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## Navigating the experience of identity intersection : an exploration of the lesbian mother identity in the United States

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NAVIGATING THE EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY INTERSECTION: AN  
EXPLORATION OF THE LESBIAN MOTHER IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES

A project based on an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work

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2012

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Navigating the Experience of  
Identity Intersection: An  
Exploration of the Lesbian  
Mother Identity in the United  
States

## ABSTRACT

This purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of lesbian women who have become mothers. My specific research aim was to investigate the formation of the lesbian-mother identity in terms of the way the individual woman's identity as a lesbian is shaped by her new experience and identity as a mother. Within this framework, I looked at which identity felt most salient in everyday life and how the individual woman felt each identity had contributed to her sense of self. I also looked at the different factors that either reinforce or inhibit an individual's likelihood to feel comfortable in expressing her identity, as a mother or a lesbian.

Ten self-identified lesbian women who were in state-recognized marriages with their partner and were co-mothering one or more children under the age of ten, were interviewed for this project. Only women who could participate in this interview with their partner were included in the study. The interviews were transcribed and the content was analyzed—four themes emerged from the data: relationship between sexual identity and accessing resources, low identity conflict, marginality as a site of resistance, and the importance of achieving motherhood. Throughout this project, I aimed to view the lesbian mother identity as one that is unique and fluid, and not in comparison to previously formed heteronormative mother identities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could not have been completed without the love, support, and patience of many individuals. In all of my moments of panic, exhaustion, and desire to give up, you were all there for me with warmth, humor, and the guiding light I needed to keep going.

Thank you to my parents, Mindy and Jay, and my sister, Julia, for giving me the encouragement I needed in moments of desperation. Thank you to all my wonderful non-social work friends who have put up with my craziness over the course of the past year. To my fellow A12 Smithies—your unyielding capacity for compassion, humor, and love in times of need will never cease to amaze me. A big thank you to my thesis advisor, Jennifer, for making this project feel doable and especially for helping me get it all together in the end. A very special thank you to my girlfriend, Jackie, who has been unbelievably supportive, encouraging, and loving throughout my engagement with this project.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I have conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences of lesbian women who become mothers in order to acquire knowledge about a parenting identity that has only become possible in recent socio-political history. My specific research aim was to investigate the formation of the lesbian-mother identity in terms of the way the individual woman's identity as a lesbian has been shaped by her new experience and identity as a mother. Within this framework, I looked at which identity felt most salient in everyday life and how the individual woman has felt each identity contributed to her sense of self. I also looked at the different factors that either reinforce or inhibit an individual's likelihood to feel comfortable in expressing her identity, as a mother or lesbian. In exploring the construction of identity in lesbian mother couples through in-person interviews, I learned that the lesbian mother identity is unique and fluid, and should not be viewed in comparison to previously formed heteronormative parental identities.

The framework for understanding societal concepts and how they impact an individual's sense of self is known as identity theory (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Identity theory can be traced back to the early writings of sociologist and psychologist, George Herbert Mead, who was researching social behaviorism in 1934. In its contemporary form, identity theory seeks to understand the ways in which the self is a reflexive force, categorizing, classifying, or naming itself (McCall and Simmons, 1978) as an occupant of

one or more roles, that then incorporates the meanings and expectations associated with that role into the formation of the self, which ultimately form a set of standards that guide human behavior (Stets and Burke, 2000). However, in the case that an individual has more than one role, it is unclear what factors determine which role will be expressed at a given moment. Some identity theorists hypothesize that individuals will embody certain roles when they are in a supportive environment with role partners, when their social context—which is reflective of social expectations—supports their role, and when they have strong personal relatedness to their role (Stryker 1968, 1980, 2000).

Other scholars suggest that individuals fight to hold on to certain identities, specifically ones that are marginalized, at the site of resistance (Tucker, 1990), which is quite the opposite of what is proposed by identity theory. These ideas lead to a cluster of research questions I would like to explore through my qualitative work—do lesbian mothers feel comfortable in expressing these two identities, separately and together?; to what extent do they feel they actually express or embody these roles in everyday life?; and to what extent is this caused by a supportive vs. resistant societal context?

This topic is important because it accounts for the progression of “lesbianism” as a fluid identity that has changed over time due partially to institutional changes in the legal system (Eagly, 1987 in Bussey and Bandura, 1999), and also as an identity that has the capacity to change in different environmental contexts. Gaining insight into the experiences of lesbian women who become mothers would contribute important knowledge to the field of social work—both, in the classroom context for students and educators, and also in the field for practicing clinicians working with lesbian women and their families.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States, children grow up understanding that their individual identity is very important—learning how one fits into various environmental contexts becomes an important purpose of life. While there are many definitions of identity, one description is the overall character of an individual that reflects the essence of who they are and how they got to be that way through influence of ideas relating to sexuality, gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, culture, politics, occupational, and social spheres (Darity, 2008). Thus, the building blocks of one’s identity are the sociocultural concepts of society that individuals’ lives are embedded in. Because these societal concepts are always changing, human beings have the continuous ability to recreate and reconstruct their identities in an ongoing and fluid process.

#### Identity Theory and Background Information

Identity theory is the framework for understanding how societal concepts are internalized and effect an individual’s development of a sense of self and formation of a set of standards or expectations that guide behavior. In order to understand identity theory, one must tease apart three main components: the roles of identity, the activation of identities and the idea of salience, and the core processes that result from the activation of an identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). The bases of identity take the form of roles that individuals adopt in terms of the specific meanings imparted by the greater society.



When one adopts a particular role identity, one acts to fulfill the expectations of that role, coordinate and compare themselves with role partners, and manipulate the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility (Stets & Burke, 2000). This notion of controlling resources is especially salient for mothers in that they are doing whatever they need in order to best control their environment to protect what is most important—their families. For lesbian mothers, this process of navigating environment and accessing resources may be more difficult, depending on intersection with other identities such as socioeconomic status, race, geographical location, and education level. The costs of artificial insemination and in-vitro procedures, for example, are astronomical—vials of sperm can range between \$300-\$600 with further costs for the actual insemination, which are only effective 5-20% of the time (Wall, 2011).

Additionally, there are expensive legal barriers that lesbian women who want to become mothers have to overcome. There are only four states—including California, Colorado, Connecticut, and Vermont—that have statutes allowing second-parent adoptions. This is the only way for same-sex couples to be legally bound to their children in the same way as heterosexual couples. Unless couples are already living in these states, they have to pay for travel costs, in addition to the amount of money they have to pay lawyers to set up legal documents protecting their families. Thus, it is important to recognize that achieving motherhood may not be financially feasible for many same-sex couples that are in lower socioeconomic status brackets. Other issues relating to accessing resources and navigating environmental context that are unique to lesbian couples becoming mothers include: finding a doctor that offers artificial insemination and is “lesbian-friendly”; finding a sperm bank that is also “lesbian-

friendly” and then going through the arduous process of finding the right donor; and finding a professional work space that would be supportive of maternity leave in knowing one’s or one’s partner’s sexual identity, should they choose to disclose it (Appleby & Anastas, 1998).

### Identity Intersection and Achieving Motherhood

It is helpful to perceive lesbian motherhood as an identity that is socially constructed in which motherhood is detached, “ ‘from its biological roots through the experience of social motherhood’ ...[where] being a mother is not as much a function of giving birth as it is being socially recognized as a mother” (Dunne, 2000 as cited in Bergen, Suter & Daas, 2006, pp. 203). Identity theory explains that individuals adopt self-meanings and expectations from others sharing the same role and then behave in a way that represents and preserves those meanings and expectations (Stets & Burke, 2000).

For heterosexual women, there are many models in society and in general discourse around how to be a mother. It is a social identity that is supported and expected in terms of reaching full female adult potential. Many individuals think of women who choose *not* to become mothers as bizarre and unnatural; it essentially strips them of their “femaleness” in that being a mother is often viewed as the quintessential identity for all women to achieve (Woollett & Phoenix, 1991; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Lewin, 1995). Thus, the idea of achieving motherhood is a major validation for women that they have ventured into this important developmental milestone (Wollett & Phoenix, 1991; Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Busfield, 1974; Rapeport et al., 1977). There are several studies that have assessed the value of children to parents, which have highlighted a

variety of symbolic and concrete values associated with becoming a parent (Antonucci and Mikus, 1988; Busfield, 1974; Fawcett, 1988; Hoffman, 1975; Michaels, 1988; and Newson and Newson, 1976). These values include: providing parents with opportunities for expressing and receiving affection and establishing close relationships with others, enjoyment in engaging in activities that are specifically catered towards parents, an expansion of self in that parenting is seen as a representation of growth, validation of adult status and identity, and to be seen as contributing members of society.

For lesbian mothers, the acclimation of the mother identity may be even more important, as it allows them to be socially recognized as women in the same way as heterosexual women (Lewin, 1995 in Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). This recognition is especially important when society may have already prevented them from achieving other important societal milestones that are reflective of female adulthood, such as marriage. In attaining the mother identity, lesbians who have previously aligned themselves with an identity that is largely marginalized by society, are able to enter into a more mainstreamed societal space (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). However, depending on environmental, political, and social context, and the existence of other women who share this dual-identity, lesbian mothers may vary in their ability to successfully negotiate the intersection of these two identities, in addition to the multiple other identities they may embody.

Although motherhood differs based on culture, ethnicity, race, age, etc., there is typically a societal context from which women can draw on concepts about how they are expected to be, and can then choose to disregard or adhere to those standards. However, for lesbians, and specifically for lesbian mothers, there is a much smaller net of

comparison from which to draw ideas on how one is *supposed to be*. Non-biological lesbian mothers may additionally struggle with identity formation, since it is a socially constructed identity that is entirely unique to lesbian families. Because of the legal changes that have occurred in the last decade allowing lesbian women—that possess the required means necessary to access resources—to become mothers, the planned lesbian family is a relatively new family form. Therefore, non-biological lesbian mothers are navigating newly formed territory on how to negotiate identity and their role within their families and society (Bergen, Suter & Daas, 2006; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Wall, 2011; and Goldberg & Smith, 2008).

