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The Impact of Legal Inequality on Power Dynamics and Parental Identity in Planned Lesbian Families

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THE IMPACT OF LEGAL INEQUALITY ON POWER DYNAMICS AND PARENTAL IDENTITY IN PLANNED LESBIAN FAMILIES

By

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Dedicated to Gurl.
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation broadly examines the impact of legal inequality on planned lesbian families, and particularly on co-parents. Data come from in-depth interviews with 27 women in planned lesbian families who conceived a child (themselves or with a partner) via artificial insemination. I explore how co-parents’ legal inequality affects their ability to create equitable families and also how co-parents negotiate a parental identity in a hostile legal and social climate with no institutional scripts to draw on.

The first part of my dissertation sheds light on the importance of the availability of legal second-parent adoption for achieving equality in lesbian relationships and illustrates how crucial power is in relationships, even when partners are same-sexed. Previous research found that the majority of lesbian couples tend to value and accomplish parity in their relationships, providing grounds for optimism about the diminution of power as a component of intimate relations in such families. However, due to sample accessibility, previous research has been limited to states where both women had parental equality under the law. In contrast, the present study finds that the quality of the couple relationship is profoundly affected by legal strictures. I apply Lipman-Blumen’s (1984) concepts of marcomanipulation and micromanipulation to understand how legal inequality creates conditions that lend themselves to a power dynamic in lesbian families that mimics traditional heterosexual marriage.

The second part of my dissertation explores the process by which co-parents construct parental identities when there are no institutional scripts to draw on. Previous research assumed that co-parents seek a mother identity, but this study illustrates that not all co-parents desire that status. Rather, they actively carved out a parental identity that reconciled their sex, gender identity, and role in the family. Co-parents’ identity construction was made difficult due to threats from legal and social discrimination, along with incongruence between their gender identities and motherhood norms. As a result of these struggles, co-parents in this study identified in one of three ways: 1) As “mathers,” 2) as fathers, or 3) as other mothers. Insofar as co-parents successfully unhinge the relationship between woman and mother, they provide a provocative challenge to gendered family arrangements.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Planned lesbian families have the potential to undermine the ideology of the hegemonic nuclear family and facilitate broader gender equality. This potential arises because in lesbian households parents are of the same sex, so sex cannot determine the household division of labor and childcare. Such couples can elide the “power immanent in gender, and gender relations themselves will be profoundly disrupted” (Sullivan 2004:8). Planned lesbian families have the opportunity to distribute paid and household labor evenly, undermine notions of family steeped in biological relatedness, refuse to gender their children, and resist ideologies of involved motherhood. Since the gendered power relations in traditional heterosexual families are central to the institutionalized inequality women face, creating a new family form that lacks them could undermine the patriarchal system.

A desire for relational equality, including equity in household chores and financial contributions, has been documented, although the findings are generalizable only to middle-class, white, lesbian families (Dunne 2000; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Kurdek 1993, 1998; Tasker & Golombok 1998; Sullivan 2004). Most previous studies of lesbian parent households were conducted in urban centers of gay-friendly states that permit same-sex and same-sex second-parent adoption and that offer resources and social support to gay families. Largely unexamined are the welfare and family dynamics of same-sex parents in less gay-friendly states where marriage and adoption are illegal. In particular, little is known about how legal pressures affect equality in planned lesbian families.

While the findings of previous studies conducted in gay-friendly states provide grounds for optimism about the possibilities of gender equality, we must consider how legal inequality affects family and power dynamics in lesbian families. Eighty percent of U.S. states do not explicitly allow same-sex second-parent adoption. Co-parents, the parents not legally or biologically related to their child, are particularly vulnerable; should they lose their partner through death or relationship dissolution, they have no legal rights to their child.

My dissertation is broadly concerned with how legal inequality affects planned lesbian families, particularly co-parents. I address three primary research questions: First, how do legal
pressures impact equality in planned lesbian families? What is the connection between a lack of legal standing and the potential of these families to create an alternative - more equal - social sphere? Second, how does lacking legal parental status affect co-parents’ personal and interpersonal negotiation of parenthood in planned lesbian families? Third, how do co-parents negotiate their parental identity a) in light of dominant motherhood ideologies and their gender identities, and b) in an institutional context that does not legally recognize them as parents?

This dissertation is designed to make several contributions. First, an exploration of planned lesbian families may provide a glimpse into how family and parenthood can be more equitably “accomplished” by undoing gender, thus facilitating broader gender equality. In the case of lesbian parents, because they are of the same sex, sex does not affect the determination of the household functions and childcare they perform. Therefore, the possibility exists that lesbians can parent and construct their families to undermine the reproduction of gendered power relations. This dissertation can contribute to the burgeoning research on how lesbian parents undo gender.

Second, this dissertation will fill gaps in the existing literature by examining how legal inequality affects equity in planned lesbian families, which hereto has not been addressed. Since the majority of lesbian families live in states that do not afford them legal protections, this is an important contribution.

Third, I also explore the impact of legal inequality on co-parents’ identity negotiation. In particular, this dissertation explores how adopting a butch gender identity affects co-parents’ experiences. Few empirical studies have analyzed how lesbians’ gender identities (i.e., butch/femme/dyke/aggressive) shape their attitudes and practices regarding parenting. The gender identity of lesbians in the context of parenthood may be understudied because of the difficulty of measuring gender identity and the inherent crudeness of categories such as butch and femme. However, overlooking gender identity is not the answer to measurement difficulties, since gender – especially gender nonconformity – has historically been an important component of lesbian identity. It is important to understand how butch women, who are typically masculine in some capacity, reconcile their masculinity with motherhood, which is traditionally considered a characteristic of femininity.

Another potential contribution of this study is the light it can shed on the experiences of co-parents who are not biologically or legally related to their children. Understanding the
experiences of co-parents is important because co-parents represent a cultural and legal disruption of the patriarchal, nuclear family. With the growing number of same-sex families, courts have to determine how to deal with families that fail to follow the one mother/one father model. Planned lesbian families have forced courts to consider how co-parents, via social parenting, are creating a category of kinship and a social identity that has not previously existed in modern western society. Thus, research on co-parents has both theoretical and practical value.

A final potential contribution stems from the context of same-sex marriage and adoption, which currently are political and legal battlegrounds; research about same-sex families serves to increase social awareness and has the potential to further social change. Currently same-sex marriage is legal in five states – Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, and New Hampshire – and the District of Columbia. Same-sex second-parent adoption is legal in nine states – California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont – and the District of Columbia.

This dissertation proceeds as follows. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the theoretical orientations that provide a useful framework to analyze relationship dynamics and identity struggles in planned lesbian families. I also review the research to date on the experiences of planned lesbian families. I am organizing the dissertation as two empirical, stand-alone articles, preceded by this introductory chapter and followed by a conclusion chapter. Chapter 2 (the first empirical paper) addresses how co-parents’ disadvantaged legal position affects power dynamics in such a way that led, in circuitous ways, to the reification of traditional, patriarchal patterns of inequality. Chapter 3 (the second empirical paper) examines the threats co-parents face to constructing a parental identity and the three ways they resolved their parental identity issues. The final chapter summarizes the main findings and offers directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Below, I begin by defining terms that are relevant in this dissertation. Next, I discuss how gender and identity theories provide a useful framework for understanding the concepts relevant to my dissertation. I begin with gender theory and review the lesbian motherhood literature as it pertains to gender. In the latter half of the literature review, I move to an overview of identity
theory and indicate how the concepts of identity and identity work are useful for understanding some of the emergent themes in the lesbian family literature.

**Defining Terms**

The distinction between motherhood, mothering, and mother is discussed below. Next, I discuss some of the definitional ambiguities of the term lesbian and describe the conceptualization of it used in this study. I then describe how gender identity will be conceptualized in this study. Finally, I discuss the terminology I will use to indicate parents’ relational status to their children.

**Motherhood, Mothering, Mother**

Dominant ideologies of motherhood and mothering continue to shape motherhood as an oppressive institution by essentializing it. For example, insofar as motherhood is considered natural and the province of women, it functions to keep women less competitive in the paid labor force, or keeps them out of it entirely. Dominant ideologies also essentialize mother by assuming that all mothers have fixed, universal traits. Discourses that situate mothers as exclusively heterosexual, married women who are biologically related to their children maintain the status quo of the patriarchal nuclear family, which reproduces gendered social relations and labels those who depart from this arrangement as deviant.

While I recognize that the use of the terms motherhood, mothering, and mother in contemporary discourses are essentialist, I employ a constructionist approach to these terms; such an approach emphasizes that there is nothing natural about motherhood—one is not born a mother, but becomes a mother. This approach underscores that there is no universal experience of being a mother, but rather, mothering varies across time and place and is shaped by race, class, and sexual orientation (O’ Reilly 2004). Thus, membership in the category of “mother” is not limited to people who are women, married, heterosexual, white, middle-class, or biologically related to their children.

**Who Qualifies as a Lesbian?**

In both popular and scholarly use, the term lesbian has suffered definitional and measurement ambiguity. It has been understood as a behavior, a social category, a performance, and as an identity. Lesbianism is notoriously difficult to quantify since it is unclear who should be counted as a lesbian. Anyone who has ever had a sexual attraction toward another woman? Anyone who
has ever had sexual relations with another woman? Anyone who is currently in a relationship with another woman?

In this dissertation, the term lesbian will be used as both an identity and a linguistic convenience. I follow past research in defining lesbians as women who identify themselves as lesbians (Brown 1995; Weston 1991). However, it is important to note that some women may choose another term to describe their sexual identity. For example, in Mamo’s (2007) study of 36 lesbians, 14 did not identify as lesbians, but chose other identifiers such as dyke, queer, gay, etc. If this occurs, I will carefully consider the meaning these terms have for respondents, but still include them in the larger category of lesbian. In this case, lesbian becomes a linguistic convenience.

The use of this definition does not suggest a universal experience of being lesbian or that lesbians as a group share a stable or fixed identity; rather, “lesbian encompasses an experiential diversity that is extremely complex, shifting, situated, and intersectional with other axes of difference such as race, gender, class, nationality, age, and geographic location” (Mamo 2007:8).

**Gender Identity**

In this dissertation I will follow a conceptualization of gender identity as “a person’s relative sense of his or her own masculine or feminine identity” (Money 1965). I consider butch, femme, dyke, baby butch, stone butch, etc. to be gender identities. As with all identities, I do not consider gender identities to be fixed, but fluid and shifting.

**Lesbian Mother Terminology**

There is little consensus in the literature regarding how lesbian parents, with their varying legal and social statuses, should be identified. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to parents who gave birth as biological mothers/parents and the partner in the couple who is not biologically or legally related to the child as the co-parent.

**Gender Theory**

I begin by providing a brief overview of theories of gender as they relate to this dissertation. First, I review conceptualizations of gender as an institution and gender as something people “do.” Next, I provide a brief overview of butch and femme, which some scholars refer to as lesbian genders (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). I then examine how gender operates through motherhood ideologies, mandating a culturally-specific definition of “good” mothering. In light of dominant mothering ideologies, I analyze how lesbians are excluded from “good
mother” status. Finally, I discuss how lesbian parents have an opportunity to undo gendered power relations.

Gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two different categories and organizing inequality around those differences (Ferree, Lorber, and Hess 1999; Lorber 1994; Risman 1998). As an institution, gender operates to organize social life (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Risman 1998). Gender shapes social life on the individual level (the binary gender system), the interactional level (norms and expectations regarding femininity and masculinity), and the institutional level (structuring institutions such as the family along gender lines) (Connell 1987; Risman 1998). Gender as an institution mandates appropriate practices for men and women, who then “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) through interaction with others. When gender is conceptualized as dynamic, every interaction represents an opportunity to conform to or resist gender norms. Just as ripples can move a sandbar, interactions that feature women as the competent equals of men can slowly erode inequality (Ridgeway and Correll 2000).

Gender is an important theoretical consideration in my dissertation, since the patriarchal family is organized by gender, and lesbian families have the opportunity to undo gender. “The family division of labor in which women mother gives socially and historically specific meaning to gender itself” (Chodorow 1978:38). Motherhood ideology is a central way through which the gendered division of labor is produced and reproduced in families. Lesbian parents transgress motherhood ideologies by disrupting the gendered division of labor (Dalton and Bielby 2000). Lesbian parents can subvert power structures that validate patriarchy through “the possibilities of self-definition and organizing family structures that are removed from the traditional one mother/one father model” (Wald 1997:182).

Gender and power relations are not necessarily absent in lesbian relationships. First, power dynamics may exist in lesbian relationships if the women follow a traditionally gendered breadwinner/caretaker relationship. Most research focuses on the majority of lesbian couples, who achieve a relatively equitable division of labor, yet a minority of couples conforms to a more traditional division of labor (Chan., Brooks, Raboy, and Patterson 1998; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Kurdek 1995; Patterson 1996; Sullivan 2004). Couples in Sullivan’s (2004) study of 34 artificial insemination (AI) lesbian couples in San Francisco discussed the painstakingly deliberate efforts they made to equitably arrange household tasks and paid work.
When couples consciously committed to equitable parenting and when paid work was structured so that neither was financially dependent on the other, household tasks were divided most evenly. Couples who adhered to a traditional caretaker/breadwinner arrangement, experienced a decline in the stay-at-home partner’s ability to influence family decisions and negotiate childcare and household tasks (Dalton and Bielby 2000; Sullivan 2004). Such research attests to the relationship between earning capacity and power, even in relationships without a man present. Thus, lesbians, too, can be party to a gendered power dynamic.

In a study of planned lesbian families, it is important to distinguish between sex and gender; while lesbians are of the same sex, they may not lay claim to the same gender. Unfortunately, in the lesbian motherhood literature sex and gender are often used interchangeably, which obscures nuances in lesbians’ gender identities, i.e., butch/femme/dyke, etc., which may translate into important differences in mothering experiences and in the division of labor. Because lesbians are of the same sex, sex is not a variable that determines task delegation, but power relations based on gender may exist. It is possible that gender identities, such as butch and femme, may be bound up with power.

**Butch, Femme, and Gender**

Mothers are expected to be feminine, so it is important to consider how lesbians’ gender identities—as butch or femme—impact their status and experiences as mothers. Historically, lesbians have played with gender identity, carving out new spaces for themselves to exist beyond the traditional gender binary.

Butches, femmes, and the butch-femme dyad are a central part of lesbian history (Faderman 1991). Butch and femme categories have served as conceptual frameworks that have organized lesbian communities (Crawley 2001). Butch and femme as categories have persisted over time, although the understandings of, and extent of adherence to the categories have varied. While butch and femme identities were popular among lesbians in the 1940’s and 1950’s, they went underground in the latter part of the 1960’s and 1970’s (Faderman 1991; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993), but have re-emerged since the 1980’s (Crawley 2001; Faderman 1992; Stein 1997).

Butch and femme are conceptualized as lesbian genders and as performances or erotic play (Crawley 2001). Rubin (1992:467) defined them as:

. . . ways of coding identities and behaviors that are both connected to and distinct from standard societal roles for men and women. . . “Femmes” identify as feminine with the larger
“butches” identify primarily as masculine or prefer masculine signals, personal appearance, and styles.

Faderman (1991) argued that butch and femme emerged among working class lesbian communities as a means to gain status in a male-dominated society. She situated women’s enactment of butch and femme gender roles in the 1940’s, 50’s, and 60’s as an indication of the limitations faced by lesbians of that era, who saw their gender identity options as lying only in acting on caricatures of heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Other scholars (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993), however, have argued that butch and femme emerged not as caricatured gender roles, but as positive gender constructions stemming from lesbians’ attempts to claim identities, power and space for themselves. Butches often dressed and developed personas to signal their willingness to engage in fights with men for the right to patronize bars (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis suggested that butch and femme genders broke down the gender structure in dominant society.

In the late 1960’s, butch and femme came under fire from feminists as mimicking heterosexual roles and setting up power relations akin to the power relations men have with women. As a result, butch and femme went underground until the 1980’s (Faderman 1991; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993).

Butch and femme are also conceptualized as performance or erotic play (Case 1993; Faderman 1992). This framework positions butch and femme as fluid styles rather than essences or identities, and thus as disconnected from power dynamics. Case (1993) argued that thinking of butch and femme as styles reduces gender to the status of play and consequently dismantles notions of biological gender. Newton (1996) took issue with Case’s argument, stressing that butch and femme are not theatrical, but instead are “real” and real in their consequences. Newton argued that butch and femme were taken seriously, and lesbians, especially butches, were often ridiculed, marginalized, and physically attacked for adopting these identities.

Butch and femme have re-emerged, although they no longer resemble the butch and femme of the 1950’s (Crawley 2001; Faderman 1992; Stein 1997). Today, the lesbian community has adopted revised butch and femme identities. Neo butch and femme are conducted today with much greater flexibility, although some lesbians still adhere to strict representations of butch and femme (Faderman 1992). Faderman suggests that neo butch/femme serve as “a defiant
proclamation of lesbianism. To them it is much more honorable than being a lesbian who can pass for straight among heterosexuals” (Faderman 1992:587).

Many lesbians insist that butch and femme are not replications of patriarchal categories, but rather original expressions of gender that transcend the gender binary. Butch lesbians who are accused of replicating patriarchy claim that their masculinity is viewed as male only because we lack the language to describe female masculinity (Halberstam 1998). Halberstam’s interviewees often explained butch as a missing gender, discredited and unrecognized, and this aperture forced butches to be defined in terms of masculinity. Female masculinity would be the better term, they argued. Butches in Newton’s (1993) study claimed to act masculine not because they want to be male, but as resistance to a pervasive construction of femaleness and to publicly announce desire for other women.

