

The Lesbian Family Life Cycle

Suzanne Slater

Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999

Reviewed by Jeanne-Marie Zeck

Suzanne Slater author of *The Lesbian Family Life Cycle* is a therapist in private practice in Northampton, Massachusetts. She describes herself as “a WASP, middle-class, coupled lesbian therapist in her late thirties, living in a well-established lesbian community.” Slater acknowledges that her identity both offers her an expertise in the subject of lesbian families and creates a limited perspective. One of the strengths of Slater’s book is that she recognizes and calls attention to the limits of previous models of the human family as well as to her own. She calls for more studies to follow hers: studies that will emphasize diversity in race and ethnicity, class, religion, and families with children. Slater’s study focuses on lesbian couples as families.

The author wisely divides her book into two sections. “Part One: Enduring Realities of Lesbian Family Life” offers the reader an excellent background which explains why the traditional paradigm of the heterosexual family fails to describe lesbian families: The heterosexual couple is the central focus of the traditional family unit with the man as the head of the household; the couple is “presumed to be part of a multigenerational family network”; bonds are created through blood and marriage; and heterosexual models are child-centered, assuming that the couple will produce offspring.

In Part One Slater also discusses the enormous and persistent stresses in the lives of lesbians including sexism, racism, and homophobia. The author then presents a series of creative rituals couples have developed to help them sustain and celebrate their unions. She offers examples of simple but meaningful rituals such as taking a walk together after dinner each night, spending Friday evenings at home alone, and both partners participating in their child’s story time before bed. Many lesbians couples also make a point of celebrating a series of anniversaries: the day they met, their decision to live together, and the buying of their rings. These self-made rituals serve as substitutions for the socially generated rituals heterosexuals routinely enjoy: engagements, weddings, anniversaries, and so on.

Throughout her book, Slater offers vignettes of lesbian couples contemplating coming out, planning commitment ceremonies, and negotiating visits with biological families. Many of the scenarios vividly depict the isolation and lack of social support in a heterosexist world. Slater expertly presents evidence of profound exclusion when she lists the rights and privileges denied lesbian couples including laws against marriage, discrimination in employment and housing, loss of custody by lesbian mothers, and a lack of insurance coverage for

lesbian partners. Slater asserts, "Heterosexual families enjoy a well-mapped-out pathway for their life together, complete with reinforcements in moments of accomplishment and support in predictable times of family stress. Lesbian families struggle to survive without these fundamental supports . . ." Slater also acknowledges the difficulty such families experience due to a scarcity of written history and models of earlier lesbian families. Yet such families have existed from the BC era of Sappho's circle to nineteenth-century America's Boston marriages to today's lesbian families who struggle for recognition and acceptance.

Slater expertly articulates the need for models of lesbian families saying that such models will prevent partners from being perceived as deviant. The models will also bolster self-esteem and offer women a self-defined identity. "Lesbian family life cycle models can positively reframe efforts to thrive in the midst of this socially imposed isolation and finally credit couples for their creative—rather than pathological—response to externally imposed obstacles," Slater affirms. Particularly insightful is her assertion that lesbians' "typically vigilant attention to their relationships allows them both to inform models of lesbian family life and to contribute to this neglected focus within heterosexual family life cycle perspectives." Without a model of women's intimate lives together, a couple may misinterpret a natural transition as an event that foretells the end of their union. Understanding these transitions, couples "may be better able to maintain their confidence in the face of more challenging or seemingly frightening changes," Slater explains. Within Part One of her book, the author clearly defines the complexities involved in negotiating and sustaining a successful lesbian family life.

In Part Two of her study, Slater defines and examines the five stages of the lesbian family life cycle: "Formation of the Couple," "Ongoing Couplehood," "The Middle Years," "Generativity," and "Lesbian Couples over Sixty-Five." The author notes that "the first three stages contain a preparatory quality as the partners build and refine their relationship, encountering the fundamental strains within lesbian family life and considering the level of commitment they can realistically promise to each other." In her discussion of the first stage, Slater acknowledges the sense of "a wonderful and terrible risk" that marks many new intimate unions. She also exposes characteristics particular to lesbian relationships including a tendency to accelerate the establishment of a partnership.

While stage one describes the emotional and sexual excitement of the "disrupted lives" of the new couple, stage two, "Ongoing Couplehood," presents a transition to daily life. During this stage "the couple can create patterns of being together and can sculpt the beginning of ongoing connectedness." In spite of the continuation of the relationship, the women have not yet offered one another a guarantee of permanence. Stage three, "The Middle Years," is the period during which the couple commits to one another and begins to make long-range plans. A "central accomplishment of the middle-years stage" is the ability to welcome into the lesbian family new

members who "may play a central and permanent role in the partners' lives."

"The Generativity Stage" is marked by the partners' awareness of their mortality. Because lesbians must face so many social pressures and prejudices, they may experience emotional maturity early. This hard-won wisdom will help couples during the fourth stage which may also, Slater notes, be marked by a "special richness and contemplation."

Because women, on the average, live seven years longer than men, a female couple has a good chance of sharing a long life together into their later years. In her discussion of stage five, "Lesbian Couples over Sixty-five," Slater describes the accumulation of stresses commonly connected with being "female, lesbian, and elderly." In this section, the author discusses differences among and between various races regarding attitudes toward the aged. She notes that many cultures such as Asian Americans and Hispanics enjoy a strong appreciation and respect for the elderly while African Americans often express a great deal of gratitude and love especially toward elderly women.

Suzanne Slater's study, *The Lesbian Family Life Cycle*, is a well-researched, academically sound yet accessible book. Women's studies and sociology professors would do well to include this volume as required reading for their courses. It can also serve as an essential resource for family therapists. General readers would surely learn a great deal from this book.

Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Twentieth-Century Literature

Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Ed.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995

Reviewed by Michelle L. Taylor

The publication of such novels as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1989), and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), sparked an important movement among critics to interrogate the role of ethnicity in mother-daughter relationships. Foundational texts and articles such as *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters* and "Born of a Stranger: Mother-Daughter Relationships and Storytelling in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," are only a few of the texts that examine this relationship. *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th Century Literature* follows in this tradition, but makes an important departure by placing African-American mother-daughter relationships in conversation with other multi-racial mother-daughter relationships, including Native-