Lesbian mothers may draw from their own mothers or cultural upbringings for ideas on how they should mother, but may not want to adhere to the “gold standard” set forth by heteronormative mothering practices. Ideas on how to mother also shifts so much generationally due to societal climate and the widespread dissemination of research findings in attachment and safety, that mothers may feel their mothers’ approaches are outdated. That being said, becoming a mother does bind lesbian women to heterosexual women in a powerful way in that they now share a very essential and biologically driven commonality (Woollett, 1991 & Payne, 1978). Between generations of women, such as mother and daughter, this may be the only common ground that exists, especially in situations where familial ties were severed or tensioned by issues relating to sexual identity. However, some lesbian women may find that their relationships with their mothers become alienated to a greater degree when they decide to have children, due to the lack of social and legal recognition that continues to exist for this identity, especially

for non-biological lesbian mothers (Bergen, Suter & Daas, 2006; Goldberg & Smith, 2008; and Bos, Balen & Boom, 2004).

### Applicability of Identity Theory Towards Lesbian Motherhood

Identity theory may be insufficient in explaining how lesbian mothers come to understand their dual-identities based on their potential lack of desire to relate to the larger mothering community, and lack of a historically and socially recognized sub-mothering community to compare themselves to. Identity theory does, however, compensate by explaining that emphasis is not centered on similarity with others in the same role, but rather on the “individuality and interrelatedness with others in counterroles in the group or interaction context” (Stets & Burke, 2000, pp. 227). Thus, the theory encompasses the somewhat obvious truth that just because individuals share an identity, does not mean they share the same ideals. For this reason, it is important to discuss this topic with many different lesbian mothers who may have differing opinions on the subject.

The second important concept of identity theory is the process by which different identities become activated and the probability that one identity will be activated over another. There are both qualitative and quantitative aspects that affect an individual’s likelihood to commit to a certain identity. Quantitative aspects describe the amount of people one may be tied to by holding onto a certain identity; the theory predicts that as this number increases, so does an individual’s likelihood to express the shared identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). Factors that are qualitative in nature refer to the relative strength of the relationship one has with others sharing the same identity—the stronger the ties to

others through an identity, the greater the probability an identity will be activated, which is referred to as salience.

Equally as important to these shared identity relationships are the "...larger social structures in which those networks are embedded...[that] act as boundaries affecting the probability that persons will enter those networks" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, pp. 285).

Thus, in thinking about identity expression, it is important to consider: 1. Whether or not an individual considers her identities to be salient in everyday life, 2. The extent to which an individual feels comfortable expressing her identities in the context of the larger social structure, and, 3. Whether or not an individual wants to openly express her identities, which may be affected by strength of relationship to her partner and others who share the same identities.

Thirdly, the concepts of self-verification and self-efficacy as the core processes that arise once an identity is activated are essential to the understanding of identity theory. Self-verification is the process by which an individual formulates an understanding of their identity as relating to the norms associated with that role, and then engages in the behaviors that are consistent with the identity standard (Burke, 1991; McCall & Simmons, 1978 as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000). When individuals identify these role activities and behave in accordance with the identity's expectations, they are reinforcing the social structure and ultimately solidifying their membership to that group (Ashmore and Jussim, 1997 as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000). There are different motivational factors that may cause individuals to want to act in accordance with or challenge their identity standards. One might want to challenge their identity standard when they are not feeling well represented by it and would therefore not feel positively

reinforced by association with group membership. On the other hand, an individual who feels competent and effective in fulfilling certain identity roles would want to act in accordance with the expectations set forth by that standard, which is known in identity theory as self-efficacy (Stets & Burke, 2000).

However, identity theory resides on two assumptions that make it difficult to apply as a universal concept: there is a concrete set of standards for a given identity that everyone agrees upon; and, acting in accordance with identity standards leads towards automatic group membership and acceptance. These latter concepts are particularly inapplicable for the lesbian community in that there is not one set of behavior standards that are clearly linked to the identity. The lesbian community can also sometimes be very exclusive based on class, race, age, and gender identity, among other elements, which has the capacity to deprive many lesbian women from feeling they are a part of a group or community. Generally, for lesbian mothers, and for any individuals that carry dual roles, the processes of self-verification and self-efficacy may be infinitely more complex to navigate, specifically when both identities are activated simultaneously.

#### Existing Literature on Lesbian Mother Identity Intersection

In the field of research on this topic, there is a great deal of literature on the symbolic and sociocultural meanings of motherhood, as well as the formation of and journey towards discovering one's sexual identity. There is also a fair amount of research exploring mothering approaches, even some that are exclusive to the lesbian population, specifically in relation to the gender identity development of children. The findings of these studies have reflected that there is not a distinct correlation between the sexual identity of mothers and the gender identity development of their children. It has,

however, shown that children who grow up with same-sex parents may experience less parental pressure to conform to gender norms, and are more tolerant towards accepting others who may identify with a non-normative gender or sexuality (Sandfort & Bos, 2010; and Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles & Patterson, 2008).

Additionally, as Ann Woollett and Ann Phoenix explain:

Women's experiences as mothers, their insider perspectives, are rarely examined. As a result little is known about how women experience motherhood, how their experiences differ and the factors that account for differences in experience.... Understandings of the complexities of motherhood require that researchers appreciate these complexities and recognize that they occur in women of all 'races', social classes, marital statuses, and sexualities" (1991, pp. 217-218)

Thus, the subjective experiences and internal processes of all mothers, and specifically of lesbian mothers, have largely gone undocumented and unexplored (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). Partially, this is due to the institutional and legal changes that have occurred in the last decade that have legally sanctioned the existence of this identity, thus making it a viable population to research. More abstractly, though, we might consider the lack of research on the actual experiences of women, regardless of sexual identity, as being due to the inherent silencing of women's voices, which still characterizes U.S. society in a lot of ways. Additionally, doing explorative research about someone's subjective experience doesn't allow for a lot of control variables, which may be less favorable and underfunded relative to quantitative research. That being said, I think this kind of research is extremely important because it allows us to reflect on the ways in which U.S. society and culture has shifted in its construction of the meanings that are assigned to identities, which ultimately tells us a great deal about how we learn to understand and negotiate our social contexts and understand ourselves. I will discuss the implications of this research for clinical practice in the following chapter.



The existing literature on the journey to motherhood, mothering approaches, and the effects of lesbian mothering on the gender identity of children (Barclay, Dahlen, & Homer, 2009; Bos & Sandfort, 2010; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Heineman, 2004; Igartua, 2009; Sutfin & Patterson, 2008), have mainly relied on psychosocial developmental theory or psychodynamic theory. These theories have historically been used to understand the development of heteronormative children and nuclear family systems. This is problematic in that it leads to viewing non-heteronormative practices through a heteronormative lens, which obscures the individuality of a minority group. In turn, it also, “support[s] heterocentric values and assumptions by suggesting the heterosexual-parent family is the gold standard against which lesbian and gay-parent families should be considered and evaluated” (Goldberg, 2010, pp. 143-144).

There is little literature that focuses exclusively on lesbian mothers in the U.S., specifically in terms of their experiences with the intersection of the mother and lesbian identity. However, in one study that was conducted in Israel, researchers sought to explore the constructed meanings that lesbian women use to relate to their experiences as mothers (Ben-Ari & Levin, 2006). Despite the different environmental, social and political climate between Israel and the United States, this study is useful as a tool for comparison to the present study. The findings of the 2006 study, along with several other studies, suggest that sexual identity plays a role in becoming a mother in terms of the uniquely different experiences of the biological mother and the non-biological mother (Ben-Ari & Levin, 2006; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Goldberg & Smith, 2008; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999).

The experience of the non-biological mother may present initially as somewhat similar to that of a heterosexual male who is unable to biologically contribute to his female partner's pregnancy. In both of these positions, the non-biological partner may have certain anxieties relating to lacking a biological link to the child, such as concern about forming a strong parent connection (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). However, it is a distinctly different experience for a non-biological lesbian mother by virtue of the non-biological partner being a woman, and therefore possessing specifically maternal innate desires for connection and attachment. One might also consider the impact of society's constructed meanings and messages to women about motherhood, which differs strongly from the messages that men internalize. The study also found that motherhood brought lesbians into a normative mainstream social class bracket that improved their ability to be accepted by their local communities and families of origin.

In hypothesizing about the experience of intersection of the lesbian and mother identity for the present study, it is helpful to consider research that has explored the impact of biopsychosocial factors on a lesbian woman in becoming a mother. One such study found that lesbian women are affected by both qualitative and quantitative factors, as identity theory suggests, that cause them to feel a certain way about the addition of their new mother identity (Goldberg & Smith, 2008). Qualitative factors include the relative strength of a woman's relationship to her partner and the strength of the support of the woman's relational community, including family and friends. Important quantitative elements are the existence of state laws that protect lesbian women's rights as citizens and parents, and the extent to which the physical community has an inclusive social climate. The study also highlighted the impact of psychological histories and the

existence of current mental health issues as factors that affect a lesbian woman who becomes a mother. All of these factors could ultimately impact the nature of the intersection process in becoming a lesbian mother.

Other research that is similar in subject matter focuses on the dissonance that is a result of the intersection of a mainstream identity with a marginalized one (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; and Bos, Balen & Bloom, 2004). The research suggests that non-biological lesbian mothers, specifically, who already had strained relationships with family members due to a lack of acceptance around sexual identity, experienced further familial alienation because they lacked the legal legitimization of their relationship to their children (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). Another finding regarding non-biological lesbian mothers found that these women were often overwhelmed by the stress of having to actively work on creating a bond with their child that was equivalent to that of their partner's. One of the most common ways of forging attachment in early mothering is breastfeeding, which is typically an experience that is exclusively for the biological mother. More recently, however, non-biological lesbian mothers are also participating in this process, either in addition to or instead of the biological mother. Though it is likely the findings of the present study will reflect some experience of struggle and dissonance between the intersection of the lesbian and mother identity, it is equally as likely that they will also reflect resiliency and strength given the reality of the human experience.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to acquire knowledge about a new type of parenting identity, relationship, and family structure that could inform social work practice with lesbian women. It would be difficult to study the effects of identity on mothering when there are a multitude of variables that might affect it. It is for this reason that I did an exploratory, qualitative-oriented thesis using identity theory as a framework. By interviewing a relatively small number of lesbian-mother couples, I was able to gain more in-depth knowledge about the nuanced experiences of these particular women. However, the downside of this was that I was not able to generalize responses to a larger, more diverse population that might give more insight into lesbian mothers' experiences. That being said, it is my hope that future studies similar to mine will be repeated and on a larger scale, which might have more of a practical or systemic impact over time.