Lesbians have been critically examining sex roles. Instead of accepting the old explanation that was handed out to them that gay women are trying to be more male, they have identified cross-behavior as an important breakthrough, going beyond the confines of sex-role categorized behavior. For the lesbian this means that she is not trying to be like a man, but that she is trying to be more a human being. (Stein 1997:80)

In sum, butch and femme have been an integral part of lesbianism in the 20th century and continue to be popular today (Crawley 2001; Faderman 1992; Stein 1997), although ideas about butch and femme are not as rigid as they were in the 1940’s and 1950’s (Faderman 1992). Insofar as lesbians use butch and femme to organize their lives and sense of identity, it is important to consider how butch and femme affect parenting experiences.

**Motherhood Ideologies**

Motherhood ideologies are one means through which gender operates to structure the family that end up supporting the patriarchy. Motherhood discourses are hegemonic, since they are taken for granted and rarely questioned (DiQuinzio 1999). Motherhood ideologies mandate what appropriate mothering is and what characteristics ideal mothers should have. According to contemporary motherhood ideologies, women have a natural competency for nurturance and motherhood, which renders them best suited for the home and functions to keep them marginalized in the workforce or out of it altogether. Contemporary motherhood ideologies mandate that women assume primary responsibility for child care and the lion’s share of domestic labor, while men work outside the home gaining income, status, and human capital,
thus perpetuating the gendered division of labor (DiQuinzio 1999). Women are often mommy tracked or relegated to low-wage jobs, which facilitates women’s dependence on a male income or the state for survival. Contemporary motherhood ideologies also promote inequality by socially and sometimes legally sanctioning those that do not adhere to these norms, preserving the heterosexual, nuclear family.

Motherhood discourses situate appropriate motherhood squarely within the context of a heterosexual, nuclear family. Family law, social policies, and cultural representations endorse the white, married, middle-class, heterosexual family as the ideal (Abramovitz 1996; Fineman 1995; Thorne 1993). DiLapi (1989) described a “motherhood hierarchy” that rewards those who most closely conform to the ideal. The mother at the top of the hierarchy is:

- a heterosexual woman, of legal age, married in a traditional nuclear family, fertile, pregnant by intercourse with her husband, and wants to bear children. She is likely to be able-bodied, of normal mental functioning, of middle to upper-middle class status, and supported primarily by her husband. (DiLapi 1989:110)

Similarly, Hoffnung (1998) conceptualized the “motherhood mystique” to illustrate the connections between sex, gender, motherhood, and patriarchy.

...the body of work assigned to mothers – caring for child, home, and husband – fit together in a noncontradictory manner; to be a good mother, a woman must like being a mother and all the work that goes with it; a woman’s intense, exclusive devotion to mothering is good for her children. (Hoffnung 1998: 282)

The prevailing motherhood ideology in the United States is that of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996). According to Hays (1996:46):

Intensive mothering is a child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive ideology in which mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture and development of the sacred child and in which children’s needs take precedence over the individual needs of their mothers’.

Women experience the “cultural contradiction of motherhood” as they face competing demands on their time and energy (Hays 1996). Mothers are expected to be competitive and ambitious in the workplace, yet nurturing and unselfish in child-rearing. Curiously, while the percentage of women in the workforce has increased, the ideology of intensive mothering has not lessened,
leaving women in a lurch. The competing logics of mothering and working in the paid labor force result in a no-win situation for women (Hays 1996).

Mothering ideologies function to police all women’s mothering despite the fact that some women may not want or be able to enact such ideologies (O’Reilly 2004). In fact, feminists argue that motherhood has different meanings and is enacted differently based on (among other things) a woman’s class, race, and sexual preference (Arendell 2000). Women who do not mother in ways congruent with motherhood ideals, like lesbians, single mothers, or disabled mothers are labeled as unfit, deviant, and bad mothers (Arendell 2000).

**Lesbians Cannot be Good Mothers**

Lesbian mothers are an example of one group excluded from good mother status, as they depart from motherhood ideologies in several ways. Historically, lesbian motherhood has been considered an oxymoron insofar as “lesbians are presumptively non-procreative and mothers are presumptively heterosexual” (Thompson 2002:6). Lesbian motherhood is considered unnatural in popular discourse. Lesbians also subvert gender norms; dominant ideology depicts mothers as feminine, yet popular stereotypes often feature lesbians as masculine. The media and conservative pundits have framed lesbians as unfit parents because their children presumably have no father figure. Popular rhetoric has pathologized lesbians, portraying them as oversexualized, egocentric, and immoral, and their relationships are critiqued as unstable (Hequembourg 2007).

Conventional wisdom suggests that heterosexuality is requisite for motherhood; thus, lesbians find themselves struggling to prove themselves as “good mothers” (Hequembourg and Farrell 1999). While assisted reproduction makes lesbian motherhood more feasible, lesbians still face perceptions that their sexual preference makes them ill-equipped to mother. The dominant ideology of mothering frames women as having a natural competence for mothering, but the idea of natural competence is not extended to lesbians.

One of the reason lesbians are not candidates for “good mother” status is that, stereotypically or in actuality, they violate norms of femininity associated with motherhood. Lesbians are often characterized as masculine man-haters. The association of femininity with nurturance precludes masculine women from being considered appropriate mothers. This is problematic for some lesbians, who, as a group, have historically violated gender norms, usually by adopting butch roles (Faderman 1991).
Lesbian mothers simply cannot win. Lesbianism is characterized implicitly as false masculinity, an extreme case of penis envy, mimicry of maleness, usurpation of fatherhood, or overt misandry. If lesbians exist presumptively outside the grounds of femininity, they can never function as adequate mothers. Lesbian mothers are on shaky ground when it comes to demonstrating their worthiness. Mother = femininity, lesbian = masculinity, therefore, mother ≠ lesbian. (Thompson 2002:113-14)

Lesbians struggle for a “good mother” identity because they still face relics of an ideology that positioned homosexuality as perverse and immoral. “Mother reads awkwardly against lesbian because, in hegemonic usage, lesbian connotes little more than explicit and perverse sexuality” (Thompson 2002: 6). While homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness, gays and lesbians still face stigmas that threaten their right to parent. Feelings of repugnance toward homosexuals still run deep (Thompson 2002). In a study of how lesbians were characterized in the popular press, Thompson (2002) found they were depicted as potential child molesters and a threat to the family. Fears about lesbians as child molesters are particularly strong if a lesbian has a job working around children because some parents feel their children will be recruited into homosexuality.

Much of the reluctance to accept lesbians as good mothers stems from a fear that their children will be psychologically harmed or be more likely to identify as homosexual (Thompson 2002). Popular rhetoric suggests that children are teased for not having a mother and father, but research finds that children of homosexual parents develop at least as well as their peers and are no more likely than children raised by heterosexual parents to identify as homosexual (Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Tasker 2005).

Undoing Gender

One of the most important contributions of West and Zimmerman’s conceptualization of gender as dynamic and interactional is that if it can be “done” it can also be “undone.” Lorber (2000) called for a degendering movement, in which the division of people into two separate and unequal categories is minimized and eventually eradicated. Lorber (2000:88) argued that “gender can be openly challenged by non-gendered practices in ordinary interaction, in families, childrearing, language, and organization of space.” Deutsch (2007) recently proposed an analytic shift from focusing how gender is done to questioning how gender can be undone. She argued that the conceptualization of doing gender is now commonly used to illustrate how
gender inequality is perpetuated, rather than how it is resisted. Deutsch suggested research needs to focus on:

1) when and how social interactions become less gendered, 2) whether gender can be irrelevant in interaction, 3) whether gendered interactions always underwrite inequality, 4) how the institutional and interactional levels work together to produce change, and 5) interaction as the site of change (Deutsch 2007:106).

The concept of undoing gender is relevant to my study, since some scholars suggest that lesbian-headed families have the opportunity to undo gendered family relations insofar as the power exercised between them will not be attached to gender (Dunne 2000; Sullivan 2004). “If parents do not in their own relationships represent biological sex distinction, then theoretically the power immanent in gender, and gender relations themselves will be profoundly disrupted” (Sullivan 2004:8). Lesbian parents have the unique opportunity to experience motherhood and raise children outside of the gendered, power laden, heterosexual context.

Little empirical work has focused on how and why lesbians undo motherhood. The empirical work that has been done focused on how lesbians undo motherhood in two ways: 1) through a more equitable division of household labor and childcare, and 2) through construction of “chosen” family (Dalton and Bielby 2000; Dunne 2000; Mamo 2007; Sullivan 2004; Weston 1991). I develop each in turn.

**Division of Labor.** Lesbian parents can undo gender by adopting more egalitarian approaches to combining work and parenting (Dunne 2000). Indeed, research has shown that lesbians value equality in their relationship more than heterosexual or gay male couples (Kurdek 2007) and that lesbians report a more equitable division of household and childcare labor and more equal participation in the paid labor force (Chan et al. 1998; Dunne 2000; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Kurdek 1995, 1996; Patterson 1996; Sullivan 2004). In a comparative sample of lesbian and gay couples, it was less likely that lesbian partners specialized in any household tasks (Kurdek 1993).

Two studies of planned lesbian families have explored how lesbians undo gendered family arrangements through an equal division of child and household labor (Dunne 2000; Sullivan 2004). Eight-five percent of AI couples in Sullivan’s San Francisco study (n=34) and 80 percent of the mostly-AI couples in Dunne’s English study (n=37) reported shared parenting. Couples in both studies were very deliberate in the planning and execution of shared parenting. They
reported that shared parenting eased the burden of household work and childcare, making the motherhood experience more enjoyable (Dunne 2000). Mothers in Dunne’s study reported that they sought “integrated lives,” wherein they had valuable time with their children, an identity conferred by the formal workplace, and the ability to contribute financially. A common strategy for accomplishing integrated lives was for both mothers to work part-time, and these mothers said they were willing to make less money in exchange for a better quality of life. In this way, lesbian mothers also challenged the patriarchal market rationale that devalues carework.

Although not all lesbian couples have equitable arrangements, those who do tend to have a disregard for traditional gender roles, which has a positive effect on any couple relationship (Sullivan 2004). Summarizing findings from extensive interviews with Bay Area lesbian mothers, Sullivan (2004:100) concluded:

Not only did Bay Area mothers not employ gender as a mechanism for allocating labor, but the vast majority did divide labor equitably, a finding I think results from their nonadherence to gender as their guide. Among the thirty four Bay Area families, eighty five percent detailed distributions of housework, child care, breadwinning, and financial management such that neither partner was disadvantaged economically or rendered vulnerable, and this in turn appears to have resulted in a balance of power such that partners exercised similar degrees of influence in family decision making.

**Chosen Families.** Lesbian families further destabilize the gendered division of labor and the nuclear family by choosing alternative family arrangements. Weston (1991) referred to such alternatives as “chosen families.” Chosen families may include multiple social mothers (not biologically or legally related to the child but engaged in mothering tasks), a sperm donor or other father figure, and friends who have adopted traditional familial roles. Such arrangements put the narrowness of legal definitions of mother and family into sharp relief. For example, historically courts have only recognized one legal mother, but over the past decade the number of AI lesbian couples who seek legal parental recognition has risen. Courts in gay-friendly states have adapted by recognizing “psychological mothers” or “social mothers” and thereby granting parental status. This recognition by the courts un hinges the link between mother and biology. “This opens the door to redefining the concept of mother; in principle, anyone who actively participates in the act of social reproduction could be deemed a mother as well” (Dalton and
Bielby 2000:39). The move from biological reproduction toward recognition of social reproduction marks a radical departure from the usual endorsement of the nuclear family.

**Identity Theory**

Identity is an important theoretical consideration, since a portion of my dissertation is dedicated to understanding how lesbian parents construct their parental identities. Below, I describe how identity and identity work are conceptualized in this study. Next, I explore how lesbian parents negotiate their identity through assimilation and resistance to patriarchal family structures. I review the dilemma that some lesbians face via the assumption that “lesbian” and “mother” are not compatible identities. Finally, I explore how co-parents construct their parental identities in a climate where they are often not socially and legally recognized.

In this dissertation, I adopt a conceptualization of identity and the self as interrelated; in other words, identity refers to both a social category and an overall sense of who one is (White 1992). I employ an interactionist approach to understanding identity as something actively created and re-created through interaction with others, a process known as identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Identities are not fixed, but are variable and can be manipulated.

**Assimilating and Resisting as Identity Work**

The assimilation/resistance debate is central to much scholarship on lesbian families as well as being a point of controversy in the lesbian community. Assimilation refers to the extent to which lesbians try to integrate themselves into existing structures, while resistance refers to efforts to construct alternatives to hetenormative arrangements and practices. Lesbian parents consciously and unconsciously assimilate and resist in order to legitimate or differentiate themselves and their families.

The assimilation/resistance debate is steeped in the history of the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. During this time, many homosexuals began leaving front marriages and coming out as a political strategy. Those involved in the movement sought to distance themselves from families as they represented the most oppressive of heterosexual arrangements. Indeed, gay liberation theorists framed the family as “a factory of heterosexuality” (Connell 1987:26). Within this political context, some who had left front marriages were struggling for child custody and had to negotiate the contradictory positions of the movement’s anti-family stance with their desire to parent their children. Essays written in the 1970’s and 1980’s reflect
the struggle of those who were “choosing children” and the resulting conflict with or
estrangement from the movement (Sullivan 2004).

The early studies on lesbian families reflect the prevalence of the assimilation/resistance
debate. In the literature on the effects of lesbian parenting on children (for review see Stacey and
Biblarz 2001), much attention was focused on how similar or different same sex parents were
from heterosexual parents, and subsequently how similar or different their children’s outcomes
would be. In this literature, assimilation refers to practices aimed at stressing similarity or
normalcy. For example, many lesbian mothers in Lewin’s (1993) and Hequembourg’s (2007)
studies emphasized their similarity to other heterosexual families and downplayed their lesbian
identities, thus preventing difference from being constructed as deficit. Alternatively, some
scholars and lesbians themselves have argued that lesbian families actively resist patriarchal
oppression by their very existence and everyday parenting decisions (Dunne 2000;

The literature has been one-sided in its representation of the assimilation/resistance debate.
Much of it has focused (sometimes purposefully) on how lesbians assimilate in order to
legitimate same-sex families. Indeed, most lesbians interviewed for studies of lesbian
motherhood have insisted on their similarity to other heterosexual families, despite behaving in
ways that might signal otherwise. Lesbian mothers often deliberately emphasized their mother
status and de-emphasized their lesbian status to validate their identity.

More recently, lesbian motherhood scholarship has shifted to examine how lesbian mothers
simultaneously resist and maintain heteronormative practices (Hequembourg 2007; Lewin 1993;
arguing that lesbians’ experiences did not need to be understood in opposition to or in agreement
with heteronormative experiences. Rather, they transcended such arrangements altogether. She
introduced the concept of chosen families to illustrate that same-sex couples could circumvent
heteronormative family models and reconstruct family as unbounded, fluid, and permeable
(Sullivan 2004).

Building on Weston’s work, Hequembourg (2007) illustrated how lesbian families both
assimilate and resist. Normative mothering discourses pressure lesbians to emphasize sameness
(to heterosexual parents), mostly in an attempt to legitimate parenting in a hostile legal
environment. However, efforts to fit into heteronormative patterns revealed the futility of such
attempts because lesbian parents are “always/already” incompatible with these structures. Hequembourg’s work highlights the liminal space occupied by lesbian parents who must parent within a larger structure in which they do not neatly fit.

The fluidity of resistance and assimilation was illustrated by a couple—Teresa and Monica—in Hequembourg’s (2007) study. Teresa and Monica insisted that they were “just like everyone else”; they very deliberately separated their lesbian status from their mother status. Yet, they described themselves as “just Mom and Dad.” Monica explained that she lacked mothering skills, but felt she knew how to be a successful father. So, while assimilating through claims of normalcy and representing themselves as mom and dad, they simultaneously disrupted categorizations of men must be fathers and women must be mothers.

**Mothers cannot be Good Lesbians**

Recent research confirms that the assimilation/resistance debate is not only alive and well in some gay communities, but staging a comeback (Mamo 2007). One lesbian mother revealed, “We’re not real lesbians [they say]. Real lesbians and sperm don’t mix” (Thompson 2002:47). Lesbians are not immune to the cultural and social constructions found in pop culture, liberation politics, and medical knowledge of lesbians as non-procreative. Some lesbians adopted a homosexual identity predicated on the notion that they would live their lives without men and children, thus liberating them from the patriarchal world.

Indeed, in recent empirical research, lesbians have been divided on whether or not lesbians should be mothers (Hequembourg 2007; Mamo 2007; Mezey 2008; Sullivan 2004; Thompson 2002). For example, many lesbians in Mamo’s (2007) study struggled with how to reconcile the idea of motherhood with deeply-held beliefs that lesbianism exists in opposition to motherhood. The tension between their lesbian identity and their potential mother identity was a crucial factor in determining whether or not to pursue parenthood (Mamo 2007; Mezey 2008). In fact, some lesbians had parenting desires but chose not to parent because they ultimately could not square their lesbianism with motherhood (Mezey 2008). Others, who initially did not want children, were swayed by partners, support groups, and therapy to accept that lesbians could be mothers (Mamo 2007).

