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**Parenting Practices of Lesbian Mothers: An Examination of  
the Socialization of Children in Planned Lesbian-headed Families**

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**Parenting Practices of Lesbian Mothers: An Examination of  
the Socialization of Children in Planned Lesbian-headed Families**

**by**

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## **DEDICATION**

To my late father who remains a superhero in the eyes of his daughter

and

to my mother, my best friend who has always been there for me

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first and foremost like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Marie-Anne Suizzo, my advisor and friend. Without her support and confidence in me, I would not have thrived. She encouraged me to be a better researcher, a better writer, and less shy. Her guidance and acceptance led to me to learn more and achieve more and I am forever grateful. She taught me that “Impossible is nothing.” I would like to thank all the members of my committee for their support and encouragement throughout this process. Their guidance and excitement in this project fueled my desire to break new ground in lesbian parenting research. I feel fortunate to have been surrounded by such wisdom and experience.

I want to thank all of the 26 women I interviewed. By opening their homes and their hearts they enlightened me with their stories. They allowed me the opportunity to get to know them and their children and trusted me to tell their stories. Without them this dissertation would not have been possible. I gained a deep respect for them and an admiration of the struggles they went through to have their children and rear them in a society that still prejudices sexual minorities. They are truly dedicated to rearing tolerant, sensitive, healthy children. They have my sincere admiration and gratitude.

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**Parenting Practices of Lesbian Mothers: An Examination of  
the Socialization of Children in Planned Lesbian-headed Families**

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While research indicates that children reared in households headed by lesbian parents are no more likely to be teased or bullied than children from other households, lesbian mothers feel it is necessary to socialize their children as if they were. Twenty lesbian mothers with at least one child between the ages of eight months and 17 years old from the central Texas area were selected for this study. The mothers came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and diverse socioeconomic statuses.

This study was qualitative in nature, using primarily grounded theory methods. The mothers were interviewed using a semi-structured format regarding their

socialization strategies. Themes emerging from the interviews were that mothers went to great lengths to secure parenthood. They engaged in both direct and indirect socialization strategies. They considered their children to be members of the gay community and emphasized contact with ‘families like theirs.’ They felt that their families were normal yet possessed some distinct advantages and had some unique concerns. Finally, they had egalitarian relationships in terms of the division of paid labor, household tasks, and childcare, with a focus on spending the most amount of time possible with their children.

Racial and ethnic socialization literature was used as a framework for this study. The similarity between participant’s responses and racial and ethnic socialization theory led to the development of a model of “Alternative Family Socialization.” Similar to racial or ethnic socialization, “Alternative Family Socialization” involves preparing minority children to thrive in the majority culture. Mothers stated that they prepare their children for bias by encouraging them to take pride in their family, accessing support from the gay community, encouraging the development of positive self-concepts, encouraging open communication, and teaching them how to access support.

Future directions for research include further development of the model of “Alternative Family Socialization” such as how this model might explain gay men rearing children. Also future research focusing on how children of lesbian parents perceive themselves within the gay community is suggested.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Within the last 30 years, the average American family has undergone some remarkable changes. Census data indicates that households headed by two heterosexual, biological parents raising children have now become the minority (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994). According to 2002 U.S. Census data, only 32% of heterosexual couples are rearing children conceived by the married partners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). A large number of households consist of blended-parent, step-parent, single-parent, and extended family homes. Single mother households account for 26% of all households. In addition, the number of lesbians rearing children has increased significantly over the last decade, resulting in what has become known as the “lesbian baby boom” (Patterson, 1992). Obtaining accurate data on lesbian and gay family households has proven difficult due to the lack of a distinct classification on the 2002 U.S. Census form, however, estimates of lesbian and gay parents range from 6 to 14 million, leading to a new area of social science research (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Litovich & Langhout, 2004).

Prior to the late 1990’s, much of the literature on lesbian parenting focused on issues relevant to custody debates (Patterson, 1992). Women who “came out” after having children in a heterosexual relationship had to argue for custody in what was largely considered a losing battle in the court system. Society has historically viewed homosexuality as deviant, immoral, and, until the late 1970’s, was indexed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as a form of mental illness (Riddle, 1978). Homophobia was a factor in determining child welfare and much research was conducted

using a heteronormative framework. Heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is 'normal' and to have two heterosexual parents is the 'right' type of family (Short, 2007). Researchers focused on examining the developmental effects of children living with lesbian parents by conducting studies comparing them to children of heterosexual mothers on constructs such as psychological well-being, psychosocial functioning, gender identity, prevalence of sexual abuse, and quality of peer relationships (Riddle, 1978; Green, 1978). The heteronormative assumptions were that children reared by lesbian mothers were more likely to have psychological problems, gender identity problems (Falk, 1989), and poor peer relations based in part on the fact that they were more likely to be teased and bullied by their peers than children reared by heterosexual mothers (Patterson, 1992).

Studies investigating these claims found that children reared by lesbian mothers are similar, in many respects, to children reared by heterosexual parents (Wainwright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). No differences have been found in their emotional or behavioral development, psychological development (Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok & Tasker, 1996), and gender role development (Brewaeys & van Hall, 1997). In addition, there has been no evidence to support concerns that children of lesbian parents experience more bullying or have more difficulty in peer relations than their peers of heterosexual parents (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004).

Prior to Charlotte Patterson's landmark study using a sample of planned lesbian families (1994), research conducted on children of lesbian mothers relied almost exclusively on samples of lesbians who had given birth to children in a heterosexual

relationship and “came out” after having a child. Within the last ten years, more options for conceiving children have become available to lesbian women. Some adoption agencies have now opened their doors to lesbian couples. Sperm banks, some of which were previously inaccessible to single women under state laws, are now becoming accessible to lesbians (Flaks, et al, 1995). These new options have created a different and unique population, in which children are conceived within the context of a lesbian relationship with no ties to a biological father.

Although there are now more options for lesbian women to become mothers, they still face significantly more obstacles than heterosexual women. Most lesbian couples spend years planning and preparing to have a child whereas most heterosexual couples may easily, even accidentally, get pregnant. Even after spending considerable time and money to become pregnant lesbian parents continue to face obstacles. Only 25 states, including Texas, have allowed some form of second-parent adoption and even then, the rights secured by non-biological mothers vary in degree and are not always recognized by other states or even some counties within the same state. To secure their rights as parents, mothers often have to resort to hiring an attorney to draw up custody agreements and wills with the hope that, regardless of the laws hindering them, the non-biological mother will not have to worry if something should happen to the biological mother.

Even though the state of Texas allows second-parent adoption, there are still over 1,100 benefits granted to married couples by the federal government which gay and lesbian couples are denied (Human Rights Campaign, 2002). The gay marriage debate is currently in the media on a regular basis and is a popular hot button in political debates.

While conservatives argue that allowing gays the right to marry protects the sacred union between a man and woman, they deny the children of gays and lesbians the right to health insurance benefits, life insurance benefits, and more. In addition to denying them benefits, the opposition to gay marriage is a constant reminder to alternative families that they are not legitimate or worthy of being legitimized in the eyes of others. All of these factors contribute to the pervasive stress sexual minority family's face from a society that privileges heterosexual couples and treats them as the social and sexual ideal (Fields, 2001).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Due to the political and social contexts, lesbian and gay families are frequently in the spotlight. Most research to date has been conducted using samples of lesbians whose children were conceived in a heterosexual relationship or using a comparison of planned lesbian-headed mothers and heterosexual mothers. It is critical at this point to bring lesbian parenting research into the future. The purpose of this study is to conduct research exclusively on lesbian mothers who have conceived their children through artificial insemination within the context of a lesbian relationship. This study starts by focusing on the strengths of these families through the use of qualitative methods to develop a narrative portrait of planned lesbian-headed families. Additionally, grounded theory is used to develop a theory or model about socialization strategies in these unique families.

Existing theories of parenting and socialization within the field of developmental psychology are based almost exclusively on traditional heterosexual families. With the ever-growing number of alternative families, there is a gap between existing parenting

theory and growing research on planned lesbian families. The purpose of this study is to explore this research and determine whether existing parental socialization theories may or may not be practical for use as a framework for understanding parenting behaviors in planned lesbian-headed families. Existing theories will be examined for usefulness in explaining parenting practices and the process of socialization in lesbian families in order to form a foundation for building theory that, as of now, does not exist.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following questions based on the literature review and my personal experiences with this population.

