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Children of lesbians: their point of view

Karen Gail Lewis

The author interviewed twenty-one children—ranging in age from 9 to 26, from eight families—whose mothers were lesbians. The children spoke about the problems they experienced during their parents' divorce and from the subsequent disclosure of their mother's homosexuality. The author suggests areas for further research on lesbian mothers and their children.

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THIS ARTICLE IS AN ATTEMPT to generate interest in the children of lesbians and to explore the impact on them of their mother's lesbianism. Although the literature on lesbians has expanded in the past five years, little has been written about the lesbian mother and even less about her children. This dearth of information led the author to interview children of lesbians, encouraging them to talk about the difficulties they experience in dealing with their mother's life-style and the influence it has had on their lives.

It is impossible to estimate accurately the number of lesbians or the number of lesbian mothers in the United States. It is equally impossible to find a commonly accepted definition of a lesbian. For this article the author used Klaich's definition, which is any woman "whose primary sexual and emotional feelings are fulfilled by other women and not by men."¹

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The bulk of the literature about the children of lesbians concerns the legal issue of whether a lesbian mother should be awarded custody of her children. Although the focus of this issue is the children's best interest, the author found no references that reflect the children's point of view, but only what professionals think would be best for children. In a major court decision, *Spence v. Durham*, a Michigan court for the first time awarded child custody to two lesbian mothers, allowing them to continue living together.² Previous court decisions granted custody as long as the women did not cohabit. The Michigan decision found, however, that "a private sexual relationship of the mothers did not detrimentally affect the child."³

Much discussion also concerns the age at which a child's sexual orientation is established. Boggan found that many psychiatrists believe sexual orientation is determined by age 4½ to 6.⁴ Therefore, after age 6, a parent's orientation is not even a contributing factor to a child's sexual identity. As is often pointed out, parents of homosexuals are usually heterosexuals.⁵

Martin and Lyon cite another per-

spective, offered by Kaye.⁶ Kaye suggests that children's sexual identity develops between the ages of 3 and 8. He feels that children should not be told of their parent's homosexuality during these years. Daniel sets the determining age at 2 or 3 years.⁷ Hormonal and genetic factors are also being explored, and the argument continues.⁸ However, as Levine observed,

in a society that relies so heavily on "experts," it is important to realize that what the experts tell us depends largely on the questions they ask or the questions they consider important [or possible] to ask.⁹

More questions need to be asked about what actually is happening to the children of lesbians.

CHILDREN INTERVIEWED

For two years the author saw several children in therapy whose mothers were newly declared lesbians. The similarities in the children's intellectual acceptance of and defensiveness about their mother's changed life-style suggested the need for a study that would explore their feelings. A local gay newspaper ran a notice of the proposed study. The author received responses from lesbian mothers who were willing to have their children talk about their experiences.

The author interviewed twenty-one children from eight families who lived in or around Boston, Massachusetts. Seven of the children's mothers were professionally or paraprofessionally employed. They were of various religious and ethnic heritages, and all seemed adequately socialized. Most of the mothers were involved in the Gay Liberation movement and thought it was politically important to obtain more information about children of lesbians. All the mothers thought it would help their children to talk with someone about being a child of a lesbian. The children would have an opportunity to talk about their feelings and the heterosexual world would begin to understand the children's point of view. The sample is not representative of all children of lesbians, however, since only those children participated whose mothers were comfortable enough with

their homosexuality to allow their children to be interviewed.

In preparation for the interviews, the author talked by telephone to each child individually. They were asked if they would be willing to share with the author and their siblings their feelings about learning their mother was a lesbian, and what it was like to be a child of a lesbian. Children were told they did not have to talk during the sessions. They could sit in on the meetings and share their feelings only when they felt like it. Several children agreed to join the study only with this stipulation, but once in the meetings, all children actively participated.

Ten males and eleven females participated in the study. They ranged in age from 9 to 26 years. Their responses varied, falling naturally into two groups that can be identified as younger children (9-13 year olds) and older children (14-26 year olds), ten and eleven children, respectively, in each group. All the children had known about their mother's gayness for at least one year. The longest any child had known was twelve years. The youngest age a child had learned of it was 6. All the children had learned of their mother's homosexuality after their parents had separated. Most children were living with their mothers, one child was living with her father, and some were living on their own.

Interviews were conducted with the children of each family. Most were held in the children's homes and lasted for several hours. Three interviews were held in the author's office, and one was done by mail. As many of the siblings of each family as possible attended the meeting. A few times, the combined children of a lesbian couple were interviewed together. All the mothers were currently living with their lovers.

