good a family as I do now. And that's about being partnered with Beth. You have to be much more conscious in your daily life—as individuals, as a couple and as a family. And it gives me strength.

Beth noted the hard work that both she and Mary have put into becoming a couple and a family.

We've worked hard. You can't put it on auto-pilot. It's a much more cognitive and conscious experience than that. You can't just let it roll. It makes you stronger, and it's just because you're dealing with more things—or preparing, whether you have to or not—just being prepared (makes you stronger).

How the concerns and advantages related to being a lesbian-headed family impact whether and when to come out

Beth's response highlights the importance that being out has for her:

We choose to come out immediately. We choose to be out right away. To any person that we're going to deal with in more than just a superficial way, we're out. We're out with the realtor—I've

worked with her on and off over the years, and told her, “Well, yeah, now we have a daughter.” We’re just out there.

Mary focused on the ways in which society’s increased appreciation for diversity has been supportive to her. She stated, “For me the fact that society is finally catching up is helping. The movies are out there, the TV’s are out. Society is catching up, it’s making it easier. But you still have the right wing, which is always going to be there—terrifying.” Beth and Mary’s progress in being openly out therefore requires both internal and external supports, both of which are feeling more solid and secure to both of these women over time.

Each participant’s hopes and dreams for their family

Both Beth and Mary’s hopes begin with Jessica. Beth reviewed her hopes for both her daughter and society:

I hope that by the time Jessica has her children it just doesn’t matter at all. It still matters now, I just hope that when she has kids that they can talk about their lesbian grandmas and not feel shame or anything adverse in any way. And I think that that is possible. I hope that in my lifetime I see a world where every teacher can come out in school. I hope again that we see another President that embraces the gay community as the Clintons did. I think Jessica’s going to do just fine—she’s happy, she’s solid. Barring anything catastrophic she’s just going to be a happy girl.

Mary added, “I want us just to grow, to be happy and healthy. And the world to keep growing also.”

Additional comments

Mary shared final thoughts regarding her perspective on religious institutions:

I think the religious world—I mean, we’re here, we’re staying, and we’re not going anywhere. You can’t just say anymore that they’re bad people, that they’re going to hell—because we’ve proved that we’re not. We’re coming out of the closet right and left. I also appreciate what you’re doing. It’s another little piece that is going to help, hopefully, make somebody realize that we’re just people.

Beth had some final thoughts about being out and the importance to her of being out.

I think the whole coming out thing is just the opportunity to be free—it’s about liberty. It’s about freedom, it’s about living your life—just simply living your life as who you are. I can’t imagine being closeted again or having to be. I am frankly uncomfortable when in a 10-minute situation where I feel it’s not worth it to go into the whole thing but I can’t talk openly. I find that oppressive. Ten minutes is as much as I can do, and that’s really too much.

Jo and Janet

Jo and Janet have been together for five and a half years. They have a eighteen month old son named Christopher and a baby girl on the way. Jo has already raised two children and is twenty three years older than Janet. Although early on in their relationship they did not plan to have children, this changed a little over two years ago. Both hold undergraduate degrees, and Jo has a graduate degree in the human services.

Participant’s coming out process before actively planning to have a child, and the advantages of coming out at this point

Jo distinctly remembers the first time that she began noticing other women and meeting other lesbians because it coincided with both her return to school to finish her undergraduate degree and the break-up of her marriage.

I had a couple friends that were lesbians who took me to women's music concerts, and that was cool. I really felt as though I fit. It was such a soul thing. Then I had several relationships over the last twenty two years, one or two significant ones, mostly one. It fit with my ideals, it fit with who I thought I was, it fit with my developing strengths. Especially after I heard that women's music concert, Margie Adam, I'll never forget it, music for women and about women is how she announced it. I just sat there with my mouth hanging open, and when I left there I was on a high for six months. That's when I knew that this was for me, and then going to school and being with very self-identified lesbians, very strong women, helped. I wasn't in the place where they were yet, and I was very homophobic, and I was leaving my marriage because it was over. It wasn't because I was a lesbian, but it's interesting how the timing fit.

Jo's father was deceased at the point that she began to come out. Her mother was still alive and spent a great deal of time around Jo's friends and lovers, but was never told directly that Jo was a lesbian. There were no policies protecting Jo personally or professionally at the time, which made it very difficult for her to feel confident as she shared with others who she is.

I was always afraid to tell my mom and my kids. Their father told them a million times and stuff, but when I finally told John he was ten and Sally was almost nine. They saw me with women and I lived with a woman so they came and stayed with me, so there was a lot of involvement. I was petrified to tell John, and he just looked at me and said, "Mom, I know, What's the big deal?" And Sally was sick with her eating disorder and everything, and she was angry with me. She accused me of not telling her the truth at the time. It was very painful. But it was relieving. I didn't come out to workplaces. My boss knew and she was very cool, she had gay friends and stuff. But I hid it because I was always afraid working in child welfare that something would happen.

Janet was experiencing a great deal of stress in her life prior to coming out. She married in 1989 and divorced two years later. Shortly after her divorce she was arrested for driving while intoxicated and subsequently filed for bankruptcy. As part of her sentence for driving while intoxicated, Janet was ordered to receive counseling, at which point she sought out clinical services at a women-serving agency.

*My counselor introduced me to Cris Williamson, women's music. She knew that I liked music and that music was very good soul food for me, and healing. She linked me up to Cris's album, *The Changer and the Changed*. It just totally hit home. It was kind of through that, and just talking about failed male relationships, that I came to the conclusion that I need to see what this (lesbianism) is all about. I need to see what this world is.*

Janet began to reflect more on her identity and eventually summoned up the courage to explore this areas further. She went to a local nightclub with a primarily lesbian clientele.

So I went, and here's this little introverted person, you know, but I'm pumped about finding out what I need to find out. So I go, you know, and I'm kind of just sitting and watching, and then I watched them play pool. Then someone asked me if I wanted to play, and I did, and it didn't take long and people were asking me to dance, and asking me to play darts, and asking me to shoot pool. I just kind of threw my fears to the wind and thought, okay, I'm just going to do this, and I'm going to talk to people, and do what people do in this place. I like this attention. And I went home with probably a few dozen roses that night, and I don't know how many phone numbers! I frequented the place for three weeks and it didn't take long and I was seeing this woman, and we just totally clicked. I was really caught up with the emotional availability of women, and I think that's really

what intrigued me the most. And that was a real emotional time in my life, and that really touched on the emotional aspects, and my emotional needs. I flew with it and had a woman who was ready to fly with me.

Janet thus began her first committed relationship with a woman named Donna. Janet's family of origin was not receptive, and for several years she did not spend holidays with them. Unwilling to honor her family's request that she attend holiday gatherings alone, Janet instead spent time with her family of creation. During the time Janet was with her first partner, her family remained distant.

An area that was particularly difficult was Janet's perspective that her partner "drilled into me that I was not a good mother, and I should never have kids because I would be a terrible mother, and everything I did was wrong and bad." Thus, when she and Jo began to see one another two years later and Jo stated clearly that she did not want more children, Janet thought, "I'm not meant to have them, I'm not going to be a good mother, I don't think that's meant to be a part of my life." They seemed to be in agreement.

They (Janet's family) never really did come around during the time I was with Donna. They loved Jo. And I had a couple extra years in there, too, and I think that once they saw that I was in a relationship again with a woman, that I picked a woman again, that it wasn't just a phase. I stressed to them that Jo thought family was so important, she thought it was so important that we gained a relationship with my family, and she really encouraged me to do that. I really pushed that, because I knew that that would be a real huge plus. They are great now. My brothers, my folks, the extended family. I mean, we don't hear anything negative anymore. In fact we heard a positive thing from someone who told us that we have really taught them a lot about love. It was amazing.

For Jo the personal benefits and advantages of coming out and accepting herself were more powerful than the social pressures to remain in the closet. Jo states that her coming out process was much like "being born again, it was that strong and powerful." She made the analogy that the experience "was like opening the shades to let the sun in, and I didn't want to close them." She enjoyed the process of getting to know and value herself. For Janet, the advantage of coming out was that she finally felt like she fit in somewhere.

I'd been feeling for a long time, and had been told oftentimes by people, that I wasn't a good person and didn't fit in or didn't do things right. And here finally I felt like I did fit in. I felt good about who I was, and it was very empowering, extremely empowering. And I was always out. I thought, "This is who I am, take it or leave it." I make her (Jo) a little nervous.

Both Jo and Janet noted the differences in their approaches to coming out (Janet was much more "out" and not worried about societal backlash), and alluded to the fact that this difference in personality styles seems to have followed them into the present.