1. How do lesbian parents socialize their children?
2. What strategies do lesbian parents use to prepare their children for potential challenges?
3. Do lesbian parents consider their children to be members of the gay community, and if so what does this mean to their parents?

### **Dissertation Overview**

In Chapter Two I will begin by discussing parenting and socialization theories and research including parenting styles, family systems approaches, ecological approaches, and racial and ethnic socialization. I will demonstrate how aspects of each of these theories contribute to an overall theoretical framework for analyzing socialization in lesbian-headed families. Existing research on lesbian mothers will be used to describe the process by which lesbians become parents, including the reasons, methods, and obstacles. Next I will discuss studies of division of labor in lesbian households including

information on how lesbian households function on a day to day basis. Then, research will be presented on one of the most commonly cited criticisms of lesbian parenting: bullying, teasing, and prejudice.

In Chapter Three I will present the methods used in this study. I will begin by explaining how grounded theory is used in conjunction with an ethnographic approach in a qualitative analysis of planned lesbian-headed families. I will include the development of the research questions. Next I will discuss the pilot study and then explain how the final study was informed by the results of the pilot. Then I will discuss how the interviews were coded and analyzed. And finally, I will discuss issues of rigor that were used to maintain quality in the research process.

In Chapter Four the results of the study are presented. These results include the seven themes which emerged in coding the interviews. Some of these themes are “securing parenthood,” “controlling the environment,” and “proactive parenting.” Concepts which contributed to each theme are presented as sub-categories. Some of these concepts are “choosing a donor,” “choosing liberal environments,” and “dealing with prejudice.” After examining the results by theme, two case studies are presented in an effort to illustrate the dynamic interactions of the themes in the lives of the mothers in this study. These results are the participants’ stories of life in planned lesbian-headed families.

Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the results and how they relate to the research questions posed in this study. I will then explain how I came to the development of a model of “Alternative Family Socialization.” And finally, I discuss the implication for

practice, limitations of the study, and future directions for research related to this model.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Socialization in the Family: Theory and Research*

The vast majority of parenting research has been conducted on traditional two-parent, heterosexual households (Patterson, 1994). However the 2002 census data revealed that only 69 percent of children live in two parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The census bureau describes a two-parent family as “living with a parent who is married with his or her spouse present.” This includes not only biological parents but step or adoptive parents as well. Therefore, this definition does not describe what most would consider traditional parents- the child’s biological mother and father. Twenty-three percent of children under the age of 18 live with only their mother, and five percent live with only their father. This accounts for a combined 19.8 million children living with only one parent. This census data reveals an ever-growing trend in alternative family forms (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

There are many theoretical perspectives on parenting and its effects on child development but the most relevant in answering the questions presented in this study are parenting style and socialization. Parenting includes a variety of specific practices that work in conjunction with each other, as well as individually, to influence child outcomes. Looking at just one behavior in a parent’s repertoire, such as spanking or criticizing, may be misleading (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). The construct of “parenting style” incorporates two important components of parenting: parental responsiveness and parental demandingness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Parental responsiveness, or warmth and supportiveness is "the extent to which parents intentionally foster individuality, self-

regulation, and self-assertion by being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to children's special needs and demands" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). Parental demandingness, or behavioral control, refers to "the claims parents make on children to become integrated into the family whole, by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys" (Baumrind, 1991, pp. 61- 62).

Family is generally the earliest and longest lasting source of social interaction for the child. Children depend on their families for nurturance and support. Because children's first interpersonal relationships are with their parents they are subject to the cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes of their parents. Personalities, backgrounds, education, religious beliefs, gender, and so on influence how parents socialize their children (Hetherington & Parke, 2003). Parke and Buriel (1994) define socialization as "the process whereby an individual's standards, skills, motives, attitudes, and behaviors change to conform to those regarded as desirable and appropriate for his or her present and future role in any particular society." Parents, peers, teachers, media, and various other agents, play a role in the socialization process.

Over the years, socialization research has taken different directions such as the typological approach, the more interactive family systems perspective, ecological approaches, and socialization within more specific domains such as racial and ethnic socialization. In the following sections I will highlight key advances in socialization research and in the theoretical approaches relevant to this study. All of the theories described offer something to this study's framework and some will be used in

conjunction with others. I will describe these approaches in a chronological or historical order.

### **The Typological Approach**

Diana Baumrind's (1973) theory on child-rearing practices is considered to be a typological approach. Baumrind (1973) theorized that permissive or democratic child rearing behaviors needed to be combined with elements of authority in order to produce optimal child development. This combination is referred to as the "authoritative" parenting style. She suggested that parental practices which intellectually stimulate the child, and are somewhat tension-producing are associated with child competence. Baumrind and Black (1967) also suggested that techniques encouraging independence, decision-making on the part of the child, and fostering self-reliance are also associated with child competence.

Later research by Maccoby and Martin (1983) and Baumrind (1991) further defined parenting styles and cited the authoritative style as the most beneficial to positive outcomes in children. Authoritative parents are defined as being both demanding and responsive so although they exert control over their children, they are not restrictive. They are more involved in their children's lives and interests. They show a high level of open communication, parental acceptance (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), trust towards the child, and encouragement of psychological autonomy. Authoritative parenting includes the concept of supportive parenting, which has also been labeled acceptance, love, warmth, and nurturance. Supportive parenting consists of a variety of characteristics such

as approval, affection, attentiveness, responsiveness, involvement, reassurance, and egalitarianism (Maccoby, 1980).

Supportive parenting has been found to provide children with a strong sense of self-worth and a buffer against emotional disturbance (Bronstein & Duncan 1996). Research on parent-adolescent relationships indicates that supportive parenting is associated with higher self-esteem, sense of efficacy, achievement motivation, emotional well-being (Baumrind, 1991), and ability to form affectionate bonds, in adolescents (Bronstein & Duncan 1996). Parental attentiveness has been found to relate to higher ego development and academic achievement in adolescents. Parental responsiveness, which consists of empathy, altruism, responsibility, and open-mindedness, enhances social development in adolescents. Further, parents' encouragement of emotional expression fosters more receptive and empathic responses resulting in higher levels of social competence in children (Bronstein & Duncan 1996).

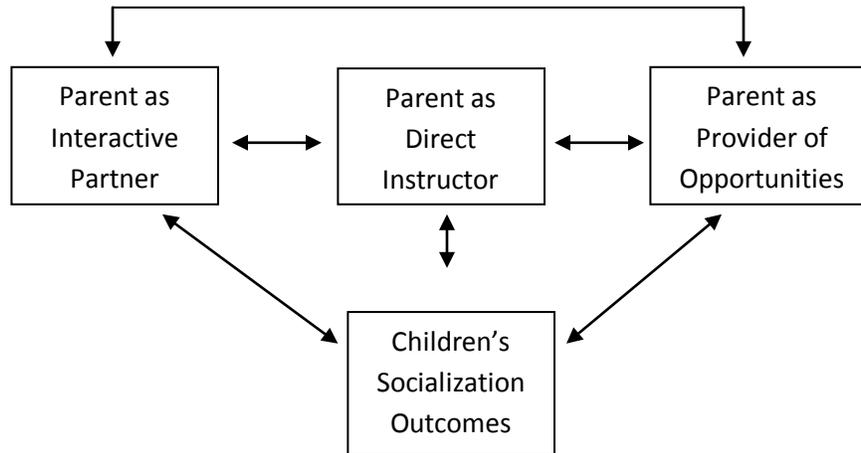
Encouraging autonomy, another effect of authoritative parenting, has been found to have a considerable impact on child development and behavioral outcomes (Baumrind, 2005). Autonomy is defined as "the ability to behave independently, to do things on one's own (Newman & Newman, 1984)." Encouraging autonomy is related to the degree and nature of control that parents exert over their children and the inclusion of the child in the decision-making process (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1990). Autonomy includes agency, a sense of self-efficacy, and the enablement of self-determination, all of which have been found to correspond with positive emotional and behavioral outcomes in adolescents (Baumrind, 2005).

