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We've Come a Long Way Baby...Or Have We?

Contextualizing Lesbian Motherhood in North America

A Florida court ruled yesterday that a convicted murderer was a better potential parent for his 11-year-old daughter than her lesbian mother. (*Halifax Daily News*, August 31, 1996: 43)

If you are gay or lesbian, it gets tiresome—after it stops being hurtful—to be told that your family isn't a real family.... (*Ottawa Citizen*, April 8, 1998: A17)

To each of us the word family is imbued with meaning. In Western culture, an exclusive definition of family has been consistently promoted—the “heterosexual conjugal unit based on marriage and co-residence” (Silva and Smart, 1999: 1). As Dalton and Bielby state, this “monolithic notion of the traditional nuclear family is difficult to dispel because it seems to be natural and biological, the most timeless and unchanging of all social institutions” (2000: 36). Although the traditional nuclear family is no longer the norm, and has never been representative of the realities of many people, the values and ideals related to this definition of family continue to be privileged and socially sanctioned (Mandel and Duffy, 2000). As such, the plethora of alternative family forms (e.g., lesbian families, gay families, foster families, extended family configurations) have been, and continue to be perceived as deficient (Silva and Smart) or rendered invisible (Dunne, 2000). The landscape of the traditional nuclear family is currently being challenged by the increasing visibility of a “wide variety of alternative family forms” (O’Connell, 1992: 281) including the family configuration that is the focus of this paper, the lesbian-parented household.

The growing numbers of lesbian (and gay) parents represents a “sociocultural innovation that is unique to the current historical era” (Patterson, 1995:

263). In fact, the term Canadian “lesbian baby-boom” has been coined in reference to the burgeoning number of lesbians choosing to become parents (Arnup, 1998). In the past most lesbian-headed families consisted of children conceived in one or both partner’s heterosexual relationships, prior to coming out as lesbians. Although these families challenged the traditional nuclear family, the social roles of both mother and father were filled. Currently, however, increasing numbers of lesbians are choosing to have children subsequent to coming out as lesbians, thereby even more directly challenging the centrality and importance of the fatherhood role in childbearing and rearing. It should not be surprising; then, that the lesbian-parented household has been, and continues to be one of the more socially stigmatized family forms.

A considerable amount of research is available supporting the social and psychological integrity of lesbians and their children (Golombok, Spencer and Rutter, 1983; Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Grey and Smith, 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; Huggins, 1989; Javid, 1993; Kirpatrick, Smith and Roy, 1981; Tasker and Golombok, 1995). However, many social, legal, political, and religious structures and institutions refuse to acknowledge and extend equal rights and support to lesbians and their children. In this paper, we explore the more common arguments advanced against lesbians and gay parents in mainstream culture and the popular media. These include the assumption that: lesbianism and motherhood are antithetical to each other; lesbians (and gays) are likely to molest children; healthy child development requires the presence and availability of biological fathers; lesbian families pose a threat to traditional nuclear families; and lesbians are selfish to bring children into families that are stigmatized by society. Each of these assumptions are discussed below and challenged in light of the available research. We conclude with a brief discussion of some of the more progressive developments that may serve to make motherhood a more viable option for lesbians and increase the visibility and legitimacy of lesbians and their children.

Lesbianism and motherhood as antithetical

Prevalent mainstream attitudes towards lesbian mothers reflect the belief that lesbianism and motherhood are antithetical to each other (Ainslie and Feltey, 1991; Gabb, 1999; Hequembourg and Farrell, 1999; Kirpatrick, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Morningstar, 1999; Muzio, 1991; Patterson, 1994; Pollack, 1992; Shore, 1996). In fact, the mere presence of lesbian mothers challenges North American society’s traditional notions of motherhood (Arnup, 1997). Prevalent societal values deem married heterosexual women as the most appropriate parents (DiLapi, 1989). In contrast, “the ‘deviant,’ ‘unwed,’ and negligent’ lesbian is not close enough to the dominant centre of ‘good mother’ to be able to assume the right to mother unquestioningly” (Fumia, 1999: 92). Thus, as Polikoff observes, “to most of the world, a mother is by definition heterosexual” (1987: 54). “Motherhood, then, while theoretically available to all women, seemingly reinscribes a cultural dilemma; lesbian or mother, but

not both” (Monson, 1999: 122).