#### *Research Design*

A qualitative, flexible research method design, applied to data obtained from a series of interviews was used to explore the experiences of lesbian women who became mothers. More specifically, the research questions included: 1. What identity feels most salient in everyday life; 2. How the individual woman feels each identity has contributed to her sense of self; 3. What are the factors that either reinforce or inhibit an individual's

likelihood to feel comfortable in expressing her identity as a mother or a lesbian; and 4. Does a resistant or a supportive societal context cause a lesbian mother to want to embody and express her identities in her community. The Human Subjects Review Board of the Smith College School for Social Work approved the design of this study (Appendix A).

### *Obtaining the sample*

The target size for this sample was six adult lesbian mother couples (12 women) that are in co-mothering relationships with their same-sex partners for one or more child that is currently under the age of 10. If parents adopted their child, they had to have begun parenting when the child was three years old or younger. Both women in the partnership needed to be present for the interview. Another exclusion criteria was that the participants' children could not be present for the interview unless they were under the age of one, due to the sensitive subject material. Because the investigator's primary language is English, the participants needed to be able to read, write, and speak in this language.

A non-probability snowball sampling method approach was chosen for the sample selection. There was contact with the investigator's Social Work network at Smith College, and a recruitment email was sent out to the graduating class describing the study, listing the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and providing contact information (Appendix B). One Smith Social Work student sent the study to a friend who posted it to the "Boston LGBT Parents" Facebook group page. The participants contacted the investigator by email to volunteer for the study.

After receiving contact from participants, the investigator emailed them the informed consent (Appendix C) to read over, emphasizing the importance of double-checking the inclusion criteria. Participants were also informed that they would be entered into a drawing with the other participants to win a \$25 gift card to Amazon. If participants responded to the investigator that they fit the criteria and wanted to participate, they were scheduled for interviews at a date/time of their convenience in participants' homes. Although it would have been ideal to interview more couples, the investigator struggled with recruitment due to the eligibility requirement of children not being allowed to be present for the interview. The study was completed with five sets of couple participants.

#### *Data Collection*

A qualitative flexible method design was used to investigate the experiences of lesbian mothers, both individually and as a couple. The data was derived from the subjective narratives of participants during five interviews in March and April of 2012. Before the interview began, each woman was given a hard copy of the informed consent for her to read again and sign. Each woman was then given a brief demographic survey (Appendix D).

To protect participants' identities, names were not used during the interviews. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and then transcribed. Transcriptions of the audiotaped sessions will be retained for three years and then shredded, as required by Federal regulations. Audiotapes will be destroyed after transcription. Each interview, informed consent, and demographic survey was marked only with a code number, and the identifying information was filed separately in a secure

location. Participants' data will not be anonymous to the investigator, but will be anonymous to everyone else interacting with it in any way. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement assuring their confidentiality.

The interview began with the investigator reading a short explanation reviewing the purpose of the study and format of the interview. It explained that participants should answer questions to the best of their availability but if they felt uncomfortable, they should immediately let the investigator know. The interview was made up of a series of five, multi-part, open-ended questions designed to gather information about each identity—the lesbian identity and the mother identity—as the individual understands it, and then also to gather information about how these two identities affect each other. Both mothers were invited to respond to each question. The expected benefit of involving both mothers of the couple in the interview was that their answers would be more encompassing of their everyday experiences of their identities, which are ultimately impacted by their partner in terms of lesbian co-motherhood. The limitations of this approach are that participants may not have been as honest about certain things they were revealing if they were concerned about their partner's feelings or reaction. Due to the sensitive subject matter a list of referral resources were provided at the conclusion of the interview. The entire exchange including the informed consent, demographic survey, and the interview, lasted between 60-90 minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

Subsequent to the interviews, a professional third party transcribed the data after signing a confidentiality pledge (Appendix E). The investigator then analyzed the data in accordance with the concepts of content analysis to identify themes related to the central

research questions. The investigator used open coding, where the transcripts were reviewed line by line, creating code definitions as concepts emerged inductively from the data. Codes were then refined until a final coding structure was achieved. This coding structure captured major concepts in the data that was then applied to all of the transcripts and reported in the findings. Illustrative quotes were also used to demonstrate themes and patterns.



## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of lesbian women who have become mothers, specifically looking at the intersection of these two identities and how they have impacted their lives. Only lesbian women who were in co-mothering relationships with their partner were included in the sample. The sample size was small but there were strong thematic messages and patterns that appeared in the data and connected women's stories to one another. There were also many differences that will be considered in the discussion chapter. The themes that will be explored in this chapter are as follows: the relationship between sexual identity and accessing resources, low identity intersection conflict, marginality as a site of resistance, the importance of achieving motherhood, and the impact of having children on intergenerational relationships.

#### Participant Demographics

This sample consists of ten self-identified lesbian women who were in co-mothering relationships with their partners with one or more children who were under the age of 10. To protect their identities, I will refer to participants in the following chapters by using the following code naming system: Couple A- Participant 1 and Participant 2; Couple B- Participant 3 and Participant 4; Couple C- Participant 5 and Participant 6; Couple D- Participant 7 and Participant 8; Couple E- Participant 9 and Participant 10.

From the demographic survey that participants filled out prior to the beginning of the interview (Appendix D), I was able to gather information on race, ethnicity, religion, age, income, education, employment status, political views, partnership status, and place of origin. All of the women identified as White or Caucasian, and all but three identified as American for their ethnic identity—two out of these three identified as Jewish, and one identified as Italian/French/English. One of the participants was 26 years old, two were 32 years old, two were 34 years old, one was 35 years old, one was 36 years old, one was 37 years old, one was 44 years old, and another was 54 years old. The participant who was 54 years old spoke about her age in the interview as being something she struggled with in terms of motherhood. Only one of the participants who had identified with a Jewish ethnicity also identified Judaism as her religion—the rest of the participants, regardless of ethnicity, identified as either agnostic or atheist for their religious identity.

The participants grew up all over the country including four on the east coast, five in the south, and one on the west coast. All of the women indicated they were employed in some capacity with the exception of one woman who is currently getting her Ph.D. All of the women had either graduated from or were in the process of pursuing higher education degrees, including MSW, Ph.D., J.D., and other Masters level programs, with the exception of one participant who was working as a BA-level professional. In looking at average household annual income, three out of the five couples were earning over 100K, while the other two couples were only earning 30K and 34K collectively. However, one of the women in the couple earning 34K was currently pursuing a higher education degree and was therefore relying substantially on student loans. All five couples were in state-recognized marriages, and one of the couples also had a civil union

partnership and domestic partnership from other states they had been living in where same-sex marriage wasn't a legal option. All of the participants identified as having liberal political views, except for one who identified as a reformed radical.

### Relationship between Sexual Identity and Access to Resources

Over the course of their interviews, all ten women discussed the ways in which their sexual identity interacted with their ability to negotiate their environment and access resources for their families. In all of the cases, accessing resources came up most in discussion of the time leading up to or in the actual process of becoming mothers. None of the women I interviewed indicated that their sexual identity as lesbians had created a negative impact on their ability to become mothers.

Couple A encountered the most obstacles leading up to the point that they became mothers. The non-biological mother (Participant 1) spoke at the beginning of the interview about the negative experiences she had while she was in college. She was playing NCAA Division 1 basketball for her university that was situated in a very conservative and unaccepting part of the country. Her school is a Baptist institution and strongly encouraged her to hide her "homosexual lifestyle" and end her relationship with her female partner, who is now her wife. She noted, "We couldn't be together. It was very scary." The couple ultimately made the decision to leave the school together, which caused a great deal of controversy at the school, alienated their support system, and drastically changed their financial stability. Ultimately, though, both women in the couple emphasized how this decision made them stronger as a couple and as mothers,

especially in resistance against negative environmental factors that could hurt their family. Participant 1 explained,

We've had a hell of a shit-storm of a life, and the fact that now we have him and like we feel so much more like protective of what we have, that we're so much less willing to let outside stuff get into our world, like stuff that's not good for us, like some of the people that we needed during that time, you know, they don't like support our relationship. And my grandmother, she was so mean when I told her that we were having a baby and that [Participant 2] was pregnant, and at the time it really rocked me, but now I just feel like I don't have time for that. Like I have so many good things in my life that I'm not going to let the bad stuff creep in and dominate it.

The biological mother (Participant 2) mirrored her partner's feelings about the decision to move as having a positive impact on their lives, and that they felt proud to be able to someday tell their story of strength to their son. Specifically, in regards to the way their environment and access to resources changed, Participant 2 explained,

I mean we lost everything, but I definitely think it was the right thing to do because otherwise like -- we lost everything but at the same time like we had nothing before, you know? So now we have the real things and while all that other stuff like family and long-term friends and money are all nice. But you know if you don't have the other good stuff, then that stuff doesn't really help. It'd be lovely to have all of it. But I'd rather have the part we have.

The couple discussed that after leaving their university, they were able to complete their degrees at other programs, but both of them have encountered difficulties in finding work in their fields to sustain a reasonable income. Participant 1 was recently offered an opportunity to play basketball professionally in another country, and they are in the process of considering this as an option.

The actual process of becoming a mother for lesbian women involves logistical elements that create a much more time-consuming and expensive process than for reproductively able women in heterosexual relationships. It requires a great deal of planning and preparation in a variety of different ways. Emotionally, this process can

also sometimes be more difficult for lesbian women based on the marginality of their sexual identity, the amount of support they are receiving, and the strength of their support relationships. The third couple I interviewed encountered the most obstacles in the actual process of becoming mothers.

Couple C had always planned that one of the women, whom both partners perceived as the more female gendered partner in their relationship (Participant 5), would be the one to give birth to their children. They began the motherhood planning process about three years before they ideally wanted to have their first child in coordination with their graduate degree programs and resulting professional positions. They were both in Ph.D. programs to become college professors and figured it would be an ideal time to get pregnant when one of them was in a tenure track position and had good benefits. However, a short while after making this initial plan, they changed their timeline and decided they wanted to have a child sooner. This was partially due to Participant 6's parents putting pressure on them to start having children sooner so that they could have grandchildren. Her parents offered to help them financially by paying for the sperm, and offered to help with childcare by babysitting a couple of days per week.