Critics of the typological approach argue that although parenting style theory and research define types/categories of parental behaviors and their effects on children, children's responses to parents' behaviors are overlooked in this theory (Parke & Buriel, 1994). Lewis (1981) contends that the child's temperament and how parents respond based on their child's behavior are not taken into account in the typological approach. Furthermore, all research conducted to date on parenting styles has focused exclusively on heterosexuals. In a 1995 special commentary on gay and lesbian families, Diana Baumrind stated that "theoretically, one would expect differences as well as similarities in the socialization practices and relationship quality of same-sex parents" (p. 131). She explains that because mothers tend to be more nurturing than fathers, if a child were to have two nurturing mothers, then the effects of these mothers' nurturing behaviors on this child may be different. Baumrind calls for more definitive research on same-sex homes in an effort to learn how parenting style theories apply to lesbian parents (Baumrind, 1995). The proposed study will be the first to explore the relevance of the typological theory of parenting style in lesbian-headed households.

### **The Tripartite Model of Socialization**

While Baumrind's research is still widely used by developmental theorists, it is often presented in conjunction with other theories such as the family systems approach. In response to those who disagree with the typological approach Parke, Burks, Carson, Neville, and Boyum (1994) introduced a parent-child subsystem which they refer to as the "tripartite approach." In this model of parental socialization, the impact of parent-child interaction, the parent-child relationship, and parental child-rearing styles are all

bi-directional concepts which impact children's socialization outcomes and vice-versa (see figure 2.1).



**Figure 2.1.** A tripartite model of parental socialization. Adapted from Parke et al., 1994

According to the tripartite model, parents have the ability to influence their children through direct or indirect instruction, education, or consultation. Parents can explicitly educate their children regarding appropriate social norms, rules, and mores about culture. Parke et al. (1994) state that “parents may serve as coaches, teachers, and supervisors as they provide advice, support, and directions about strategies for managing new social situations or negotiating social challenges or dilemmas.” This model takes into account the managerial role parents take on and how this influences their children. This managerial function involves the organization of the child's home environment, limit setting, and access to opportunities for socialization outside the home (Parke et al., 1994). Parents may directly or indirectly influence the friendships their children have and teach appropriate ways for initiating and maintaining these relationships. In this way,

parents may have an interactive relationship with their children, part of which functions to provide them with suitable opportunities to learn and exercise social skills (Hartup, 1979).

Additionally, parents can affect the social relationships of their children by monitoring their child's social activities. Parents tend to monitor more directly when their children are younger and monitor more distally as children move into adolescence (Parke et al., 1994). Monitoring consists of a variety of activities including supervising where children play, what they play, and who they play with. Children who receive less monitoring have been found to be more susceptible to delinquency and peer rejection (Dishion, 1990). More direct ways of affecting their children's socialization include choosing to live in certain neighborhoods as a method of controlling access to peers and encouraging participation in clubs and organizations, such as scouting. Parents often serve as mediators in such contexts, linking their children to organizations that encourage positive social interaction and values (Park, et al., 1994).

In a study by Ladd, LeSieur, and Profilet (1993) parents were found to serve as arrangers in facilitating the friendships of their children. Parents initiated contact between their children and potential playmates, particularly in the case of younger children. Children whose parents actively arranged play opportunities and facilitated friendships were found to have a larger number of playmates and more playmates outside of school than children of parents who did not actively facilitate arrangements. While the amount of initiating or facilitating on the part of parents decreases over time, in preadolescence, children whose parents played an active role of arranger on their behalf had more stable

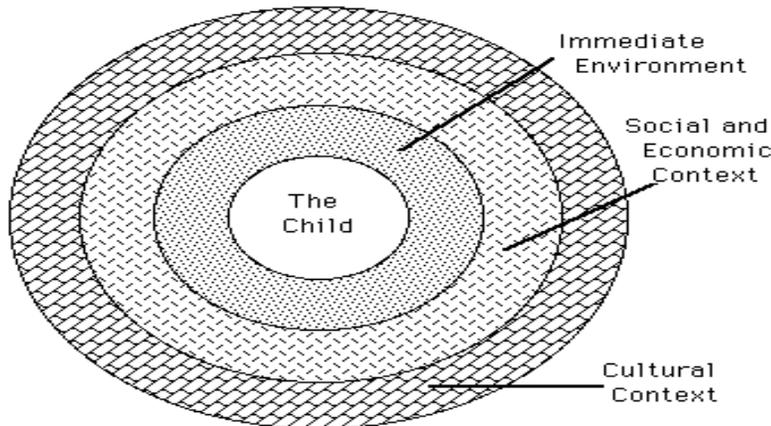
and close peer relationships than children with less active parents (Krappmann, 1996). The lack of research on lesbian parents leaves unanswered the question of whether there is a difference in the amount or type of initiating and facilitating performed by lesbian parents, and if this is affected by heterosexism, discrimination, or prejudice.

Additionally, parents' own social networks can serve as a source of potential social contacts for their children and provide them with a possible source of playmates. In this instance, parents already have a relationship with the parents of other children and are aware of their values and personalities. Similarly, other types of parental exposure such as parenting or support groups may provide their children with social contacts insuring that children are similarly socialized (Parke and Buriel, 1994). In peer groups of this nature children may receive parenting messages from the parents of their playmates. When the majority of the parents in the group are more authoritative in their style of parenting, adolescents have been shown to have lower levels of deviant behavior such as substance abuse (Fletcher, Darling, Steinberg, & Dornbush, 1995). Because there is evidence that lesbian mothers are particularly concerned about how their children will be treated outside the home and are likely to participate in support groups (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004) this type of exposure is of particular interest in lesbian-headed families.

### **Ecological Determinants of Socialization**

It is important to understand how ecological demands shape socialization goals, values, and practices. Socialization practices that were previously viewed as further separating minorities from the dominant culture may now be seen as adaptive strategies

for responding to the majority as well as the minority cultural environments. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory in which families are embedded in a variety of other social systems and cultural contexts helps to explain socialization goals. Bronfenbrenner's approach is based on four types of nested systems showing the bi-directional relationship of the individual to all socializing agents (see figure 2.2).



**Figure 2.2. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model** showing the child or Microsystem, the Immediate Environment or Mesosystem, the Social and Economic Context or Exosystem, and the cultural context or Macrosystem.

The microsystem consists of the immediate environment such as the family, school, peer group, or neighborhood. The mesosystem is comprised of connections between immediate environments such as between home and peers. The exosystem consists of indirect external environment settings, such as the mass media or family friends. Finally the macrosystem consists of the larger cultural context which includes the social class and the world. Bronfenbrenner's theory is helpful in demonstrating how multiple contexts influence socialization. In lesbian-headed families where families of

choice and support groups, whether formal or informal, play a prominent role, it is important to understand how all of these contexts interact and revolve around the developing child.

### ***Racial and Ethnic Socialization***

Taking into account both the ecological and cultural perspectives is the study of socialization of minority racial and ethnic group families. Noted minority researcher John Ogbu (1983) defines a population as a minority “if it occupies some form of subordinate power position in relation to another population in the same society.” This definition encompasses the gay and lesbian community as well. Early research on minority family socialization was framed within a “deficit model.” According to this model, European-American cultural values and practices were seen as a gold standard. Accordingly, minority ethnic parents who did not follow this standard in their childrearing were putting their children at risk. Their lack of proficiency in the dominant Euro-American culture was therefore seen as a deficit. More recent models of cultural difference, such as Garcia Coll and colleagues’ (1996) conceptual model for the study of minority child development, propose that “cultures and lifestyles different from white middle-class mainstream are not pathological, deviant, or deficient relative to the mainstream but rather legitimate and valuable in their own right” (p. 1895). While racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression are an ongoing element of the lives of minority populations, the Garcia Coll et al. model demonstrates how these factors actually play a role in influencing child competencies in adaptive cultures. For example, as a result of experiences with prejudice, children may develop a strong sense of cultural heritage or

individual identity which motivates them to succeed in environments in which they are oppressed by the dominant culture. Parents who are effective at teaching their children to navigate and succeed in both the dominant culture as well as their own culture can be considered effective teachers of adaptive racial socialization (Garcia Coll et al, 1996).