Participant's coming out process from the time of planning to have a child to the present, and the advantages of coming out at this point

Both Jo and Janet shared their initial discussions related to having a child. They contemplated how having two moms might affect a child, and how having a child might impact their neighbors and Jo's grown children:

We had to talk about consequences. Is this a good family? We had to look at the whole big picture. Janet has a great family and my kids knew I was a lesbian, but it was a little scary. Not so much

with John but with Sally, because of some stuff in her past, so I was a little worried. Then I thought, "You know what, I can't live my life around Sally. Janet and I want to have a baby." Then I thought about the neighbors and wondered, "Are they going to think we really went off the deep end?" But I felt so strong about who I was and I knew that we had a good relationship at that point.

Janet was unsure about bringing a child into a lesbian-headed family, and offered the following insight into her part of the decision making process.

We talked alot about what our child would have to go through. Is he going to feel weird with two moms? Is it fair to bring a child into a lesbian relationship? Is it going to be good for that child? We read books, and we talked about it a lot and we came to the conclusion that yeah, this will be good, especially with two mothers who, well you know love has got to be the first thing, but two mothers who felt so positively about themselves and about their relationship. He's going to adopt those attitudes and feel good about himself and our family too.

Given her parents' religious beliefs, Janet was concerned about telling them they were going to be grandparents.

There was some fear when we first came out, especially to my folks, and said that we were pregnant, but I was really counting on them being so excited about being grandparents that that would overcome their judgments. And that happened, and some of the judgments did too. But they were just so thrilled, especially my mother. My father was a little less, he wondered whether this is fair to the child. My mother too wondered how this is going to affect this child, worried that he is going to be laughed at and teased. We told her that our child will not be the only child of lesbian parents, and the more that she hears and sees that other people are like us, the more comfortable I think she is with it.

Nearing the end of her pregnancy, Jo and Janet had a commitment ceremony. Symbolically, they wanted to have a ritual that announced to their world of friends and family members that they are a family. They were uncommonly nervous on this day, not due to the meaning that such a day brings, but rather, out of concern or fear of being judged. Jo shared that she was nervous, saying, "Your dad made me nervous. Not so much your mom, but I couldn't face them in case they gave me a dirty look. I felt uncomfortable." Janet concurred, saying, "It was a hard day. There were people there that I wish hadn't shown up. We didn't give each other a huge smooch when we should have either, and it was because we didn't want to put anyone over the edge."

The day was symbolic of their commitment to one another and to their family of creation, and was a ritual that they wanted members of their various communities to share in. The effect of the ceremony was evident when on their next visit to Janet's parents they were allowed to share a bedroom.

Jo and Janet found the medical community to be open and supportive. Jo described their experience with their first pediatrician:

We walked in and said, "Okay, we're two moms, are you okay with that?" It was our first question and she was very nice about it. We were a little worried, but each step of the way has been supportive and comfortable. I think it's because we feel strong, we feel positive. I feel strong about who I am as a lesbian, as a person with rights and appropriate feelings.

Janet agreed, stating, "We had nothing but great people working with us and acceptance and good vibes from people. We have not had a negative look, a negative feel."

Daycare is another area that Janet and Jo have needed to attend to in terms of potential homophobia. They chose a daycare on the recommendation of lesbian friends who are also parents, and no concerns related to the treatment of their son or themselves as parents.

When they became pregnant, Jo and Janet shared with friends and colleagues that they were expecting, and both felt unconditional support and acceptance. For Jo, coming out as a mom-to-be was an advantage in that it enabled her to share with friends and colleagues the excitement and pride she felt.

I didn't tell colleagues we were planning to have a child, but as soon as we were pregnant I had to tell because I was so proud and so excited and knew that I wanted to share about this very exciting and wonderful baby coming. I received total support from everybody. I haven't come out to everyone at work, but could. If someone asked me, or if someone comes in my office, they see the shrine to Christopher. And I tell them.

Janet felt great about having a baby and was already out as a lesbian to people in her personal life and at work. She said, "In my mind there was nothing wrong with lesbians having a baby. So when I told people that we were going to start a family, I wasn't looking for any kind of reaction. I assumed it was a great thing and everyone would be excited, and they were."

The coming out process as a couple and how this affected their identity

Both Jo and Janet were in long-term relationships prior to becoming a couple. Thus, coming out as a couple consisted primarily of introducing a new partner to friends and family. Janet stated that a difficult aspect of coming out as a couple was related to their age difference of twenty three years.

There were some issues around our becoming a couple because of our age difference. Not with our friends so much. So when we came out, I'm sure that there were some reactions from family. It wasn't because we were a lesbian couple but because Jo is twenty three years older. It certainly wasn't as big of a deal as when we came out as lesbians.

Jo described the impact of coming out as a couple on family members:

If I understand the question, coming out as a couple, there was a little fear and trepidation at first when we met Janet's family. And with John and Sally, it was hard. Especially Sally, with the eating disorder, but John was so supportive. And Sally was fine, but it took a little time for her to come around.

Within Janet's family of origin, she was still somewhat of an outsider since she came out as a lesbian in a relationship with her first partner and her family never grew to accept this relationship. Hence, bringing a new partner to meet her parents was extremely uncomfortable for her. Jo recounted these first experiences of meeting Janet's family and the affect this had on Janet.

Initially, Janet would drink before they came. It was awful. She was really stressed. She was petrified when they would drive up. And I'd say, "It's okay, it's okay." Her previous partner was not accepted. They didn't like her, so there was all that stress around approval. But they were fine. We limited contact because they can engulf you. Her mom can boss you around and say, "We want you to be here this weekend and we're coming Friday and we're staying for a week," and stuff like that, so we had to set some limits.

In terms of how becoming a couple affected their identity, Jo returned to the age issue, saying, "The age difference was sort of a problem for me, initially. I think about other people's judgment. But I don't

feel as though between us it gets in the way.” For Janet, being in a relationship did not greatly affect her identity:

As far as coming out or being a lesbian, I knew I was, and I felt comfortable with that. Being in a relationship didn't change that. It changes your identity just because you're no longer single, you're part of a couple rather than just a single lesbian. But as far as changing, I just felt like a lesbian in a relationship.

How having a child affected the coming out process

Janet described how having a child expanded her coming out process, stating, “Now we're talking about medical personnel we have to deal with and things like that.” Jo discussed many life areas that are now affected as a result of their having a child:

We're in the process of thinking about school, and we're thinking about moving to a suburb. How will we fit in, how will Christopher? I don't feel very afraid for us. People will like us and we'll be fine. But I am worried about Christopher and the neighborhood and people who aren't fine with it. Kids can be really cruel. He's also going to question it, and wonder why he doesn't have a dad. And people will say to him, “Where's your dad? You have two moms and that's no good.” So, as a couple, we're going to have to work on how to answer those kinds of questions for him. As we grow with him, there are more questions, there are more thoughts to consider.

Janet and Jo are looking for a new home in neighborhoods where people are educated and hopefully more thoughtful about social issues, and where people are not “redneck” or “uppity”—though it was unclear how they determined these qualities as they looked for their new home.

Limits placed on the coming out process to protect child(ren) and/or family

Janet spoke assertively about setting no limits on being out as a lesbian-headed family, noting that “we've got to feel very positive and up-front about our relationship and our family in order for Christopher and Anna (the baby she is carrying) to feel that way. If we are hesitant about it and hide it, he's gonna see that and think that there is something wrong with our family.” Jo was a little more reticent, stating, “My response is more about being very careful, and critically thinking about every move we make. We don't want to withhold information, which is a change for me, not so much for Janet because she was very strong about that.”

The ways in which having a child affected identity as a family

Janet stated, “It's different. We are a family now.” Jo elaborated and described her experience of being in a family with children:

We were a couple before, and now we're a family. Before we only had ourselves to think about...and it was a carefree life. The two of us were a couple and a family, but now that we have children in our family, there's a lot more effort going into being a family and what it means and what it's going to mean for Christopher.

How having a child strengthened identity as an individual, couple, and/or family

Janet described how having a child has strengthened their identity as a couple and as a family:

I don't think it strengthens the lesbian aspect. The couple and the family, yes. It has a direct relationship on it. We're two moms, and our relationship is not just two lesbians, we're two moms who work together to raise a son and create a family and build it. Adding Christopher expanded our

family, and it really changed our relationship and the roles that we have. We've got huge responsibilities.

Jo shared that she may be trying harder, working harder on her relationship and family since having a child.