Lesbian parents also face threats to their lesbian identity from inside the lesbian community because of criticisms claiming lesbian mothers replicate heterosexual norms and in an echo of
conservative claims, that lesbian motherhood is unnatural. A lesbian non-mother vehemently expressed her disapproval of lesbian motherhood:

Lesbians’ lifestyle totally frees them from the breeding farms of heterosexual family. Yet some lesbians are so totally out of their mind that they go great lengths to replicate and create women’s essential oppression. Worldwide, heterosexual women don’t know how to stop their own breeding apparatus. Lesbians go to extremes of artificial insemination to add to the problem! And what great innovations have these dyke moms created? They have pseudo-marriages of two ‘mom’ families. . . . The lesbian mother is denying her role designed by the Fates who made her a lesbian in the first place. Our role as lesbians is not, and should not be, to replicate the heterosexual nuclear family, and the sometimes sickening romanticizing of motherhood. (Thompson 2002:7)

Ultimately, lesbians find themselves receiving criticism from both outside and inside their communities, rendering both their motherhood and lesbian identities vulnerable.

The Identity of the Co-parent

Lesbians must parent within a structural context that tells them their sexuality renders them ill suited for motherhood; thus, they face a continual struggle to have their parental identity legitimized. Co-parents are particularly vulnerable, since they have no legal or biological tie to their child. When lesbian couples create families through artificial insemination, the birth mother has a biological and therefore legal tie to the child. When lesbians become parents through adoption, neither parent has a biological tie to the child, but one parent is legally recognized. In both cases, one parent is left in the lurch, with no socially or legally recognized tie to the child. Second parent adoption may be a viable option if the couple resides in a state where this is permitted and they have the funds to do so. However, in Florida, adoption by homosexuals is prohibited by law, rendering second parent adoption impossible, and homosexuals who have adopted in Florida have been successfully able to conceal their sexual orientation. So, while all lesbians struggle to be recognized as legitimate parents, co-parents are particularly marginalized.

Research on lesbian mothers more generally and popular press accounts of co-parents indicates that identity issues are salient (Sullivan 2004; Aizley 2006). Co-parents report feelings of limbo between being a mother and not being a mother and being a father and not being a father. The co-parent is not a father substitute, but she is not a genderless parent. She is not
giving birth to the child, but she is the child’s mother (Sullivan 2004). A recurring theme in the narratives of co-parents is the need to forge their own paths.

I am sad. I feel left behind in unmarked territory. I am expecting a baby, but I am not pregnant. I will be a mother, but I won’t have given birth. I will adopt our child legally, but my experience has little or nothing in common with most adoptive parents. There is really no category, no name for what I will be. I am defined by what I am not: a non-biological parent, the non-birthmother. Gays and lesbians often say they spend much of their lives making their own road maps. This feels to me a little too much like making the road (Aizley 2006:10).

Lesbian couples were often very deliberate about including the co-parent in activities with the child in order to negate threats to her motherhood status. Both parents agreed that the biological mother enjoys an emotional and social advantage vis-à-vis their child; further, both parents viewed this inequality as a negative because both placed great importance on having an equal emotional connection to the child (Hequembourg 2007; Sullivan 2004). To counter the birth mother’s relational advantage, many couples designated special time and activities for the co-parent to bond, such as special bath times, song times, or play times (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Sullivan 2004). Co-parents often made great strides to be equally or even more involved in childcare than the biological mother to compensate for not having a biological connection to the child (Sullivan 2004).

Not all co-parents are uncomfortable with their ambiguous identity. Some felt uncomfortable with the mother label and relished their undefined role (Aizley 2006; Sullivan 2004). One co-parent spoke about the fluidity of her role, explaining that she could “step back and forth over gender lines” (Aizley 2006:12). The undefined role of the co-parent allowed some women to play with the complex relationship between their gender and sexuality. Lesbian dad, dyke daddy, and high-femme dad were some of the labels co-parents used to describe themselves (Aizley 2006).

Even if a co-parent is comfortable with her role inside the relationship, her social standing is vulnerable. Public forays proved challenging, since they presented opportunities for questions about who the mother and father were and what name the baby called each parent, questions that can be painful for lesbian co-parents. Some co-parents implemented strategies to legitimize their
tie to the child. For example, one co-parent preferred to carry the baby in her arms, which made her feel more secure in her parental role (Aizley 2006).

Co-parents often discussed the difficulty outsiders have in understanding the concept of dual mothers, which reflects their cultural attachment to the notion that there can be only one mother. When both mothers were present in a social situation, reactions stemmed from confusion to discomfort to outright rejection. People can have a hard time reconciling how a woman who did not give birth or adopt a child can be a mother. This was reflected in a comment to one co-parent in Dunne’s (2000:24) study: “Well if you’re not the biological mother, then what the hell are you?” Depending on the context, co-parents may decide to fully disclose, partially disclose, or pass as the biological mother (Sullivan 2004).

Co-parents (and lesbian mothers more generally) spoke about the difficulties of being validated by the outside world (Dunne 2000). Lesbian mothers reported having to continuously explain and justify their family structure to outsiders, both heterosexuals and others in the gay community. The following excerpt provides a glimpse into the conscious efforts lesbian mothers make to lead a normal life.

We don’t get a lot of affirmation outside of our house that we are good parents. . . You know, we have to work at it all the time, we have to forge links with the school, we have to forge links with this and forge links with that, we have to work hard at being good neighbors and making contact with the neighbors so that as the children come along they’re not surprised and they can adjust. We’re doing the work, we’re doing the outreach, we’re doing the education, and what we get back is the right to be ourselves, sort of, as long as we’re careful (Dunne 2000:20).

In sum, lesbians parent in a broader social context that deems their parental status inappropriate and even illegal. To compensate, lesbian parents engage in identity work through emphasizing how they assimilate and resist in their everyday lives to prove they are good parents.

To date, due to sample accessibility, scholars have largely focused on the experiences of lesbian families in gay-friendly states, leaving a gap in knowledge about the experiences of lesbian families without legal protections. The next two chapters investigate how legal inequality impacts planned lesbian families. Chapter 2 addresses how co-parents’ disadvantaged legal position affects power dynamics that ended up mimicking traditional, heterosexual patterns
of inequality. Chapter 3 examines the threats co-parents face to constructing a parental identity and the three parental identities they constructed. Chapter 4 is a summary of the main findings and provides directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2

THE IMPACT OF LEGAL INEQUALITY ON POWER IN PLANNED LESBIAN FAMILIES

INTRODUCTION

Planned lesbian families have the potential to undermine the ideology of the hegemonic nuclear family and facilitate broader gender equality. This potential arises because in lesbian households parents are of the same sex, so sex cannot determine the household division of labor and childcare. Such couples can elide the “power immanent in gender, and gender relations themselves will be profoundly disrupted” (Sullivan 2004:8). Planned lesbian families have the opportunity to distribute paid and household labor evenly, undermine notions of family steeped in biological relatedness, refuse to gender their children, and resist ideologies of involved motherhood. Since the gendered power relations in traditional heterosexual families are central to the institutionalized inequality women face, creating a new family form that lacks them could undermine the patriarchal system.

A desire for relational equality, including equity in household chores and financial contributions, has been documented, although the findings are generalizable only to middle-class, white, lesbian families (Dunne 2000; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Kurdek 1993, 1998; Sullivan 2004; Tasker & Golombok 1998). Importantly, most studies were conducted in urban centers of gay-friendly states that permit same-sex and same-sex second-parent adoption and that offer resources and social support to gay families. Largely unexamined are the welfare and family dynamics of same-sex parents in gay-unfriendly states where marriage and adoption are illegal. In particular, little is known about how legal pressures affect equality in planned lesbian families.

Planned lesbian families, via the social parenting of the co-parent (non-biological parent), have created a category of kinship and a social identity relatively new in Western society and that represents a cultural and legal alternative to nuclear family patterns. While courts occasionally have recognized co-parents’ social identity, co-parents typically struggle to have their parental identities legitimized in the public realm (Aizley 2006; Sullivan 2004). Further,
co-parents’ lack of biological ties to their child leaves them vulnerable to a host of problems stemming from their not-legal relationship status, particularly in states, such as Florida, where this study takes place, which fail to recognize their status as parents.

The gaps in the literature raise two important questions. First, how do legal pressures impact equality in planned lesbian families? What is the connection between a lack of legal standing and the potential of these families to create an alternative - more equal - social sphere? Second, how does lacking legal parental status affect co-parents’ personal and interpersonal negotiation of parenthood in planned lesbian families?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section reviews the literature on lesbian parenting, beginning with conceptualizations of gender as an institution that individuals construct by their everyday practices (Martin 2003), followed by a review of research showing that planned lesbian families have been able to undermine the non-egalitarian family model through an equitable division of labor. The assimilation/resistance framework helps provide a way of understanding how lesbian families both conform to and circumvent non-egalitarian family practices. The literature review concludes with research on the unique position and dilemmas of co-parents.

**How Lesbian Families Can Undermine Household Gender Inequality**

Gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two different categories and organizing inequality around those differences (Ferree, Lorber, and Hess 1999; Lorber 1994; Risman 1998). Indeed, gender can be said to be fundamentally a system of difference (Ridgeway and Correll 2000). As an institution, gender operates to organize social life (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Risman 1998) by shaping it at the individual level (the binary gender system), the interactional level (norms and expectations regarding femininity and masculinity), and the institutional level (structuring institutions, such as the family, along gender lines) (Connell 1987; Risman 1998).

Traditional heterosexual marriage is based on a gendered division of labor that has subordinated women in two ways. The first is that it puts one partner, the man, in the public sphere, which tends to accord higher status, and relegates the other to the lower-status domestic
sphere. Second, it imposes a division of labor within the household in which women do more labor and men have more leisure (Hochschild 1989).

Lesbian parents, who by definition are not subject to the strictures of the traditional nuclear family, have the opportunity to undo gender and construct families in ways that undermine the non-egalitarian family model. Lesbian-headed families have the opportunity to undo gendered family relations insofar as the power exercised in the household will not be attached to sex (Dunne 2000; Sullivan 2004). Lesbian parents can subvert power structures that validate patriarchy through “the possibilities of self-definition and organizing family structures that are removed from the traditional one mother/one father model” (Wald 1997:182).

**Empirical Evidence on Equality in Lesbian Families**

Empirical work has centered on two ways lesbians undo the traditional unequal power relations in the family: 1) through a more equitable division of household labor and childcare, and 2) through construction of a “chosen” family (Dalton and Bielby 2000; Dunne 2000; Mamo 2007; Sullivan 2004; Weston 1991). It is important to note, however, that previous studies have typically been conducted in gay-friendly states, where second-parent adoption is legal and social support and resources for gay families are often available. Therefore, we know little about how the dynamics of families might be affected by a lack of legal support.

**Division of Labor.** Lesbian parents can undo gender by adopting more egalitarian approaches to combining work and parenting (Dunne 2000). Indeed, research has shown that lesbians value equality in their relationship more than heterosexual or gay male couples (Kurdek 2007) and that they report a more equitable division of household and childcare labor and more equal participation in the paid labor force (Chan et al. 1998; Dunne 2000; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Kurdek 1995, 1996; Patterson 1996; Sullivan 2004). A comparative sample of lesbian and gay couples showed that lesbian partners were less likely to specialize in household tasks (Kurdek 1993).

Two studies of lesbian motherhood have explored how lesbians undo gendered family arrangements through an equal division of child and household labor (Dunne 2000; Sullivan 2004). Eighty-five percent of artificial insemination (AI) couples in Sullivan’s San Francisco study (n=34) and 80 percent of the mostly-AI couples in Dunne’s British study (n=37) reported shared parenting, and all reported being very deliberate in the planning and execution of it. Mothers in Dunne’s study (2000) reported that shared parenting eased the burden of housework.
and childcare, making the motherhood experience more enjoyable. These women also talked about how they sought “integrated lives,” wherein they had valuable time with their children, an identity conferred by the formal workplace, and the ability to contribute to the household financially. A common strategy for accomplishing integrated lives was for both mothers to work part-time, and these mothers said they were willing to earn less money in exchange for a better quality of life. In this way, lesbian parents also challenged the patriarchal market rationale that devalues carework.

Although not all lesbian couples have equitable arrangements, those who do tend to have a disregard for traditional gender roles, which has a positive effect on any couple relationship (Sullivan 2004). Sullivan (2004) concluded from extensive interviews with Bay Area lesbian parents that most couples divided work evenly because they did not use gender as a guide. Eighty-five percent of the 34 couples Sullivan interviewed distributed housework, child care, breadwinning, and financial management such that neither partner was disadvantaged economically or rendered vulnerable. The equitable task distribution translated into a balance of power in which both partners exercised similar influence over decision-making. She concluded that lesbian couples who share primary parenting are the only group with the opportunity to truly disrupt gendered power relations (Sullivan 2004).

**Chosen Families.** Lesbian parents further destabilize the gendered division of labor and the nuclear family by choosing alternative family arrangements, what Weston (1991) referred to as “chosen families.” Chosen families may include, for example, multiple social mothers (not biologically or legally related to the child but engaged in mothering tasks), a sperm donor or other father figure, and friends who have adopted familial roles. Such arrangements put the narrowness of legal definitions of mother and family into sharp relief. For example, courts historically have only recognized one legal mother, but over the past decade the number of AI lesbian couples seeking legal parental recognition has risen, and courts in gay-friendly states have adapted by recognizing categories called “psychological mothers” or “social mothers” in order to grant parental status. This legal recognition unhinges the link between motherhood and biology. “This opens the door to redefining the concept of mother; in principle, anyone who actively participates in the act of social reproduction could be deemed a mother as well” (Dalton and Bielby 2000:39). The move from biological reproduction toward recognition of social
reproduction marks a radical departure from the usual definition of the nuclear family and thus helps destabilize it as the only definition.

Not all the empirical evidence implies that lesbian families necessarily destabilize the traditional family. Some couples have adhered to a traditional caretaker/breadwinner arrangement, and they experienced a decline in the stay-at-home partner’s ability to influence family decisions and negotiate childcare and household tasks (Dalton and Bielby 2000; Sullivan 2004). Such research attests to the relationship between earning capacity and power, even in relationships without a man present. Thus, lesbians, too, can be party to a power dynamic with overtones of non-egalitarian gendered relations.

Unequal biological ties to children also can cause tension in planned families. It has been well documented that most lesbian parents strive for relational equality, but parental equality is more difficult to achieve when only one parent is biologically related (Pelka 2009). Few studies have addressed the complex emotional struggles created by unequal biological ties, but preliminary evidence suggests that co-parents can experience feelings of jealousy and exclusion, which cause relationship conflict (Morningstar 1999).

**Assimilating and Resisting**

Rather than focusing exclusively on how planned lesbian families either assimilate to or resist heteronormative family models, scholars have recently shifted to examining how lesbian families simultaneously resist and maintain heteronormativity (Hequembourg 2007; Lewin 1993; Mamo 2007; Weston 1991). Assimilation refers to the extent to which lesbians try to integrate themselves into existing structures, and resistance refers to efforts to construct alternatives to heteronormative arrangements and practices. Lesbian parents consciously and unconsciously assimilate and resist in order to legitimate or differentiate themselves and their families. Early studies reflected the tendency of scholars to focus on how lesbians assimilated to heterosexual family models, fearing that difference would be construed as deficit. Many lesbian parents, too, focused on assimilation, as Lewin (1993) and Hequembourg (2007) found. In these studies, lesbian families emphasized their similarity to other heterosexual families because it made them feel safer in a hostile social climate.

As for resistance in the early literature, the tendency (found in the majority of research) towards more equitable divisions of household and paid labor helps disrupt key elements of the traditional family. Lesbian couples also depart from heteronormative patterns by emphasizing
the importance of chosen families, rather than giving primacy to older traditions that privilege biological relatedness. Many lesbian couples resist traditional gender norms, such as the coupling of the words female with mother and male with father. By violating taken-for-granted notions and speech, the social construction of gender is rendered more visible, which undermines its taken-for-granted quality.

More recently, scholars have focused on how families can simultaneously assimilate and resist heteronormative practices (Hequembourg 2007), in part because the assimilation strategy was flawed in practice. Normative mothering discourses pressure lesbians to emphasize their similarity to heterosexual parents, mostly in an attempt to legitimize parenting in a hostile legal environment. Yet efforts to fit into heteronormative patterns revealed their futility because lesbian parents are “always/already” incompatible with these structures. Hequembourg’s work highlighted the liminal space occupied by lesbian parents who must parent within a larger structure into which they do not neatly fit.

The simultaneity of resisting and assimilating was illustrated by a couple in Hequembourg’s (2007) study. Teresa and Monica insisted they were “just like everyone else,” and described themselves as “just Mom and Dad.” So, while assimilating through claims of normalcy, they simultaneously disrupted categorizations of only men as fathers and women as only mothers, challenging patriarchal gender roles.

**The Unique Experience of Co-parents**

Lesbians must mother within a structural context that tells them their sexuality renders them ill suited for motherhood; thus, they face a continual struggle to have their mother identity legitimized. Co-parents are particularly vulnerable, since they have no legal or biological tie to their child. When lesbian couples create families through artificial insemination, the birth mother has a biological and therefore legal tie to the child. When lesbians become parents through adoption, neither parent has a biological tie to the child, but one parent is legally recognized. In both cases, one parent is left in the lurch, with no socially or legally recognized tie to the child. Second-parent adoption may be a viable option if the couple resides in a state where this is permitted and they have the funds to do so. In Florida, however, adoption by homosexuals is prohibited by law, rendering second parent adoption impossible. Only homosexuals who have been able to conceal their sexual orientation have adopted in Florida.
While all lesbians struggle to be recognized as legitimate parents, co-parents are particularly marginalized.