The socialization of a minority family often includes recognition by parents of disadvantages of their particular group, including negative societal images about that group (Hughes & Chen, 1997). Developmental and social psychologists emphasize four dimensions of racial and ethnic socialization. These include cultural socialization, preparation for bias, egalitarianism, and promotion of mistrust (Hughes, Johnson, Rodriguez, Smith, Spicer, and Stevenson, 2006). Cultural socialization refers to parenting practices that encourage the child's cultural, racial, or ethnic pride and include teaching about culture and heritage and exposing children to cultural celebrations and events (Hughes & Chen, 1999). Preparation for bias includes efforts made by parents to heighten their children's awareness of discrimination and to teach them effective coping strategies. Parental teaching of racial coping strategies encourages positive child adjustment (Hale, 1991; Hughes & Chen, 1999). Egalitarianism describes the process of giving or teaching children the skills needed to not only survive but to thrive in the dominant culture. Emphasis on hard work and achievement are part of egalitarianism emphasized in African-American socialization literature (Demo & Hughes, 1990). And finally, promotion of mistrust is defined as parenting practices which emphasize a distrust of the dominant or other cultures or races.

Racial centrality, which results from racial socialization, has been found to act as

a buffer against racial discrimination, leading to better mental health outcomes and school engagement (Stevenson, McNeil, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2005). Emphasis on cultural pride and knowledge helps children to understand and cope with discrimination and prejudice (Hughes & Chen, 1997). By teaching their children to have pride and a positive identity in their culture from an early age, parents in minority groups are proactively safeguarding their children against the harmful effects of discrimination. One of the early studies showing how parents socialize their children regarding race was conducted by Marie Peters and Grace Massey in 1978. It was called the Toddler Infant Experiences Study (TIES) and the results became part of the foundation for the theory of racial socialization.

### **The Toddler Infant Experiences Study (TIES)**

In 1978 Marie Peters and Grace Massey undertook a longitudinal study of the social and emotional development of young black children and the child-rearing practices of their parents called the TIES (Peters, 1990). Thirty African American children, beginning at the age of one year old, and their parents were interviewed and observed once a month for two years. They focused on child behaviors and parenting behaviors, looking for the interaction between the two. Of particular interest is the extensive interview data that were gathered from 16 parents concerning their children's racial socialization. The interviewers asked questions about the attitudes, behaviors, and goals of the parents. The TIES parents talked about having to not only raise an American child but also an African American child who was different from the dominant culture. They talked about their own personal experience with racism, discrimination, and prejudice.

Racial identity was important to them personally and in rearing their children. Six themes emerged from the interview data. These were “teaching children to survive,” “the importance of self-respect and pride,” “understanding that fair play may not be reciprocal,” “a good education: a top priority,” “but most of all- love,” and “do parents perceive racism as stress?”

The mothers in the TIES study felt a strong responsibility to provide care for their children and to prepare them for survival in a world in which they would experience prejudice and discrimination. Richardson (1981) concluded:

Black mothers know that their children will ultimately experience racism. They believe that racism experiences can be devastating and destructive if the child has not been prepared to recognize or develop techniques and strategies for coping with these experiences. The mothers also know that black children will ultimately have to know they are black and understand what a black identity means in a racist society (Richardson, 1981: 168-169).

Parents defined survival in terms of coping. A mother of two toddler boys stated that it was important for her to teach her sons how to deal with society and let them know they are protected when they're at home but when they are out in the world, they are no longer protected. She stated that they needed to know that they would experience prejudice in a white society. Parents talked about teaching their children to have tough skin and be more tolerant. Another important part of the socialization process for these parents was to teach their children to be positive about themselves, to have pride, to have self-respect, especially concerning their racial identity. A number of parents had already educated their two and three year old children about being black and what that meant for them.

They emphasized the importance of getting along with others even in situations that aren't fair and getting the best education possible.

When asked what was most important in socializing their children, most parents first mentioned love. They believed love and security to be the best protection against emotional scarring from prejudice and discrimination. Finally, the 16 parents believed that being African American brought a different dimension to the way they socialize their children and added additional stress into their lives and the lives of their children. They all felt that it was extremely important to do “special things” to prepare their children for prejudice and discrimination and Peters and Massey labeled these “special things” as “racial socialization” (Peters, 1990). This study focused on African American parents, their experiences and the process of socialization in their families but the responses of the participants are very similar to those of the lesbian mothers in this study.

Using racial and ethnic socialization as a framework for examining the socialization practices of mothers in planned lesbian-headed households is not to say that children born into racial or ethnic minorities are the same as children born into planned lesbian-headed families. Unlike ethnic or racial minorities, children of lesbian mothers typically are not born into a family in which they, themselves, are sexual minorities nor are they the product of multiple generations of sexual minority family members. Unlike children of ethnic or racial minority parents, children of lesbian mothers are not socialized within an extended family of origin who share the same minority affiliation. However, like ethnic minority parenting, lesbian parenting has often been evaluated using a deficit framework. Like parents of different ethnic or racial backgrounds, lesbian

parents are minorities and they experience discrimination. For the purpose of this study, the comparison is not of the people themselves but of the framework of parental socialization. Using a minority framework of parental socialization may prove useful for examining the socialization practices of lesbian mothers who have conceived their children using artificial insemination with an unknown donor.

In the context of the proposed study, I question whether racial/ethnic socialization strategies may be relevant to sexual minority parenting. Because lesbian parents have faced discrimination themselves and must confront the possibility that their children will experience prejudice as well, do they utilize adaptive strategies similar to those of racial and ethnic minority parents? Do they emphasize bicultural socialization in an effort to help their children navigate their way in the dominant culture and yet gain pride and support from the gay community?

### ***The Development of Alternative Families***

While there has been considerable research on what are essential components of parenting necessary for healthy psychosocial, emotional, and intellectual development of children, there has been little exploration of the parenting styles and practices of lesbian mothers. Some argue that the absence of a father and the stigmatization faced as a result of growing up in an alternative family may negatively influence children's development (Golombok, et al., 2003).

Socialization theory has typically held that two parents, a man and a woman, are vital to the optimal socialization of children (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). Marriage has been associated with increased finances and better physical and

psychological health for husbands, wives, and children (Steil, 2001). The majority of family research, especially prior to the late nineties, identified marriage as the social institution in which positive child adjustment is most likely to occur (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

However, recent research which has begun to examine child outcomes in alternative family forms shows that this may not be the case. Silverstein and Auerbach (1999), in an analysis of two decades of research on the role of fathers, argue that children need at least one stable caretaker who has a positive emotional connection and consistent relationship with them. They argue that it matters little whether this relationship is with a mother or father and they believe a wide variety of family structures can foster positive outcomes for children. The quality of family relationships, the interaction between parents and children, and the parents' division of labor are more likely to influence the development of the child (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998). Planned lesbian families are becoming more common and by exploring the motivation to become parents, the division of labor, and the socialization of their children, we are better able to understand the functioning of these families and the effects on child development.

### **How Lesbians Become Mothers**

Oswald (2002) states that intentionality is a necessary part of creating and maintaining a family in a society where legal recognition of homosexual families is not available. According to Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom (2003), most lesbian couples make the decision to have children long before they begin the process. Although this process to motherhood, for lesbian couples, involves more decision-making than is

typical of heterosexual couples, lesbians choose parenthood for many of the same reasons as heterosexuals (Perrin, 2002). Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom (2003) conducted a study looking at the differences in the decision-making processes using 100 planned lesbian couples and 100 heterosexual couples. They found that lesbian parents and heterosexual parents scored similarly in terms of their parenthood motives. Both groups cited happiness as the number one motive for choosing to start a family, followed closely by the motive of parenthood. Both groups scored relatively low on social control. However, results indicated that lesbian parents had spent more time thinking about having children and scored higher on measures of strength of desire to have children compared to the sample of heterosexual parents. Based on these findings, Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom suggested that happiness may be cited as a stronger motive for lesbian parents because lesbian parents have gone through long periods of decision making, complex procedures, and extensive periods of waiting.

Decision making is key in the process used by lesbian couples to navigate the road to parenthood. Decisions made by lesbian couples are often complex and multilayered and include decisions about conception, donors, legal issues, and expenses (Chabot & Ames, 2004). Chabot and Ames conducted a study with ten lesbian couples who had at least one child conceived through donor insemination or were in the process of trying. The goal of the study was to gain an understanding of the process lesbians undergo in pursuit of parenthood. The researchers developed a model, based on interview data, connecting steps involved in the decision making process. This model consisted of interest and desire to parent, where information was accessed, how they became parents,

decisions regarding donors, and how they negotiated parenting in the larger social context. They found that the women in their study reported spending years planning and discussing every step involved in parenthood prior to accessing reproductive or adoption services, suggesting that decisions about family formation were well researched by lesbian mothers prior to taking action.