I'm thinking about it more than I did when I was married and raising children. I've had experience as a parent, and I'm looking at it differently this time, enjoying it differently, and it's feeling so good. We're a great team. If I've had him all day, Janet takes over when she comes home.

As a couple, they are working hard together, complementing and supporting one another. While both agreed that they could not have perfectly predicted how well they would work as a parenting team prior to having Christopher, Jo said that they would not have had a baby if they could not get along and cooperate with each other prior to having children. She finished by sharing that they both really enjoy what they are doing: "We like being a family, we like having a child."

Sources of physical, emotional, and social support

Jo described how supportive their friends are, even those who do not have children:

We don't feel like we're in the way because we have a kid. We're starting to feel as though we deserve it (support). We are fortunate to have good neighbors, nobody makes faces at us and walks away. In our daily lives, we have very positive and consistent sources of social and emotional support.

Janet noted the support they receive when they are out with friends, stating, "Sometimes I'll miss three-quarters of the conversation because I'm walking around with Christopher and don't get to see anyone. Some people would really get teed off about that, but not our close friends, they understand." Janet also reflected on her good fortune and that she feels "lucky to have such a good life. We could be living in a hole somewhere, or one of us could lose a job, or be in a car accident, I mean, we're lucky."

Experiences of stress since having a child

Janet focused on physical and emotional stressors associated with parenting:

Christopher still doesn't sleep through the night. Usually 90% of the time he doesn't. Stressors would include lack of sleep, not being able to comfort a child who is either sick or is crying and you can't comfort him to settle him down. There are toys laying all over and never having a house that's clean. Being responsible for another human being is a stressor—just knowing that you are responsible and in total control of whether this child thrives or gets wounded.

Jo stated that there are financial stressors, and described other physical, social, and emotional stressors:

There are some social stressors. If we could just call up friends and go out to dinner—it feels stressful that we can't, because we can't. We have to cook, we have to make meals, we have a child, we have to do laundry—there's extra work. Cleanliness is a huge issue. I don't mind toys laying all over. I mind dirt, though. Just being a parent and keeping our child safe is a stressor.

Experiences of feeling energized since having a child

Jo shared that she feels energized “watching the world through him—it's precious.” Janet agreed, and added that she feels energized when she watches Christopher learn new things, stating, “It's mind boggling.”

Concerns about being a lesbian-headed family in our society and/or community

Neither Jo nor Janet have any concerns about being a lesbian-headed family in the community in which they live. Janet feels grateful that they live in a “really good neighborhood, with really good neighbors. This community is very supportive of children.” They do feel somewhat reluctant to move to a suburb, but Jo feels an inner trust in the world.

You know I have my head in the sand. I'm not very political, so in terms of worrying about the world, mostly I simply trust. Mostly I go day by day trusting the world that it's okay to be who I am. There are a lot of LGBT people out there who worry about being gay in our society, and if I get in among those groups I get scared, so I don't go overboard with it.

Janet described how safe she feels in the small town where her parents currently reside. She said, “It's a small redneck type of town, and we don't walk around in fear. We're just people in that town, and we're a family. We're not walking around looking for trouble or looking for something to worry about. We're just living our lives as we can enjoy them.” Thus, while Jo does have some concerns about the larger society and the hatred she knows exists, they both feel mostly comfortable navigating around their world as a lesbian-headed family.

Advantages and/or special experiences related to being a lesbian-headed family

Janet and Jo expressed a sense of pride in valuing individual differences and diversity. Jo shared that she believes an advantage of valuing diversity is that they “can help Christopher understand that.”

Janet described her process of growing to accept and value herself as a lesbian, and believes that the work she did in this area of her life will be a positive influence on Christopher's developing self-esteem. She said, “I think we'll be a very positive influence on his self-esteem, because in order to thrive as a

lesbian, I think you’ve got to have that self-esteem. You’ve got to first feel good about who you are and your life.”

Both Janet and Jo stated that one of the messages they want to give Christopher is that “it’s okay to be different—you are still a good person.”

How the concerns and advantages related to being a lesbian-headed family impact whether and when to come out

Jo focused on their upcoming move to a suburb as a new opportunity for them to come out:

For us right now, we’re thinking about moving to a suburb. I have been out for 22 years, and Janet less but she’s been strong right from the beginning. So coming out to a new community, I’m absolutely fine with. But we don’t have a lot of experience yet with a child and what his needs are going to be and what we’re going to come up against. But being strong about who we are and being able to help him, because there’s not just going to be bumps because we’re lesbians, they’re going to tell him he doesn’t know how to ride his bike good, and he’s going to come home crying, and we’re going to have to help him with that, too. But coming out, I guess I feel like we’re strong women and feel good, and that we’re going to do fine in any community. Because we’re also nice people. We’re just people.

Thus, while Jo acknowledges that there may be parenting “bumps” related to their sexual orientation, there are other crises that Christopher will experience that are unrelated to their lesbianism. She also feels confident that she and Janet have what it takes to get through whatever comes their way.

Each participant’s hopes and dreams for their family

Janet described her hopes for her children’s health:

I hope Anna doesn’t get as many ear infections as Christopher did. Christopher has been sick from the beginning to the end of each winter, during the cold season. Being in daycare he’ll pick up these colds, have them for a week, be clear for two days and get another. And that is so hard to watch. They don’t sleep when they can’t breathe or when they’re hurting or coughing, they don’t eat, and it disrupts everyone’s lives.

Jo added that she wants Christopher to be a “strong, self identified person.” She also stated that she wants him to have “a family he can be proud of, to have a sense of himself in the world, and I hope that the world treats him well.”

Additional comments

Jo returned to the process of coming out and stated that it was enhanced and expanded when they chose to have a child:

You can hide from coming out if you want to, even as a couple. But once you have a child it makes you take another look at what your strengths are, what you’re still feeling homophobic about or what worries you, and puts you in touch with that stuff—it challenges you to look at it. If you’re not safe with yourself, it’s damaging. You hurt yourself and your children. It doesn’t mean you have to wear an, “I’m a lesbian” logo on your shirt. It just means you have to be comfortable with your identity.

Janet, too, reflected on the importance of being out and having a solid identity.

I’m sure that there are families out there who are trying to cover. And we’ve talked about that. That’s an issue that you’ve got to thoroughly evaluate when you’re thinking about having kids. How

are you going to be to your kids, how are you going to live you life, and how are you going to show them your life values?

Both agreed that they need to be comfortable and accepting of their own identities so as to not burden their children with any sense of shame about who they are as a family. Being out as individuals, as a couple, and as a family are ways that their children will know there are no secrets, and thus no shame, regarding who they are as children of lesbian parents.

Paige and Lydia

Paige and Lydia have been together for nearly fifteen years, and had a commitment ceremony ten years ago. They have two children, five year old Justin, and three year old Michael. They are both employed full time. Both have undergraduate degrees, and Paige holds a graduate degree. Paige is employed in the student services area of a college. Lydia is employed at a non-profit agency.

Participant's coming out process before actively planning to have a child, and the advantages of coming out at this point

Paige began the process of coming out to others almost immediately after her own identification as a lesbian. A year out of college, she moved to a liberal college town in California and found herself attracted to another woman:

I didn't really identify as anything; I just sort of followed my heart and ended up dating this woman for a summer. It's funny because I had a number of friends who were lesbians, but I didn't feel like I had to name it or say it or anything. I just wrote pretty much anybody I could think of and said, "You know, this is who I am in love with." Which pretty much outed me automatically. I was living in a progressive college town, very lenient in terms of one's sexuality. I don't think there was any huge need to name anything at that moment. I really came out to my family and closest friends within a matter of months of first identifying myself as a lesbian.

Paige credits the liberal sexual politics that existed in the town that she was living in as contributing to the ease she felt being who she was and dating whom she wanted without feeling guilty or ashamed. Her coming out letter was not well received by some family members. Paige's mother in particular had a difficult time accepting her sexual orientation, and mourned when they announced plans for their wedding ceremony because she realized that her daughter would never again be involved with a man. Her difficulty led her to be the only parent not in attendance at the wedding. Their ceremony created an opportunity for Paige to be more out than she had been up to that point:

I think she (her mother) had saved hope—like maybe something would be different. And it was also claiming being a lesbian to a whole different point—now we're a family. Now we're a committed relationship, we are as you are with your husband. And that was when I went into outing myself to more distant friends and to all the relatives. I did so through a letter proclaiming that we were going to get married and what that meant legally, personally and everything else. It was a public affirmation that I was in a relationship and I knew I was in love with Lydia and in a committed relationship. My aunts and uncles all dealt with it really well. My grandma had a little bit of a hard time but family stood in there.