At first, Participant 5 insisted that she had to be the one to become pregnant:

I had really wanted to have a baby and was pushing for that, was pushing to get pregnant even before I graduated, but I was like not economically realistic, but I really wanted to. I just felt like, whatever, we'll figure it out. I just need to get pregnant like now, this is my last chance, like all that stuff.

Ultimately, though, when they considered the logistical components of pregnancy, they came to the conclusion that it made more sense for the other partner to have the first child. This was based on Participant 5's history of chronic gastrointestinal problems; she had undergone a series of abdominal surgeries that would make the process of getting

pregnant harder and would take longer. It was also due to Participant 6 being a few years ahead in school, and thus being able to access financial security and paid maternity leave faster than the other partner. Participant 5 plans to carry their second child in a couple of years once she has graduated from school, and is also in a better financial situation. Thus, this couple faced some logistical obstacles while on the road to motherhood that are unique to lesbian couples. However, they did not indicate that their sexual identity had a negative impact on their ability to access resources in becoming mothers, rather that it just made the process look different than it would for heterosexual couples.

#### Low Identity Intersection Conflict

One of the key research aims of this study is to explore the actual intersection of the lesbian identity with the mother identity and to take a look at the ways in which they affected each other, especially in terms of identity salience. To address this in the interviews, all participants were asked: What are the different identities that make up who you are, currently? How might you have answered this question differently prior to motherhood? If participants did not indicate their sexual identity as a part of their answer, they were then asked: To what extent does your sexual identity impact the rest of your identity, as you understand it now? What about how it impacted you prior to becoming a mother? These questions led to some unexpected answers.

Eight out of the ten participants did not list their sexual identity as an important part of their identity in the first question. After asking the second series of questions, six out of the ten participants reported that they did not think of their sexual identity as something that significantly impacted their everyday experiences as mothers.

Participants identified four main contributing factors: 1. Strength of connection to an LGBT organization or LGBT-identified group of friends, 2. Living in a liberal/inclusive environment, 3. Identifying more strongly with their relationship/marriage to their partner than their sexual identity, and 4. Being a mother is an all-consuming role/identity that overpowers other identities that may have once felt more salient.

### *Strength of Connection to LGBT Organization or Community*

The findings suggested that there is a correlation between a lesbian mother's current connection to an LGBT organization or LGBT-identified friends and her likelihood to claim her sexual identity as a salient one. Participant 5 initially disclosed that her sexual identity, as a queer woman, felt like an important part of her identity because of the social justice work she does with the LGBT community. This identity becomes activated and feels salient because other LGBT individuals who are all fighting for the same cause surround her. Feeling strongly about her identity in this atmosphere is helpfully motivating and reinforcing for the work she is doing. She explains:

I think when I do a lot of diversity outreach work and stuff with my job and then I feel like being queer becomes really salient and it's strategically salient, right, it's a way that I can relate to other students who are socially marginalized in different ways.

Even though this individual feels connected to her sexual identity through her professional work, she goes on to describe how this saliency shifts in other contexts:

In terms of my day-to-day life it [her sexual identity] doesn't feel like it like gets in the way really of much. A lot of our friends are straight, and I think particularly maybe because, I mean it's a bummer in a way, but I feel like because I don't catch a lot of negative feedback around being a lesbian, it doesn't often feel as salient to me.

The participant brings up an interesting point here—she feels that her queer identity is less salient in everyday life because she is not experiencing it negatively; we could then surmise that her mother identity must feel pushed against in some way in order for her to experience it so saliently.

### *Living in a Liberal/Inclusive Environment*

Three out of the five couples (Couples C, D, and E) expressed that their environments and resulting communities were very liberal in their social and political values. They identified this as the reason that their sexual identity did not cause them to stand out in any way. Participants' interpretations of what it meant to be living in a liberal community varied—most mentioned it was either due to there being multiple other same-sex couples living in the community, or that they just felt sexual identity is a non-issue. Because their sexual identities don't cause them to stand out and they are not actively experiencing oppression or prejudice, their lesbianism becomes invisible to their communities who see them more as mothers or parents. This invisibility seems to be somewhat internalized, causing these women to feel mainly salient about their identities as mothers and sort of forget that their sexual identity is different from the majority.

After initially stating that her sexual identity felt salient to her when she was engaging in diversity outreach work, Participant 5 (Couple C) also discussed her other identities that often take precedence:

I think about this a lot: I am a woman, a graduate student and sort of identifying as an intellectual is a really big identity point. I'm also a recovering addict, that's a big identity thing for me. Tons of my friends are also recovering addicts and also involved in 12-step recovery stuff and so that's a really, really salient thing for me. I think maybe being a woman feels to me like the one that has most informed my life all along, and you know my family is very traditional in terms of gender



setup, and so that's the big one. In some ways a lot of those feel more important than being queer at least at this point in my life.

The above excerpt reflects that sexual identity is not as salient for this individual as her other identities because there is a lack of resistance against it from the community. This reduces the chances for identity activation.

In speaking to Participant 5's wife, I found that Participant 6 expressed herself similarly on feeling that her sexual identity is less salient. She explains,

I don't feel like I ever think about it too much. I do feel like as my mom identity goes up, my queer identity does go down. It's almost like they're anti-correlated in a way, and even when we're out together like at swim class. We are the only same-sex couple and like I kind of just forget that we are though.

Her wife jumps in,

Yeah, well, that's being in Massachusetts, because nobody makes a big deal out of it, right? We don't get the stink eye. It's great. But I mean it's interesting because when I go to see my parents in Dallas, I feel incredibly queer.

Interestingly, Participant 5 points out that there is actually a negative correlation between her two identities—as her mother identity becomes activated, her lesbian identity feels less salient. In the example she gives about being at a swimming class with her wife and daughter, she notes that she is aware of being the only same-sex couple, but it doesn't cause her to feel alienated, which we might expect to be the case. This highlights the strength and significance of living in an inclusive community—even though there may not be other same-sex couples in a particular group setting, knowing that a lesbian sexual identity is not marginalized allows individuals to exist comfortably in all spaces. It is thus an individual's choice as to whether or not she wants to express or claim her identity in a given moment. Participant 6 contributes to this finding by pointing out how

extremely differently she feels when she is in a more conservative and less inclusive environment, such as Texas.

Participant 7 and 8 of Couple D similarly explained that they are often the only same-sex couple in community spaces, but that this does not initiate a sense of discomfort about their sexual identity. Participant 8 first described the identities unrelated to sexual identity that feel important to her:

I guess my work identity is kind of big. I identify as a nurse, and you know, that's what I do for work but it also sort of fringes into my whole life and being nurturing and a caretaker. As a wife, as a daughter, as a sister, as a mother, obviously, first and foremost.

She then paused for a moment, and continued:

I don't know, it's weird. I don't think -- like lesbian falls much farther down the list because it's just not something I think about, you know? It's such a non-issue. Especially nowadays. Which is good for me and for us personally, obviously. It doesn't seem to impact us in any way. I mean we often are the only lesbians or same-sex parents or couples anywhere that we end up, be it with friends or school events or that type of thing. But it doesn't -- I don't feel like people treat us any differently, so that doesn't seem to be the biggest identity for me.

This participant's wife mirrored her sentiments on this subject. For these two women, as well as for the couples already mentioned, the intersection of their identities does not cause any inner conflict because they feel accepted in their community environment. There may not be many other same-sex couples living there, or at least ones that make themselves visible, but this does not impact the comfort level in holding this dual-identity.

#### *Relationship/Marriage Has Greater Saliency*

When the women of Couples A, D, and E did not list their sexual identity as an important part of their identity in the first cluster of questions, I asked them more

specifically about it, as outlined earlier in this chapter. The participants in two out of these three couples indicated that their sexual identity felt like an afterthought in comparison to their relationship with their wife, which ultimately felt like a more activated identity that played a salient role in their daily life. Participant 1 of Couple A talked about the fact that her sexual identity is a “side-note”, feeling that, “the relationship with your partner is a result of your sexuality”; thus, identifying as being in a relationship with her wife is a more accurate description of her sexual identity. She went on to talk about her frustrations with family members who interpreted her attempts to inform them about her relationship with her girlfriend as information about her sex life, which she perceives as very separate. She recalls these conversations, trying to explain, “I’m just telling you I love this person and I’m going to share my life with her and if you’re going to be a part of it, then you’re going to have both of us in your world.’ I never felt the need to talk about my sexuality with people, I just wanted to share my relationship”.

Participant 2, who shares her wife’s sentiment about the relationship feeling more important than her sexual identity, offered another explanation,

Neither of us had relationships before each other, so we're the only person we've ever been with. So I think that if we had had a lot of other relationships or more time to experience being like ‘I'm a gay person’ or ‘I'm a lesbian’ before each other then it would have been different. Maybe also if we had had time to experience that in a space that was less intense, maybe it would be different too.

This excerpt highlights one of the effects of “coming out” in an intolerant environment—trying to gain a sense of individual identity as relating to sexual identity can be more challenging if there aren’t many role partners to compare oneself with and mirror. It

makes sense, then, that these two women were able to latch onto and claim their sexual identities solely in terms of their relationship to one another.

In interviewing couple D, I found that they felt similarly to Couple A about sexual identity holding less importance than their relationship with each other in the context of their daily lives as mothers. Participant 7 hypothesizes that, “99% [of heterosexual couples] never have to sit down and go, ‘hmmm, I wonder if I’m heterosexual’”. She inserts,

Once you're a parent and you're in a relationship, no matter what your identity is, I don't think you really think of it -- it's not something that's at the forefront of your mind. ‘Okay, today I'm gay and I will wear this’. It's just not an issue. You go through your day and you know you share the responsibilities of parenting and household chores with your partner, whether that partner is of the same sex or the opposite sex.

Her wife, Participant 8, adds,

I mean I know I have [Participant 7], and she's a woman and I'm married to her, but I go through most days not even really thinking about the fact that, you know, I'm a lesbian or I'm different in that way from other people.