Research on lesbian mothers and popular press accounts of co-parents indicate that identity issues are salient to them (Aizley 2006; Sullivan 2004). Co-parents report feeling in limbo between being a mother and not being a mother and being a father and not being a father. The co-parent is not a father substitute, but she is not a genderless parent. She is not giving birth to the child, but she is the child’s mother (Sullivan 2004). A recurring theme in the narratives of co-parents is the need to forge their own paths.

Research shows that lesbian couples were often very deliberate about including the co-parent in activities with the child in order to negate threats to her motherhood status. Birth mothers and co-parents agreed that the biological mother enjoys an emotional and social advantage vis-à-vis the child; further, both types viewed this inequality as negative in light of the importance they placed on having an equal emotional connection to the child (Hequembourg 2007; Sullivan 2004). To counter the birth mother’s relational advantage, many couples designated special time and activities for the co-parent to bond with the child, such as special bath times, song times, or play times (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Sullivan 2004). Co-parents often made great efforts to be equally or even more involved in childcare than the biological mother to compensate for not having a biological connection to the child (Sullivan 2004).

Not all co-parents are uncomfortable with their ambiguous identity. The undefined role of the co-parent allowed some women to play with the complex relationship between their gender and sexuality. Lesbian dad, dyke daddy, and high-femme dad were some of the labels co-parent used to describe themselves (Aizley 2006).

Co-parents’ parental identities were challenged in the public realm. Public forays proved challenging, since they presented opportunities for questions about who the mother and father were and what name the baby called each parent, questions that can be painful for lesbian co-parents. Some co-parents implemented strategies to legitimize their tie to the child. One co-parent, for example, preferred to carry the baby in her arms, which made her feel more secure in her parental role (Aizley 2006).

Co-parents often discussed the difficulty outsiders have in understanding the concept of dual mothers because outsiders hold a cultural attachment to the notion that there can be only one mother. Reactions to the presence of two mothers ran from confusion to discomfort to outright
All three reactions are apparent in a comment to one co-parent in Dunne’s (2000:24) study: “Well if you’re not the biological mother, then what the hell are you?” Depending on the context, co-parents may decide to fully disclose, partially disclose, or pass as the biological mother (Sullivan 2004).

Co-parents (and lesbian mothers more generally) spoke about the difficulties of being validated by the outside world (Dunne 2000). Lesbian mothers reported having to continuously explain and justify their family structure to outsiders, both heterosexuals and others in the gay community. Phrases such as “outreach, education, and trailblazing were commonly used among lesbian parents (Dunne 2000).

In sum, planned lesbian families can undermine the traditional nuclear family by disrupting heteronormative divisions of labor and notions of family steeped in biology. Scholars have found that most lesbian couples strive for and achieve relationship equality through an equitable division of labor and child-rearing. However, tension does exist in some lesbian relationships, particularly for co-parents, who are legally and socially vulnerable. Co-parents face legal and social discrimination since they have no legal ties to their children and struggle to have their parental identities recognized. Despite research that finds that planned lesbian families disrupt traditional arrangements through an equitable division of labor, scholars recently have pointed out that lesbian couples simultaneously maintain the non-egalitarian family model in other ways.

METHODS AND DATA

Data come from in-depth interviews with 27 women in planned lesbian families who conceived a child (themselves or with a partner) via artificial insemination. All were currently parenting in a lesbian couple, and none had children from a previous heterosexual relationship.

Of the 27 mothers interviewed, 17 were co-parents, eight were birthmothers, and two were both. They ranged in age from 26 to 62; the median age was 36. Two had high school diplomas, 12 had a bachelor’s degree and 13 had advanced degrees. Regarding race, 20 are white, three are Black, and four are Latina. Sixteen work full-time, four work part-time, and seven were not working at the time of the interview. Sixteen of the parents had at least one child under age five and the rest had older children.
Participants lived in or near a medium-sized city in the Southeastern United States. Initial interviews were conducted with four women with whom the principal investigator is acquainted, and they offered referrals to other lesbian parents who were coupled and had children via artificial insemination. Out of the 27 parents interviewed, 22 were referred by other participants. The names of all the participants and their children have been changed.

Each interview began with a common set of open-ended questions, but the respondent’s answers shaped the direction of each interview (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Esterberg 2002). After conducting several interviews, I changed open-ended questions to address emerging themes. It became clear early on that legal inequality was a salient issue for co-parents, as it continually appeared unsolicited. All but one interview, which took place in a public park, took place in respondents’ homes and interviews averaged about an hour- and-a-half. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed three steps: open and focused coding, analytic and theoretical memo-writing, and data interpretation (Charmaz 1983, 2006; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Salient themes that emerged from my analysis are described below.

I draw on these themes to address two research questions: First, how do legal pressures impact equality in planned lesbian families? Second, how does lacking legal parental status affect how co-parents negotiate motherhood in planned lesbian families? By conducting this research in a state that prohibits second parent adoption, this study sheds light on how equality in planned lesbian families is affected by a lack of legal protection for co-parents. Further, this study examines how co-parents negotiate their parental identities and relationships in an environment that does not recognize them as parents. This examination is important because previous research on relationship equality among lesbian couples and on co-parents’ dilemmas were conducted in gay-friendly states that allow same-sex second-parent adoption and provide resources and social support for same-sex families. Since the majority of states in the U.S. do not allow same-sex second-parent adoptions, it is crucial to understand how legal and social discrimination affects planned lesbian families.
RESULTS

The inability of co-parents to legally adopt created severe disadvantages that led, in circuitous ways, to the reification of traditional patterns of inequality. A lack of legal support for lesbian families led to relational inequality because it put co-parents in a one-down power position relative to birthmothers. Co-parents’ lack of legal rights to their child led to a reduction of their power in the relationship, leaving them vulnerable, stressed, and fearful about the possibility of being separated from their children in the case of relationship dissolution. In an attempt to minimize the likelihood of relationship dissolution and the risk of being estranged from their children, co-parents engaged in five strategies: 1) acquiescing to biological mothers’ wishes to avoid conflict; 2) manipulating situations to ensure birthmothers’ emotional or financial dependence; 3) activating community accountability; 4) differentiating themselves from birthmothers in their child-related roles in order to seem indispensable; and 5) “leveling the playing field” by planning to be a birthmother in the future. While co-parents believed these strategies helped neutralize the threat of losing their children, the strategies ultimately sabotaged equity projects by shaping family dynamics to resemble those of the traditional, heterosexual family.

In the following sections, I document these women’s commitment to equality in their relationships before describing the vulnerability co-parents faced and their strategies for diminishing the likelihood of a breakup. I conclude by discussing how these strategies—induced by fear due to the lack of laws giving them rights to children—undermined their goal of relationship equity, and as a result rendered hollow a critique of existing domestic power relations.

Desire for Relationship Equality

All couples in this study specifically said that they desired relational equality and that they did not want relationships built on power relations. Many couples discussed equality as a core value in their relationship that they made great efforts to achieve. Marcy, a biological mother, explained:

Before we even got together officially, we were both adamant about wanting everything to be equal. I don’t think either one of us realized how hard that would actually be at the time. But
we do make daily efforts. I think we both try every day to make decisions with that thought in mind.

Veronica, a co-parent, discussed how she and her partner tried to keep things equal:

We actually came up with a chore schedule that we post to the ‘fridge so it is concrete and more likely we will stick to it. We discussed it beforehand and stick to it fairly well. One week she does dinner cleanup, garbage, and bathing, while I do laundry, cooking, and bedtime reading. You get the idea. If we didn’t write it down, we would fall into bad habits, I think. There is no “you do this because it’s a man’s job and I will do this because it’s a woman’s job.”

Stacy discussed the difficulty in actualizing equality in the relationship:

We are both very committed to having an equal relationship, like in making important decisions together, sharing stuff around the house, all that. But, let me tell you, it’s hard! Sometimes we get caught up in life and I find myself doing most of the work with Daniel. This goes on until I eventually blow up and scream and shout about being the “wife.” Then we have to sit down, hash it out, and get back on track. But I think it all starts with awareness. You have to be aware of it all the time.

All women interviewed expressed a desire for relational equality, although they admitted it was sometimes difficult to achieve in practice. Equality was actively discussed among lesbian parents and often activities were scripted in an effort to achieve equality.

**Breaking Up: The Fear and the Reality**

Seventeen of 19 co-parents expressed distress about the possibility of losing their children should their couple relationship end, since biological mothers have the legal authority to prevent non-adoptive parents from seeing their children. Co-parents varied in the extent to which fear interfered with their daily lives. A few experienced debilitating fear. Jessi, who described herself as “clinically depressed” since the birth of their daughter six months previously, explained:

I thought I was prepared to deal with it. I trust Kelly and I feel like our relationship is strong. But, nothing can prepare you for this feeling. Since the moment I looked into my daughter’s eyes I have been overwhelmed, thinking how powerless I am. They could walk out of my life and there is nothing I can do. Since Kayla’s birth, I’ve been so depressed. I can’t sleep, I
can’t eat, I need constant reassurance from Kelly. And it’s starting to affect our relationship, which makes me worry even more.

Another co-parent described her fear:

Our son is 18 months and I still have nightmares. I have gone on medication to try to manage some of the anxiety I have. I had to take some time off from work to try to get myself together . . . I was pretty bad off for awhile. I am better now with the medicine, but I still struggle.

Other co-parents better managed their anxiety, but fear remained:

Vikki and I have a great relationship, but the fear is still there. The fear is always there. I know that Vikki wouldn’t keep me from the kids if we split but it’s the “what ifs” that make you crazy. I have to manage it, talk myself down or else it consumes me. Still, every now and again I get a wave of absolute and total terror. I think, oh my god, I have no rights here! I am completely at the mercy of Vikki. Yeah, it causes some sleepless nights.

Co-parents’ fears of relationship dissolution were not unfounded, a fact that contributed to the anxiety and distress they experienced. A theme that arose spontaneously in interviews was the high rate of relationship dissolution among lesbian couples the women knew. They pointed to a variety of reasons. Some said same-sex relationships were difficult to sustain because they often lack family and broader societal support, and others emphasized how the stress of having children in a state that does not recognize both parents pushed many couples over the edge. According to one:

There is a huge break up factor going on because of the extra stress of having children without the extra support, and there isn’t much family support a lot of times. And considering that we know more people who have broken up than stayed together, that concerns me.

The ubiquitous fear was that a breakup could deprive the co-parent of access to the child. One described the situation she had observed in her community:

We know a lot of folks that have split up and the childcare arrangements have not been equal. I can tell you six, seven, eight situations that have not been equal. The kids are usually pretty young, and all that equality you talk about, all that other stuff changes overnight when it comes to a breakup and who grabs the rights there. If it just happened once or twice I’m not going to think much about it, but we’ve seen it where they cut off contact completely. We’ve
seen it as a phenomenon. The biological mother doesn’t want to deal with the other mother so they conjure all this stuff up in their head that justifies it. You can have a heterosexual family who breaks up and the parents may be angry as hell at one another but they both have some legal rights there.

Many couples personally knew co-parents who were denied any contact with their children after a breakup. In fact, three of the nineteen co-parents were themselves kept from seeing their children from a former relationship by an ex-partner. One explained:

I thought our relationship was stable before she had Michael, but not long after he was born the threats started. It seemed like every time I moved the wrong way, she would threaten to leave with him. I was constantly on pins and needles. Eventually, she did leave, and now she won’t allow me any contact with Michael. The worst part is I have no idea why and there is nothing I can do. I feel like a parent whose child has been stolen or kidnapped! I dream about him constantly. I dream that I put him somewhere and I can’t find him.

Another co-parent who lost a long court battle to gain parental recognition said:

I was naïve. I didn’t know anything was wrong. Then she literally absconded with Tonya in the middle of the night. I pursued every legal angle and came up short. It’s every parent’s worst nightmare! I was at every doctor’s appointment, I was there for her birth, I bathed her, fed her, stayed up nights with her and now . . . nothing, none of that matters. It’s like I never existed. You never think it will happen to you and then it does, and you have no rights.

Several co-parents spoke about the unwillingness of lesbians to talk about or acknowledge the long-term effects of inequality within their relationships. One co-parent explained that she didn’t think lesbians wanted to talk about the notion that they themselves don’t really see co-parents as equal:

I have some concerns about lesbian families. It definitely makes me question in our own minds as lesbians if we really look at each other as co-parents. People might go along with it and say “Oh, isn’t that sweet that they’re doing that” but they don’t even look at the non-biological mother as a parent really.

Another co-parent made a similar point:

I don’t think lesbians want to talk about it. We like to talk about equality and think our relationships are equal, but as soon as there’s a breakup, that goes out the window. If we can so easily cut off the co-parent, what does that say about us?
In sum, state laws that refuse to recognize both mothers as legal parents disadvantage co-parents by causing vulnerability and stress over the possibility of losing their children should their relationship end. This legal vulnerability creates one partner with power over the other, introducing inequality into the relationship insofar as co-parents feel at the mercy of birthmothers and behave in ways they might not otherwise behave in order to maintain the relationship. Fear was the impetus to engage in the five strategies described below.

Co-parents’ Strategies to Keep Families Intact

Co-parents’ legal vulnerability translated into insecurity in their relationships, leading them to engage in at least one of five strategies to minimize the likelihood of relationship dissolution and thereby reduce the chance of being kept from their children. These actions, often acts of intentional manipulation, had the unintended result of shaping family dynamics to more closely resemble those of a patriarchal, heterosexual relationship rather than the equitable planned lesbian families they desired to be.

Acquiescing

Six of 17 co-parents said they often acquiesced to the wishes of the birthmother in all aspects of their relationship in an effort to minimize conflict that might upend the relationship. These patterns of acquiescence were not simply elements of the normal give-and-take that characterizes intimate relationships. Instead, there was a strategic orientation underlying them, as interviews make clear. One co-parent explained:

Debbie and I talked endlessly before Mathew was born about how we were going to raise this child as equal partners. Now that Mathew is here, it doesn’t feel like we are equal partners at all! It feels like she calls the shots. When she says that she thinks he should be put down at a certain time, I don’t argue with her even if I disagree. I find myself afraid to disagree because I don’t want to start an argument. I disagree with many of the things she’s been doing with Mathew’s feeding schedule, but I don’t want to anger her. Since Mathew, I am constantly thinking, what if she gets angry and leaves with Mathew?

Another described the changes in her relationship:

It’s like we have a parent/child relationship now; she’s the parent and I’m the child. She tells me what to do and I do it. I jump through whatever hoops she tells me to. We haven’t been getting along well lately and I am scared to death. I try to be nice and agreeable and do whatever I can to make her life easier.
Birthmothers were often able to detect such changes in their partners’ behavior, and ironically, some were disturbed by the very behavior co-parents thought was conflict-reducing. One birthmother had this to say:

Since Stella’s birth, Sienna has been acting really weird. She seems totally disengaged. I will ask her what she thinks about Stella’s feeding schedule and she will say something like, “whatever you think.” It seems like she doesn’t care. It infuriates me.

The six co-parents who used acquiescence as a strategy to neutralize power made it clear that such behavior had not been typical of their behavior prior to becoming a parent. For these co-parents, acquiescing was intended to reduce conflict and thereby lessened the likelihood their partners would leave them.

**Creating Dependency**

Eleven of 17 co-parents tried to create conditions in which their partners--the birthmothers--were emotionally or financially dependent on them. In doing so, they surmised that their partners would be less likely to leave, thus reducing the risk of losing their children. Nine of the 11 co-parents who used this strategy admitted they were intentionally manipulating their partners.

One way co-parents intentionally created dependency was by securing a position as they breadwinner, which made them feel indispensable. One explained:

I knew she wanted to stay home with Danny full-time but we couldn’t afford it, so I took a second job so she could quit hers. It’s hard and I’m tired all the time, but I figured it was one way I could contribute. It’s a sacrifice but it makes me feel like I am important to this family.

Another co-parent deliberately attempted to secure her place in the family by being the breadwinner. She said:

She wanted us both to work part-time after Jacob was born so that things were equal, but I refused. I told her I wanted to work and be the breadwinner and for her to stay home. I told her honestly that it would lessen my anxiety because it makes me feel needed. You know, she couldn’t do it without me. She can’t just walk out on me because I am supporting them. I mean, she could, but this way it’s more difficult.
Some birthmothers reported feeling manipulated and resentful about this positioning. Ironically, such efforts to reduce the likelihood of relationship dissolution could create tension that might lead to the opposite effect. Janine, a birthmother, reported:

Katrina insisted on me staying home while she works crazy hours to support us. I don’t like that she works so much, but I also don’t like feeling dependent on her. I feel like I have to ask permission to spend money or something. It bugs me.

Others created situations in which their partners were emotionally dependent on them. They struggled with the problem of feeling manipulative, but felt the threat of losing the relationship and the child merited the cost. Anna, a co-parent, tearfully reported her moral dilemma:

I am so ashamed of myself. I make Tessa feel guilty when she wants to go out with her friends to get out of the house. She needs time away from the baby and wants to get out so bad sometimes. (Sobbing) I always ask her how she can leave the baby, tell her it’s not good for the baby, or whatever I can think of. Really, I don’t want her to go out with her friends because I want to be her support system. I want her to need me. If she has her friends to go to, I am more replaceable.

Some co-parents justified such manipulation by pointing to the benefit of keeping the family intact:

I know I am manipulative, and yeah, I feel bad about it, but I also know that ultimately it’s what’s best for Kyle. Kyle and I are tight and I make sure that Brenda knows how important I am to him. I even tell Kyle to tell his mom how much he loves me. I say to Brenda, “You know, we could never split because it would kill Kyle. He needs me.” I just like to make sure that she knows that. Makes me sleep easier at night, you know?

Co-parents consciously manipulated their partners by creating emotional and financial dependency, even though they experienced guilt about it. They believed that creating dependency lessened their partners’ ability to exit the relationship.