FINDINGS

Under the best of circumstances, it is "not easy to grow up in a society that suspects as pathological any variation from a [mother and father] stereotype."¹⁰ Although describing children living with single fathers, this quotation aptly applies to children of lesbians. Few of the children inter-

viewed were living in good circumstances prior to learning about their mother's lesbianism. There was intense marital discord in every family before the mother's gayness was revealed. In most families, a separation or divorce occurred before the mother became involved with another woman. The children unanimously agreed that the breakup of their parents' marriage was far more upsetting than the subsequent disclosure about their mother. A 13-year-old boy asked rhetorically, "Wouldn't you rather have someone [the lover] coming into your home than leaving [the father]?"

Most of the older children felt that emotional communication with their parents prior to the separation had been cloudy at best. They learned about their parents' separation in the same awkward way they learned about their mother's relationship with another woman. In most families, the mother's discomfort in telling her children about her homosexuality had been a problem. This discomfort prevented the children from asking questions necessary to quell their own fears and from talking more about their anger and other feelings.

Reactions Children's first reactions ranged from, "My god, you're not one of those!" or "I don't mind if you love Carol, but you can't be a 'Lesie'!" to relief that the mother could no longer "put me down for things I've done" or pleasure that the mother was no longer dishonest to herself and could "be more real. . . . I used to want to pinch her to be real." After the initial shock of the disclosure passed, a verbal acceptance prevailed, but the children seemed to deny any pain or anger. Although the findings with children of lesbians are similar to those of Kelly and Wallerstein in their study of children of divorce, the particular issue of acceptance of the "crisis" is dissimilar. Kelly and Wallerstein found children's initial reaction to divorce was denial of pain; follow-up one year later revealed more open acceptance of the hurt.¹¹ One reason for this difference may be that children of divorce have community support for their pain; children of lesbians do not.

Initial hostility came primarily from the older boys and was directed toward the lover or hidden in the guise of concern for siblings. One boy denied any negative feelings about his mother's lesbianism, but was furious with his mother's lover for being "butch" and "trying to boss me around." Another boy, who was the oldest child in his family, said about his mother's lesbianism:

I couldn't accept it because it was bad for my little sister. . . . Mom certainly deserves to be happy just as anyone else does. I respect what she's doing. . . . I'm proud of her.

Sense of Differentness After their initial reactions, the children voiced acceptance of their mother's homosexuality, but expressed a variety of concerns about its effect on them. Older and younger children emphasized different aspects of its impact. The younger children focused on the need for secrecy and the isolation a secret imposed on them, separating them from their peers. They felt they could not tell their friends about their mother because they would be ostracized and called "lesie" or "fag" and their friends' mothers might forbid their playing together. A highly sensitive 11-year-old stated it succinctly: "It's living a lie." She was not alone in struggling with a sense of differentness. A 9-year-old proposed that when he becomes older, perhaps "gay will be straight and straight will not be normal." He seemed to feel that he would always be different. Several younger children used their mother's gayness as an excuse for not being close to other children.

Sexuality The younger children questioned how their mother's change would affect their own sexuality. They saw it as a guessing game: "Will I or won't I be gay when I grow up?" Some were adamant that they did not want to be gay. A 13-year-old child expressed for others the feeling that "I have one parent of each [sexual orientation] so I could be either." Several children said ambiguously, "It depends on my influences."

The older teenagers also worried

about the reactions of their peers, although their major concern focused on their sexual preferences. They could better deal with the question of whether homosexuality is personally chosen or genetically determined. Although none of them rationally thought there is any genetic basis for homosexuality—that is, that it is predetermined—this sense filtered through their discussions. The unfinished sentence was: "If my mother changed after so many years, maybe I must also...." Several girls thought they might turn to women if they did not have a satisfying relationship with a man. One added, "that's what my mother did." She said, in regard to her dating, if she complained to her mother about boys, "she would tell me to try girls." This response not only sets up the daughter to fulfill her mother's prophecy; it also denies the girl maternal support in problem-solving.

The boys' reactions followed different themes. Several were furious, not, they claimed, at their mother's homosexuality, but at her lover. Some were embarrassed by the stereotypical "butch-femme" relationship they thought the two women had. This seemed to be a thin veil over their bruised self-esteem. One boy was glad he learned about an affair his father had before learning about his mother's gayness. It helped him to see his father "as a man, and if he is a man, I can be one too."

Other reactions expressed by more than one child included the following: relief that their mother had found someone to take care of her so the children would not have to feel that burden; brief experimentation with homosexuality; a feeling of freedom from continual parental battles; and preference for mother's involvement with a woman rather than a man, saying another man would force them to choose allegiance between father and mother's new male friend.