Lesbian families also challenge traditional ideas about motherhood given that social motherhood introduces the “possibility of detaching motherhood from its biological roots” (Dunne, 2000: 15). In discussing the “culture of motherhood’ with its own entrance requirements [and] discourse” (Nelson, 1999: 41), Nelson notes how biological mothers make the transition into maternal culture when their pregnancies become apparent and others begin to recognize them as mothers. In contrast, social or non-biological mothers do not have a similar “claim to the status of ‘mother’” (Nelson: 42), as is the case for the lesbian parent whose relationship status with her child(ren) is based on social rather than biological ties. This effectively renders her parental status as anomalous with accepted norms, making it difficult for her and her children to define their respective roles and to have these socially acknowledged, much less accepted or respected.

Another reason lesbianism and motherhood appear to be antithetical to each other is that for many people the word lesbian conjures up images of sex (Pollack, 1992) and specifically non-reproductive sexual practices that occur outside of marriage and that are seen as deviant and immoral (Sullivan 1996). Motherhood on the other hand, conjures up stereotypic images of women who unconditionally love their children, are selfless, and whose primary identity is as mothers—the Madonna side of the Madonna-whore dichotomy (Daniluk, 1998). In underscoring the nature of this social construction of motherhood Kitzinger (1985) notes how mothers are frequently portrayed in the popular media as sexually uninteresting and sexually undesirable. Hence the stereotypic image of the sex-craved lesbian is highly inconsistent with this virginal image of mothers.

Homosexuals molest children

Another argument made against lesbian motherhood pertains to the erroneous and unsubstantiated belief that homosexuals molest children (Achtenberg, 1990; Falk, 1994; Hargaden and Llewellyn, 1996; O’Brian and Goldberg, 2000, Kirpatrick, 1990; Pollack, 1992; Rivera, 1987). This belief is elucidated in an article that recently appeared in the *Edmonton Journal* (July 16, 1997) which presented an argument against allowing gays and lesbians to be foster parents. The article reported the following:

Though Edmonton’s foster parents association has said there is a shortage of people willing to be foster parents, Oberg [Alberta’s Family and Social Services Minister] said that isn’t enough reason to place them in the care of gays and lesbians. “You could carry that argument one step further” [the minister said] “and if someone who was a convicted child molester comes forward, are you going to take them just on the basis that we don’t have enough foster families?” (Arnold, 1997: A1)

The association between homosexuals and child molesters implies that gays and lesbians are not fit to be foster parents because, based on their socially deviant sexual orientations, they are more likely to molest children. The same bias underlies arguments against gay and lesbian teachers—purportedly based on the need to ‘protect’ young children from possible abuse, and from being influenced into a homosexual lifestyle. However, the reality is that 85 percent of all molestation is perpetrated by men who are heterosexually orientated (Rivera, 1987). The assumption that homosexuals will molest children is unfounded.

Fathers are required for the healthy development of children

Lesbian parenting, and in particular the use of donor sperm by lesbians, is also challenged on the grounds that the adequate psychosocial development of children requires the availability and presence of a biological father. This belief is clearly evident in the words of Margaret Somerville, a founding director of McGill University’s Centre for Medicine, Ethics, and Law, who stated in a recent newspaper interview that:

it is not in the best interest of a child to use reproductive technologies to create babies for same-sex couples.... Not because the people are gay, [but] because I think you need a mother and a father. I think you need a role model of each sex. (cited in Kirkey, 2000: A8)

Consistent with holding the nuclear family as the norm against which all other family configurations are judged as deficient, the assumption promoted by Ms. Somerville and by many “experts” is that a child requires a father as a role model (ideally the child’s biological father) in order for healthy psychosocial and *psychosexual* development to occur—irrespective of the quality and nature of this relationship. The origins of this argument can be traced to Western theories of psychological development that traditionally emphasized mothers’ and fathers’ roles in healthy child development (Brewaeys and van Hall, 1997; Patterson, 1997). For example, psychoanalytic theory proposed that healthy psychological development depends on the successful resolution of the oedipal conflict—which requires the presence of both a mother and a father in a child’s life. Likewise, social learning theorists suggest that lesbian families may be non-conventional in their reinforcement of gender-role behaviors, which in turn may negatively impact children’s sexual identities and gender development—in other words, that lesbian and gay parents may, through modeling and social influence, encourage their children to become homosexual (Golombok, 1999).