Activating Community Accountability

Almost half (nine of 19) of the co-parents relied on social pressure to help keep their families intact by deliberately integrating themselves into the lesbian community in hopes that community recognition as an engaged parent would raise the specter of social disapproval and even ostracism if their partner were to quit the relationship and deny visitation rights. By arranging play-dates and generally befriend other lesbian families to create a social support
network, co-parents made themselves visible to others parents in the community at school and local events, and they explained that community accountability was a powerful force in keeping their families intact. Eve, a co-parent whose partner had kept her from seeing their daughters spoke of her experience:

   Elaine grew up here and we were friends with everyone in the lesbian community. In fact, we were one of the first lesbian couples to have a baby so everyone knew us, came to us for advice, and whatever. Then one day, Elaine took off. Everyone was shocked and I think scared, too. It really provided a first-hand account of what can happen, what’s allowed to happen in Florida. But she could never come back here now; she would be lynched. It’s sad, really, because she’d been here her whole life. This is where her friends and family are. Everyone really rallied around me, thankfully.

   All of the interviewees knew of Eve’s experience or others like it and generally heaped condemnation on women who denied former partners rights to the children. Co-parents thought stories like Eve’s and Elaine’s reinforced to birthmothers the catastrophic implications of breaking up the family. One co-parent explained:

   Being a part of the community is necessary anyway because we are all in this together. You know, we share information. But it was really important to me because I wanted everyone to know Sharon and me and that we are a family. I can’t say I feel good about what happened to Eve. I mean because it could happen to me too, but you know, it shows, well, Sharon knows that if she did that to me, she would lose all her friends, everything.

Another way to deploy the community was by holding commitment ceremonies, which co-parents said served to create accountability. Nikki discussed her decision to have a commitment ceremony:

   I never had any desire to have one before Gwen was born. Then after she was born I felt panicked and wanted to do anything to feel more connected to them. Even though it wasn’t legal, standing up in front of our friends and family and pledging our commitment made me feel less vulnerable, like we were a real family.

Another co-parent spoke of how she and her partner incorporated the permanence of co-parenthood in their ceremony:
We made it part of our ceremony. Well, I insisted it be part of it, and she agreed, that she vow to never take Patrick away or try to diminish my role as his parent. Her saying it out loud in public made me feel like she meant it. Like she had to stick to it.

Co-parents recognized the importance of their social networks in all aspects of their lives, but emphasized that they purposefully used their networks as a means to police their partners’ behavior.

**Establishing Childrearing Differentiation**

Another strategy, employed by about half the co-parents (9 of 17) was to make themselves an indispensible part of the family by consciously differentiating their child-related roles from those of the other mother. When co-parents felt their partners valued their role in childrearing, they worried less about relationship dissolution. One co-parent of a six-year-old boy explained:

Amy likes to put him to bed and read to him. They paint and color together; that’s their thing. With me, he gets more physical play. We go out and throw the ball and ride dirt-bikes. I let him help me with projects around the house. That stuff isn’t Amy’s thing. I know she likes that he gets that with me because she’s not into that boy stuff, but she thinks it’s good for him. I know she would think twice about leaving me just because she knows I give him stuff he needs that she can’t give him.

A co-parent of a four-year-old boy said:

My partner and I have been having trouble for the past few years. I mean, I think we would have broken up by now if it wasn’t for Jake. He comes to me for everything. I mean when he cries, he wants me, when he wants to play, he wants me, when he goes to bed, he wants me. It kills Theresa. . . . She knows how attached he is to me and I think that’s why we’re still together. She wouldn’t want to take that away from him. I mean, I guess I encourage it in my own way because that’s my connection to them.

Co-parents tended to establish a childrearing role for themselves that they knew the birthmother valued but was unable to fill on her own, thus carving out a place for themselves. In so doing, co-parents reasoned that the birthmother would be less likely to leave because staying was in the best interests of the child.

**Leveling the Playing Field**

Six of 17 co-parents planned to be birthmothers in the future. Co-parents and birthmothers alike noted that when each partner was a birthmother the relationship was more equal and
Co-parents offered an additional reason for it: when each partner birthed a child they were equally at risk of losing rights to a non-biological child and in the event of a split, the birthmother would be unlikely to deny involvement to the co-parent for fear of facing a similar fate. Indeed, the two co-parents who reported no sense of vulnerability were birthmothers as well as co-parents. Interviewees were quite frank in describing their strategic orientation towards becoming biological mothers:

I plan to have our next child in about a year or so. We both think it’s important that each of us has one, especially here in Florida, because of the way it works. You know, then there’s no jealousy about the biological mother being closer to the kid, but also, it’s like my ace in the hole. If I have a child I will feel less worried about Alice leaving me and not letting me see Justin because I know she wouldn’t want to be kept from seeing the kid I give birth to.

A co-parent actively trying to get pregnant similarly described her decision:

I had no desire to carry a child until Jane had our daughter, Vivian, and then I felt so damn powerless. I decided that the only way I would ever have any power was to be a birthmother. It’s sad to think of a child as a bargaining chip, but these laws force you to do it. It doesn’t mean I won’t love this child, but I want some insurance that Jane isn’t going to run off with Viv, and I think this is the best way to do that.

In sum, 17 of 19 co-parents engaged in at least one of these strategies to neutralize the threat of relationship dissolution that could lead to their losing their children.

**DISCUSSION**

These results shed light on the importance of the availability of legal second-parent adoption for achieving equality in lesbian relationships and illustrate how crucial power is in relationships, even when partners are same-sexed. Previous research found that the majority of lesbian couples tended to value and to accomplish parity in their relationships, an accomplishment that gives grounds for optimism about the diminution of power as a component of intimate relations in such families. Due to sample accessibility, however, previous research has been conducted in states where both women had parental equality under the law. The fact of being same-sexed and committed to equality is not enough to guarantee equality. Lesbian couples do not exist in a vacuum, and the quality of their relationships is profoundly affected by legal strictures. Like the
lesbian parents in other studies, parents in this study valued relationship equality, but a lack of legal structural support prevented them from achieving it.

A lack of legal rights to children created conditions that were conducive to the emergence of power dynamics that resembled a traditional, heterosexual relationship. All mothers in this study reported that equality was a relationship goal, but upon birth of the first child, relational power began to tip in favor of the birthmother. Their legal authority to prevent co-parents from seeing their children afforded them a power that distorted the relationship. Co-parents’ responses to this power imbalance – engaging in strategies to minimize the possibility of a breakup – lessened the power differential, but constituted a step away from the open, non-manipulative relationships these women professed to want.

Previous studies of planned lesbian families analyzed power in the division of labor, but tended to stop short of considering other manifestations of power, particularly how legal inequality can impact the role of power in relationships.

In order to understand the relationship dynamics of the women in this study, it is necessary to understand the role of power. Lipman-Blumen (1984) argued that control over institutional resources is a key component of power in relationships; it is through control of institutional resources that men have been able to macromanipulate women. In an attempt to neutralize the power of men, women have engaged in micromanipulation: “the less powerful become adept at micromanipulation using intelligence, canniness, intuition, interpersonal skill, charm, sexuality, deception and avoidance to offset the control of the powerful” (Lipman-Blumen 1984:8).

Although Lipman-Blumen’s (1984) work centers on power relationship between men and women, it sheds light on the findings reported here, which show that power, regardless of sex, can define a relationship. Like men in Lipman-Blumen’s analysis of power, birthmothers have state-sanctioned legal power on their side – recognition as a legal parent -- and can therefore macromanipulate co-parents. While birth mothers may not control the legal institution (men do), they derive power from it by receiving the institutional benefits of all biological mothers. Co-parents have no such benefits and engaged in micromanipulation in an attempt to neutralize the power differential and threat they experienced by virtue of not being legally recognized parents. Feelings of distress, depression and vulnerability were the impetus for co-parents’ micromanipulative strategies to keep their families intact. These strategies include acquiescing, creating dependency, activating community accountability, establishing childrearing
differentiation, and planning to be a birthmother. I expand on each below to illustrate how each strategy reinforces heteronormative family models.

Reinforcing the Traditional nuclear family

**Strategy #1: Acquiescing**

Co-parents sometimes agreed or deferred to the wishes of the birthmothers, even when they disagreed with them, in order to avoid conflict. According to Lipman-Bluman (1984) some of the techniques of micromanipulation include acquiescing and creating the appearance of disinterest. She argued that women have learned when to obey the rules the dominant group has created, and, I argue, co-parents similarly acquiesce so as to not make waves. They consciously manipulate the situation, trading their voice in the relationship for a measure of power or control over the success of the relationship. To lose one’s voice, even by choice, is a hallmark of powerlessness in a relationship.

**Strategy #2: Creating Dependency**

To minimize the chance of a breakup, co-parents engaged in micromanipulation to create conditions in which their partners – the birthmothers – were financially or emotionally dependent. In contrast to previous research, which depicted lesbian relationships as emotionally and financially equitable, these relationships more closely resembled the traditional, nuclear family in which men breadwinners are “heads of household.” Since financial and emotional dominance in a relationship translates into power, breadwinning co-parents or those who created emotionally-dependent partners reported experiencing feeling more in control of their futures.

**Strategy #3: Activating community accountability**

Historically, heterosexual marriage served to publicly legitimate a relationship and as a means to control the participants’ behavior. Much like 1950’s housewives used micromanipulation and relied on the community to keep husbands in line, co-parents utilized social accountability to police the behavior of their partner. The more integrated the family was into the community, the more difficult it was for the birthmother to a) end the relationship and b) keep the co-parent from the children should the relationship end.

Urban legends of birthmothers ostracized for preventing co-parents’ involvement with the children were a powerful tool for enforcing accountability. Co-parents, while frightened by these urban legends, invoked them to remind birthmothers that such decisions were not without consequence. Using social opprobrium as a threat is at odds with egalitarian principles.
Strategy #4: Establishing Childrearing Differentiation

Lipman-Blumen (1984) likened micromanipulation to the “games” family members sometimes play to garner power. Similarly, some co-parents managed interaction with their children with an eye to establishing a relationship dynamic with their partner. Unlike the majority of lesbian parents depicted in previous research, who shared duties and had role overlap, these couples had a high degree of child-rearing task differentiation, primarily due to the conscious efforts of co-parents. Such differentiation is reminiscent of a division of labor more typical of a heterosexual family, wherein men and women tend to perform different and unequal child-rearing tasks. While these couples did not value some tasks over others, the fact of having differentiation at all represents a departure from the sharing found in past research. Insofar as role sharing undermines a traditional division of labor, differentiation signifies a regression to a less equitable model.

Strategy #5: Level the Playing Field

Perhaps co-parents’ most overt attempt to manipulate their situations was the desire of many to give birth to a child in order to gain a legal advantage over their partner, effectively leveling the playing field. Co-parents viewed having their own child as an insurance policy against their partner keeping them away from their non-biological child should they break up, since co-parents could then subject the other birthmother to a similar fate. In other words, the power birthmothers derived from being the only parent with legal parental rights would be neutralized.

This strategy reinforced the traditional, nuclear family by underscoring the importance of biological relatedness, just as the state does by failing to recognize co-parents as parents. This strategy among some co-parents, while understandable and possibly effective in individual relationships, does nothing to change the reified nature of the biological tie. Insofar as birthmothers are able to cut co-parents out of their children’s lives after separating, they too are devaluing social mothering and reinforcing the importance of biological ties.

In sum, lacking structural support not only prevented dual-mother couples from un-doing gender and achieving equitable relationships in the family, it also set the conditions for macromanipulation and micromanipulation processes. Birthmothers’ legal power allowed them to macromanipulate their partners; in response, co-parents’ strategies of micromanipulation reinforced the traditional nuclear family through acquiescence, by creating dependence, using
community accountability to police their partner’s actions, relying on role differentiation, and planning to birth a child.

Legal and social concerns surrounding same-sex families continue to be lightning-rod issues in the U.S. It is important to understand the real-life effects of discrimination on same-sex families because perhaps a deeper understanding of how same-sex families are hurt by social and legal discrimination will galvanize social change.
CHAPTER 3

OTHER MOTHERS, FATHERS, AND MATHERS: LESBIAN CO-PARENTS NEGOTIATE PARENTAL IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

Many of the lesbian co-parents (parent not biologically or legally related to her child) interviewed for this study expressed some variation of this sentiment: “I am a woman with a child, but I did not give birth, nor am I an adoptive parent. What does that make me?” In a society with an affinity for binary categorizations and an ideological preference for a one mother/one father model of family, lesbian co-parents muddy the waters. Lacking an institutionally recognized role, co-parents struggle to negotiate a parental identity in a context that denies them legal and often social recognition as parents. The struggle for a parental identity is further complicated because co-parents’ experiences of their own gender often collide with current motherhood and family ideologies.

Previous research on the identity struggles of lesbian co-parents has focused on their experiences of becoming and being mothers. In doing so, scholars themselves have reinscribed the heteronormative relationships that many lesbian families seek to dismantle, including an association between woman and mother, man and father. Assuming that women want to be mothers because they are women is faulty and precludes an understanding of how lesbian families can be truly provocative in unhinging sex and gender. I argue that in order to gain a more complete understanding of lesbian families, we must consider how co-parents’ negotiate a parental identity, rather than presuming that women naturally want to mother.

Co-parents face threats to their parental identity on multiple, often overlapping fronts. Co-parents enter into parenthood with an ambiguous status – they do not clearly fit into either the mother or the father role; they did not birth the child, which usually conveys membership into the mother category, and being a woman excludes them from being considered a father. Dominant ideologies of motherhood further threaten co-parents’ identities since they suggest that good mothers should be married, heterosexual, feminine, and ideally birth their own child, and

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lesbian co-parents often violate all of these assumptions, effectively excluding them from good mother status.

Co-parents must negotiate the many ideological threats to their parental identity in a context that doesn’t recognize them legally and often socially as parents. Second-parent adoption is unavailable to same-sex couples in 80 percent of U.S. states, leaving co-parents vulnerable since they are neither legally nor biologically related to their children. They also face social discrimination from the outside world, which assumes a biological relationship between parent and child, and that children have only one mother, and ideally a father. As a result, co-parents repeatedly have to explain and justify their position in their child’s life.

Better understanding the identities and family roles of co-parents has both theoretical and practical value. Insofar as co-parents reject the gendered roles of the family, they provide alternative arrangements that may promote broader gender and family equality. Additionally, we know little about the experiences of co-parents in states that disallow same-sex second-parent adoption, so this analysis provides insight into how institutional inequality affects non-heterosexual families.

Understanding the experiences of co-parents also has practical implications, as well. The growing number of same-sex families has forced courts to deal with families that fail to follow the one mother/one father model. Co-parents, because of their social parenting (rather than biological parenting), represent a cultural and legal disruption of the patriarchal nuclear family. They have created a category of kinship and a social identity that has not previously existed in Western society. Courts in gay-friendly states have adapted by recognizing a category of “psychological mothers” or “social mothers” and granting them parental status. This recognition by the courts unhinges the link between mother and biology and “opens the door to redefining the concept of mother; in principle, anyone who actively participates in the act of social reproduction could be deemed a mother as well” (Dalton and Bielby 2000:36). The move from away from biological reproduction toward recognition of social reproduction marks a radical departure from the usual endorsement of the nuclear family.

This chapter addresses two questions: How do co-parents negotiate their parental identity 1) in light of dominant motherhood ideologies and their gender identities, and 2) in an institutional context that does not legally recognize them as parents?
LITERATURE REVIEW

Below, I provide an overview of the social constructionist perspective on identity, which provides a useful framework for understanding the identity struggles co-parents face. Next, I review dominant motherhood ideologies in the U.S. and consider how, in light of these ideologies, lesbian parents are excluded from “good mother” status. Following this, a review of the historic importance of gender identity in the lesbian community provides a context to understanding how a butch gender identity may conflict with a mother identity. Finally, I provide an overview of the literature on co-parents’ identity.

I employ a social constructionist approach to identity, which suggests that identities are not fixed, but are variable and can be manipulated. As such, identity is understood as something that is actively created and re-created through interaction with others, a process known as identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). I adopt a conceptualization of identity and the self as interrelated; in other words, identity refers to both a social category and an overall sense of who one is (White 1992).

Social constructionists conceptualize gender as an interactional accomplishment that is continually re-negotiated. Within this perspective, subjective definitions of masculinity and femininity and the symbols and norms that sustain these binary categorizations are important (Cerulo 1997). Constructionists explore how the family, schools and media promote a gendered self, a process that restricts behavior by prescribing appropriate ways of being male and female.

Queer theory, a variant of social constructionism, also emphasizes the social nature and fluidity of identity, while emphasizing that gender and sexuality both inform a sense of self. Gagne and Tewksbury (2002) introduced the concept gendered sexualities to refer to the complex interplay between societal constructions of gender, sexual behaviors, ideations, attitudes, and experiences while recognizing social institutions reify hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality. They argue that “gender affects sexuality and that sexuality affects gender presentation and gender identity” (Gagne and Tewksbury 2002:4).

Co-parents must negotiate and reconcile multiple and often conflicting identities – their parental identity, their lesbian identity, and their gender identity, and these identities often shift in importance.
Parental Identity:

Dominant Ideologies of Motherhood in the Contemporary United States

Motherhood discourses are hegemonic, since they are taken for granted and rarely questioned (DiQuinzio 1999). Motherhood ideologies mandate what appropriate mothering is and what characteristics ideal mothers should have. According to contemporary motherhood ideologies, women have a natural competency for nurturance and motherhood, which renders them best suited for the home and functions to keep them marginalized in the workforce or out of it altogether. Contemporary motherhood ideologies mandate that women assume primary responsibility for child care and the lion’s share of domestic labor, while men work outside the home gaining income, status, and human capital, thus perpetuating the gendered division of labor (DiQuinzio 1999). Mothers are often “mommy tracked” or relegated to low-wage jobs, which facilitates dependence on a male income or the state. Contemporary motherhood ideologies also promote inequality by socially and sometimes legally sanctioning those who fail to adhere to these norms, preserving the dominance of the heterosexual, nuclear family.