Occupationally, Paige did not experience overwhelming complications when coming out. When they were living in California, she was not out to everyone she worked with prior to their ceremony, but was at the time of the ceremony and was treated well by her colleagues:

I was out to my boss and to one or two people and not out to anybody else, and that got pretty tedious after awhile and I finally snapped and blurted. Not even really intending to, I just couldn't take another Friday night where somebody was like, "What are you going to do this weekend?" That's where I was when we got married. Everybody knew, it wasn't a hidden thing. By the time we came here, my perspective was, "I'm a lesbian, get over it." When interviewing for a new job, I don't come out in the first interview...I wouldn't come out about being straight in an interview, but it certainly isn't very far behind in terms of who I am. It just takes so much more energy to have something hidden, it really does. I am of the mind now where I'd rather blurt it as big as it can get so I don't even have to tell people. A lot of it's just living more cleanly, and people aren't—it's Minnesota, they're not going to really say much so I'd rather just be out.

Lydia had her first relationship with a woman when she was in high school. At this point in her life, she identified as bisexual. By the time she reached college in the mid-eighties, she was identifying more as lesbian and spending time with others in the lesbian community:

It was in college that I came out to my parents and to my best friend from high school. My parents probably thought it was a phase or didn't know what to do with it. My dad is a doctor and had to research it. The first college I was at there was a huge amount of homophobia at that time. So I transferred colleges and was in a relationship with another woman before I met Paige. With different relationships I'd mention to my parents who I was seeing and they slowly got used to it. Paige and I got together in 1987 and at that point again I was introducing her to my parents and my friends and it's almost, I think, that as our relationship evolved into more and more years, I would come out to more and more people.

Lydia described the coming out process that her parents had to go through as parents of a daughter who is lesbian. Through their own coming out process, they met and befriended people their age who are gay and lesbian and became strong advocates in their church on behalf of gays and lesbians in their community—all of which felt extremely powerful and supportive to Lydia.

They've come a long way and they're incredibly active as far as gay rights. They tried to get their congregation to become a reconciling congregation, which basically is the Methodist church for gay and lesbians, and it was very political and it didn't pass in their church. They're very active in that church and they've threatened to pull their membership. So it's just been huge. Another thing that happened is that they have gay and lesbian peers who are their age and of their faith, and that was huge in helping them in that process. I think my parents provided mentors for us because they didn't know how to provide mentorship for us as a lesbian couple so they were looking for that. After the ceremony we moved here, and I think being in San Francisco you're just so used to being out everywhere that we just assumed it would be the same here.

Upon entering the work force in San Francisco Lydia experienced no noticeable homophobia. Her first post-college job was at a small non-profit organization in San Francisco:

Everyone referred to their significant other as their partner, and couldn't care less if I was gay. My boss kept saying partner and I kept thinking, "He just does not seem gay to me." And he wasn't but he wasn't married. It's easy to come out there. Now, it's a big thing trying to find a company that has benefits for domestic partners here in Minnesota. At least to find out it's a safe place to be out.

Lydia stated that she saw being out as an advantage at this stage in her life primarily because remaining closeted took up too much energy: “When your co-workers say, ‘What did you do this weekend?’ saying that I was with my roommate drove me nuts. I wanted my co-workers to know that Paige is my partner. Before kids, there were still times when it wasn’t safe and we did have to play straight.”

Paige hypothesized that coming out later than Lydia did may have been an advantage for her: “I already knew what it was like to really be supported in relationships. I’d been in heterosexual relationships and people had respected and supported them so I think I had an entitlement factor...there was never that sense of being ashamed or anything.”

Participant’s coming out process from the time of planning to have a child to the present, and the advantages of coming out at this point

Lydia noted that although she and Paige chose to be out in most environments they participated in before having children it was not mandated. Now there are many areas where such a choice no longer seems to exist:

You can still hide somewhat not having kids—I never told my grandmother about Paige. She’s met Paige, she came to all kinds of family stuff but I never said, “We got married.” Then I got pregnant, and I realized that I can’t hide that. So it’s a whole new level of not being able to hide. That was one thing, and I think it’s a whole other area to also be coming out—you’re in the health system and you have to be public about that. I know that there are many gay families where the parents decide to stay closeted but we’ve chosen not to do that and just feel like we can’t. I feel so much more motivated to advocate for change also, because it’s for my child.

In addition, having children expanded Lydia’s parents’ coming out process in a manner parallel to hers—with terrific results—and changed their relationship for the better. Lydia stated, “Having kids totally changed my relationship with my parents. With a child it’s another situation where they have to come out also. Someone might say to them, ‘There’s Lydia, how did she get pregnant?’ So they had to come out even more.”

Paige described her interest in joining other adults in conversations regarding parenting and the ways in which this can be stressful, as well as coming out at her children’s daycare.

When we got married, we viewed ourselves as married people, but it’s not like people sit and talk about that that often. After having kids, I can’t stop myself from being in a parent conversation with any parent, and within that parent conversation comes the gender of my partner and those other issues around it. I found it more stressful to come out amongst strangers. Like in daycare, peripheral teachers will say, “Now I haven’t met you,” or the kids will say, “Who are you?” and I’ll say, “I’m the tall mom.”

For Paige and Lydia, another aspect of coming out as a couple was changing their last name. After they became pregnant with their first child, they combined their last names to unify their relationship and family. By this point, family members were “on board” and had no negative reactions to this newest change in their lives.

Having children changed the dynamics in Paige and Lydia’s relationship with Paige’s mother. They were both concerned that Paige’s mother would not love their children because she continued to have a difficult time with their relationship, and continued to be unaccepting of Lydia. It was important to Paige and Lydia that Paige’s mom love their children and treat them like she does her other grandchildren.

Paige feels proud of the work her mom has done:

We really talked about what if we have this kid? Are we going to let her hang out with them because we don’t even know if she will love our children like all the rest of her grandchildren. So we yanked her into therapy and had a big session. Fortunately she was willing to go. And things got better. It’s not like it ended up perfect, but things definitely got better. Now she’s decided that she wants to work for systemic change within the school district in California on gay and lesbian parents and inclusion in the curriculum and the overall atmosphere. She’s been to the Rainbow Families Conference three years in a row. She said, “These boys are going to grow up, and they need to have a world that is going to respect them.”

Paige regards age and experience as advantageous to the coming out process at present, as she and Lydia have more confidence and can now come out “with more love and empathy.” Lydia described the benefits to their children of being out at this point in their lives, as she does not “want our kids to be the ones who have to explain it to anyone who knows us knows already.” Paige agreed, but added that they would take precautions if they were on vacation and were unfamiliar with those around them. There are also benefits to both Paige and Lydia having legal status as parents. Lydia stated, “If we weren’t out and something happened to one of us, there could be questions and legal battles, but we’re both legal parents of both children.”

The coming out process as a couple and how this affected their identity

Lydia shared that she thinks it’s easier to come out as a couple than an individual, because “You don’t have to say ‘I’m gay,’ you can say, ‘this is my partner.’” Paige agreed and added that having a partner has enhanced her identity as a lesbian because “it gave me somebody to go through it with on a day-to-day basis—the processing of being gay.” She also discussed the influence of being in a relationship with a good person and how that can soften other people’s judgments of them individually and as a couple. Paige added that it is the same with having children, others will say, “What a nice child,” and then have to reflect on what that means with respect to their being lesbian parents. Her perception is that others’ experience with meeting them and their children and seeing that they are nice responsible people can help soften their judgments.

How having a child affected the coming out process

Paige restated what Lydia said earlier, “Having children eliminated a lot of the choices.” Although both Paige and Lydia chose to be as out as much as possible prior to having children, they were aware that they still had a choice at that point. The couple also reiterated that they prefer to be deliberate in coming out so as not to burden their children with this responsibility. Paige noted that “children will out you, not even by anything they say, just by being” (referring to times they are in public as a family and

their children look to them both as moms). In terms of how having a child impacted the coming out process, Lydia described how it solidified their commitment to be out on a conscious level. Beginning at the point they began to conceive their first child, Lydia stated that there was “no question for us that we were going to be out because we were going to be the parents of this child.”

Limits placed on the coming out process to protect child(ren) and/or family

Two instances in which Paige and Lydia stated that they are selective about coming out include situations in which they are amongst strangers and prefer not to come out (e.g., at a store), and when they don't feel safe (again, usually around strangers). For example, Lydia shared that she and Paige were at a grocery store with their oldest son when he was an infant and the butcher asked, “Who's the mother?” Lydia stated, “I don't think I answered the question directly, or kind of avoided the question because I did not feel safe with that particular woman.” The couple noted that going on vacation would not necessarily require placing limits on being out; they gauge each environment independently to determine what to do. Lydia and Paige attribute the decision not to come out less to fear than wanting to be in a position of deciding with whom they discuss their family structure.