However, research does not support the assumption that healthy child development is contingent on the presence or involvement of biological fathers (Golombok, Spencer and Rutter, 1983; Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Grey and Smeith, 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; Huggins, 1989;

Javid, 1993; Kirpatrick, Smith and Roy, 1981; Tasker and Golombok, 1995). For example, Golombok, Tasker, and Murray (1997) conducted interviews and administered a battery of standardized tests to children between the ages of three and nine years in 30 lesbian and 42 heterosexual families. These researchers found that children raised in fatherless families since their first year of life, were no more likely to develop emotional or behavioral problems than children residing with their fathers.

Lesbian families pose a threat to traditional nuclear families

Some theorists contend that mainstream resistance to lesbian families is based on the threat these families pose to patriarchal institutions—and in particular the male dominated family unit (Pollack, 1992). This resistance to lesbian (and gay) families is evident in the reactions of the public to legal rights being extended to homosexuals. For example, in response to the Supreme Court of Canada's recent ruling to expand the definition of spouse to include same-sex couples, based on the *Charter of Rights and Freedom*, the *Toronto Sun* reported the following:

The court's ruling in *M v. H* redefined common-law spouse to include a same-sex partner... "The ruling is an assault on democracy." The ruling, we are told, overrules the wishes of citizens and politicians who have constantly voted against changing the definition of spouse to include same-sex partners. What right do eight of nine judges (there was one dissenting opinion) have to change laws passed by dozens of legislators on behalf of thousands of constituents? (Ward, 1999: 15)

Similarly, lobby organizations such as the Coalition of Concerned Canadians "views any move towards the recognition of gay and lesbian families as a diminution of traditional [families]" (Duffy, 1996: A10). Lesbian families threaten patriarchal culture by creating family structures that do not include men and over which men have no power or authority. Lesbian families also challenge the heterosexual norm of the woman as homemaker and caretaker and the man as breadwinner, as lesbian couples may choose to divide household, childcare, and paid labor on the basis of factors other than gender (Sullivan, 1996). Additionally, the existence of lesbian families removes parenting from the monopoly of heterosexuals (Dunne, 2000). Finally, lesbian women choosing to parent without the presence of males "implies a kind of self sufficiency which is threatening to the patriarchal order of society" (Evans, 1990: 45).

Children of lesbians will be stigmatized

Another prevalent argument made against lesbian motherhood is based on the assumption that children of lesbians will be traumatized or stigmatized by society (Falk, 1994; Mooney-Somers and Golombok, 2000; Rivera, 1987).

Lesbians have been called selfish for wanting children, knowing that they may be socially stigmatized, shamed, and subjected to ridicule by their peers for having lesbian parents (Aldred, 1996). North American courts have often ruled that children should be removed from their lesbian homes based on the assumption that these children will be socially condemned. For example, the *Montreal Gazette* reported the following Richmond, Virginia judge's statement:

We have previously said that living daily under conditions stemming from active lesbianism practiced in the home may impose a burden upon a child by reason of the 'social condemnation' attached to such an arrangement. (Associated Press, 1995: A21)