### **The National Study of Gay and Lesbian Parents**

One segment of data collected from The National Study of Gay and Lesbian Parents (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002) addresses the issues involved in family formation. The study, conducted between 1999 and 2000, is currently the largest national assessment of gay or lesbian-headed families. Questionnaire data were collected from 415 parents, representing 256 families from thirty-four states. Of these parents, 336 were lesbian mothers parenting at least one child under the age of eighteen. Lesbian mothers frequently reported that the desire to have children was something discussed very early on in relationships with their partners. On average, lesbian mothers had been together as a couple approximately five years before beginning artificial insemination or adoption of a child. While most couples cited a lifelong desire to become parents, they wanted to wait until they were fully prepared to begin the process.

After making the decision to start a family, the lesbians in The National Study of Gay and Lesbian Parents (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002) reported the next step of the process as the complex decision of how to become parents. In contrast, a heterosexual couple does not have to decide who will carry the child or what the genetics of their child should be prior to conception. The heterosexual couples' child will share the genes of the

mother and father unless the couple faces fertility issues. In order to begin their families, unlike typical heterosexual couples, lesbian couples have to choose between adoption, artificial insemination using a known donor, or an unknown donor (Chabot & Ames, 2004). Lesbian couples who choose donor insemination must then decide which one of them will become pregnant. While the non-biological mother may share the responsibilities and financial obligations with the biological mother, she does not hold the same rights. In most states, only one parent in a lesbian-headed household can be the legal parent, leaving the other parent without legal rights or status regarding the child (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002).

Lesbian couples who choose artificial insemination spend a considerable amount of time reviewing possible lists of donors within their families or circle of friends or studying lists of unknown donors based solely on characteristics published by sperm banks. When using an unknown donor, the lesbian couple may seek characteristics similar to those of the non-biological mother in an effort to substitute for the lack of biological contribution from the non-biological mother (Brill, 2001). In their study, Chabot and Ames (2004) found that many lesbian mothers who chose artificial insemination expressed concern with using a known donor due to the possibility of losing custody of their child to a third party. They preferred to use unknown donors to compensate for this possibility. These findings were supportive of Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom's (2003) results indicating that the strength of desire to have children was stronger in lesbian parents than heterosexual parents. Research on heterosexual mothers has shown that intentionality of pregnancy status may impact child development

outcomes such as temperament and may contribute to more authoritarian parenting styles (Baydar, 1995).

### ***Lesbian Family Households, Division of Labor, and Equality***

In addition to decisions about whether to use artificial insemination or to adopt, or to use a known or an unknown donor, lesbian mothers must make decisions that will affect the very structure of their family. Patterson (2004), a noted authority on division of labor in lesbian couples, states that research has consistently revealed that lesbians, when compared to heterosexual couples, make choices about division of labor based on different family values. A frequent finding in this body of literature has been that lesbian mothers are willing to experience a reduced standard of living in order to enable both partners to spend more time with their children (Dunne, 2000).

### **The Lesbian Household Project**

In Dunne's (2000) Lesbian Household Project, 37 lesbian couples with dependent children were evaluated based on work, parenting styles, and division of labor. The mothers in Dunne's study reported that a central part of the process of planning to start a family involved exploring their expectations regarding parenting such as attitudes towards discipline, schooling, and the sharing of responsibilities. They cited their employment situation as a key consideration with the majority expressing a desire to break from traditional division of household labor and family responsibilities. Based on this desire, the timing of bringing a child into the home was frequently influenced by employment conditions such as insurance benefits, sick leave, or maternity leave.

In comparison, despite the fact that women have increased their numbers in the

paid labor market, in heterosexual families, husbands continue to be the primary source of income as they are more likely to work full-time, earn more money, and have higher status position in their professions (Steil, 2001). Heterosexual mothers who are employed are still doing a disproportionate amount of the household tasks and caring for the children. Employed wives report that they have very little choice in the decision to be the primary caregiver and household manager as compared to their husbands (Steil, 2001).

Based on data from the Lesbian Household Project (Dunne, 2000) lesbian mothers reported a range of partner employment strategies. Lesbian mothers reported taking turns being the primary earner while 25% of the sample chose half-time employment for both partners. Mothers in Dunne's study also characterized their household and childcare roles as interchangeable citing child-care as the priority. Sullivan (1996) found that many couples allocated their paid labor and family responsibilities so that neither mother assumed an unequal share of labor and neither partner was financially dependent on the other.

There is a growing body of research, based largely in feminist studies, that focuses on the concept that lesbian couples are not bound by gendered stereotyping of parenting roles. Research suggests that lesbian couples with children rarely mimic heterosexual division of labor (Saffron, 1998). Saffron conducted interviews with 17 children ranging in age from 11 to 66 years old, reared in lesbian households with two mothers present. She suggests that lesbian couples may have an advantage over heterosexual couples for modeling equality in domestic life. One of the adult children in Saffron's study felt that the equal distribution of labor and childcare demonstrated by her

parents influenced a sense of egalitarianism in her own relationships. Saffron suggests that, based on themes which emerged from the in-depth interviews, children of lesbian mothers have the potential to become more accepting and broad-minded about women's independence, the concept of family, social diversity, and equality. She states that learning by example, rather than by explanation alone, is a distinct advantage for children of lesbian mothers when compared to children reared in heterosexual families. While equality may be encouraged in heterosexual families, without the modeling of acceptance and pride demonstrated in minority families or by those with stigmatized identities, children may not gain the same understanding.

By watching their mothers divide labor equitably, children, especially boys, learn that anyone can do the dishes or mow the lawn, and that successful families can be gender neutral in the division of labor. Boys reared in fatherless families have been found to be more feminine than their counterparts in father present homes but no less masculine (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Dalton and Bielby (2000: pp. 39-40) state, "Although lesbian mothers may draw from gendered scripts to construct themselves as two-parent families, they do so in ways that fundamentally challenge implicit heteronormative assumptions." In her book "Lesbians Raising Sons," Wells (1997) states that lesbian headed-households are creating a new generation of men who do not conform to notions of patriarchal families.

### ***Socialization in Lesbian Families***

According to Brill (2001), since there are no preset cultural assumptions regarding how lesbians should socialize their children, the rules and roles can be defined by lesbian

parents. Lesbians often fight stereotypes about what a mom or dad should do. Baptiste (1987) states that lesbians have few models to follow in terms of child-rearing and, while positive images have increased in the media, lesbian mothers are still minimally portrayed. This provides the opportunity for lesbian mothers to be creative in their parenting styles, which leads to greater flexibility and freedom for their children (Bozett, 1983).

Children born into lesbian families have a unique experience of life. Brill (2001) states that: “Although our children are not necessarily members of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered community themselves, they are part of the queer culture. Our children learn to straddle multiple worlds.” Steil (2001) also states that there is a distinct lack of research on the particular strengths that children in these kinds of households are likely to develop, including an appreciation of diversity and a willingness to challenge traditional sex-role stereotypes.

According to Patterson (1992), parental influences are critical in psychosocial development, and since lesbians may provide different kinds of influences than heterosexual parents, children can be expected to develop in ways that are distinct. Evidence shows that home environments provided by lesbian parents are just as likely to support and enable the psychological growth of children compared to children with home environments provided by heterosexual parents (Patterson, 1992). Tasker and Golombok (1995) studied 25 children of lesbian mothers against a control group of 21 children of heterosexual mothers, looking at family relationships, peer relationships, psychological adjustment, sexual orientation, and stigmatization. Using standardized questionnaires and

semi-structured interviews, they found children reared in lesbian-headed households score at least as well as children of heterosexual parents on measures of psychosocial functioning.

### ***Heterosexism, Prejudice, Discrimination, and Bullying***

One of the most vocalized concerns in opposition to lesbian parenting is the claim that children who grow up in lesbian families are more likely to be teased or bullied and, therefore, will have greater difficulty in their peer relationships than children growing up in heterosexual families (Vanfraussen, Ponjaret-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003). This concern was frequently used as grounds for awarding custody to fathers in cases where the mother came out as a lesbian after having a child in a heterosexual relationship. In the 1987 custody hearing of SEG versus RAG, the judge justified his denial of custody to the mother by saying he wished to protect the children from peer pressure, teasing, and possible ostracizing they might encounter as a result of their mother's sexual orientation (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004).