Thus, the findings suggest that when lesbian women feel supported as parents and are able to feel equal to other parents with differing sexual identities, they identify most with their relationship to their partner and role as a mother, as oppose to individual sexual identity.

### *Mother Identity is Most Salient*

As discussed earlier, all of the women in this study either did not consider their sexual identity an essential part of their whole self, or did not think of it as an identity that significantly impacted them in their lives as mothers. The suggested reason for this, which was reflected in all of the participants’ narratives, is that being a mother is such an

emotionally and physically consuming identity, that it holds prominence over all other identities. While sexual identity became activated in certain situations, the mother identity was the one they always carried with them and actively thought about in their day-to-day lives. As Participant 8 phrased it, “mom trumps all”.

Participant 1 of Couple A proposed, “I think that being a mom feels bigger than being gay right now, because I’m kind of in the thick of it”, referring to the fact that her son was just seven months old at the time of the interview, so she was a fairly new mom. Her wife, Participant 2, spoke about the “engulfing” quality of being a mother that she had not fully anticipated prior to motherhood. She explains,

It's the kind of love that almost hurts and like every single thing that he does I could literally watch him like while he sleeps. He lays on this thing sometimes, this is his little potty where he goes -- I mean all these things are infinitely fascinating to me and I don't know, I think the biggest thing that I wasn't expecting was the intensity and how much I would love him and care about him.

Even though this mother’s sexual identity felt salient to her in the context of her decision to leave her school and stand up for what she believed in, she is now in the early stages of new motherhood, which fulfills her sense of identity in a different way than it did before.

Participant 6 of Couple D expressed that she becomes most aware of the saliency of her mother identity when she thinks about her professional goals and priorities. She says,

I was never political really, but I just feel like I've become more conservative since I had the baby and my priorities are much more kind of logistical and practical. As soon as she was born I was like, ‘I need to make more money’, and I became open to working in an environment that is much more straight and conservative. I just feel like it's brought me more to the middle in a lot of ways.

This excerpt highlights the degree of shifting that can occur when one adopts a powerful new identity, and the enormous impact that it can have on other identities that may have

previously held more importance in one's life. While this finding reflected that these women did not feel their sexual identity was salient in the context of their everyday lives, the next finding will show how this changes when women are faced with moments of marginality.

### Marginality as a Site of Resistance

While the majority of participants reported that they rarely faced moments of prejudice or judgment as a result of their sexual identity, two out of the five couples (A and E) drew on experiences in which they had anticipated or actively felt resistance and acted accordingly. These women noted that in their daily lives they often felt their sexual identity blended in because it was not being threatened in any way. However, in certain situations where these women sensed they were about to be marginalized in some capacity based on their sexual identity, or actually were marginalized, this identity instantly became activated and felt salient. In both of these situations, the identity activation and desire to “out” oneself in order to get a point across was influenced by their child in some capacity. Participant 10 reiterates this concept:

I feel like that part of my identity [being a lesbian] gets subsumed, but it is there. It's like a protective mama-bear thing, like being aware when there might be tension for [child], and anticipating that tension and how to handle it for her before it becomes an issue. I don't want my sexual orientation to sort of pass in the playground and that kind of thing; I adamantly refuse to do that because I don't ever want to hide in front of her or even have her feel the tension of wanting to. I very much want to be of a whole cloth and to teach her all the parts of herself, interact in a healthy way, and not to feel like she has to somehow hide certain parts.

Consider the debate of a lesbian mother in this situation: she wants to show her child that she is proud of her identity and will always stand up for herself so that the child can

internalize that; yet, at the same time, she doesn't want to place herself or her child in danger, emotionally or physically. This particular mother feels strongly about making sure to never pass up these kinds of moments of strength and resiliency, but other mothers in different contexts might feel differently.

In a lot of ways, when Couple A took action against homophobia and marginality by leaving their school together, the event marked the beginning of their narrative as a family that will most definitely impact their child's development and experience in the world. Even though they didn't have their son when they made the decision to leave, they knew that they wanted to have a family and wanted to begin that process in a comfortable space and from a position of strength. Participant 2 explained,

I'm really proud that we've done that [about leaving the school] and I feel really good about the fact that [child] will some day know that we made a lot of choices to be comfortable, like we've moved here to a place where we could be safe, but we've also made choices that were uncomfortable in order to demonstrate that we think you shouldn't have to hide and you shouldn't have to apologize and so I'm proud of that.

Participant 2's partner talked about a situation where she was in a new mothers support group that was entirely composed of women in heterosexual relationships, aside from her, and she felt very marginalized, which caused her gay identity to feel more salient. She explained,

I always feel very funny in those contexts [referring to groups where she is the only individual who is not in a heterosexual relationship]. I feel that my identity as being gay is very big in those contexts, even if it's just inside of me. Like when I'm in a mommy circle, because I feel so different from the other mommies and I feel like I can't chat with them about the things that they're chatting about. And my sexual identity is just not being acknowledged. So there are those moments when that identity rises up, and feels sort of fiery and more important.

Couple E brought up a situation in which Participant 9 was at a playground with her daughter, and overheard her conversation with another child:

I heard her saying to the other kid, ‘well, yeah, I have a mom whose name is Robin and a mom whose name is Eden’, and you know, I didn’t hear all the details of what they were saying, but they were obviously talking about this and figuring this out and [child] seemed very comfortable with it.

She recalls that the other child was there with his grandmother, who was visiting from Israel, and she didn’t speak very much English. Participant 9 remembers,

His grandmother and I were talking and the kids wanted to have a play date the next day and I knew I couldn’t bring [child] but Participant 10 was going to be with her, and so I quickly in my mind went through, ‘okay, what am I going to say to this older woman from Israel who doesn’t speak much English about who Participant 10 was and how this was all working. And then I just decided not to hide it and said, ‘Oh, that’s my wife, [child] has two moms’ and kind of explained it. We actually had a lovely conversation about it because she was talking about same sex relationships in Israel and she was a pretty liberal woman. But it was this situation where I was being open to this person who I wasn’t really clear like what her response would be. But that moment of just like, ‘forget it, I’m just going to go for it. ’I didn’t see that dilemma for me in my life that I do see for her [referring to daughter]-- not dilemma, but that like that developmental importance of being able to say who you are and be proud of it.

These interactions highlight that lesbian mothers may feel the need to stand up for themselves in the face of social injustice, especially when their child is present or is in some way affecting their existence in those moments. This happens in part because they want to instill certain values about strength and equality, and feel strongly about protecting their family dynamic that is typically marginalized by society. Even though the mothers I interviewed were living in relatively liberal communities, they are still aware of the social injustices that frame our larger social structure. They want their children to grow up feeling normal, but at the same time, don’t want to unrealistically portray the belief systems of U.S. society.

### Achieving Motherhood



All of the women I interviewed talked about how incredibly meaningful it was for them to become mothers, and how it had brought about positive changes in their lives. Three out of the five couples spoke more specifically about how the actual achievement of motherhood status felt particularly poignant in the way they understood themselves, which was greatly impacted by their personal histories prior to motherhood. In all three of these couples, the non-biological partner was the one who indicated that achieving the role of motherhood represented profound significance in her life. Additionally, in all of these cases the non-biological mother expressed experiences of anxiety about the bond that she would have with her child, worrying it wouldn't be equivalent to that of her partner's. Some of these women also expressed feeling left out while their partner was pregnant in not being able to experience motherhood in the same way. That feeling sometimes carried over into the bonding processes of early motherhood, such as during breastfeeding. A few of the non-gestational mothers attempted to combat this anxiety by joining with the biological mother in the breastfeeding process.

The non-biological mother of the first couple I interviewed shared that she had never felt as though she was accepted as a woman in her community growing up because it was very stereotypically gendered and she did not fit the criteria for being female. She loved playing sports, she was tall and muscular, and she did not dress femininely. Therefore, when her partner gave birth to their child, she felt that it was her proof to the rest of the world to be acknowledged as a woman:

The second that I became a mom, I felt so much more confident in my womanhood than I ever had before. So I think like in a way like all the cultural stuff that comes with that kind of made me feel like I had less explanation to do about who I am. I'm from Texas so simply being like a bigger person who played sports, like I had a lot of gender stuff my life that's always been really hurtful to me, because I don't identify as anything other than female. It was always

intended to hurt, you know, so I have a lot of baggage around that. But I did feel that the second [child] was born so much more confident in being a woman.

In another couple, one of the women talked about how she had made clear from the very beginning of their relationship that she did not want to be the one to give birth. She explained, “I was really afraid of being pregnant and giving birth. My mom was a home birth midwife when I was little and I was there for a lot of births. I was like, ‘no freaking way, blood and screaming’, that seems awful.” However, once she watched her partner go through the process of being pregnant and giving birth, she realized that it was an experience she also wanted to personally have, not just experience through her partner.

In the fifth couple interview, the non-biological mother talked about how she had resisted the idea of having children altogether, even if she wasn’t the one to give birth, for a very long time. While thinking about her identity as a mother as prompted by the interview questions, she discussed the feelings behind her previous resistance:

I mean it's obvious, but I hadn't thought about it until you were talking about it, like me drawing on my own mother who still is and was very just, you know, kids focused, very loving, very giving, overly giving, probably self-sacrificing. So that was my model, and I was the recipient of that, which means, I was used to having all the attention. So in thinking about living up to those standards and thinking about having to give up some of my own attention felt kind of daunting. Until just now I don't know that I ever consciously thought about that, but definitely I think that that sort of played on me, because my mother is just right there all the time. So it was a hard thing to live up to that standard, and I knew that was the right standard, and I felt like I got all of what I needed in that way, so it was hard to imagine following in those shoes.

Later in the interview, this participant talked about how she eventually was able to understand more about where her resistance came from, and realized that motherhood was, in fact, something that she cared very much about. Once she became a mother, she remembers looking back on that resistance and seeing it as immature—she is incredibly

appreciative of her wife in helping her to realize that achieving the role of motherhood was something that she actually really wanted and needed in her life.