Motherhood discourses situate socially-approved motherhood squarely within the context of a heterosexual, nuclear family. Family law, social policies, and cultural representations endorse the married, middle-class, heterosexual family as the ideal. (Abramovitz 1996; Fineman 1995; Thorne 1993). DiLapi (1989) described a “motherhood hierarchy” that rewards those who most closely conform to the ideal. The mother at the top of the hierarchy is “a heterosexual woman, of legal age, married in a traditional nuclear family, fertile, pregnant by intercourse with her husband, and wants to bear children” (DiLapi 1989:110).

Similarly, Hoffnung (1998) conceptualized the “motherhood mystique” to illustrate the connections between sex, gender, motherhood, and patriarchy. She emphasized that mothers’ work, including caring for the child, home and husband fit together seamlessly. In order to achieve good mother status, women are expected to enjoy caretaking and all that goes along with that. Additionally, good mothers believe that intense devotion to their children is beneficial for children.

The prevailing motherhood ideology in the United States is that of intensive mothering (Hays 1996). According to Hays (1996:46), “Intensive mothering is a child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive ideology.” Intensive mothering pressures mothers to put the needs of their child above their own.
Mothering ideologies function to police all women’s mothering (O’Reilly 2004). The ideology ignores the feminist argument that motherhood has different meanings and is enacted differently based on (among other things) a woman’s class, race, and sexual preference (Arendell 2000). Women who do not mother in ways congruent with motherhood ideals - like lesbians, single mothers, or disabled mothers - are labeled as unfit, deviant, and bad mothers (Arendell 2000).

**Lesbians Cannot be Good Mothers**

Lesbian mothers violate ideologies of motherhood in numerous ways and are thus one group excluded from good mother status. Historically, lesbian motherhood has been considered an oxymoron insofar as “lesbians are presumptively non-procreative and mothers are presumptively heterosexual” (Thompson 2002:6). Lesbians also subvert gender norms; dominant ideology depicts mothers as feminine, yet popular stereotypes often feature lesbians as masculine. The media and conservative pundits have framed lesbians as unfit parents because their children presumably have no father figure. Popular rhetoric has pathologized lesbians, portraying them as oversexed, egocentric, and immoral, and their relationships are critiqued as unstable (Hequembourg 2007).

Conventional wisdom suggests that heterosexuality is a prerequisite for motherhood; thus, lesbians find themselves struggling to prove themselves as “good mothers” (Hequembourg and Farrell 1999). While assisted reproduction makes lesbian motherhood more feasible, lesbians nevertheless face perceptions that their sexual practice makes them unable or ill-equipped to mother. The dominant ideology of mothering frames women as having a natural competence for mothering, but the idea of natural competence is not extended to lesbians.

Another reason lesbians struggle for a “good mother” identity is because they still face relics of an ideology that positioned homosexuality as perverse and immoral. “Mother reads awkwardly against lesbian because, in hegemonic usage, lesbian connotes little more than explicit and perverse sexuality” (Thompson 2002: 6). While homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness, gays and lesbians still face stigmas that threaten their right to parent. Feelings of repugnance toward homosexuals still run deep (Thompson 2002). In a study of how lesbians were characterized in the popular press, Thompson (2002) found they were depicted as potential child molesters and a threat to the family.
Much of the reluctance to accept lesbians as good mothers stems from a fear that their children will be psychologically harmed or more likely to identify as homosexual (Thompson 2002). While the fear is that children will endure teasing, research finds that children of homosexual parents develop at least as well as their peers, nor are they more likely than children raised by heterosexual parents to identify as homosexual (Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Tasker 2005).

In sum, contemporary motherhood ideologies police all women’s behavior, but function to marginalize those who do not conform, including lesbian parents. Therefore, insofar as lesbian parents depart from motherhood norms mandating heterosexuality, femininity, and the nuclear family as the ideal form, their identities as good parents are threatened.

**Gender Identity**

Lesbians may experience threats to their parental identity if, either stereotypically or in actuality, they violate norms of femininity. Lesbians are often characterized as masculine haters, and the association of femininity with nurturance precludes masculine women from being considered appropriate mothers. This creates a problem for some masculine lesbians, who, as a group, have historically violated gender norms, usually by adopting butch roles (Faderman 1991). “Mother = femininity, lesbian = masculinity, therefore, mother ≠ lesbian” (Thompson 2002:113-14). Therefore, those co-parents who have a masculine or butch gender identity may have difficulty reconciling that with motherhood.

Gender identity is “a person’s relative sense of his or her own masculine or feminine identity” (Money 1965). Examples of gender identities are butch, femme, dyke, baby butch, and stone butch. As with all identities, gender identities are not be fixed, but fluid and shifting.

Butch and femme have been an integral part of lesbianism in the 20th century and continue to be popular today (Crawley 2001; Faderman 1992; Stein 1997), although ideas about butch and femme are not as rigid as they were in the 1940’s and 1950’s (Faderman 1992). Butch and femme categories have served as conceptual frameworks that have organized lesbian communities (Crawley 2001). Butch and femme as categories have persisted over time, although understandings of the categories have varied. Popular among lesbians in the 1940’s and 1950’s, thee butch and femme identities, they went underground in the latter part of the 1960’s and 1970’s (Faderman 1991; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993) and have re-emerged since the 1980’s (Crawley 2001; Faderman 1992; Stein 1997).
Butch and femme are conceptualized as lesbian genders and as performances or erotic play (Crawley 2001). Rubin (1992:467) defined them as “ways of coding identities and behaviors that are both connected to and distinct from standard societal roles for men and women.” “Femmes” more closely conform to hegemonic femininity and usually “pass” as heterosexual, whereas “butches” identify primarily as masculine and prefer masculine signals, personal appearance, and styles.

Faderman (1991) argued that butch and femme emerged among working-class lesbian communities as a means to gain status in a male-dominated society. She situated women’s enactment of butch and femme gender roles in the 1940’s, 50’s, and 60’s as an indication of the limitations lesbians of that era faced - their gender identity options lay only in acting on caricatures of heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Other scholars (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993), however, have argued that butch and femme emerged not as caricatured gender roles, but as positive gender constructions stemming from lesbians’ attempts to claim identities, power and space for themselves. Butches, for example, often dressed and developed personas to signal their willingness to engage in fights with men for the right to patronize bars (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis suggested that butch and femme genders broke down the gender structure in dominant society.

In the late 1960’s, butch and femme came under fire from feminists as mimicking heterosexual roles and setting up power relations akin to the power relations men have with women. As a result, butch and femme went underground until the 1980’s (Faderman 1991; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993).

Butch and femme are also conceptualized as performance or erotic play (Case 1993; Faderman 1992). This framework, which developed in the 1990s and holds sway today positions butch and femme as styles rather than as identities, thus disconnecting them from power dynamics. Case (1989) argued that thinking of butch and femme as styles reduces gender to the status of play and consequently dismantles notions of biological gender. Newton (1996) took issue with Case’s argument, stressing that butch and femme are not merely theatrical. They are real in their consequences, since many take the categories seriously, and lesbians, especially butches, were often ridiculed, marginalized, and physically attacked for adopting these identities.

Butch and femme have re-emerged, although they no longer resemble the butch and femme of the 1950’s (Crawley 2001; Faderman 1992; Stein 1997). Today, the lesbian community has
adopted revised butch and femme identities. Neo butch and femme identity performances are conducted today with much greater flexibility, although some lesbians still adhere to strict representations of butch and femme (Faderman 1992). Faderman suggests that neo butch/femme categories serve as “a defiant proclamation of lesbianism. To them it is much more honorable than being a lesbian who can pass for straight among heterosexuals” (Faderman 1992:587).

Many lesbians insist that butch and femme are not replications of patriarchal categories, but rather original expressions of gender that transcend the gender binary. Butch lesbians accused of replicating patriarchy claim that their masculinity is viewed as male only because we lack the language to describe female masculinity (Halberstam 1998). Several of Halberstam’s interviewees explained butch as a missing gender, discredited and unrecognized; lacking the language to define them forced butches to be defined in terms of masculinity. Female masculinity would be the better term, they argued. Butches in Newton’s (1993) study said they acted masculine not because they wanted to be male, but because they wanted to resist the pervasive construction of femaleness as feminine and because they wanted to publicly announce their desire for other women. Similarly, according to Stein (1997), lesbians may act masculine, not because they want to be male, but because they are challenging sex roles; cross-behavior transcends the gender binary. “For the lesbian this means that she is not trying to be like a man, but that she is trying to be more a human being” (Stein 1997:80).

In sum, butch and femme remain an important part of lesbians’ identities (Crawley 2001), and thus it is important to consider how co-parents’ gender identity might affect their mothering experiences. In this paper I focus on co-parents who adopt a masculine gender identity, since it (unlike the femme identity) is incongruent with motherhood norms.

**The Co-Parent Identity**

Lesbians must parent within a structural context that tells them their sexuality renders them ill suited for motherhood; thus, they face a continual struggle to have their parental identity legitimized. Co-parents are particularly vulnerable, since they have no legal or biological tie to their child. When lesbian couples create families through artificial insemination, the birth mother has a biological and therefore legal tie to the child. When lesbians become parents through adoption, neither parent has a biological tie to the child, but one parent is legally recognized. In both cases, one parent is left in the lurch, with no socially or legally recognized tie to the child. Second-parent adoption may be a viable option if the couple resides in a state
where this is permitted and they have the funds to do so. In Florida, however, adoption by homosexuals is prohibited by law, rendering second parent adoption impossible. Only homosexuals who have been able to conceal their sexual orientation have adopted in Florida. While all lesbians struggle to be recognized as legitimate parents, co-parents are particularly marginalized.

Research on lesbian mothers and popular press accounts of co-parents indicate that identity issues are salient to them (Aizley 2006; Sullivan 2004). Co-parents report feeling in limbo between being a mother and not being a mother and being a father and not being a father. The co-parent is not a father substitute, but she is not a genderless parent. She is not giving birth to the child, but she is the child’s mother (Sullivan 2004). A recurring theme in the narratives of co-parents is the need to forge their own paths.

Research shows that lesbian couples were often very deliberate about including the co-parent in activities with the child in order to negate threats to her motherhood status. Both birth mothers and co-parents agreed that the biological mother enjoys an emotional and social advantage vis-à-vis the child; further, both types viewed this inequality as negative in light of the importance they placed on having an equal emotional connection to the child (Hequembourg 2007; Sullivan 2004). To counter the birth mother’s relational advantage, many couples designated special time and activities for the co-parent to bond with the child, such as special bath times, song times, or play times (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Sullivan 2004). Co-parents often made great efforts to be equally or even more involved in childcare than the biological mother to compensate for not having a biological connection to the child (Sullivan 2004).

Not all co-parents are uncomfortable with their ambiguous identity. The undefined role of the other parent allowed some women to play with the complex relationship between their gender and sexuality. Lesbian dad, dyke daddy, and high-femme dad were some of the labels co-parents used to describe themselves (Aizley 2006).

Co-parents’ parental identities were challenged in the public realm. Public forays proved challenging, since they presented opportunities for questions about who the mother and father were and what name the baby called each parent, questions that can be painful for lesbian co-parents. Some co-parents implemented strategies to legitimize their tie to the child. One co-
parent, for example, preferred to carry the baby in her arms, which made her feel more secure in her parental role (Aizley 2006).

Co-parents often discussed the difficulty outsiders have in understanding the concept of dual mothers because outsiders hold a cultural attachment to the notion that there can be only one mother. Reactions to the presence of two mothers ran from confusion to discomfort to outright rejection. All three reactions are apparent in a comment to one co-parent in Dunne’s (2000:24) study: “Well if you’re not the biological mother, then what the hell are you?” Depending on the context, co-parents may decide to fully disclose, partially disclose, or pass as the biological mother (Sullivan 2004).

Co-parents (and lesbian mothers more generally) spoke about the difficulties of being validated by the outside world (Dunne 2000). Lesbian mothers reported having to continuously explain and justify their family structure to outsiders, both heterosexuals and others in the gay community. Phrases such as “outreach, education, and trailblazing were commonly used among lesbian parents (Dunne 2000).

In sum, co-parents’ parental identities are threatened by outsiders who do not understand or validate lesbian families. Co-parents lack institutional scripts to guide their behavior and struggle to make sense of their position in the family.

METHODS AND DATA

Data come from in-depth interviews with 27 mothers in planned lesbian families who conceived a child (themselves or with a partner) via artificial insemination. All were currently parenting in a lesbian couple, and none had children from a previous heterosexual relationship.

Of the 27 mothers interviewed, 17 were co-parents, eight were birthmothers, and two were both. They ranged in age from 26 to 62; the median age was 36. Two had high school diplomas, 12 had a bachelor’s degree and 13 had advanced degrees. Regarding race, 20 were white, three Black, and four Latina. Sixteen worked full-time, four part-time, and seven were not working at the time of the interview. Sixteen of the mothers had at least one child under age five and the rest had older children.

Participants lived in or a near a medium-sized city in the Southeastern United States. Initial interviews were conducted with four women with whom I was acquainted, and they offered
referrals to other mothers who were coupled and had children via artificial insemination. Of the 27 mothers interviewed, 22 were referred by other participants. I requested interviewees provide referrals if possible for those outside of their social network to ensure diversity within the sample. The names of all the participants and their children have been changed.

Each interview began with a common set of open-ended questions, but the respondent’s answers shaped the direction of each interview (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Esterberg 2002). After conducting several interviews, I changed open-ended questions to address emerging themes. It became clear early on that legal inequality was a salient issue for co-parents, as it continually appeared unsolicited. All but one interview, which took place in a public park, took place in respondents’ homes and interviews averaged about an hour and a half. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed three steps: open and focused coding, analytic and theoretical memo-writing, and data interpretation (Charmaz 1983, 2006; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Salient themes that emerged from my analysis are described below.

I draw on these themes to address the question of how co-parents create a parental identity in the face of dominant motherhood ideologies that categorically exempt them from “good mother” status and in an institutional context that does not legally recognize them as parents. By conducting this research in a state that prohibits second-parent adoption, this study sheds light on the obstacles co-parents face publicly and privately in developing and maintaining a parental identity. This examination is important since the majority of U.S. states do not allow same-sex second-parent adoptions and thus understanding how legal and social discrimination affects dual-mother families here has implications for how they affect most planned lesbian families.

RESULTS

All 17 co-parents in this study reported that developing a parental identity was an anguished struggle. Threats to co-parents’ parental identity fell into three categories: 1) They faced legal discrimination since they were not recognized as legal parents to their children, 2) they faced gender identity dilemmas insofar as their butch (masculine) gender identity was incongruent with motherhood norms of femininity and nurturance, and 3) they faced social discrimination when interacting with the public.
In response to these threats, all co-parents were engaged in identity work. Co-parents in this study identified in one of three ways – as mathers, fathers, or other mothers. Mathers did not feel like they fit neatly into either the mother or father category and were able to develop their own hybrid identities. Similarly, co-parents that identified as fathers did not feel completely like mothers or fathers, but felt more comfortable identifying as a father than a mother. Some co-parents actively sought mother statuses, but felt marginalized due to social and legal discrimination.

**Threats to Parental Identity Construction**

**Threats Stemming from Legal Discrimination**

Almost all (16 of 17) co-parents struggled with their parental identity because they were not legally recognized parents, which influenced how they thought about themselves as parents and how they felt others perceived them. Many emphasized that legal discrimination was even more of a hindrance than was lacking biological relatedness for developing a parental identity.

Maureen described her position:

> It wouldn’t matter that much to me if I wasn’t biologically related as long as I had some rights. Not having any rights to protect my child or even keep my child if something happens to my relationship or partner is the killer. It’s hard to feel like a parent when you have no rights.

Melissa explained how she felt marginalized by her lack of legal recognition:

> We were told the report card has to be signed by the legal parent. The first time Erin got her report card I signed it. Of course, I have a different last name and the teacher didn’t really know our situation so she called the house and talked to my partner who explained everything. The teacher said that it needed to be signed by the actual parent. I have my doubts about whether report card signing is a legal issue, but it’s an example of not feeling like the real parent.

Tracy:

> I knew it would be rough at the beginning to see my partner breastfeed and not have that biological connection, but that can be somewhat compensated by being a legal parent. When you can’t establish a legal connection, though, it is really hard to feel like a good parent. Right now, I feel like a nanny or mommy’s sidekick. And I think that’s how my son’s teachers view me. I can’t sign any of the official paperwork at school. She has to do the
official important stuff. I get delegated to bring in cupcakes or whatever. Apparently, they will allow us non-moms to do that.

Rachel explained:

We have to carry a big file of papers everywhere we go. Literally everywhere. It’s all our legal documents trying to cover our butt if something happens to say that I can make parental decisions, even though they might not get recognized anyway. I am so paranoid about being in a situation where I need to make a decision for Becca (daughter) and not being legally allowed to, and something awful happens. What kind of parent has to carry around a binder to legitimize themselves? But, it’s weird. I have to carry around a paper to say I’m a parent.