Issues Involving the Lover Most of the mothers were separated from their husbands and living alone with their children before they became involved with another woman. Most mothers talked with their children about the

lover's moving in, but, as one 11-year-old said, "We had no choice, she just moved in." In another family, the children complained, "Mother said she couldn't live without her," so they felt they had no choice. In some families, the mother accepted a "roomer," and the children discovered the nature of their relationship by accident.

It is impossible to separate the impact of the mother's lesbianism from the impact of the parents' divorce. It is unclear how much anger the lover received that really was aimed at the father for leaving or at the mother for making him leave. It is often easier for children to show overt hostility to an unrelated person. One girl who had never felt close to her mother used the lover's moving in as a means of consolidating her previous ambivalence toward her mother into a spiteful hatred. An older boy said that his mother's lover had become "a threat to my sense of family." Another older child identified the major problem with the lover—"she sleeps with my mother."

A heterosexual mother in remarrying confronts the same problems as a lesbian mother with a lover. The other person is seen as an outsider, an intruder in the family. It is important to prepare children for this "intruder." It is also important to prepare the lover for the children. The lover's wish to be accepted immediately by the children is unrealistic. The impact of the intrusion must first be dealt with.

Further complications arose when the lover became the disciplinarian. Not surprisingly, the children balked. There was less difficulty in those families in which the children were prepared for the newcomer, in which rules of authority and discipline had been discussed, and in which the lover (sometimes a mother herself) did not force herself on the children. Families with teenagers experienced the hardest adjustment. The mother who helped her lover with the necessarily slow initiation into the family saw rewarding results. The children did not feel they had lost a father. As one younger child put it, "It's like having another parent."

Although some children felt they had

gained another parent, others felt they had lost both parents. One set of siblings complained they never felt their mother or father cared about them before the divorce, but at least the family was together. When the lover moved in after the divorce,

Mother had no time for us at all. They had all night together, all morning, and part of the afternoon.... And Mother made us go with our father on Sunday, so they could have a day off together.

This was the only family in which overt anger was expressed by all the children, and in which they felt an orphanage would offer more love and affection. This also appeared to be the most disturbed household, with neglect predating the mother's announced lesbianism. This was also the only family in which the mother saw men negatively. She wished her daughters would be gay and her sons would be straight, "so they would all have a woman."

The relationship between the children of the two families may also be a problem. The children of a lesbian couple have a forced involvement with no legitimate binding. In a remarriage, they become stepsiblings. In a lesbian couple there is no legal tie, however. Perhaps this ambiguity adds to the family's tension. If the children like each other, they become friends; as one girl said, "She is my stepsister." If they do not get along, there is no adequate substitute label.

Issues Involving the Father Of the children living at home, all but one lived with their mothers. Although all the children had some contact with their fathers, they did not have a good relationship with them prior to the divorce. With the parents separated, the children and father apparently had a new opportunity to begin building rapport. This occurred when enough time had passed for the father to reestablish himself and for the children's hurt and anger to settle. The parents' separation became a stepping-stone in the children's effort to establish a relationship that had not been possible while the father's energy was focused on his failing marriage.

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The girls had made less effort to keep in touch with their fathers than the boys—the younger ones even less than the teenagers. One 9-year-old girl was fearful of staying overnight in her father's house. It was unclear if her feelings resulted from his new and unfamiliar house, renewed oedipal stirrings, an avoidance of becoming enmeshed in her father's anger at her mother, or an identification with her mother's position. It should be noted that the girl who continued to live with her father was uncomfortable staying overnight with her mother. It was unclear how much of the difficulty these children experienced with their fathers concerned his being the father and how much was related to his being the non-custodial parent.

The boys, the older ones in particular, had reached out more actively to their fathers. One boy said it was only after his mother's lesbianism was revealed and the divorce started that "I really got to know my father." Contact with their father provided these boys with reassurance concerning their own maleness at a time when adolescence and their mother's changed sexual image caused them to question their sexual identities.

Some fathers did not know about the mother's lover, and the children were in the awkward position of maintaining that secret. In these families the relationship between the father and children continued to suffer.

A question can be raised about the effect of the father's disapproval of the lesbian relationship on children trying to accept it out of love for their mother or to gain comfort within their living situation, especially if the children respect and admire their father. This seems to be another area in which the child's ambivalent feelings are denied rather than aired. Children either ignored the topic altogether with their father, had an intellectual discussion

with him about the mother's lesbianism (either supporting or condemning it), or allied themselves with whichever parent they were talking to at the particular moment.