This argument against children residing in lesbian families does not appear to be based on evidence that lesbian mothers demonstrate deficient parenting abilities, or on the problematic nature of their parent-child relationships. Indeed, the literature supports the parental competencies of many lesbian parents and underscores the benefits to children of being raised with two mothers, often within a close and supportive community of women (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, van Hall and Golombok, 1997; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua and Joseph, 1995; Tasker and Golombok, 1998). The stigma associated with being a member of a lesbian-headed family is a societal by-product based on homophobic and sexist attitudes, not on the quality of lesbian families (Falk, 1994). As Tulchinsky illustrates in her editorial in the *Vancouver Sun*, it is inaccurate to assume, as many people appear to do, that lesbian parents do not care that their children may experience discrimination. Indeed this is a serious consideration for many lesbians when making the decision to bring children into a homophobic world:

My partner and I are not naïve. We are prepared for the worst (and the best). We cannot know what our child will experience in a world that often shuns gay families, or in schools that refuse to recognize gay parents. But we do know what the child will experience in our home. Our child will know other lesbian and gay families. We will teach our son or daughter to respect others, to be proud and rejoice in diversity. We will honor our child's feelings and respect her struggles. Whatever the challenges, there will be no shortage of love, laughter and leather teething rings. (Tulchinsky, 1999: E5)

Indeed much of North American society is homophobic and as such, children of lesbians are likely to experience teasing, particularly in geographic areas and communities that support right wing, conservative beliefs. Much of North American society is also racist and children of minorities are often teased and harassed. However, people of color and economically disadvantaged people are not socially encouraged to reconsider their parenting desires and are

not labeled as being selfish when they elect to have children (Epstein, 1996).

A crack in the door? Some recent developments toward legitimacy and equity

These negative assumptions and biased beliefs about lesbian parenting reflect the homophobic, heterosexist (DiLapi, 1989), and heteronormative assumptions that pervade North American culture. Although they have no basis in fact, they persist—creating a hostile and dismissive social environment for lesbian-headed families. Given the prevalence of these erroneous and unsubstantiated beliefs, it is inevitable that to varying degrees all lesbian couples and their children must struggle to have their families and realities acknowledged and supported.

However, there are some glimmers of hope. As recently as ten years ago most lesbians had to turn to friends and acquaintances to access sperm, and to liberal and compassionate physicians for assistance in becoming pregnant. Today however, they have considerably more options available. Recent access to donor sperm through fertility clinics has significantly reduced concerns about the safety of the sperm (HIV infection) and health history of the donor (e.g., screening of donors re: genetic predisposition for serious health problems, mental illness, addictions, etc.) (Haimes and Weiner, 2000; Saffron, 1994). The availability of large sperm banks is allowing many lesbian couples to have greater choice in the selection of their sperm donor, and opens up the possibility of using sperm from the same donor for subsequent pregnancies, thereby ensuring that their children share a common genetic history. The option of donor anonymity has also helped assuage the fears of many lesbian couples about future paternal claims for involvement in the lives of their children.

Small but significant inroads are also being made in terms of increasing the legal and institutional rights of lesbians (Nelson, 1996; Pies, 1987). For example, on August 29, 2001, the *Vancouver Sun* reported the following:

Ruling in the case of two lesbian couples who challenged the current process of registering their newborn infants, the tribunal said that when a lesbian couple conceives a child using sperm from an anonymous donor, both partners can be listed on the child's birth certificate. Before this decision, the non-birth mother had to legally adopt the child before being officially recognized as a parent. (Sandler, 2001: A1)

Previously, the non-biological mother was required to formally adopt her child—a legal option that even seven years ago was not available to her. This ruling advances the rights of lesbian families even further in permitting non-birth mothers to have the same legal rights as men whose partners' conceive children through anonymous donor insemination. It represents a "significant decision in the continuing progression towards full equality of lesbian and gay families" (Sandler, 2001: A1). As a consequence of the tireless efforts of lesbians

and gays throughout North America to have their families and their parental roles acknowledged and legitimized, in recent years many companies and public institutions have begun to extend the same spousal and parental rights to lesbian and gay couples and their children (e.g., parental leave, health benefits, etc.).

Although controversy over lesbian parenting remains, legal and social changes are taking place. We hope these trends toward a more equitable and inclusive vision of family continue, not just for lesbians and their children but for all the many families that fall outside the margins of the traditional nuclear family. We acknowledge however, that much work remains to be done.

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