Lacking legal parental recognition makes co-parents vulnerable in many practical ways, but it also hinders their parental identity construction. Co-parents found it difficult to feel like a parent without institutional acknowledgement. Further, they perceived that their lack of legal relationship to their child de-legitimized their parental status to outsiders.

**Threats Stemming from Identity Dilemmas**

About half (eight of 17) of the co-parents experienced incongruity between their gender identity and perceived motherhood norms. These respondents associated motherhood with femininity and felt excluded from or uncomfortable with the motherhood status because they didn’t consider themselves feminine or motherly. Three of these eight co-parents self-defined as butch and a fourth described herself as a butch genderqueer. Lynn discussed the confusion she felt because her butch gender identity was incompatible with motherhood norms:

I am butch. How could I possibly be a mom? It’s laughable really. I would rather ride bikes and play ball with the boys, which is something I think fathers typically do. I do some things moms do I guess, but I don’t feel like a mom. I guess it’s more a mental thing. And maybe it’s a gender thing. I don’t want to be a man, but I guess I kind of feel like a guy.

Jackie:

I have always been butch. Ever since I was young I knew I would never carry a child in my body. That would feel weird, just weird. I don’t know how to be a butch mother. It makes me mad, though, because everyone thinks if you’re butch that you want to be a dude. I don’t want to be a guy, I just don’t really feel like a mother you know? I feel like I am better able to be a father than a mother.
Veronica defines herself as a butch genderqueer. She spoke about how her sense of self conflicted with her parental identity:

I am a butch genderqueer. How the hell do you square that with being a mom? You don’t. I really did try. I cried, I screamed and kicked. I took pills. I read books. I went to therapy. Genderqueers don’t claim a gender. But then my kids came along and I felt, much to my surprise, that I don’t know how to be a genderless parent! I can be a genderless lesbian, but not a parent. My girlfriend finally said, “Stop beating yourself up. You’re obviously not cut out to be a mom, so just be a dad.” I screamed at her, “But I’m not a dad!” Right now, my kids call me Veronica, because nothing feels right. I guess I’m a dad, but not enough of one that I want to be called that.

Internalizing motherhood ideologies that suggest mothers are feminine caused butch women to feel uncomfortable with the mother label. These women thought they should be mothers because they are women, but couldn’t square their own gender identity with that status, thus leaving them feeling troubled.

**Threats Stemming from Social Discrimination**

Ten of 17 co-parents identified discrimination as threatening to their parental identity. Public forays were often challenging because they had to field questions about their relationship to their child and the structure of their household. Often outsiders, including doctors, teachers, and other parents threatened co-parents’ identities since they did not understand or accept them. Ruth explained:

Other people are really attached to the idea that there can only be one mom. Every Saturday my Margaret and I take Cameron to Playcenter and there are lots of other parents there. Even though we know a lot of the parents there now because it’s a thing for us to go and so we have explained our situation, I feel like most of them don’t take me seriously. Just last week, one of the mothers said that her kid was having a birthday party and Cameron was invited, and she said she was going to see if it was okay with Margaret. I said, “You don’t need to ask her. Cameron can go. We don’t have any other plans.” She told me pointblank that she really thought that she should ask Margaret since she was Cam’s mother. I had to walk away.
Gretchen:

I recently changed jobs and insurance and so we started seeing a new doctor, which one of my gay friends told me was gay-friendly. I took our daughter to the doctor for a vaccination. One of the questions on the form asked what my relationship to the patient was and I put mather (mother and father) and then in parentheses I wrote “parent.” When we got in front of the doctor, he asked what a mather was. I told him that I am her parent, but don’t consider myself a mother or father. Then he asked me if the child was biologically mine and of course, I said no, but I was getting defensive. He refused to give my daughter the vaccination because I was not a legal parent or guardian and then asked to speak to me alone. He actually told me that in his medical opinion, referring to myself as a mather was harmful to our daughter. This put me into a tailspin about whether I was messing up our daughter. A lack of social support threatened co-parents’ parental identities. They received subtle and overt messages that made them feel like they were not a real parent.

In sum, all co-parents reported struggling to secure a parental identity because they experienced legal discrimination, gender identity dilemmas, and social discrimination.

**Identity Construction**

All co-parents actively sought to carve out a parental identity for themselves, and it was something they gave much thought to and collaborated with others to achieve. Co-parents sought such an identity for several reasons. First, it helped them make sense of their position in the family and served as a guidepost for behavior. Second, for some, their status as a parent presented an existential and philosophical question they needed to answer in order to have a coherent sense of self. Third, some worried that as their children became aware that most families had a mother and a father they would need to adhere to this model, albeit untraditionally, to provide their children with a sense of normalcy. Co-parents in this study identified in one of three ways: 1) as a “mather;” 2) as a father, by virtue of being disqualified from the mother category; or, 3) as an “other” mother.

**Mathers**

Six of 17 co-parents labeled themselves “mathers” to capture their ambiguous social status. A group of co-parents who were neighborhood acquaintances decided to start an informal support group. Identity issues were a salient topic at meetings, and numerous co-parents lamented how they did not feel like a mother or a father, but lacked any other categorization,
which caused them stress and anxiety. Out of these conversations was born the label “mathers.” Co-parents who used the term said it reflected the nebulous position they occupied – not quite a mother, but not quite a father either. Ellen described:

A mather is a combination of a mother and a father. Lots of us felt like, what the hell are we? It wasn’t a good feeling. It was stressful, you know? After talking and talking about it, one day it seemed so simple: we don’t have to be one or the other! Once we had this word, we all clinged to it, you know? Somehow it made us feel better to say, “Ok, we have a word for it. This is what we are.”

Jan explained:

I don’t even know if there is anything a mather does that is really that different from what a mother or father does. Being a mather is more a way of thinking, like a way of dealing with feeling uncertain about what you are. . . . As a mather, I can tell my kid, “Hey, families don’t have to have moms and dads. They can be whatever.” And I don’t have to just do mom things or dad things. We do everything together. We talk, paint, wrestle, whatever. Also, when you think of yourself as mom or dad there are lots of things that go along with that. Like if you’re mom then you do certain things, and dads do certain things. Being a mather, I feel like I can cross those lines without penalties. Like I can play ball with my kid and wear my hat backwards, but I can also let myself be vulnerable.

Nancy:

Being a mather lets me experiment with gender and roles. We have three boys and I think that having masculinity in their lives is important. Not men necessarily, but masculinity. I can provide what they need. I mean, my concept of masculinity comes from a nurturing father, so right there I think it’s unique. But we play at masculinity. We throw elbows and wrestle, and I tell them “if someone messes with you, hit him in the nose.” But then we laugh, because I am just teasing them, because I am a pacifist. But being a mather lets me play. Sometimes I have to laugh because I will look down at myself and I will be wrestling in my apron. Now that is a gender quagmire!

Another theme that ran through mathers’ narratives was being a pioneer. Some entered the support group with the intent of creating a new niche, as was the case for Lorraine:

I fully embrace my role as a mather. I feel like I am a trailblazer. I didn’t want to be pigeon-holed as mom or dad. I felt free to be something different because I am something different.
A lot of my friends have a hard time figuring this all out, but it has never caused me any angst. . . . I have fully enjoyed creating this role. It’s amazing what it feels like when you don’t attach one of those labels to yourself! It opens up this creative way to be, to parent.

Addison:

Being a mather feels like activism. I see lots of my gay friends feel like they have to choose. But my options are mom or dad, so hmm, which do I feel more like? I get to bust out of those categories. I get to introduce myself to my daughter’s teachers and say, “I’m Addison, Jillian’s mather.” Inevitably, after they get over their shock, they ask me what that means and I get to educate them! I feel like I will make it easier for other parents down the road who don’t want to have to be mom or dad. Man, it’s about social change.

Some mathers discussed how the “mather” mentality transcended their parental role and affected their sense of self on many levels.

Jan:

Since I started thinking of myself as a mather, I have changed in lots of ways. I feel more free to express myself without thinking about gender. I stopped thinking about gender when I parent, so I guess it makes sense it would happen in other areas of my life. For example, sometimes now I wear a tie and men’s dress shoes to work, which I never would have done before. It’s not because I want to be a man; it’s because I have always liked the look and now I feel free to do it.

Addison also described how being a mather allowed her to express her true self:

Now, I am a lot more androgynous. I have never been really girly, but I have never been how I am now, either. It’s funny, because after my daughter was born, I actually started to dress more feminine, because everyone had these expectations of me as being a mom, even though I knew that didn’t feel right. But through the group I realized I didn’t have to be a mom just because I am a woman, and it allowed me to be me. Being a mather, I don’t have to dress or act a certain way – I can just be myself now.

In sum, the mather term anchored the identities of women who felt they did not fit into established parental categories. Interestingly, prior to inventing the mather label, these co-parents reportedly felt anxiety about their ambiguous parental role, but adopting the mather identity proved cathartic for them.
Fathers

“I don’t look like a mother, and I don’t feel like a mother, so I must be a father.” Expressions like this appeared in about one-third of the sample. Five out of 17 co-parents described themselves as fathers by virtue of not fitting neatly into the mother category as they perceived it. These women had clear ideas about how mothers should look and act and felt they failed to embody these ideas. Clearly constrained by society’s dichotomous approach to parental roles, these co-parents explained that they were more like fathers than mothers.

Co-parents felt tethered by the roles available to them and they lacked the language to refer to themselves as anything other than a mother or father. None of the co-parents in this group were comfortable being referred to as a mother. They did not necessarily feel like full-fledged fathers either – a few took pains to explain they did not fit the father prototype exactly – but they felt closer to a father than a mother.

Kelly described:

I struggle with it because I know I’m a woman, but I don’t look like a mom. I wear work boots and flannels. I drive a truck, not an SUV. And I sure don’t act like the moms I knew growing up or the moms I know now really. I don’t bake cookies. I’m not nurturing in that way. I mean, I am in my own way, but more like a dad, I guess. I don’t feel comfortable being called mom, because I don’t feel like one. It just doesn’t fit me. It makes it difficult, though, because it is really hard for other people to understand that I’m a woman but I feel more like a dad. It’s confusing.

Another co-parent described her resistance to the “mother” label:

My partner and I talked a lot about my feelings about being a mother while she was pregnant. I told her then that I didn’t want to be called mom. I knew I didn’t feel like a mom before the baby was even born. My family is Italian so Keven calls me Babbo, which is father in Italian. I don’t think I act exactly like the fathers I know, but I definitely feel more like a father than a mother and those are my two choices, right? I guess I think of mothers as being feminine and huggy/kissy, and that is definitely not me.

Other co-parents assumed a father role because they felt pressure from their family and children to conform to the one mother/one father model. Mallory described the pressure she felt from her son:
I am an androgynous person and one time I went to pick up Jack at the park and I heard him say to his friend, “that’s my dad.” He had never referred to me like that before; he always called me by my name. Another time he said, “When we go into the store, can you lower your voice?” I think it comes from the social idea that you have a mom and a dad. It just made me realize that it was kind of selfish not to be mom or dad for his sake. Jack seemed to think of me as dad, and I sure didn’t think of myself as mom – he has one of those – so here I am. A dad. 

Krista described the tension between her and her partner that led her to call herself a father: 

To be fair, I am not the mother type, but Denise insisted, very firmly, that I was to take the role of the father. For example, she wants to pick out his clothes because she thinks that’s something mothers do. One day I tried to dress him and she freaked out. She felt like I was invading her territory. Oh, another example is our baby shower. Well, she referred to it as her baby shower and didn’t even want me to come, but I kind of crashed it. One of the presents she got was a baby book. She told me that since she was the mother I wouldn’t really be the one putting stuff in the book, so I went out and bought my own. She flew off the handle. She told me that she never heard of a dad buying a baby book. She wants to be the mother and wants me to be a father, so clearly that’s what I am. Now I just have to figure out what that means exactly.

In sum, this group of co-parents felt constrained by contemporary ideologies of motherhood that position mothers as feminine and nurturing. Unable for various reasons to perceive of themselves as embodying those characteristics, they defaulted to what seemed the only available alternative: a father identity, although many only tenuously held this identity.

The “Other” Mother

Six of 17 co-parents desired and actively tried to adopt a mother identity, and all six experienced what one referred to as “the mother hierarchy.” They said they felt maternal, longed to be mothers, and wanted to be called mom or mamma. Despite this desire, they expressed feelings of futility, being second-best, and not being a “real” mother, all of which caused them to struggle with identity and self-worth. Although the women themselves did not describe themselves as other mothers, the term expresses the desire to be a mother, but ultimately feeling unable to achieve parity with the birth mother. Mamma two, Madre, and Big Mamma are examples of some of the terms co-parents used to refer to themselves.
Karen:

I have always wanted a baby. I was the quintessential little girl who wanted to be a mom when she grew up. Well, when I realized I was gay I knew it wasn’t going to be easy, but I still wanted a baby. Now I have the baby, but I didn’t have the baby. Before she was born, I kept saying, “It won’t bother me. I know I’m her mother. I don’t need a law to say so.” Well, I was wrong. I feel like a mother, I do, but not the mother. It’s like, I am always getting slapped in the face. “Oh, you can’t breastfeed. Oh, you can’t sign this paper. Oh, you have to be related to do that.” It’s exhausting.

Ruth:

I know in my heart I’m Cameron’s mom, but it sort of feels like I’m playing house, playing a mom, but everyone knows I’m not a mom. Actually, I’m in therapy to try to deal with all this, because it gets me real depressed. The other day, my daughter had friends over and they were in the dining room and I was making a snack in the kitchen. I heard them ask her who I was and she said, “that’s my mom.” One of her friends said, “I thought Margaret was your mom. You can’t have two moms.” And I started to cry. It’s pathetic. A comment from a seven year old can start the waterworks. But imagine feeling that from everyone, every angle. All day, everyday. I want to be a mom, but I’m just not.

Samantha always felt second-best because she didn’t give birth to her child. As a result, she felt like she had to justify her relationship to her son:

When I was in grad school, I would say something about Evan and people would start with the questions. Like, how do you have a kid? You were never pregnant. Did you adopt? And then I would do this whole explanation thing, like, well, my partner actually birthed him, but he’s my kid too. This always made me feel really bad, like I wasn’t a real parent you know? One day my advisor said, “Why don’t you just say yes, I’m his mother. Stop explaining and apologizing.” And after that I did, but it took me a long time to get to that place.

Some co-parents felt expendable. Yolanda explained:

I think of myself as a mom, but I don’t know that anyone else does, even my partner sometimes. I am not identified anywhere as a parent. It goes as far as photographs. I am always the one taking the photograph. So I am not even in very many pictures. It is always “take a picture of us.” Like, they are the real family.
Taylor:

I even feel like my partner doesn’t consider me an equal mother. We had been debating whether or not to get a certain vaccination. One day she came home and told me that she decided to get the vaccination done. I was floored. I couldn’t believe that she made that kind of executive decision without me. And this was right after she had read me the riot act because I got Shaun a buzz cut without consulting her. I felt so irrelevant.

In sum, some co-parents do want to identify as mothers, but felt marginalized by outsiders, the legal institution, and even their partners, leaving their mother identity in question. Women in this category struggled to validate their mother identity in the face of legal and social discrimination that positioned them as inferior.

DISCUSSION

An approach that assumes that because co-parents are women, they seek to identify as mothers belies the complex nature of parental identity development for lesbian co-parents. Previous research on the identity struggles of lesbian co-parents has focused on their experiences of becoming and being mothers. There is pervasive use of terms in the literature such as “dual-mother families,” “co-mothers” and “mothering experiences.” This faulty assumption has precluded asking how co-parents negotiate their sex, gender identity, and relationship with the child to construct a parental identity. These findings illustrate that not all co-mothers desire a mother identity and that the process of claiming a parental identity when there are no institutional scripts to draw from is a complex and anguished process.

Co-parents occupy a unique position insofar as they don’t have a familial precedent to serve as a behavioral guidepost. They are female parents who did not give birth and have no legal relationship to their child, with the result that they often do not feel entirely like a mother or a father. They are in a liminal space, trying to make sense of their identities and family roles.

Impact of Motherhood Ideologies on Identity Development

The bulk of co-parents’ identity struggles resulted from the incongruence between internalized motherhood ideologies and their sense of self. Some scholars have posited that lesbian-headed families, by virtue of their non-adherence to gender norms, have the ability to construct their families in new and more equitable ways. While this may be true, this study
illustrates that doing family differently is not an easy task since, like most women in the U.S., co-parents have been exposed to motherhood ideologies that define good mothers as heterosexual, feminine, and nurturing (among other things). Insofar as co-parents violate these motherhood norms, they experience dissonance about how they fit into the family, illustrating the complexity of creating alternative family structures.

The internalization of motherhood ideologies was evidenced in several ways. First, many co-parents subscribed to the notion that there can only be one mother, even though it rendered their status tenuous. By virtue of not having given birth, these co-parents felt they were not at the top of the mother hierarchy.

Additional evidence of the internalization of motherhood ideologies is co-parents’ perceptions that mothers are feminine and nurturing. Some co-parents did not feel comfortable identifying as a mother because they violated the motherhood norm of femininity. Femininity and nurturance went hand and hand and were often explained in stereotyped terms that referred to baking cookies and hugging and kissing.

Those women who identified as butch had a particularly difficult time reconciling their gender identity with motherhood ideologies. These women said that being butch eliminated the possibility of identifying as a mother; butch and mother were utterly incompatible. Some butch co-parents felt comfortable identifying as a father, but others did so only because they knew they were not mothers.

Such difficulties illustrate the rigidity of gender categorizations. Most women were unable to disassociate female/mother/feminine and male/father/masculine. In fact, much of co-parents’ emotional stress centered on wanting to embody some combination of these traits but not knowing how. They sought to integrate masculine mothers and feminine fathers and dyke daddies into one identity but lacked the language and social support to be successful.