Peer relationships are a very crucial part of child development as being disliked or rejected by peers affects the social and emotional development of children as well as their self-esteem (Golombok, 2000). Vanfraussen and colleagues (2004) conducted a qualitative study of 24 lesbian donor inseminated and 24 heterosexual families and their children. The children's mean age was 10.5 years. The researchers focused on whether children from lesbian families were more likely to be teased than those with heterosexual parents. When asked if they were teased or made fun of at school, all 24 of the children from lesbian families responded positively as did 21 of the 24 children from the

heterosexual families. Both groups reported being teased from time to time but not for lengthy periods of time. The majority of all children reported being laughed at, excluded from activities, called names because of their clothing, physical appearance, intelligence, or for being in love. Nearly half of the children from lesbian families reported having been teased about having two moms or about not having a father or had been called gay themselves. It seems that regardless of who they are, all children experience teasing as a part of peer socialization and how this affects their development is determined by their ability to cope with these stressors.

The same study by Vanfraussen and colleagues (2004), compared children's awareness of their unique family structure according to age. Most of the children in the sample were early adolescents. When asked about their father, the majority of the donor inseminated (DI) children began to tell their birth story or said that they had two moms instead of a dad. When asked how their peers responded when told this, most reported that peers were amazed or expressed disbelief. They reported receiving more positive than negative responses, although there were infrequent neutral or negative responses. Interviews revealed that the DI children were no less likely to ask friends over to their house and were not likely to avoid having contact between peers and parents. Results indicated that both the DI children and the children from heterosexual families felt equally accepted by their peers.

Unlike lesbian parents, heterosexual parents may not understand the advantages of, or the need to, educate their children about different types of families until they encounter them (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). In the library of a child of lesbian

mothers, it would be typical to find books such as “Is Your Family Like Mine?” by Lois Abramchik (1996) in which a little girl with lesbian moms explores the question of different types of families, “ABC: A Family Alphabet Book” by Bobbie Combs (2001) teaches young kids the alphabet while incorporating gay and lesbian families into the story, or “Celebrating Families” by Rosmarie Hausherr (1997) which celebrates all kinds of families in a funny, silly, and reassuring way.

Ray and Gregory (2001), using questionnaires, conducted a study of 28 primary and 20 secondary school-aged children of lesbian-headed families and their mothers to determine if children had similar experiences at school. They focused on whether discrimination was experienced, and if so, what those incidents were like, and what strategies were used by the children, parents, and teachers to handle these experiences. Aside from fear of their children being teased or bullied based on their sexual orientation, lesbian mothers stated that they most feared that their children would feel or be isolated from peers. A significant percentage of parents reported that there was no inclusion of families like theirs in any curriculum and children reported this as something they would prefer to see in school as well. Children felt that if teachers and students could be educated about different families, they would not experience teasing or bullying even though the reports of such incidents were relatively low.

Children of lesbian parents are faced with some form of bias because of their family structure but no more so than children from other family types, nor are they affected any differently (Litovich & Langhout, 2004). The socialization of children by lesbian parents seems to serve as a proactive approach to dealing with issues of teasing,

bullying, and homophobia. This approach can be compared to racial socialization of children of ethnic minorities, as previously suggested. Parental teaching of racial coping strategies, similar to coping strategies taught by lesbian parents, encourages positive child adjustment (Hale, 1991).

In their study, Litovich and Langhout (2004) examined heterosexism faced by lesbian-headed families, the effects on their children, and how parents helped their children cope. The authors define heterosexism as the institutionalized practice of favoring heterosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality is not. In an in-depth study of five lesbian couple families and their adolescent children, the authors found evidence that parents prepare their children for potential discrimination and hostility. They concluded that parents begin a discourse with children at an early age to help prepare them to handle heterosexism as they get older. Parents reported that this discourse helps children to gain and understand the terminology about sexual orientation and alternative families and facilitates open discussion throughout children's development. In this discourse, parents talked with their children about teasing and discrimination. Parents reported that, while they did not expect the preparation to take the pain out of future experiences, it could help prevent children from being surprised or caught off guard. They felt that this also laid the groundwork for open communication about incidents and feelings.

Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that teaching children not to take discrimination personally was an important part of parents' discourse with their children. Lesbian mothers reported explaining to their children that teasing or discrimination was

not a personal attack on their own character but aimed at a group, similar to discrimination based on ethnicity. Mothers talked with their children about why other children tease or discriminate, citing values, upbringing, and lack of knowledge about other types of families and groups. Mothers reported encouraging their children not to take discrimination personally and to be tolerant of different opinions from their peers. The authors cited this as one of the coping strategies that may increase the resilience of children by helping to maintain their self-esteem. Litovich and Langhout state:

These parents are preparing their children to deal with all types of adversity. These children are developing impressive psychological strengths and growing up to be capable of dealing with the kind of prejudice and discrimination they will face from our larger heterosexist society. (Litovich and Langhout, 2004, p.431).

It seems that growing up with lesbian parents may offer some advantages to children as they have been described as more tolerant of diversity and more nurturing toward younger children than children of heterosexual parents (Perrin, 2002). Steckel (1987) conducted a study to assess the effect of lesbian parenting on the development of separation-individuation in children. Eleven three and four year old children reared in lesbian mother families were compared with an equal number of same aged children reared in heterosexual families on domains of independence, ego functions, and object relations. Using structured parent and teacher interviews and a projective structured doll technique interview with each child, children of lesbian parents portrayed themselves as more lovable and were described by parents and teachers as more affectionate, responsive, and protective of younger children than their peers with heterosexual parents. Children of heterosexual parents saw themselves as being somewhat more aggressive

than did children of lesbians. Parents and teachers reported that the children of heterosexual parents were more bossy, negative, and domineering. Ratings by mothers and teachers of children of lesbian mothers, using various quantitative and qualitative methods, have shown children's social competence and the prevalence of behavioral difficulties are comparable to social norms (Perrin, 2002).

In a study conducted by McNair, Dempsey, Wise, and Perlesz (2002) lesbian mothers reported taking pride in successfully rearing well adjusted children despite challenges posed by societal beliefs about homosexuality. The mothers identified a variety of strengths of their family structure. These included describing their families as thoughtfully planned, tolerant and accepting of diversity, having flexible gender roles, and a wide range of positive role models and social support within their minority community. In accordance with the findings of this study, Fitzgerald (1999) found that children of lesbian families have an increased appreciation for diversity and greater respect for differences and different ways of living. When compared to children of heterosexual parents, children in Fitzgerald's study displayed more empathy, greater social responsibility, greater awareness and concern with inequality, oppression and prejudice of any kind.

### ***Gaps in the Literature***

There is now an established body of research indicating that children who are being reared in planned lesbian-headed families are faring at least as well as their peers (Flaks et al., 1995). Indeed, research has been done demonstrating that children may have some distinct advantages as a result of being reared by two mothers (Perrin, 2002). Much

of the research conducted on lesbian families or children of lesbians has had an emphasis on comparison to heterosexual families and children reared in heterosexual families. The very nature of such a deficit model overlooks the positive aspects of lesbian-headed families. There is virtually no research in which parenting styles/behaviors or socialization methods are explored in detail in an effort to determine what, specifically, accounts for any differences in how children are being reared in planned lesbian-headed households. This first step, of determining what, exactly, are the tools lesbians use to parent that make their family dynamics different from the traditional heterosexual household, is the goal of this research. It is my intention to examine lesbian-headed families using the theory and framework of racial and ethnic socialization because it bears some distinct similarities with the experiences of lesbian parents. As a sexual minority, lesbian-headed families experience difficulties such as prejudice and marginalization just as racial and ethnic minorities do. Racial and ethnic socialization theory may provide a model for the socialization and coping strategies used by lesbian mothers. If children from planned lesbian-headed households are considered to be members of the gay community by virtue of their parents then understanding parenting strategies in terms of bicultural socialization may help researchers better understand the lives of these children. By gaining a better understanding of how lesbians parent, the door is opened for future research on the specific issues and needs of this rapidly growing family form.

## **CHAPTER THREE: THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

In this chapter I will discuss the research process involved in this study. I will discuss the rationale for this research, the research methods and process including a pilot study in which eight participants were interviewed, and finally the remaining 20 interviews needed to achieve theoretical saturation.