With respect to their children's daily lives, placing limits on coming out is definitely not an option. Lydia shared, “It's really more difficult with strangers. But with something like starting in a new school—our son will be starting kindergarten—I don't know anybody at the school, but from day one I'm choosing to be out there and I'm going to the principal and let him know who our family is.”

The ways in which having a child affected identity as a family

Both Lydia and Paige described the enormous impact having children has had on their identity as a family. Paige discussed practical matters such as scheduling differences and how having children impacted her:

It's pretty much like the difference between night and day. We rely on each other totally differently. Before children, I would call from work to say I'd be late and it was no problem, but it's different with children. We have to negotiate time schedules, how we want to raise them, everything—it's not just us anymore. Now we have to be the grown-ups.

Lydia described her process of realizing that prior to having children she could undo anything she's done in her life—relationships, jobs, house—but she can't undo children because “They're with you for life. Anybody will tell you that there is a difference between when you don't have kids and when you do have kids. I didn't realize how much it was going to change.”

Paige and Lydia noted that their family identity is now very much tied to the children's activities. Paige stated, “We just had to choose Justin's kindergarten for next year and it took everything out of me. Most everything we do revolves around what the kids need or what they can do.” Their social network has changed dramatically, as Lydia described, “The friends we used to see all the time who don't have

kids, we don't see as much. So our community has totally changed—more heterosexual friends than we've ever had because they're parents.”

How having a child strengthened identity as an individual, couple, and/or family

Paige and Lydia emphasized that one of the ways having children strengthened their family is related to the intentionality of their family. Lydia described her decision making process:

There were a couple of years when I said, “Am I going to do this or not? What does this mean?” It was very, very heavy questioning, “What does this mean to have a child?” These kids were both very much wanted and I think obviously you would question family acceptance. Like Paige's mom, either you're going to love this kid or you're not going to be grandparents. So we had to be very intentional about that. We were very intentional about the city that we have decided to live in. “Is it safe for them, a good place?”

Lydia and Paige are also self proclaimed “totally kid-centered” parents. Paige described how having children influenced their decision to choose which neighborhood to live in.

Where we were living, there weren't a lot of gays and lesbians. We knew the next-door neighbors here and that was a big pull for us to buy this house. I talked to the person across the street to drill him about the neighborhood and he somehow figured out that we had two boys and two moms and he just laughed really hard, it was great. You can tell the people who are comfortable and the people who just sort of delight in it. We bought a house that was more beat-up versus tidy so that the kids could be kids. And we also knew what high school we wanted our kids to go to because of how accepting it is.

Lydia emphasized this last point, stating, “The school has to be gay friendly.” Another strength is their commitment to parenting as equal partners. As Lydia explained, “It feels like we are both fifty-fifty in this. We're both working full-time and we would like it not to be that way but I think it really helps and I think it's a real strength. We work well together. We are very compatible and I think that is a real strength.” Paige added, “We keep communication high. We don't really let a lot of stuff get in our way. We've started to use a lot more babysitters so we can have more time together. We're kid-centered but with balance.”

Sources of physical, emotional, and social support

Both Paige and Lydia agree that they have wonderful sources of support. They refer to one another as solid and predictable sources of emotional support. For Lydia, activities that include other families or physical activity appear to be the greatest sources of support.

I would say emotional support would be Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) or with Rainbow Families. I work out over lunch. And we have very active kids so we go to a lot of dance parties. We love to go on hikes and do a lot of walking...I think the kids are now more at the point where they can do more. And our families are both supportive.

Paige described several life areas in which she receives personal support:

Church is a supportive place. We just switched churches, but we're really going faithfully every week now so there is this emotional connection for me that comes through the church. Definitely I would say ECFE. I'd also say that we both have really good colleagues—we chose places where we want to be and that makes a big difference for me. We're also really close to both our families.

Paige and Lydia have taken parenting classes through ECFE, with several offered specifically for LGBT parents. Rainbow Families is a local organization for LGBT families, with several functions throughout the year in which families can participate in fun activities (e.g., dances, picnics, a children’s choir). Every year Rainbow Families sponsors a one day conference highlighting issues important to the LGBT community. Paige has been particularly active with this organization, serving on the board for three years, with two of these years as board chair. She remembers this time fondly, seeing it as “an avenue for activism and education, as well as a continuing source of community for our entire family.” Both Lydia and Paige’s families have joined them on this day as they celebrate the wonderful strengths of their family.

Experiences of stress since having a child

Both Paige and Lydia immediately answered this question with one word—time. Paige reflected back to the birth of their oldest child, who is now five:

As soon as Adam was born there was this refereeing that we had to do for two years. Hitting and name-calling and temper tantrums. It was sort of like walking in the house and going, “I don’t want to be here—do you want to be here?” It’s gotten a lot better—a lot of it was just figuring out the pieces to make his life happier. And you’re so tired and angry and stressed out that it’s like there’s not that much energy to focus, so we went outside and got therapy. We’re kind of into the therapist thing if it can help. On weekends, I used to think, “It’s the weekend!” Now I wonder, “Do I have the energy to get through the weekend?”

Lydia concurred that lack of time is the biggest factor, but also stated that parental illness and simply having young children are stressors.

I guess it has to do with time. I’d say a different stress is about when you’re kind of sick and then who’s going to do what, especially during the first three or four years of parenting. I feel like we’re in a whole new stage now that they’re three and five but those first three years there was a lot of stress about just having an infant. A lot of people say, “Oh, you must be busy” when they hear we have two young children.

Paige also feels affected by a lack of spontaneity. She stated, “What’s really stressful for me is the lack of spontaneity. Sometimes I feel like reading the paper for an hour or taking a nap, but to do that means that Lydia has to be taking care of the kids for an hour, and that’s not realistic—we’re both parents.”

Experiences of feeling energized since having a child

Both Lydia and Paige described the wonder of seeing the world through their children’s eyes. Paige shared an example of how she feels energized by her children:

Like this morning—Lydia goes to work early and I get them up and to school, and normally I have about a half hour where I take a shower and they watch Arthur. Today, they didn’t want to watch Arthur, they wanted to dance. So they put on the tape from my high school reunion and their cowboy outfits and danced and they’re just adorable. I really like that—no matter how stressed out we are with this whole time issue, the trade-off is worth it. We’re able to remain present. It’s not like, “Oh, I gotta clean, I can’t stay and smile at you guys.” When they want me to be the audience and I’m not busy, I’m going to sit and be the audience. That’s really sweet. It’s also fun to watch when Justin and Michael are in love with Lydia or in love with me. It’s a different way of seeing your partner

with your kid hanging over their necks and snuggling with them. It's just very sweet. I think that there is a lot of tenderness around that.

Lydia reflected on the opportunity to re-live parts of her childhood. She stated, “I like being able to go through all that kid stuff again. Justin just asked me today if the tooth fairy was real. So I like re-living that again.”

Paige also described how having children has created opportunities for new connections with their own parents: “It's been really nice to connect with our parents as parents—it's been a really big gift. You have a whole different level of compassion around things. I think each set of grandparents are really into the kids. It's neat to watch your parents be into them and the kids enjoying that.”

Concerns about being a lesbian-headed family in our society and/or community

Lydia acknowledged that there are many realms of society that are not gay-friendly, and believes that there will be difficult times for their children: “I think that there will be issues and there will be hard times obviously for the kids. I think we're okay until junior high.”

Paige focused specifically on what she thinks some of the obstacles will be.

Being in an environment that is more likely to be understanding and accepting is really why we stay urban. I remember even before we had kids calling up an elementary school and asking them if there are kids with lesbian parents there. He said, “We have every family structure you can think of in this school, your family will be welcomed.” I think that there is a big reality of that within the Twin Cities. I think our kids are going to be savvy as to understanding their safe zone. One thing that we talk about in Rainbow Families is at what age do you tell your kids that a huge part of the population is going to hate them potentially because of this or not understand. Because it's going to be that way. What about when they want to open a bank account and the form asks for their mother's maiden name. Which one? They're going to have to determine how they navigate in this heterosexual world.

As a result of consciously choosing a progressive neighborhood, church, and school district in which to belong, Paige and Lydia have no concerns for their own or their children's safety.