Separately from the anxiety this participant discussed in terms of being a good-enough mother for her child, other participants, specifically non-biological mothers, talked about the kinds of anxieties that go along with this unique parent role. Participant 1 discussed how her anxiety manifested itself:

I did feel like before we had him was the hardest time because then people were kind of like – ‘well, you're not really doing anything right now’, or ‘you're not really a mom right now’, whereas [Participant 1] was already getting to feel that excitement of people looking at you and knowing you are pregnant and asking you questions about naming. People just didn't ask me that kind of stuff. The other thing is we both went off to our work places, and everywhere she goes, there's a big sign on her that says, ‘I'm pregnant. I'm having a baby.’ So everybody and their dog was also asking her if she needed anything or baby stuff, and she just got all these different sources of confirmation from people who were affirming her motherhood. Even though at the time she was working in a really conservative area, everyone was still totally cool with it, so everyday at work she got to feel celebrated in that way. I definitely told my group of people, but I *had* to tell them, and didn't get that automatic community celebration kind of thing. And so, I felt sad about that. That part of the pregnancy was hard for me because I felt like I didn't know where I fit in. It's so different for men who are partners in heterosexual relationships because society has such a space carved out for expecting fathers, and there's not really that for a non-gestational mom.

This participant draws attention to several important points about the position of the non-biological mother in a lesbian relationship: 1. The experiences of lesbian couples where there is one non-biological and one biological mother are very different from one another in the time preceding the child's birth, 2. There is not any universally accepted or acknowledged discourse around the position of the non-biological lesbian mother, which may cause disorienting and upsetting anxiety for this individual in the couple, and, 3. The non-biological mother is in a position where she has to specifically tell people about this part of her identity, whereas the biological mother experiences the privilege of

assumption on a daily basis. These themes will be discussed further in the discussion chapter.

During their interview, couple 3 engaged in a conversation about the non-biological mother's (Participant 5) fear and anxiety around the expected quality of her bond to her child before she was born:

Participant 5: I think that was a really big fear for me before she was born, not even that I wouldn't be able to bond with her, but that she wouldn't bond with me.

Participant 6: Definitely not the case.

Participant 5: No, that is definitely not the case. I mean it's understandable, but it's also like totally insane as fears go...

Participant 6: I don't think it's insane.

Participant 5: I mean it's not insane. I should say unrealistic. It's understandable and I think it's something that happens to all non-biological parents, adoptive or queer, but I also think that it's so far from what taking care of a kid all of the time is actually like. I guess that's what I mean by crazy. Not that I was crazy but it's so different from reality. It's just not the same for men in heterosexual relationships because there's already discourse around it. Like the same kinds of conversations would be so much harder to arrive at, I think, because the expectations going in are so different.

Here, the anxiety of the non-biological lesbian mother looks a little different from that of Participant 1. Participant 5's anxiety centered mostly on worry that their child wouldn't want to or would not be able to form strong bonds with two female parents, especially when one of them gave birth and was breastfeeding, and the other did not. She also mirrors Participant 1's feeling that the position of the non-biological lesbian mother is extremely different from a heterosexual father's position, whether there is a biological link or not. This is due to the general lack of discussion about this type of parent and the lack of circulating resources and information about how these women can integrate more smoothly into their roles as mothers within their family.

### Impact of Children on Intergenerational Relationships

In four out of the five couples I interviewed, participants emphasized the ways in which their relationships with their parents improved once they had children. The women in these couples cited that their relationships with their parents had been tensioned prior to having children due to parental discomfort around their sexual identity. All of these women brought up the idea that having children gave them common ground with their parents that hadn't necessarily existed beforehand. Some of the biological mothers of these couples also mentioned that giving birth triggered the creation of a special bond with their mothers who they were now connected to through this shared experience. The women in the couple that did not report this relational theme in their interview had long-standing, strong relationships with their parents. However, it can be noted that one of the women's parents became extremely enthusiastic around the topic of having children, and offered their financial and physical help.

Couple B discussed the way in which this pattern has played out with Participant 4's father and his relationship with both her and her partner:

Participant 4: I think this is true for any strife people have with their parents; children are a wonderful buffer to that. Once we had [a child] it just became what we talked about—it fostered all of this communication around things that the kids are doing.

Participant 4: It's amazing. I mean I think it probably heals all sorts of things, but it does help with this too. It doesn't mean I've had more conversations about being gay with him. And he doesn't feel able to meet [the donor]. He feels like he can't do that.

Participant 3: But he does introduce me as your partner now.

Participant 4: Right, I mean that took a long time, but yeah, he's gotten better.

Interestingly, this pattern also played out between Couple B's donor—who is a good friend of theirs—and his parents, who had always struggled with his sexual identity as a gay man. The couple explains,

Participant 3: For [donor] and his parents, it's been super healing for them to see how happy and well adjusted our kids are and how happy our family is and what a delightful life we lead. They come up here and visit us and we just went and visited them in Miami.

Participant 4: The kids call them the GrandSpecials.

Participant 3: For Special [donor's name].

Participant 4: But his parents have been completely grateful for the relationship with the kids, and when we went down there, they had pictures of the kids all over the house.

Participant 3: So many of them, perhaps more than any of their other grandparents. Truly, like all these different collages of them.

In their interview, Couple B demonstrated that having children has the capacity to lessen alienation between family members who are more obviously connected, but can also extend to those more distantly involved, both figuratively and physically.

The participants of Couples D and E talked about the common ground that was formed between themselves and their parents due to the emergence of their shared experience of parenting. Couple D jokingly remarked,

Participant 7: Ever since we had a child—forget it. I don't care if you've got three heads, you're great now. Look at this child you brought us. It's amazing how children change all of that.

Participant 8: It's very true.

Participant 7: And it's almost like we're all on equal footing now because we're all parents, so we can all sort of relate in one way or the other.

Similarly, participant 10 of Couple E explained,

I didn't anticipate this, but when I was trying to conceive and when I was pregnant, I really had a different shift in my way of thinking. Before that, I had really limited my relationship with my mother. But when I was pregnant, it opened up again as a possibility. I ended up closing it down again, but there was a window there that I hadn't anticipated, where I rethought my relationship with my mother and that questioning and reflection on my childhood and on her as a person has been ongoing.

These participants highlight the significance of mutuality and the extent to which the shared experience of parenting can bridge the gap of distance between family members who have been historically unaccepting of the lesbian sexual identity.

## Conclusion

This chapter revealed, in depth, the findings of this project. The major themes discussed were: the relationship between sexual identity and accessing resources, low identity intersection conflict, marginality as a site of resistance, the importance of achieving motherhood, and the impact of having children on intergenerational relationships. The following chapter will explore the meanings of these findings, connect findings from this research to findings from the literature, discuss implications for social work, and review the limitations of the study.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The previous chapter illustrates the major findings of this research. In the discussion chapter, the researcher will extract meaning and propose explanations for these findings. Research findings discussed in the literature review will also be integrated into this chapter for comparison. Next, the limitations of this project will be shared. Finally, the researcher will discuss the implication that this research has for the field of social work. This chapter will be structured using the themes that formatted the findings chapter.

#### Relationship Between Sexual Identity and Accessing Resources

I did not come across any research that explored the intersection of sexual identity with ability to access resources. There is a fair amount of literature that looks at the experiences of single heterosexual women who are juggling child rearing and working, but this is without the support of a partner, which makes it incompatible for comparison to lesbian co-mother couples. The findings of the present stated that all ten women I interviewed discussed the ways in which their sexual identity interacted with their ability to access resources for their families. The examples provided for this theme reflected that being in a lesbian relationship introduced different kinds of obstacles than would exist in a heterosexual relationship, including: financial instability triggered by



homophobia; time, financial, and legally-based constraints on a couple's ability to have a child; and lack of discourse and support around the role of the non-biological mother. However, none of these women indicated that their sexual identity had a negative impact on their ability to access resources, just that their process looked different from heterosexual couples.

It is clear from the findings that Couple A has experienced more struggle and hardships than the other couples I interviewed. There are several factors that cause this differentiation. Both of the women in this couple grew up in socially unaccepting and politically conservative physical environments, and then went to college in an area that had similar values. When they left college together, they were able to complete their degrees at other schools, but have been unable to find steady work in their fields and are struggling financially. They are also not receiving any financial support from their families. One of the women in this couple also has an extremely negative and painful family history that continues to characterize her relationship with her parents, or lack thereof. Therefore, in considering the impact of sexual identity on a lesbian woman's ability to access resources, specifically in relation to becoming a mother, it is important to look at the ways in which an individual has been supported or rejected from her various social and environmental frameworks (i.e. family, local community, government, etc.).

#### Low Identity Intersection Conflict

In exploring the lesbian sexual identity and the extent to which participants felt it was an important part of their identity, participants either did not think it was an essential identity component, or that it didn't impact their everyday experiences as mothers. Upon consideration of the factors that participants identified as affecting this, the most common

ones were: connection to an LGBT organization or LGBT-identified group of friends, living in a liberal/inclusive environment, identifying more strongly by their relationship to their partner rather than their sexual identity, and that the mother identity is so powerful that it feels more salient than other identities.

Participants' responses also reflected that they often felt differently about their sexual identity at different points throughout the day based on a variety of environmental elements. These findings suggest identities are not fixed or concrete in the ways one feels or thinks about them, or in the ways one might be impacted by them. This is significant in that it reflects the fluid nature of identities; they always have the capacity to change and may feel more or less salient to an individual depending on the context.

Participants who discussed the role that living in a liberal environment had on their way of thinking about sexual identity reported that being a lesbian was a non-issue for community members, and was therefore invisible to others and to themselves. In race discourse, scholars refer to identity invisibility as negative and painful—it causes those in privileged positions to oppress minority groups, often without conscious awareness. However, in thinking about this finding, we can consider the pros and cons of viewing identity invisibility as a positive process. On the one hand, many LGBT individuals feel that their identity is salient because it is the recipient of so much hatred that they experience everyday—if sexual identity was a non-issue and therefore invisible, this would drastically change the lives of this population. On the other hand, identity invisibility can lead to overgeneralizations and assumptions, and can cause minority groups to feel that they have to merge completely with majority groups, losing their individuality.