### **Methods of Inquiry**

This study involves the use of qualitative methods. While grounded theory is the principle qualitative method used, ethnography informs this study by emphasizing the importance of the relationships and community in understanding this group. A grounded theory approach, drawing on the experiences and perceptions of the mothers themselves, proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), is useful in helping to develop a theory or model about how lesbian mothers parent. Grounded theory begins by describing a phenomenon then moves beyond descriptions to developing interrelated themes and concepts, forming a theoretical framework for explaining the phenomenon. In grounded theory, not only are relevant conditions revealed but also, the researcher is able to establish how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions. The researcher's responsibility is to capture this interaction. A researcher using the grounded theory method derives concepts directly from the data by constantly balancing induction with deduction in order to hypothesize the relationship between concepts. The researcher also balances pre-existing ideas based on prior research or personal knowledge with the ability to see the data in new ways in an effort to facilitate the emergence of new concepts and relationships giving voice to this marginalized population. The emerging theory or model

is constantly compared to existing and new data to verify its fit thereby validating concepts and their relationships as grounded theories. This emerging theory or model about the phenomenon of interest is grounded in the data collected from these subjects who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon.

According to Wolcott (1990) a good starting point in writing an ethnography is a description of the culture-sharing group. Using an ethnographic approach, a story unfolds about the lives of lesbian parents as a sub-culture of gay culture or the gay community. While children of lesbian parents are rarely gay or lesbian themselves they are considered to be a part of the gay community by virtue of their mothers. An ethnographic approach can be used to understand what it means to be part of the gay community and how it may impact the lives of children reared by lesbian mothers. The participants in this study tell a story about what life is like on a day to day basis in their households including the particular challenges they face rearing children in a heteronormative world.

In ethnography, the meanings of the behaviors, languages, and interactions of a culture sharing group are examined in an effort to distinguish patterns in ordinary settings. These patterns are cultural themes (Wolcott, 1990). Spradley (1980) talks about the meaning of culture in ethnographic research as something attributed to a group by the researcher after examining patterns of daily living. Culture is derived from what the group members do and say. By examining these patterns in the interviews of the participants in this study, I am developing a portrait of the group and establishing “cultural roles” of planned lesbian-headed families. This helps to provide the reader with

the necessary knowledge to understand what is going on in this group and, according to Wolcott (1994, p.6) “more challenging still, be able to participate in a meaningful way.”

The end result of incorporating an ethnographic approach into this study is a holistic cultural portrait of planned lesbian-headed families. This portrait not only expresses the voice of the participants, but also incorporates my interpretations about all the facets that make up the portrait of the group including religion, politics, economics, and the environment that I have learned through in-depth interviewing. By using grounded theory with an ethnographic approach, I am not only able to develop a theory or model regarding socialization in planned lesbian-headed families, but also provide a narrative portrait of them as a culture sharing group.

### **Pilot Study**

Prior to the primary study I conducted a pilot study to provide a framework for the larger study and aid in the development of interview questions. One of the most important outcomes of the pilot study was helping to determine the boundaries of the sample. I interviewed eight lesbian mothers. Five of the participants were recruited by word of mouth and were not active in any parenting groups. The remaining three participants responded to a post on Houston area parenting group website. One of the mothers had two children from a previous heterosexual marriage. I interviewed her and her partner. After transcribing those two interviews I realized that their family structure is unique and the presence of a still partly active father created a step-parent role for the non-biological mother. In the primary study I was able to focus on only including

mothers who had utilized artificial insemination to have their children and who had no father or father figure present.

In the pilot study six of the eight interviews were included in the analysis. Interviews were coded using the grounded principles outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). In coding the interview data I identified 110 concepts and seven themes or categories. The seven themes which emerged include; “securing parenthood,” “controlling the environment,” “proactive parenting,” being part of gay culture,” “being normal,” “division of labor and gender context,” and “issues specific to lesbian parenting.” These seven themes lead to the development of a core theme or model of “Alternative Family Socialization” (See Appendix C- Pilot Study). These themes were further developed in the primary study. All three research questions were satisfactorily addressed in the pilot study and expanded upon in the primary study.

### **The Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to develop theory or a model related to the socialization of children in lesbian-headed households. In order to do so, I posed the following research questions:

1. How do lesbian parents socialize their children?
2. What strategies do lesbian parents use to prepare their children for potential challenges?
3. If lesbian parents consider their children to be members of the gay community, what does that mean to their parents?

## **PRIMARY STUDY METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Participants for the primary study were recruited from a mid-size south-western city through personal contacts or “friendship pyramiding” (Clarke, et al., 2004), a commonly used sampling method in lesbian research by which participants are recruited by individuals who have already agreed to participate. Limitations of this method are that it can provide access to only a discrete and homogenous network of participants. To counterbalance this effect, I sought to obtain a representative sample of culturally diverse families using local websites, and lesbian parenting groups. Self-identified lesbian parents who have conceived at least one child between the ages of three and ten years old were initially sought. This age range is based on the concept of the “gayby” boom, (Dunne, 2004) termed as such as a result of lesbian-headed donor insemination families becoming more prevalent and visible within the last decade and a half. In addition, research suggests that children as young as three years old start to demonstrate prejudice and, with the development of language skills, young children learn from their parents about sexuality and other characteristics of prejudice (Litovich & Langhout, 2004).

Many couples and individual lesbian mothers responded to my call for participants. Not all of them strictly met the criteria but were very interested in participating in this study. If they met the majority of the criteria, they were interviewed. Interviewing some participants who did not quite meet the criteria helped to establish the boundaries for the study. While the excluded interviews did not contribute to the data to be analyzed, they did contribute to the study as a whole. A total of 26 participants were

interviewed (See Table 3.1). Six participants were excluded based on the relationship of the father or donor. While two participants who used known donors were brought into

**PRIMARY STUDY PARTICIPANT DATA**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Children's Gender/ Ages</b>	<b>Partnered? How Long?</b>
S	Tina	39	Caucasian	Bachelors	female 8, male 5	14 years
B	Candy	39	Caucasian	Bachelors	female 8, male 5	14 years
B	Monica	37	Caucasian	some college	twin 8 mo. Females	7 years
S	Greta	57	Caucasian	some college	female 3	8 years
B	Alex	28	Caucasian	Bachelors	female 3	8 years
B	Jackie	36	Caucasian	some college	male 5, male 3	no
B	Joy	33	Caucasian	some college	female 3	8 years
S	Marty	43	Lebanese	trade school	female 3	8 years
B	Alecia	50	Caucasian	some college	female 15	no
S	Esther	52	Caucasian	Bachelors	male 17, female 15	22 years
B	Carol	46	Hispanic	Bachelors	male 17, female 15	22 years
B/S	Patsy	40	Caucasian	Bachelors	male 3 1/2, female 8mo	10 years
S/B	Tracey	38	Hispanic	Ph.D.	male 3 1/2, female 8mo	10 years
B	Dina	34	Caucasian	Bachelors	twin females 4	7 years
S	Freda	47	Hispanic	some college	twin females 4	7 years
B	Amy	42	Caucasian	Ph.D.	twin girls 8 ½	16 years
B/S	Jamie	45	Caucasian	Ph.D.	female 9, males 8 & 4	no
S	Pam	51	Caucasian	Masters	male 8, male 5	14 years
S/B	Erica	38	Hispanic	Bachelors	male 7, female 4 ½	10 years
B/S	Karen	39	Caucasian	Bachelors	male 7, female 4 ½	10 years

**Table 3.1. Primary Study Participant Demographics.** In the “role” category, “B” designates the biological mother, “S” designates the social mother, “B/S” means they have conceived a child and are the social mother to another.

the study, it was essential that the donor not be a father, father figure, or family member. All mothers who conceived children from previous heterosexual relationships or adopted children were excluded as their family structures were found to be distinctly different from this sample.

Mothers were initially recruited through word of mouth or “friendship pyramiding” which produced six mothers. For the remaining participants, messages were posted to four lesbian parenting groups in the Central Texas area; one in Houston and three in Austin. This gave me access to the remaining participants, either through group members or members who knew other families in various Central Texas cities. Approximately half of the twenty mothers interviewed for the primary study participated in group events. The other half were aware of the groups in their area and some may have gained information from visiting online discussion boards but did not participate in group events. Most of the mothers who were derived from these groups participated in group events on an infrequent basis. While my original goal was to interview intact couples, two participants were single at the time the interviews but had experienced childrearing with a partner. In relation to the research questions, their experiences were the same as those participants with partners and in some cases only one partner in an intact couple wanted to be involved in the study. Eight of the mothers were interviewed individually. Two of those were a couple who were interviewed separately. Two were single at the time of the interview and four were interviewed without their partner as their partners chose not to participate. The remaining twelve mothers were interviewed as six couples.