Advantages and/or special experiences related to being a lesbian-headed family

Paige and Lydia's appreciation of diversity, and the likelihood that their children will pick up on this, is viewed as a major advantage:

I would certainly say we truly value diversity and we think it's gotta be something that they're going to learn. I think that since we don't fit in the world's box, we don't try to make other people fit. I think we constantly question stuff a lot more than the average parent. For example, I caught myself calling a kid at the Children's Museum a “he” and then I thought I heard a parent call her a “she” and I thought, “Oh, shit, why did I attach a gender to that kid?” There's this sense that nothing is really taken for granted. I don't want people to take it for granted for me and I don't want to take it for granted for them. We probably have a lot more chats with our kids about that kind of stuff.

Lydia concurred, stating, “There certainly are a lot of conversations where we'll say, ‘Some families do this, and some families do this.’ So we're always talking about different families doing different things.”

Paige added that both gender and being an intentional family may affect parenting. Specifically, she hypothesized that being a lesbian-headed family in which the parents consciously chose to become parents may be related to greater participation by both parents compared to many heterosexual families she knows in which “the mom” is primarily responsible for child care and for planning family activities.

I definitely think in terms of our family structure, we're really hands-on parents, maybe more than many heterosexual two-parent families. I don't know if you can say that this is true of all lesbian families, but since we both really wanted kids and had to work on it together, come through this process to really decide to have kids—at least compared to my siblings relationships where their husbands are either working or disengaged—it's just a different priority, and it's really the priority for both of us. I don't know if that's the mom instinct in both of us. We have gay male fathers in our ECFE class and they're the best dads I know. But they both chose to be parents too. I think that is a real strength for our sanity and our relationship—that the kids will see two parents working hard and having a good time at it.

Lydia concurred, sharing that when they began to have children, she readily gave up playing sports three nights a week—a sacrifice that she's not sure many men would be willing to make.

How the concerns and advantages related to being a lesbian-headed family impact whether and when to come out

Lydia emphasized the importance of being out as a way to support her children and effect social change:

There have been times when I have come out a lot more with kids for purposes of creating social change. There are a lot more people now that know me as a lesbian and know that I have kids, so I would say helping create social change is an important determinant for when to come out.

Out of concern for their children, Paige shared that she comes out to the children at day care so that Justin and Michael don't have to:

There are times where I just feel like it's important that—even if it's a little kid—that we come out, so that we can make that normal so that they don't have to do it. But, there would definitely be safety issues with it too, about being quiet about stuff. In many places, once they know, they know—and we're known as the lesbians. Like at the kids' school, we'll never be mistaken as “Who's that person?” It will be more like, “Oh, yeah, those are the lesbians.” So that's a plus in my mind, we want to make sure they know us.

Each participant's hopes and dreams for their family

Paige stated that her hopes and dreams are that her children, “will always know that they are loved and they get through the hard times, because they are going to have them. I hope they will have big hearts and have a lot of fun.”

Lydia worries about how she will support her kids through adolescence. However, from her experience with her own parents, she feels confident that her family can withstand challenges and grow together. She reflected both on what she wants for her children and how her own experience of growing up informs her outlook:

I want us to continue having fun. Things are going to keep changing, but to be able to take family hikes and doing other family activities will be important. Seeing my relationship change with my

parents and just seeing how my future will be different as they grow older—just the constant change in relationships, and knowing that they keep going.

Additional comments

Both Lydia and Paige had final comments regarding sexual orientation, coming out, and family structure. Lydia highlighted the importance of being out, even though the process is not one that she relishes: “I want to be out, not come out”.

Paige remembered a class that she took as an undergraduate and shared her reflections on the long-term impact it has had on her:

I remember being in a psych class and they said that if you’re a lesbian that’s going to be one of your major identifiers. I think that sometimes I think, “Well, it’s not really that big. It’s really being a mom or being a professional.” But I think that realistically, as I talk to students and I notice that they were looking at my family pictures behind me. I don’t think I would notice that as much if I wasn’t a lesbian. It’s an ever present identifier. It’s hard to remember that sometimes because we are so busy doing life that as we come out to people that it may not have even crossed their minds that morning that anybody was gay in the whole world. And then there are other places that it just doesn’t matter, like when we went to a party down the street—it didn’t matter.

Paige also noted that as a result of her giving birth to one child and Lydia the other, people assume that each child belongs to the one who carried him.

There’s that whole question of who had which kid? And, “Are they really yours?” I’m surprised how often, at least once a month I get some statement that very clearly somebody believes that since Lydia had Justin he’s hers and I had Michael he’s mine. It is so bizarre to me because you would never—that just wouldn’t cross the mind of any other family unit. So I feel like that is just another weird phenomenon in terms of the family structure.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDINGS

While several themes emerge from the stories of these women and mothers, the needs and safety of their children are central to the function, identity, and focus of each family. All three couples shared openly their perceptions that having children has strengthened their identity as individuals and as a family, and that they are focused on creating a safe and loving environment within which their children can grow. Each couple had been together several years prior to beginning a conscious process to have a child. Each couple worked hard to ensure that their relationship was solid (sometimes entering therapy and emerging stronger than ever), each discussed with one another their reasons for wanting a child, some found it necessary to work through their internalized homophobia, and all sought out medical providers with whom they felt accepted and comfortable. Through listening to their stories, it was striking to hear how prepared each couple was in their own lives prior to bringing another human being into the world, and how thoughtful each was about having a child. The needs of the children in these families are primary, and each couple stated clearly that the strength of their commitment to be open as lesbians and lesbian-headed families is to a great degree related to wanting what is best for their children. For example, Lydia and Paige stated that they do not want to burden their children with having to come out; they see it as their role as parents to do the bulk of this work. Jo and Janet stated that they feel strongly about being out due to concern that a lack of commitment could be interpreted by their children to mean there is something to be ashamed of. Mary and Beth shared that they feel a strong responsibility to be out because they believe it is important that they live honestly and thus model honesty to their daughter. For all of these couples, coming out and being out took on added importance when they became parents.

The efforts that each couple makes to create a loving and safe environment for their children does not end with the micro system of their family. For example, while finding a community within which they could live openly was important to each couple before becoming parents, it became an essential safety issue once children were involved. All of the couples stated in one way or another that they do not feel concerned about how they will be treated—they can take care of themselves and they have strong support systems. Each couple discussed concerns for their children, specifically related to mistreatment they might endure as children of lesbian parents. All three couples said that they know the day will come when their children will be teased because their moms are lesbian, or taunted with words like “gay,” “fag,” or “dyke.” Mary and Beth described their process of advocating for their daughter by ensuring that school staff would address homophobic comments in an appropriate manner. While they do not believe Jessica will be exposed to such harassment for a few years, they felt it wise to begin exploring this area early in

order to determine which school system to enroll her in and what to expect from school administrators and staff. Although Jo and Janet are only beginning this process—given their son is just 18 months—they described their process of seeking out a daycare environment that was affirming to them as a family. Likewise, Lydia and Paige stated that they have chosen their neighborhood, school system, and other important life environments according to the likelihood that their children and family will be treated respectfully.

Hence, each couple has taken appropriate measures to insure that they and their children can safely be out in the environments in which they live and learn. An activity that feels less predictable to both Mary and Beth and Lydia and Paige is family travel, when they may find themselves in an environment where they are uncertain of the degree of homophobia that exists. Jo stated that she believes as parents she and Janet need to think critically about whether and when to come out to others, not for the purpose of withholding information, but rather to be cautious for the sake of their children.

While most of the women interviewed were committed to being out to others in their personal and professional lives prior to having a child, the process of coming out took on new meaning once children were involved and became a responsibility to which they committed themselves. Mary and Jo were not out to their parents prior to having children. Jo shared that she chose not to be out to her mother and many others after she began to develop her identity as a lesbian due to her fear that she would be judged and ostracized—a fear that was particularly real in the late 1970’s when legal protections for persons who are LGBT were nonexistent. Currently, Jo states that she is out to her children, colleagues, friends, and members of her community with relative ease. Mary, too, was closeted to her parents prior to becoming a parent herself; her daughter provided the impetus to come out, as Mary felt that only through honesty could she ensure her daughter’s best interests. After having children, the process of coming out was described by many of the women as a vehicle for strengthening their personal identity, solidifying their family identity, and providing their children with a sense that their family is strong.

Interestingly, while each couple is keenly aware that being a lesbian-headed family is distinctive in many ways, Mary and Beth and Paige and Lydia described the support they currently need as parents, independent of their being lesbians. For both of these couples, they have found that their support networks consist of other families whose children are similar in age and interests to theirs, regardless of sexual orientation. However, Paige and Lydia acknowledged that it is a pleasant experience when they can spend time with like families because they do not have to expend energy describing or explaining their family structure.