Child in the Middle Divorce and a mother's lesbianism bring to the surface a child's interconnectedness with his or her parents. Children who allow themselves to be the go-between or peacemaker remain trapped in their role even after their parents separate. They are caught trying to justify one parent to the other. If drawn back to "try again," the child has a more complicated task now with a history of defeat. Children less enmeshed in their parents' struggle have stayed on the outside, allied with neither parent or, if old enough, have left their home or town. Kelly and Wallerstein had similar findings in their study of teenagers of divorced parents.¹² They also found that children who were not enmeshed in the parents' struggle were self-centered and insensitive. This could not be assessed in the present sample.

Intellectual Acceptance The intellectual acceptance of a mother's lesbianism is a common response for children of lesbians. Children wish to support their mother, not only out of love for her, but out of their own self-respect. Not to respect or accept their mother would reflect on their own self-image. If they devalue their mother, then they, as her progeny, are also devalued. In their own hearts they may have doubts and fears, but to the world they must present a facade of acceptance. The children in this study lived in an intellectual community where being "liberal" was considered positive. While struggling with the differentness of their situation, they could couch themselves in snobism, for example, "I'm more intellectually liberated than others." Many cracks in

this facade surfaced during interviews with children in both age groups: forgetfulness about what events happened when, hesitancy in sharing information with peers, withholding feelings from siblings, intense anger at one of the lover's children, deterioration of school work, and frequent excuses during the interview to leave the room. In addition, there were striking contradictions in what the children said:

Linda seems to be like my mother's man. It bothers me. There is nothing wrong with it.... I've gotten so used to it, I don't mind unless I think about it.

Kathy's sleeping with my Mom shouldn't bother me. I know that it shouldn't. My immediate reaction was [negative], but if I think about it I can accept it and I can accept it emotionally, too.

Reactive Behavior In a few of the families with older teenagers, gross maladaptive behavior occurred around the time of the mother's disclosure. The boys were able to verbalize their intent: if they caused enough trouble, the lover might leave. Children saw their behavior directed not at their mother, but at the removal of the "outsider" from the home. When that failed, they proceeded to get themselves removed from the home. Two girls became pregnant. They saw no connection, but one can speculate that the mother's changed sexual identity prompted them to reaffirm their own identity through pregnancy.

Youngest Child The youngest child in each family seemed least able to deal with ambivalence toward the mother. They escaped instead into a well-rehearsed role of acceptance, one they had copied from an older sibling. Most of these children simply denied any ambivalence toward their mother. The anger, hurt, and grieving—the

normal feelings one would expect in reaction to any crisis, developmental or situational—were missing. The older children seemed able to wrestle with these feelings while covering them with an intellectual defense. The youngest in each family only mimicked the surface acceptance. This was especially true of the children between 9 and 11 years of age.

Sexual Issue Perhaps the last issue the children attempted to tackle overtly was the sexual relationship between the two women. Although heterosexuality is not automatically associated with the sexual act, the mention of lesbianism immediately brings to mind a sexual encounter between two women. Perhaps because this is such an emotionally charged issue for adults, children face it last. But as one child pointed out, it was just as impossible to imagine his parents making love as it was his mother and her lover. Before children can cope with behind-the-bedroom-door scenes, they have to deal with in-front-of-the-bedroom-door scenes. The simplicity of this, perhaps, accounts for its being overlooked. The children seemed to have accepted their mother's sexual relationships, however, if only intellectually.

Therapy Experience Most of the children had been in some form of therapy about the time of their parents' separation or their mother's "coming out." Few of them felt it had been helpful. In some instances the therapist knew about the mother's lesbianism, but the children felt too embarrassed to mention it, and it was never discussed. Some of the children were in family therapy with a gay therapist, but the therapist was seen by the children as their mother's co-conspirator. The sexual preference of the therapist, when known, seemed to hinder the children's involvement in therapy rather than help it.

More important is that the therapist should be trustworthy and non-judgmental of the mother, helping the children come to their own resolution of the situation, not leading or blocking them. It is important that therapists who work with these children not focus

on the mother's homosexuality, but rather focus on helping the children deal with their own feelings about their mother's lesbianism.

Interview Experience The honesty and openness that these children showed during the interviews were remarkable. Not only had they not used their previous therapy to explore their feelings but they had not shared them with their siblings. One boy spoke for many when he said, "I never talked with my brother and sisters because I didn't want to upset them." After the interview, however, his siblings commented how much better and closer they felt having shared their feelings and changing their misconceptions of each other during the family crisis. Most of the children had similar reactions. A 19-year-old woman summed up the value of these conversations when she said it helped "seeing what happened not as separate traumas, but all a part of the process."