A few of the couples noted that they were often the only same-sex couple in a particular space, but that they were rarely aware of it because they knew they were in a supportive and liberal environment where they felt sexual identity was a non-issue. Identity theory dictates that an individual's likelihood to feel salient about a particular identity is dependent on the amount of people that identify similarly, and the strength of relationship to such role partners (Stets & Burke, 2000). This is reflected in the finding of the present research. That being said, the motivational reasoning is different—identity theory suggests that individuals wouldn't experience identity salience in this situation because they wouldn't have support and would therefore not feel confident about it. However, the couples interviewed indicated that their lack of awareness of sexual identity was due to feeling that they were supported, and therefore, their sexual identity wasn't relevant in the same way that a heterosexual couple's sexual identity wouldn't be. This suggests that mutual role partners, as well as an understanding of the greater framework or societal ideologies, plays a role in impacting identity salience.

Another common theme that came up in participant responses about sexual identity salience is that they identified more strongly with their relationship to their partner. Participant 1 of Couple A spoke specifically about how she felt confused and disconnected from lesbian women who identified more strongly with their sexual identity than their relationship. We might consider that this has to do with her upbringing in a very conservative and unaccepting environment where identifying as a lesbian was not a viable option. It is possible that she internalized some of this homophobia and accordingly feels discomfort around identifying by her sexual identity as a lesbian that she associates with so much negative stigma from her past. Participant 8 of Couple D

offers another explanation for lack of sexual identity salience—we would likely not expect a heterosexual couple to actively think about their sexuality, so why would we assume something different for a same-sex couple? One of the overarching causes of this difference in assumption is the extent to which lesbian mothers are deemed to fit into the larger framework, such as their relational and physical communities as well as their state and country of residence.

The final reason given for lack of sexual identity salience, which was reflected in all of the participants' responses, is that motherhood is an all-consuming identity that overpowers all other identities. As discussed in the findings chapter, the process of becoming mothers for lesbian women is extremely time-consuming, emotionally taxing, and incredibly expensive. We might look at the ability for lesbian women to have children as a privilege reflective of class, socioeconomic status, geography, and level of education, among other things. Despite the limiting scope of motherhood possibilities for many lesbian women, U.S. Western society views women who are in childless long-term relationships as narcissistic and inadequate as female adults. Therefore, we might speculate that when a lesbian woman finally becomes a mother, the moment carries an incredible amount of psychological significance and is reflective of a great deal of work. This may be especially true for older lesbians who do not have children until later in life, such as the case with Participant 9 of Couple E. It is important to consider the multiple facets of alienation or marginality she may have experienced from society, including being a lesbian, being a woman, being a single woman in her 40s, and being childless. While all couples and families are different, this significant moment of achieving motherhood may be a common thread that links many lesbian women together.

### Marginality as a Site of Resistance

Identity theory hypothesizes that individuals are less likely to feel they can express their identities when they are in an unsupportive environment. However, the findings of this section show that lesbian mothers feel strongly about going out of their way to make their sexual identity known in situations they feel or anticipate resistance. I have identified three main factors that may impact a mother's choice in activating her lesbian identity in the moment of resistance: 1. Evaluating the negative or dangerous consequences for herself and her child in "outing" herself in a particular moment vs. the positive outcomes and lessons that could be taught, 2. The extent to which the individual generally feels supported by the environment and mutual role partners on a daily basis—if an individual is usually supported, it could give her more strength in a random marginalized moment, and, 3. The amount of unconscious guilt one feels about her marginalized identity becoming invisible due to conjunction with a mainstream identity. To understand this latter factor, consider the experiences of lesbian women whose lives may have been significantly impacted by their struggles with their sexual identity for a long time. The equality that they now have with other heterosexual women that allows them to be defined by identities aside from sexual identity is liberating. However, consider the possibility that women in this position may also feel be experiencing some unconscious guilt for having the privilege to now be viewed by their majority identity. If this was the case, then it would make sense that when a lesbian woman faces a moment of potential oppression, especially if she has been living a more privileged life since motherhood, she would feel more passionately about standing up for herself.

### Achieving Motherhood

Interestingly, the findings of the present study reflected that non-biological mothers emphasized the importance of achieving motherhood more so than the biological mother. This may be due to the unique nature of this position for lesbian couples in that there is not a lot of discourse about it that would help both women to negotiate their different roles within the family system. The warm reaction of strangers towards an expecting mother is fairly universal, regardless of sexual identity, but the non-gestational partner is left out of this equation. Therefore, these two mothers—the biological and non-biological—may have drastically different experiences in the time leading up to a child’s birth, which could impact their relationship and the way in which they interact with their child when he or she is actually born. This mirrors the results of other research that points out the distinctly different experiences of the non-biological and biological mothers (Ben-Ari & Levin, 2006; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Goldberg & Smith, 2008; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). Additionally, non-biological lesbian mothers may feel more passionately than biological mothers about the idea of achieving motherhood, because they do not receive the same automatic legal and societal recognition. Due to the “lack of a well-defined and societally sanctioned relationship with their child” (Gabb, 2005 as cited in Goldberg & Smith, 2008, pp. 214), non-gestational lesbian mothers are left to negotiate the meaning of this role with very little model for precedence.

### Impact of Children on Intergenerational Relationships

Identity theory claims that when an individual has multiple identities that interact on a daily basis, there are certain qualitative and quantitative factors that impact an individual’s likelihood to commit to one identity over another (Stets & Burke, 2000).

However, the theory is lacking in its application towards non-heteronormative identities, including instances where a marginalized identity intersects with a mainstreamed one, as is the case with the lesbian mother identity. There has been some research that has explored this phenomenon (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; and Bos, Balen & Bloom, 2004). These research findings, which focused on the experiences of non-biological mothers, found that relationships with family members that were already characterized by tension were likely to face further familial alienation. However, this is very different from the findings reflected in the present study, which showed that nearly all of the women felt their previously tensioned relationships with family members improved upon having children. It is difficult to assess the reasoning behind this difference due to the extremely small sample size and non-generalizability of the present study.

#### Implications for the Social Work Profession

The findings and discussion highlight several key elements that should be implemented in clinical social work practice with lesbian women. Perhaps most importantly, it is essential for clinicians to gain a deeper understanding of the distinctly different experiences that non-biological and biological mothers have in the period of time prior to childbirth. Along with this, it is important for clinicians to acknowledge the multiple levels of marginality that lesbian mothers may experience, depending on their other identities. Additionally, clinicians must acknowledge the impact of social class, race, ethnicity, geography, education, and economic status on the identity of a lesbian woman in terms of her understanding, desire, and ability to achieve motherhood. In terms of implications for social work policy, it would be helpful if this kind of research could help to bridge the socioeconomic gap that determines whether or not lesbian

women are financially capable of having children. Policy could allow for more resources (educational and financial) to be more available to less economically-abled individuals in going through the process of conception.

### Research Limitations and Future Research

This study's main limitation was that the sample size was small and it lacked diversity in terms of race, gender identity, marital status, and geographical location. This researcher was committed to face-to-face interviews and did not have the funding to travel to different parts of the country, or time to interview more participants. Therefore, all of the participants were recruited from various parts of Massachusetts, all of which are fairly liberal in their political and social values. Additionally, those who volunteered for the study may feel more positively about their mothering role than those who did not volunteer. Another limitation may include bias in the analysis and interpretation of the data. Although this researcher identifies as a queer adult woman who wants to someday have children with a female partner, all attempts were made to remain neutral while analyzing the data.

Future studies should include a larger sample size with greater diversity on various levels. This researcher was particularly interested in the experiences of lesbian mothers, so a qualitative approach was appropriate. However, this study could also be replicated in a quantitative format so that it could include a larger number of participants. A suggestion for future research would be to compare the anxieties of non-biological lesbian mothers whose partners are carrying their child with those of heterosexual mothers who are adopting children. Another suggestion would be to explore the degree



to which becoming a mother—which is perceived as a mainstream identity—actually shifts lesbian women into a higher social class bracket. This study could then look specifically at the various sociocultural factors that might effect this, including race, class, geography, education level, income, gender identity, and religion.

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Publications.

## APPENDIX A

### HSR BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts

01063

T (413) 585-7950 F (413)  
585-7994

February 8, 2012

Sarah Horn

Dear Sarah,

The requested revisions to your Human Subjects Review application have been reviewed and are approved. Nice job with the edits and explanations. Thank you for your professionalism.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.



Good luck on your research project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David L. Burton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jennifer Perloff, Research Advisor

## **APPENDIX B**

### **RECRUITMENT EMAILS**

Subject: Seeking Lesbian Mother Participants for a Research Opportunity

Dear Friends and Family,

I am writing to let you know about a research study I am conducting for my Masters thesis at Smith College School for Social Work. Please read the attached document about the study and contact me if you are interested in participating. If you have friends or family who are living in Boston, MA or Northampton, MA that you think might also be interested in participating, I would greatly appreciate it if you could please send them the attached document, along with the informed consent that I have also attached to this email.

Thank you so much!

Sincerely,

Sarah Horn

Subject: Seeking Lesbian Mother Participants for a Research Opportunity

Dear Potential Participants,

I am writing to let you know about a research study I am conducting in association with Smith College School for Social Work that you have the option to take part in. You are being contacted because I know one of your friends or family members who thought you might be interested in participating.

This research study is being done to investigate the formation of the lesbian-mother identity in terms of the way the individual woman's identity as a lesbian is shaped by her new experience and identity as a mother.

I am looking for individuals who want to participate in this research and who:

- Identify as females and as lesbians
- Are mothers to one or more children with their partner under state-recognized marriage or civil union partnership; both women in the relationship must be available to participate in the study
- Have been parenting their children since they were no older than three-years old
- Their child/children are currently 10-years old or younger

The study consists of a 60-minute audiotaped interview between myself and you and your partner, at a date/time of your convenience, in your home. I apologize for the inconvenience, but your child/children may not be present for the interview due to the sensitive subject matter. However, if your child/children are under 12 months of age, this rule does not apply and it is okay for them to be present.

The interview will consist of 5-7 open-ended questions aimed to address my research area of interest. Unfortunately, I cannot pay you for your participation in this study due to lack of funding. However, if you choose to participate, you will also be entered into a drawing with the rest of the participants to win a \$25 gift card to Amazon.

I have included a consent form, which explains the research study in more detail. Please read this and do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you have on it. I am happy to review any aspect of the study with you as you decide whether or not you would like to participate. If you would like to speak with me, the lead researcher, about questions you may have or with interest for participation, please email me. If you would like to speak with the institution affiliated with this study, please contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Sarah Horn  
Smith College School for Social Work

**APPENDIX C**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

**Subject Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of Study:** An exploration of the lesbian mother identity in the U.S.