A second theme that emerged from the stories of these women and mothers is the role that advocacy plays with respect to being out. While the process of coming out to others may not always be comfortable (“I want to be out not come out,” Lydia stated), being closeted is more uncomfortable to Beth (“I can’t go

more than ten minutes without being out in most conversations”) and Janet (“...he’s [Christopher] gonna see that and think that there is something wrong with our family”). Beth shared that she speaks on behalf of a school organization that advocates on behalf of LGBT youth regarding her experiences as a member of a lesbian-headed family, an activity that she claims has helped her organize her thoughts and beliefs about LGBT families. Paige, too, has actively participated with a local organization advocating on behalf of LGBT families throughout the state of Minnesota. Lydia stated that they feel obligated to do advocacy work in order to ensure that the world is a better place for their children. Lydia and Paige stated that they have experienced a good deal of support from their own parents, whom have championed gay rights either within their church or the public school systems.

A third theme that emerged from the interviews is the important role that family of origin plays in the well being of each woman interviewed. The acceptance of members of their family of origin, particularly parents (or parental figures), is deeply meaningful. Feeling welcomed and cared for by parents remains important to each family. For example, while Mary described feeling grateful that her family of creation is now allowed to spend time in her parents’ home, the fact that they were rejected early on and continue to be less than fully accepted is heart-wrenching. Likewise, the fact that Beth is no longer welcome in the home of the people whom she considered to be her surrogate parents continues to pain her emotionally.

Paige and Lydia have navigated successfully the coming out process with their parents. They described how they sought out therapy as a means of encouraging Paige’s mother to be involved with and accepting of their family. Similarly, Lydia stated that she began to feel support from her parents as they progressed from their initial assumption that Lydia was “going through a stage” (when she first came out to them) to actively working through their own coming out process. The security and strength that Lydia and Paige feel as a result of their hard work and patience, and that of their parents, was evident throughout the interview as they described with empathy and understanding the process in which they and their families of origin are engaged.

Jo and Janet, too, have worked hard to maintain positive relations with members of their families of origin, and with Jo’s adult children. For example, Jo shared that while her children accepted her sexual orientation, her daughter struggled early on in her relationship with Janet due to her connection with Jo’s previous partner. Janet stated that her lengthy period of alienation from her parents ended shortly after she and Jo became a couple. While there are times when they still feel uncomfortable, or fear being judged by Janet’s parents, both shared that the comfort they feel in their own identities minimizes the impact of these experiences.

A fourth theme that emerged from these interviews concerns each woman’s need to be supported in her role as parent. Lack of time was cited by each woman as the greatest unmet need—for each other, for

their children, and for themselves. Additional areas that are important buffers in the role as parent include physical, emotional, and social support. Each woman considers her partner to be her greatest source of support, and each couple describes themselves in terms of a team. For example, although Jo and Janet felt strong in their relationship prior to having a child, they described feeling amazed at how well they complement and support each other as parents. Mary and Beth stated that they are visibly present at their daughter’s school, frequently making time in their work schedules to be there together or individually. Paige and Lydia described themselves as a great parenting team as well, and emphasize the importance of the support they provide to one another in coming out. They are grateful to have a significant other with whom to share coming out experiences, and described being keenly aware of the importance of acting as a buffer for one another throughout this process. Finally, there are many other avenues of support that each couple receives and feels extremely grateful for. Family and friends, neighbors, faith communities, and organizations such as Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and Rainbow Families, are essential sources of support for these families as they traverse—and in many ways carve out—the terrain for future LGBT families.

A fifth and final theme that emerged from these women’s stories concerns the positive and hopeful aspects of being a lesbian-headed family today. All of the couples report feeling pleasantly surprised at the degree to which they and their children have been accepted in various life environments. While the parents have done the ground work to insure that their children are safe, they are pleased at the level of open mindedness they have encountered on their journeys. Jo and Janet and Paige and Lydia noted that a major advantage to their children as members of a lesbian-headed family is their value for diversity and differentness; they hope and believe that their children will internalize this value as they grow. Mary described the advantages that her family has experienced as a result of how hard she has worked to develop her identity as a lesbian, and her belief that this same hard work is going into developing her family identity, into her relationship with Beth, and into parenting. She feels strengthened by this process, and states that her family has benefitted by her growth.

Each of the couples talked about the joys of parenting, of being in relationship with one another, and being a family. Paige and Lydia, and Jo, described the wonder of seeing the world through their children’s eyes. Paige went on to describe the joy she feels when she sees her children and Lydia being in love with each other and that she likes to see how this experience brings out special qualities in each. Jo described the experience of seeing the world through Christopher’s eyes as “precious.” Beth and Mary love to talk about Jessica’s love for life, how happy she is all the time, and how much they love spending time with her. There are not yet many LGBT families (the 1990’s is seen as the beginning of a baby boom for lesbian and gay couples) that have preceded these families and they are indeed carving a path for like

families in the future. Despite a lack of models from which they can create their own family rituals, each individual takes great joy in parenting, loving, and looking out for the welfare of her children.

The hopes and dreams that each parent has for her children and family contain many positive expectations: they want the world to be kind to their children, they hope their families can weather the changes they will go through and have fun in the process, they hope that societal homophobia decreases and that the world continues to grow in its acceptance of persons who are LGBT, and they hope their children feel loved at all times and have a strong sense of self.

Additional comments from the participants are worth noting given they highlight additional aspects of the coming out process and how this affects each person. Paige shared her reflections on the constant presence of sexual orientation as a personal identifier. Whether she is at work and notices students looking at pictures of her family that are on her desk, or with her family in public and her boys call out for one of their mom's, she is frequently conscious of the fact that she is a lesbian. Lydia believes that while it is important for her to be out, she does not often relish the experience of coming out. Mary commented on religious institutions and her belief that over time they are "coming around;" specifically, she emphasized her perspective that the negative perceptions many followers of these institutions hold of LGBT people is proving to be untrue by the overall goodness that exists amongst LGBT individuals. Beth shared her resolve to be out by stating she is making a choice to be who she is. She also stated that she hopes LGBT teachers will one day be able to be out in their schools and that we will once again have a U.S. President to embrace the gay community. Jo and Janet returned to their identities as lesbians and the importance of showing their children that they accept themselves for who they are. They believe that having a solid foundation in their own identities, in their relationship with one another, and as a family are essential ingredients for their children to develop a strong sense of self as they grow up.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study provides a unique contribution to the literature on lesbian parents in that it explores the ongoing coming out process of lesbians, as individuals, partners, and parents. In addition, it is relatively uncommon to find small-sample, qualitative and descriptive research of this type, though it is called for by several researchers (Kahn, 1991; Laird, 1994; Morris, 1997). Only by listening to the stories of women who are lesbians and parents will we begin to better understand the unique challenges that they face, and strengths that they hold, in a world where they are becoming ever more visible.

The experience of spending time with the three couples who so generously participated in the present study was nothing short of amazing. Their stories speak volumes to the strength, perseverance, and optimism that each woman has regarding her ability to create and maintain a healthy family. All three took valuable time away from one another and their children to share with this interviewer their

experiences and beliefs related to coming out and parenting. It is hoped that this paper does adequate justice to the commitment each person has made to being out, maintaining their relationships, and providing a safe and nurturing environment for their children.

Results of the current study are not generalizable. While all of the participants are Caucasian and middle class, the sample size does not warrant generalizability of any sort; rather, the results are meant to provide the reader with rich information from which to develop future research. The current study followed the research methodology reviewed in Chapter Three. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic inquiry fit well with the focus of the current study to explore both the coming out process for lesbian parents and the effect that the transition to parenthood had on coming out experiences. The feedback phase of the research, during which time the author obtained input from each of the participants, as well as this author's advisor and partner, was invaluable in ensuring the accurate portrayal of each participant's story and added to the richness of information. It is hoped that readers will find this document useful.

An aspect of the naturalistic inquiry that has not yet been completed is that which addresses theoretical fit. As stated earlier, much of the research that was reviewed for this paper incorporated intergenerational and feminist theories into its framework. Both of these theories fit well with the results of the current study. Intergenerational theory examines patterns of behavior that may be transmitted from one generation to the next as a way to understand strengths or challenges of current generations. Hartman and Laird (1983) describe how current generations are tied to the past:

Although families are, of course, embedded in a larger culture, they also develop their own styles or cultures over the generations, and these traditions profoundly affect the lives of their members. The living are intricately bound to those who have come before, both to their wider, historicocultural forebears, and more specifically, to their own ancestors (pp. 76-77).