**Claiming an Identity**

“Mathers” were the only group to be able to successfully deconstruct the mother/father binary. Like the fathers and other mothers, mathers also experienced stress and dissonance because of their ambiguous co-parent identity, but they responded by creating a support group from which the “mather” label ultimately arose. Group members’ collective realization that they could exist outside the binary reduced their stress significantly. The label carved out an ideological space for them to redefine their role in the family. Thus, laying claim to an identity
was a powerful act. The identity was protective and served as a means for co-parents to anchor themselves in otherwise uncertain seas. Lacking such an anchor, fathers and other mothers continued to struggle with their parental identity.

The success of the maters illustrates the power of language, social support and a collective identity. The fathers experienced the same struggle as the maters – not feeling like either a mother or father – but unlike the maters, they lacked a language to redefine themselves and their role. The maters also had the benefit of engaging in identity work with others in similar situations. The social support and shared experiences of the support group empowered maters to successfully claim their identity.

**Lacking Institutional Support**

Legal discrimination threatened the identity of all co-parents. Not having a legal relationship to their child loomed large in the lives of co-parents in ideological and practical ways. Co-parents were unable to perform many parental tasks, such as signing their child’s report card, and subsequently had difficulty feeling like a parent. Moreover, co-parents’ feelings of marginalization were exacerbated by social discrimination from a public unaccustomed to dual-mother families.

In sum, co-parents experience identity struggles due to legal discrimination, gender identity dilemmas, both internally and with their partners, and social discrimination. Despite these struggles, co-parents were engaged in identity work claiming identities such as mather, father, and mother. Co-parents’ internalization of contemporary motherhood ideologies constrained their ability to fashion new family roles. For those who were able to successfully transcend the one mother/one father model of family, social support and claiming a new identity were key factors. While planned lesbian families have the potential to construct families in more equitable ways, this study illustrates that the task is not an easy one.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

This dissertation addresses three primary research questions. Chapter 2 addressed two of these. First, how do legal pressures impact equality in planned lesbian families? What is the connection between a lack of legal standing and the potential of these families to create an alternative - more equal - social sphere? Second, how does lacking legal parental status affect co-parents’ personal and interpersonal negotiation of parenthood in planned lesbian families? The third question is addressed in Chapter 3: How do co-parents negotiate their parental identity a) in light of dominant motherhood ideologies and their gender identities and b) in an institutional context that does not legally recognize them as parents?

Major Findings from Chapter 2

These findings highlight the necessity of legal second-parent adoption for achieving equality in lesbian relationships and illustrate how crucial power is in relationships, even when partners are same-sexed. Similar to findings of previous research, these lesbian couples valued and actively tried to accomplish parity in their relationships. Unlike previous research findings, however, couples in this study were unable to achieve relationship equality. What accounts for this disparity between my findings and the findings of others? Previous research has been conducted in states where both women had parental equality under the law, yet this study was conducted in a state that does not recognize co-parents as legal parents, and this lack of legal structural support prevented lesbian couples in this study from achieving relationship equality. These findings illustrate the critical role of institutional support. The fact of being same-sexed and committed to equality is not enough to guarantee equality. Lesbian couples do not exist in a vacuum, and the quality of their relationships is profoundly affected by legal strictures.

A lack of legal rights to children translated into a power dynamic that resembled a traditional, heterosexual relationship. Upon birth of the first child, relational power began to tip in favor of the birthmother, despite relationship equality being a goal of all couples. Birthmothers’ legal authority to prevent co-parents from seeing their children afforded them a power that distorted the relationship. Co-parents’ responses to this power imbalance – engaging in strategies to
minimize the possibility of a breakup – lessened the power differential, but constituted a step away from the open, non-manipulative relationships these women professed to want.

**Major Findings from Chapter 3**

Previous research on the identity struggles of lesbian co-parents has focused on their experiences of becoming and being *mothers*. There is pervasive use in the literature of “mother” related terms, such as “dual-mother families,” “co-mothers,” and “mothering experiences.” This language and approach assumes that because co-parents are women, their identity issues center on being mothers, an orientation that I believe belies the complex nature of parental identity development for co-parents. This faulty assumption has precluded an understanding of how co-parents negotiate their sex, gender identity, and hereto unidentified role in the family to construct a *parental* identity. These findings illustrate that not all co-mothers desired a *mother* identity and that the process of claiming a parental identity when there are no institutional scripts to draw from is a complex and anguished process.

Co-parents in this study struggled to make sense of their identities and family roles. They experienced many threats to their parental identity, including: 1) Legal discrimination, since they were not recognized as legal parents to their children; 2) Gender identity dilemmas, insofar as a butch (masculine) gender identity was incongruent with motherhood norms of femininity and nurturance; and 3) Social discrimination when interacting with the public. In response to these threats, all co-parents were engaged in identity work. Co-parents in this study identified in one of three ways – as mathers, fathers, or other mothers. Mathers did not feel like they fit neatly into either the mother or father category and were able to develop their own hybrid identities. Similarly, co-parents that identified as fathers did not feel completely like mothers or fathers, but felt more comfortable identifying as a father than a mother. Some co-parents actively sought mother statuses, but felt marginalized due to social and legal discrimination. Mathers were ultimately most comfortable with their parental identity largely because they were able to collectively create an identity outside of the gendered mother or father roles.

**Lesbian Families and the Challenge to the Patriarchy**

The findings of this study illustrate the crucial role of legal and social support for lesbian families, particularly co-parents, in achieving equitable relationships. Equitable family arrangements illustrated in previous research (Dalton and Bielby 2000; Dunne 2000; Hequembourg 2007); Mamo 2007; Sullivan 2004) would be difficult to achieve without legal
equality. Since egalitarian family arrangements have the potential to shape broader gender
equality through de-gendering of children and parental modeling of household and childcare
equity, the need for equality under the law becomes even more compelling.

While not the purpose of my study, these results provide support for the notion that lesbian
families both assimilate to and resist heteronormativity. Scholars have recently emphasized how
lesbian families are *simultaneously* similar to and different from heterosexual families rather than
being *either* similar or different. Assimilation refers to the ways that lesbian families conform to
heteronormative arrangements, while resistance represents challenges to traditional family
arrangements (Hequembourg 2007; Lewin 1993; Mamo 2007; Weston 1991).

Planned lesbian families resisted heteronormative family arrangements by unhinging sex and
gender. Although the couples in this study were unable to achieve relationship equality, many of
the co-parents were nevertheless radically challenging heteronormativity through de-coupling
female and mother, male and father. Without institutional scripts or support, these co-parents
sought to carve out a new space for themselves that transcends the gendered binary. Insofar as
the fathers and the mathers identified themselves using these terms in the public sphere, they
were active agents in challenging the patriarchal system.

The presence of female masculinity also challenges conventional family models. Co-parents
who identified as fathers and mathers often discussed feeling more masculine than feminine,
although they did not want to be men. It is tempting to assume that female masculinity is akin to
hegemonic masculinity or subordinate masculinities and that masculine women are simply a
stand-in for men. However, Halberstam (1998) argues that female masculinity exists apart from
men and should be recognized as its own gender. My findings lead me to concur with her that an
effort must be made to understand female masculinity on its own terms and to explore how it
may uniquely shape family dynamics.

In addition to resisting, families in this study also simultaneously reinscribed the sex/gender
connection. Whereas all the co-parents struggled with their parental identity, and several did not
feel distinctly like a mother or a father, none of the birthmothers struggled with their identity or
desired to be anything other than a *mother*. The linear relationship between being a woman,
giving birth, and becoming a mother was uninterrupted, reinforcing the essentialist notion of
motherhood and perpetuating the heteronormative sex/gender coupling.
Co-parents simultaneously assimilated to and resisted motherhood ideologies. The internalization of good mothering was evidenced by the pressures women experienced to conform to a narrow definition of mothering and the anguish they felt when they did not, or could not, conform. However, many co-parents also resisted motherhood ideologies by actively constructing alternatives, although they struggled to have those alternatives legitimized.

**The Gay Rights Movement**

Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgenders (LGBT’s) face inequality on many fronts, including workplace, legal, and social discrimination. Despite many pressing issues, the recent focus of the Gay Rights Movements has been the fight for marriage equality. While marriage equality is important—federal recognition of same-sex marriage, for example, confers approximately 1200 rights (hrc.org 2010)—it is not the only important issue facing LGBT’s. The consequence of the focus on marriage equality is that other issues, such as the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), Hate Crimes Prevention Act, the Family and Medical Leave Inclusion Act, and the legalization of same-sex second parent adoption and joint adoption (to name a few) are relegated to the back burner.

Scholarly research on lesbian families has also tended to have a narrow focus. Much of it has focused on 1) the similarities between same-sex and heterosexual parents and 2) the effect of same-sex parenting on children. Consider that a Google Scholar search reveals that Stacey and Biblarz’s (2001) *(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?* has been cited 276 times. In contrast, aside from practical how-to guides for lesbian families to navigate the legal system, the effects of parental legal inequality have been virtually ignored.

This study provides compelling evidence that parental legal inequality affects planned lesbian families in ways that undermine their health, vitality, and commitment to equality. The findings of this study serve as a call to action for the purpose of fighting for parental equality under the law.

There is reason for optimism, even in Florida, which is the only state in the U.S. that explicitly prohibits homosexuals from adopting. On March 3rd, 2009, Florida HB413/SB500, legislation that would repeal Florida’s statutory ban on adoption by homosexuals, was introduced, as was Florida HB460, which would permit LGB people to adopt under certain specified circumstances (hrc.org 2010).
Florida has recently made national news and propelled parental legal equality into the spotlight by allowing its third gay adoption, despite the state’s ban. The legal precedent in Florida was put into motion in November 2008 when a Miami-Dade circuit judge ruled that a Florida law that blocks gay people from adopting children is unconstitutional, declaring there was no legal or scientific reason for sexual orientation alone to prohibit anyone from adopting. In a 53-page ruling, she rejected the state’s arguments that there is "a supposed dark cloud hovering over homes of homosexuals and their children" (hrc.org 2010).

The Gay Rights Movement’s focus on marriage equality combined with a lack of scholarly research has obscured the effects of laws banning gay adoption on same-sex families. This study clearly indicates that legal inequality is impactful, and attention must be given to this issue at both the academic and grass-roots levels.

**Limitations and Direction for Future Research**

The qualitative nature of this project produces several limitations, most importantly, the lack of generalizability. I interviewed 27 lesbian parents in one state, so there is no way to know if the results are typical of other lesbian parents in the United States or even in other parts of Florida. The urban setting from which I drew my sample means that lesbian parents in more rural settings might have different experiences. Although the lesbians in this study lack the same degree of social support and resources that cities like San Francisco provide, it is likely they have more support than lesbian parents in rural areas.

The respondents of this study were recruited through a snowball and convenience sample and as a result the likelihood of homogeneity is increased. If respondents were drawn from a random sample, the results might have been different. The majority of my interviewees are well-educated and earned more than the national average. A higher class position is representative of the demographic of planned lesbian families, perhaps because artificial insemination is a costly procedure and for this reason only women with somewhat high incomes would be in the sample.

This study is limited in other ways, as well, and leaves room for future research. First, it is cross-sectional, and a longitudinal study would have allowed me to gauge these couples’ long-term success and understand the ebb and flow of their struggles. It only scratches the surface of recognizing female masculinity, and future research should consider the nuances and complexities of this phenomenon and how it shapes the family. Finally, this study was limited to women, and future research should expand to include the experiences of gay men with children.
Insight into if and how men *mother* can continue to challenge heteronormative family arrangements.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
*Interviews will be semi-structured so this schedule serves only as a guide.

1. Who lives in your household? Employment? Education?
2. Can you walk me through how you and your partner decided to become parents?
   - Always wanted children? Society’s standard? Advantages and disadvantages?
3. Let’s talk about what it means to be a mother nowadays. What do you think a mother’s job entails? What do you think a parent’s job entails?
   - Expectations of mothers; more a father than mother? Typical day with child
4. Can you talk about how, as a lesbian parent, you think about and change parenthood?
   - Heterosexual model? Think about prior to motherhood? Influence decision?
5. Can you tell me about how you and your partner typically divide childcare and household tasks?
   - Primary caregiver? Equitable? Hire out? How sexuality affects d.o.l.
6. Can you tell me about how you decided which partner would carry your child (or legally adopt)? How has this affected how you feel as a partner?
7. (For co-mothers) Some people report that it’s a different experience to be the parent who is legally (or biologically) related to the child than the parent who isn’t. Can you tell me what your experience has been like?
   - Practically; emotionally; legally; feel as a mother; identity to outsiders; rituals/activities?
8. Can you tell me about any special issues you have to deal with because you are not recognized as your child’s legal parent?
9. Can you tell me about your experience of being a lesbian and a parent in Florida?
   - Community? Approach to parenting? Benefits to child?
10. Can you tell me about what your experience has been interacting with those in the community—schools, neighbors, etc.?
    - Coping? Negative responses? How identify? Legality?
11. (For butch mothers) Can you talk about what it means to be a butch mother?
    - Masculinity; use of term mother; tasks, decision making; acting like men
12. How did you decide what your child would call you?
    - Meanings; Implications
That is the end of my formal questions. I am sure there are elements of your experience that I haven’t thought to ask about. (Pause) Is there anything else that you want to add? I want to thank you for your time; I appreciate it so much. Is it okay with you if I contact you again if some questions come about our discussion? Do you know anyone else who might be interested in speaking with me? Do you know any lesbian mothers who identify as butch? Is it okay if I use your name in speaking with (other contacts)? Again, thank you for you time; it has been wonderful talking with you.
APPENDIX B

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL MEMO AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM
APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 2/9/2009

To: Jonniann Butterfield
MC 2270

Dept.: SOCIOLOGY

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Charting Their Own Paths: Lesbian Motherhood in the Contemporary United States

The forms that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Human Subjects Committee at its meeting on 11/12/2008. Your project was approved by the Committee.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals which may be required.

If the project has not been completed by 11/11/2009 you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

You are advised that any change in protocol in this project must be approved by resubmission of the project to the Committee for approval. The principal investigator must promptly report, in writing, any unexpected problems causing risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols of such investigations as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

cc: Irene Padavic, advisor
HSC No. 2008.0972
Informed Consent Form (For Adults)

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT:

1. Jannnna Butterfield, who is a PhD candidate in sociology at Florida State University, under the guidance of Dr. Irene Padavic, has requested my participation in a research study being conducted in Florida.

2. The purpose of the research is to examine the meaning and practices of motherhood in lesbian families.

3. Participation will involve a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The interview may be tape-recorded only with my written permission.

4. The expected time commitment for my participation is approximately 1 hour. My participation is completely voluntary and I may end the interview at any time without penalty of any kind.

5. There are minimal foreseeable risks if I agree to participate in this study. These minimal foreseeable risks are not expected to cause harm or discomfort that exceeds that which is ordinarily encountered in daily life. However, because homosexual adoption is illegal in Florida, I may experience anxiety discussing my experiences. If so, I understand that I can contact the Family Tree at (850) 445-2375 or (850) 443-9034 to discuss any problems I am having as a result of discussing my experiences.

6. The possible benefits of participating in this research study include the opportunity to discuss both positive and negative experiences of motherhood in a confidential setting without the risk of negative reaction or response and to further a greater understanding of lesbian headed families.

7. Information obtained by the researcher during the course of this interview and the research study will remain confidential to the extent allowed by law.

8. The results of this research study may be published and I may be quoted, but my name and identity will not be revealed. To maintain my confidentiality, the researcher will use pseudonyms to conceal the names of individuals, geographic locations, and any other identifying information. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions, analysis, and all research reports of this project. All personally identifiable information, including audiotapes of recorded interviews, will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office. No individual other than the researcher will have access to this information. All audiotapes will be destroyed immediately after transcription, and all other information related to this study will be destroyed by September 1st, 2015.

9. I have the right to review the transcript of my interview.

10. I will not be paid for my participation in this research study.

11. Any questions I have about the research study or my participation in it, before or after my consent, can be answered by:

   Jannnna Butterfield, primary researcher
   Department of Sociology
   516 Bellamy Building
   Florida State University
   Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2270
   (850) 644-3057
   jb03m@fsu.edu

   Dr. Irene Padavic
   Department of Sociology
   515 Bellamy Building
   Florida State University
   Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2270
   (850) 644-6416
   ipadavic@fsu.edu

12. If I have questions about my rights as a subject/participant in this research study, or I feel that I have been placed at risk, I can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Institutional Review Board, through the Office of the Vice President for Research, at (850) 644-8633.

13. The nature, demands, benefits, and risks of the project have been explained to me. I knowingly assume any risks involved. I have read the consent form. I understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. In signing this consent form, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given to me.

I agree to be tape-recorded: Yes □ No □

Respondent's Signature __________________________ Date ____________

[Stamp: Florida State University, Institutional Review Board, approved 3/9/01, signed 3/9/01]
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonniann Butterfield was born on August 2, 1977 in Towanda, Pennsylvania, where she lived with her family until graduating from Wyalusing High School. After high school Jonniann attended the University of Pittsburgh where she graduated with a Bachelors of Arts in Sociology in the Summer of 1999. She began graduate school at Florida State University in the Fall of 2003, earning a Masters Degree in Sociology in the Fall of 2005. Jonniann received her Ph.D. in Sociology in the Spring of 2010 with the completion of her dissertation, “The Impact of Legal Inequality on Power Dynamics and Parental Identity in Planned Lesbian Families.”