**Principal Investigator:** Sarah Horn

Dear Participant,

You have been selected to participate in a study exploring your experiences, as you perceive them, of the intersection of your lesbian identity with your identity as a mother. This study is being conducted by Sarah Horn, an MSW candidate, for a Masters thesis in affiliation with Smith College School for Social Work. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked specific questions about your sexual orientation in terms of how it affects your conception of yourself, as well as about your experience as a mother, and how you feel those two identities have intersected.

If you sign this form, you are confirming that you identify as a lesbian woman and are in a co-mothering relationship with your partner. Your child/children are under 10 years of age. If you adopted your child/children, you began parenting when they were three-years old or younger. Should you choose to participate in this study, your participation will involve a 60-minute interview made up of a series of open-ended questions directed towards you and your partner as individuals and as a couple. I apologize for the inconvenience, but your child/children may not be in the interview room/space due to the sensitive subject matter. However, if they are somewhere else in your home, specifically where they cannot hear the interview, than it is okay for them to be there. Additionally, if your child/children are under 12 months of age, this rule does not apply and it is okay for them to be in the interview area. Prior to beginning the interview, I will also ask you to respond to a series of demographic questions, which I anticipate will take approximately 10 minutes. Your comments during the session will be audio taped and will be sent to a professional agency for transcription; they will sign a confidentiality pledge.

There is minimal risk involved in your participation. However, some questions may include sensitive subject matter so there is minimal risk that you may experience some emotional discomfort during the interview. There is also risk that your partner may become uncomfortable during the interview if your responses include information on these topics that you may not have discussed together in the past. You have the right not to answer a question, stop the audio taping, or end the interview at any time. A list of referral resources will also be provided at the conclusion of the interview. It is my hope that you receive a personal benefit by taking part in this study, by exploring your shared experience of motherhood with your partner, and myself. It is also my hope that this kind

of information will contribute towards increased knowledge of the experiences of lesbian women who become mothers, and will be useful for mental health professionals, as well as students and educators in various fields. Unfortunately, I cannot pay you for your participation in this study, due to lack of funding. However, you will be entered into a drawing with other participants in this study to win a \$25 gift card to Amazon. I will notify the winner at the conclusion of my data collection phase.

To protect your identity, your name will not be used during the interview session and copies of comments (transcribed from audiotape) will be retained for three years and then shredded, as required by Federal regulations. Each interview will be marked only with a code number, in accordance with the informed consent forms, and the identifying information will be filed separately in a secure location. Your data will not be anonymous to me, but will be kept confidential from anyone else that I share it with, including a professional transcriber, my SW research advisor, and anyone I present the data to. Anyone hired to transcribe audiotapes will sign a confidentiality agreement. I will not work with any research assistants but I will be in collaboration with my SW research advisor who will have access to the data, though only after identifying information has been removed. When I present my research, or if I pursue publication, it will be presented in a way that protects your identity. In my actual thesis, the data will be coded and then discussed as a group. If I do include quotes from individual participants, I will disguise the identity of the speaker.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and once you agree to participate, you may change your mind and withdraw at any time leading up to or during the interview. However, once you have signed this form and the interview period is complete, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data. Should you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, you are encouraged to call the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

### **RESEARCH SUBJECTS' RIGHTS**

**MY SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, MY PARTICIPATION, AND MY RIGHTS AND THAT I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

I will keep a copy of this form for my records. I understand that if I am not satisfied with the manner in which this study is being conducted or if I have questions regarding my rights as a study participant, I may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

### Western/Central Massachusetts

#### **GLBT Community Center Project of Western Massachusetts**

17 New South St., Suite 111  
Northhampton, MA 01060  
Email: valleyctr@hotmail.com

#### **Pride Zone**

2 Maple Avenue, #34  
Northhampton, MA 01060  
Phone: (413) 584-1116  
Fax: (413) 584-0571  
E-mail: przone@valinet.com

#### **P-FLAG: Greenfield & Pioneer Valley**

c/o Jane Harris  
53 Elm Street  
Shelburne Falls, MA 01370  
PFLAG holds monthly meetings to offer support, education and advocacy. We welcome all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals, families, friends and allies. Confidentiality is assured.  
Helpline: (413) 625-6636  
Email: PFLAGPV@valinet.com

#### **P-FLAG: Springfield**

P.O. Box 625  
West Springfield MA 01090  
Meetings are the last Wed. of each month at South Congregational Church, 45 Maple Street, Springfield  
Phone: 413-783-7709  
Email: EduDon@aol.com

#### **Time Out**

A social support group for adult women in the Central Massachusetts area who are interested in making connections and friendships while gaining the strength, understanding and support of women who love women.  
Meets first and third Tuesday, 7:00 pm to 9:00pm at Gardner VNA 35 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA 01420  
Phone: 978-343-4142  
Info: timeout-group-owner@yahogroups.com  
Email List: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/timeout-group/>  
Website: <http://www.geocities.com/candacevan/timeout.html>

### **Venture Out**

An outdoor adventure club for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community of Western Mass. Volleyball, bowling, and lots more.

Phone: 413-584-8764

Email: [ventureout.geo@yahoo.com](mailto:ventureout.geo@yahoo.com)

### **ServiceNet**

ServiceNet provides a wide range of human services for people in the Pioneer Valley.

Our programs include outpatient behavioral health services; adolescent support programs; an employee assistance program; early intervention for young children; home health care; rehabilitation and residential programs for those with mental health issues, developmental disabilities, head injuries, or addictions; and shelter and housing services for the homeless.

ServiceNet has program sites in Hampshire, Franklin, Hampden, Berkshire, and Worcester counties. ServiceNet's administrative offices are located in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Website: <http://www.servicenet.org/>

Phone: <http://www.servicenet.org/>

### **Greater Boston Area**

#### **PFLAG: Parents, Families, Friends of Lesbians and Gays**

Supporting families, creating safe schools, and fostering inclusive communities

Greater Boston PFLAG

85 River St., Suite 3A

P.O. Box 541619

Waltham, MA 02454

Tel: 781-891-5966

Fax: 781-891-7444

Email: [info@gbpflag.org](mailto:info@gbpflag.org)

Helpline: 866-427-3524

#### **Fenway Health**

Website: [www.fenwayhealth.org](http://www.fenwayhealth.org)

If you are a new patient or have a general inquiry, call 617.927.6202 to access Behavioral Health services.

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Helpline:

617.267.9001, Toll-free: 888.340.4528

## **National Resources**

### **GLNH: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline**

The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline provides telephone and email peer-counseling, as well as factual information and local resources for cities and towns across the United States.

Phone: Toll free: 1-888-843-4564

Website: <http://glnh.org/hotline/index.html>

### **COLAGE: Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere**

Website: [www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org)

Phone: 415-861-5437



## **APPENDIX D**

### **DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS**

1. What is your racial identity?
2. What is your ethnic identity?
3. Where were you born?
4. What is your religion?
5. What is your (approximate) household annual income?
6. What is your age?
7. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
8. What is your current employment status and title?
9. Are you in a state-recognized marriage or civil union partnership? Please list.
10. How would you describe your political views?

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Introduction:**

*As you know, I am interested in talking to the two of you, and other lesbian mother couples about your experience of becoming mothers and how that has shaped your individual identity. While there are many definitions of identity, I am defining it here as the overall character of an individual that reflects the essence of who they are and how they got to be that way, through influence of ideas relating to sexuality, gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, culture, politics, occupational and social spheres. Identity is always changing and is influenced by personal experience, other people, and different environments we find ourselves in, among many other elements. I'd like to talk to you specifically about the way in which your identities as lesbians have intersected with your identities as mothers, both individually and in the context of your relationship.*

*I have a series of questions I would like to ask you, but I am willing to spend more time on particular questions if they feel more relevant to our discussion. Please feel free to interrupt or correct me if I say something that feels uncomfortable or is incorrect.*

1. I would like to begin by each of you thinking about the word “mother” and telling me what that word means to you.
  - a. Do you feel that your upbringing or cultural ideals affects your thoughts about motherhood, specifically in terms of how you see yourself? If so, then how?
  - b. How might you have answered this question before attaining the role of motherhood; is it different or the same?
2. Couple question: How did you become mothers? How long have you been mothers for? How old are your children? How long have you and your partner, and your children, lived in your current community?
3. Individual question: What are the different identities that make up who you are, currently?
  - a. Since becoming a mother, do you feel that any of your identities have felt more or less salient to you in comparison to pre-motherhood? Explain.
  - b. What about over the course of motherhood (i.e. infancy vs. toddlerhood)?
  - c. (If not mentioned in answer previously) What is your sexual orientation? Has the way you identify (in this way) changed since motherhood? To what extent does this identity impact how you see yourself since becoming a mother in comparison to pre-motherhood?

4. Individual question: In being a lesbian mother, to what extent do you feel you can closely identify with both of those identities (lesbian, mother) simultaneously? Does it ever feel easier to identify as one over the other? Explain. What factors influence this?
  - a. Couple question: What is the degree to which your lesbian identity (specifically in the context of your relationship) is reinforced or inhibited by your physical community i.e. the broader space in which you live, such as the grocery store or your child's school?
    - i. What about your mother identity (reinforced or inhibited)?
  - b. Couple question: What is the degree to which your lesbian identity is reinforced or inhibited by your relational community? (i.e. friends and family) Do you feel connected to a queer/lesbian organization or group? Did you feel connected to a queer/lesbian org prior to motherhood? If so, how is your current connection similar or different to your previous connection? What about your family? Are they supportive to your identity and relationship?
    - i. What about your mother identity? Do you feel connected to a parenting/mothering group or culture in your community? Are there other same-sex parents that are a part of this group? If so, do you feel that there is a sub-group of same-sex parents within that parenting group or do you feel that everyone is more or less just seen as a parent, and sexual orientation is left out of it? Are your families supportive of your roles as mothers? Are they involved in your child/children's lives?

## APPENDIX E

### TRANSCRIBER PLEDGE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer, or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, Sarah Horn, shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

### PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Sarah Horn, for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

\_\_\_\_\_ Sarah Horn

\_\_\_\_\_ Date