With respect to families in the present study, family of origin played a significant and pivotal role as participants strove to create positive connections with family members who were not initially accepting of their sexual orientation. The hard work and patience required of these women to successfully navigate this process continues to pay off over time. Beth's experience of rejection by her surrogate family illuminates the importance of intergenerational patterns that may be broader than one's own genetic or environmental lineage. For Beth, many of the values that she learned from her surrogate family reside in her home today, and the chasm that exists in her relationship with this family has left her with feelings of sadness and emptiness.

Feminist theories are diverse, but a fundamental tenet of each is that women's lives are at the center of study and analysis (Richardson and Robinson, 1993). Because not all women are alike, additional variables such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, age, and religion are important areas to explore so as to not perpetuate the oppression of women. The current study was developed to focus on the lives

of a special sub-group of women—lesbian mothers. In the present study, it is striking to see how each woman perceives herself to have become stronger and more confident in her identity over time, despite overwhelming societal assumptions that she is heterosexual (Rich, 1980). Each participant has determined that there will be a place in our society for her as an individual, as part of a couple, and as the head of a family. Without many models from which to create their families, these participants—and many like them—have decided to simply forge ahead and create a structure, framework, and rituals that fit for them and their families.

Directions for future research are many and varied, and this researcher does not pretend to know all of the possible directions that may be taken. Additional exploratory research is clearly needed to share stories of LGBT families and thereby increase our knowledge of who these families are, the struggles they face and how they cope with them, and the ways in which they prosper. Storytelling is a way that many families pass their traditions, values, and history from one generation to the next. Within the LGBT community, research is one avenue that can provide a forum for such stories to be shared in order for community members to model for and learn from one another.

Typically, the current study points to the importance of future research focusing on the period of adolescence and how families cope with this developmental stage. Each of the three families shared concerns about how their children will fare during late elementary school and middle school when they begin hearing the words “fag,” “gay,” and “dyke.” Likewise, they are also concerned that their children will be made fun of when their family structure becomes known to their peers. Mary and Beth shared their expectations with their daughter’s teachers and principal and are satisfied that school personnel will respond appropriately in such situations. Yet it is impossible to altogether prevent incidents of taunting or harassment, and thus each of these parents will need to plan for how they will support their children through difficult times. Research that focuses on this area could be immensely helpful to LGBT parents who are guiding their children through adolescence.

Another important area for future research is that of social support. Each of the participants in the current study strongly emphasized the important role that family of origin continues to play in their lives. What about this support is helpful, and in why? In addition, how can those whose families of origin are unaccepting—and thus unable to provide needed support—create relationships with others that meet similar needs for connection and unconditional regard? Future research could contribute greatly to the lives of many LGBT individuals, couples, and families, by further exploring the richness of relationships and identifying those qualities that contribute to feelings of personal well-being and belonging.

Future research focusing on the relationship between child well-being and strength of one’s lesbian identity and relationship with a significant other would be extremely useful. All participants in this study stressed the importance of being solid in their identity and in their relationship with one another to their

children's well-being. In what ways do these parental strengths affect child well-being? Operationalizing what constitutes a solid lesbian identity and a positive, supportive relationship and correlating these variables with specific aspects of child well-being may help lesbian parents understand the ways in which they can strengthen their sense of inner security and relationship with a life partner, enhance parenting experiences, and support their child's development.

Two important areas that were not explored in this study include socioeconomic status and race. All of the families interviewed were Caucasian and middle class; the challenges and benefits associated with being a lesbian-headed family in this study, while not generalizable, are likely to be quite different than they would be if cultural variables related to race were factored in, and if the socioeconomic status of the participants were different. Such research is warranted and necessary, and should include cultural issues associated with adopting children from cultural backgrounds that are different from the parents.

Finally, implications for therapy are threefold: 1) it is important to review with lesbian clients who are parents issues related to the quality of their relationship with members of their family of origin, particularly their parents. Each participant in this study noted that it is extremely important that they have a positive connection with their parents, and each achieved this goal through hard work and patience. 2) Within lesbian-headed families, preparing parents to develop skills to support their children through an adolescence that may include a barrage of homophobic experiences is essential. Parents may also experience homophobia from their adolescent children as these children attempt to fit in with social groups that they have deemed important; developing coping skills to work through these experiences will be important. 3) All of the families in this study exhibit many strengths: hope for the future; respect for themselves, one another, and their children; and great dedication to parenting. These are only a few examples, and any type of supportive individual, couples, or family therapy will benefit by building upon and exploring these and other areas of client resilience.

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APPENDIX A**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Age of partner #1 _____ Age of partner #2 _____

Race/Ethnicity of partner #1 _____

Race/Ethnicity of partner #2 _____

Age and sex of each child _____

Education:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than a high school diploma | <input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate coursework |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High School diploma | <input type="checkbox"/> Masters degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D. |

Income:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than \$20,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$35,000-\$39,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$70,000-\$79,999 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$20,000-\$24,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$40,000-\$49,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$80,000-\$89,999 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$25,000-\$29,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$50,000-\$59,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> Over \$90,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$30,000-\$34,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$60,000-\$69,999 | |

Describe your spiritual or religious identity, if any: _____

Describe the spiritual or religious identity in your family of origin, if any: _____

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

The Ongoing “Coming Out” Process Of Lesbian Parents

Susan M. Conlin, Marriage and Family Therapy Department, University of Wisconsin-Stout, is conducting a research project titled, The Ongoing “Coming Out” Process Of Lesbian Parents. We would appreciate your participation in this study.

It is not anticipated that this study will present any medical risk or social risk to you. The information gathered will be audiotaped, which will then be transcribed. Any information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and any reports of the findings of this research will not contain your name or any other identifying information.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. If at any time you wish to stop participating in this research, you may do so, without coercion or prejudice. Just inform the researcher.

Once the study is completed, the analyzed findings would be available for your information. In the meantime if you have any questions, please contact: Susan M. Conlin, Marriage and Family Therapy Department, University of Wisconsin-Stout, (612) 872-1772.

Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the researcher or research advisor and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair of UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI, 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.

Consent Form

I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and I may discontinue my participation at any time without prejudice.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to investigate the topic, The Ongoing “Coming Out” Process Of Lesbian Parents.

I further understand that any information about me that is collected during this study will be held in the strictest of confidence and will not be part of my permanent record. I understand that in order for this research to be effective and valuable certain personal identifiers need to be collected. I also understand that the strictest of confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study and that only the researchers will have access to the confidential information. I understand that at the conclusion of this study all records which identify individual participants will be destroyed. I am aware that I have not and am not waiving any legal or human rights by agreeing to this participation.

By signing below I verify that I am 18 years of age or older, in good mental and physical condition, and that I agree to and understand the conditions listed above.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

- * This interview will last approximately one and one half hours. It will be audiotaped, and all questions will be asked of each of you. Please take your time and let me know if you have any questions.
- 1) In your own words, please describe your coming out process. Start at the point at which you began to think of yourself as a lesbian, and continue up to the point when you began to actively plan to have a child.
 - 2) What advantages did you see in coming out at this point in your life?
 - 3) Describe your coming out process beginning at the point when you began to actively plan to have a child up to the present.
 - 4) What advantages did you see in coming out at this point in your life?
 - 5) Describe your coming out process as a couple. How was this similar to or different from your coming out process as an individual?
 - 6) How did becoming a couple change your identity as a lesbian?
 - 7) As you reflect on your coming out process, in what ways did having a child impact this process?
 - 8) Do you find yourself placing limits of any kind on the coming out process, or treading carefully, to protect your child(ren) or family?
 - 9) How has having a child changed your identity as a family? [If child is school age: Have you told your child that you are lesbians? Does your child ask questions either related to your being lesbians or that your family structure is one that is headed by two women?].
 - 10) Since having a child, in what ways do you feel strengthened in your identity as a lesbian, as a couple, and as a family?
 - 11) How would you describe your strengths as a family?
 - 12) As parents, what are your sources of physical, emotional, and social support?
 - 13) Since having a child, in what ways do you experience stress?
 - 14) Since having a child, in what ways do you feel energized?
 - 15) Do you have any concerns about being a lesbian-headed family in our society and/or the community in which you currently live?
 - 16) As a lesbian-headed family, do you feel that you have particular advantages and/or special experiences that you offer to your children, community, and society?
 - 17) How do these concerns and advantages impact whether and when you choose to come out?

- 18) What are your hopes and dreams for your family?
- 19) Do you have any final thoughts about what the coming out process has meant to each of you as individuals, as a couple, and as a family?