After listening to these children talk about their unsuccessful experiences in therapy, it seems likely that what made the author's interviews profitable was their mother's absence, their siblings' presence, and the author's unbiased acceptance of what they said. This suggests that a peer support system is valuable. Children want to accept their mother's life-style, and the gay community and the therapeutic community should provide an opportunity for these children to achieve a realistic assessment and acceptance of their feelings.

NEW DIRECTIONS

It was striking how much the children shared during the course of these interviews, but equally striking how much there is to learn. Much of what they said suggested questions that still need to be pursued. Mothers are concerned about how to tell their children about their homosexuality, how much to tell them, and what words to use. Several mothers were still in the final stages of marriage with possible loss of custody looming heavy. This period is crucial for a child, also, for it is often the introduction to an altered life. Further study is needed to better understand when

and how a lesbian mother should tell her children about herself.

The interviews showed the glaring absence of any support system for the children. Beginning with a child's latency, peer influence becomes increasingly important as a means of maturing, confirming identity, and satisfying dependency needs.¹³ The children of lesbians seem not to have peer support available to them, since most of these children have either pulled away from their friends altogether or maintained friends but with a sense of their own differentness. Children of lesbians have been taught the same stereotypical myths and prejudices against homosexuals as the rest of society. Better understanding is needed about available family support systems and other systems that should be provided. These might include peer supports as well as educational supports, for example, dissemination of information about homosexuality.

It appeared that the children did not feel ambivalent toward their mothers. Ambivalence is a normal reaction to significant changes in an individual's life—one can be pleased with the change, and yet upset over the loss of what is familiar. It was expected, then, that these children would feel proud that their mother was making an honest statement about her sexuality and yet angry that they had to give up their previous image of her. But these children spoke only of their acceptance of their mother's lesbianism. The other side of ambivalence was missing—anger, hurt, and grieving.

The change in the mother's sexuality raises other questions, also. Thus far in the children's lives, for example, their mothers have been seen as heterosexual. When children learn of their mother's homosexuality, they may question her credibility. They may wonder what else she has told them that is not as she described. Further study might consider what impact, if any, this has on a child's overall belief in his or her mother.

It would also be important to understand the effect on children of living in a home with hostile heterosexual adults versus living in a home with loving homosexual adults. Another question is

the impact upon children of seeing their parents' heterosexual relationship fail and their mother's homosexual one succeed. What effect, if any, might it make upon their choice of sexual partners?

Do children of lesbians question their own sexuality? Do they have a greater burden in choosing their sexual orientation and their life-style in general? If they are encouraged to explore their feelings about their mother's lesbianism, would they—more than children growing up with heterosexual parents—be better able to explore their own life potential?

Further study is also needed on the long-term effect on the self-image of boys and girls living with a lesbian couple in contrast to the long-term effect of their having a lesbian mother but living with their father. Research should also consider the difference of the effect on younger versus older children.

CONCLUSION

Interviews with twenty-one children of lesbians in the Greater Boston area, ranging in age from 9 to 26, identified several major issues. Early family discord made coping with subsequent family problems more difficult for the children. The mother's lesbianism became another problem around which the children's feelings were blocked since they could not express freely both sides of their ambivalence. One striking point, however, was the children's desire to accept their mother's new lifestyle. Almost without exception, the children were proud of their mother for challenging society's rules and for standing up for what she believed. Problems between the mother and children seemed secondary to the children's respect for the difficult step she had taken. Many of the children said the experience had given them permission to seek roles in life that were not conventional. This support for their mother was not easy, however, since they lacked the approval of both family and society.

The children were willing to share their struggles and rewards with a

nonjudgmental adult. Although most children had been in some form of therapy and thought it was of little use, they felt therapy for other children just learning about their mother's homosexuality would be useful. Some form of mutual support group, such as a multifamily group, would meet some of the needs they identified. It is clear that there is still much to learn about the experiences of a child living with a lesbian mother.

After meeting with these twenty-one children, the author feels it is important that children grow up experiencing love and security from adults. The parent's sexual preference does not matter as much as the love, caring, and maturity of the adults and their effort to help their children become self-reliant and self-assured. The mothers of the children interviewed showed great courage in revealing their lesbianism. Like all parents, lesbian mothers should teach their children

the tools that can provide them with the courage to explore the journey of selfhood, as well as the stamina and support they may need to nurture and protect that self once it is identified.¹⁴

The challenge for the mental health community is to help them do so.

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