In a few instances, children were either younger or older than the established age range of three to 10 years old. The actual ages of the children ranged from eight months to 17 years. While the ages of the children may have varied and the parent of the 8 month old children may not have experienced as much as the parents with a 17 year old child, their responses to questions were similar. For instance, all mothers, regardless of the age of their children, shared the fear that their children may be discriminated against based on their mothers' sexual orientation. Almost all of the mothers agreed that their children were members of the gay community. All mothers, regardless of their ages or the ages of their children, talked about discussing differences in families with their children, preparing their children to deal with discrimination, and being selective about the people and places their children are exposed to. As long as the stories told by the mothers were similar in context, the age of the child was not a factor. By being more flexible on the study criteria, it allowed me to obtain a somewhat more ethnically diverse sample which has not been well represented in previous research up to this point.

In grounded theory, sampling is done on theoretical grounds, progressing in terms of concepts, their properties, dimensions and variations, rather than drawing on samples from specific groups. By approaching sampling from this position, representativeness and consistency is accomplished and a theoretical explanation can be developed. The goal is not necessarily to generalize results to an entire population but to reveal concepts and conditions under which a phenomenon has been found in these particular data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In alignment with the principles of theoretical sampling, a grounded theory researcher may not specify how many participants will be needed at the beginning of the study. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) the research continues with data collection until the researcher finds that no new data is being uncovered, also referred to as theoretical saturation. Any new data would only add to patterns already identified and may exceed the limits of time and monetary constraints of the study. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twentieth interview was conducted. At this point, no new data was being uncovered and there was significant conceptual variation of this study within its constraints.

The participants in this study were relatively diverse in terms of ethnicity and mothers with lower income and educational levels than are typically seen in lesbian parenting research on mothers who conceived children through artificial insemination using an unknown donor. Mothers ranged in age from 33 to 57 and of the mothers in couples, their years together as a couple ranged from seven to 22. Their income levels ranged from lower class to upper class. Four of the 20 mothers were Hispanic and one was of Middle Eastern descent. The mothers' educational levels ranged from trade school to doctoral degrees. The reason for this diversity is most likely due to the climate of the Central Texas area which is very eclectic, drawing people from all walks of life (See Appendix D- Biographical Sketches of Participants).

### **Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis. It is important that the researcher identify and be consciously aware of her

own biases in regards to the area she is studying, not allowing those biases to influence any part of the process of data collection and analysis. As a lesbian who has personally been involved in some of the processes of preparing to have a child in the context of a lesbian relationship, I am aware of notions, concepts, and issues that could possibly affect my research. Being of aware of this, I had to be vigilant throughout data collection and analysis so as not to impose these on the data. I have attempted to approach this from the perspective of someone who knows little or nothing involved in the process of becoming a lesbian parent in order to present unbiased answers to the proposed research questions.

My interest in this topic is rooted in my past experience as a therapist and as someone who planned, with a partner, to conceive a child through the use of an anonymous donor. Like most of the mothers in this study, I turned to books and journal articles to help inform my decisions about the process of artificial insemination and parenting. At the time, most of the literature was derived from the perspective that it was necessary to prove that, as lesbians, we were rearing children that were comparable to children reared in heterosexual households. I felt like this form of research did not address the full story of planned lesbian-headed households so it has been my goal to try to conduct research from a perspective that tells the story of the participants' lives without the use of a heteronormative lens.

## **Procedures**

### ***Informed Consent***

All participants were given consent forms to review. The consent forms detailed the purpose of the study, the participants' rights, confidentiality, and any potential risks

involved (See Appendix A). I explained that all records would be kept confidential and secured and they would each be given a pseudonym so they could not be identified.

### ***Demographic Information***

All participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire containing information on age, race or ethnicity, occupational status, income levels, educational background, and number and ages of children. Questionnaires were labeled by participant numbers to ensure confidentiality. This questionnaire was designed specifically for this study.

### ***Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants home or a mutually agreed upon meeting place such as a coffee shop. Partners both participating in the study were usually interviewed together depending on the participants' convenience and wishes. Most interviews were conducted in the participants' homes during the evening when their children were present. This seemed to be the most convenient time for most and as an added benefit this afforded the researcher a glimpse into their evening routines and an opportunity to meet their children. One family insisted I come early and have dinner with them so as not to disrupt the household schedule. This provided a unique insight into their division of labor, childcare routine, and socialization practices. Interviews conducted in the participant's homes with their children present felt more relaxed and participants seemed to reveal more of their lives. The data gathered in those interviews seemed richer and lengthier.

Interviews were audio-taped with the participants consent. During one interview, the audio equipment malfunctioned and I had to rely solely on notes taken during the interview. Two interviews that were excluded from the analysis were conducted via telephone conversation. These were audio-taped as well but were excluded since they did not meet participant criteria. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one and a half hours. While participants did use names during their interviews, these were replaced with pseudonyms in transcription.

Interviews were directed by a list of questions (See Appendix B). These questions were developed and honed during the pilot study. The questions were used as a guide to address topics from the research questions but allowed for flexibility, facilitating the emergence of concepts. According to the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), concepts enter into theory by the repeated presence or absence of them within the interviews. Evaluating relevance of concepts during the interview process is another method of controlling for researcher bias. If a concept is not relevant, regardless of the researchers' beliefs about that concept, it must be thrown out. This leads to "theory-observation congruence" by grounding concepts in the reality of the data in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After completing an interview I sent the participants a thank you note and reminded them to contact me if they felt that they had left anything out or had any questions.

### **Transcription and Data Analysis**

After returning from an interview I would begin the transcription process by typing in the participant's demographic information followed by notes on their

environment and their family in general, as observed while in their homes. If the interview was not conducted in the participant's home, information about the location of the interview and my perceptions about the participant were written down. Following this process, interviews were transcribed verbatim and printed. Each printed copy was attached to a folder with the participant's consent form and any other notes or pertinent information. Before conducting another interview, I read through the transcript for accuracy and initial coding. I filled the margins with comments and codes. As additional interviews were completed, transcribed, and coded, concepts and themes began to emerge.

In grounded theory, data analysis begins at the time of the first piece of data collection and continues throughout the course of the study. By analyzing data from the start, collected data are used to guide the next interview. As an essential part of grounded theory, this method allows the researcher to capture data that may be relevant to the topic as soon as they emerge. After transcription of the interviews, "open coding" begins by breaking data down analytically in order to stimulate inductive thinking and avoid standard ways of looking at phenomena. In open coding, events, actions, and interactions are compared for similarities and differences and given labels based on concepts. For example, the first research questions on "child socialization" (RQ 1) produced concepts such as "proactive parenting." Strategies were then identified such as "instilling autonomy and independence" or "encouraging confidence." If they are conceptually similar, they are grouped together to form categories and subcategories and broken down into properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

After open coding the process of “axial coding” began by evaluating categories and subcategories against data. Categories are related to each other based on their properties and dimensions. Phenomena were examined in terms of its condition, actions/interactions, and consequences. Axial coding also involved tracing processes over time to see if and how they change. Continuing with the example in the previous paragraph, intervening conditions were “amount of time spent encouraging decision making” or “teasing at school.” Axial coding allows the researcher to revise questions or hypotheses based on new relationships or variations, making the theory more dense and conceptual linkages more relevant (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the final level, selective coding, all categories come together around a core category and any category that needs further development or elaboration is filled in descriptively. This provides an integration and refinement of categories to form a more central theory or model. The objective of selective coding is to allow the researcher to identify the relationship of the other categories in relation to the core category and allows the researcher to return to the data to fill in the gaps if necessary. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that “sufficient coding will eventually lead to a clear perception of which category or conceptual label integrates the entire analysis.” The concepts, categories, phenomenon, and themes which began to emerge in the pilot study were consistent in the remaining 20 interviews. The primary study contributed several more initial concepts to those found in the pilot study. For the most part, subcategories remained the same and were further fleshed out in axial coding. In the final level, selective coding, the additional three categories or themes that were only briefly touched on in the pilot study were fully

developed. These three categories consisted of “division of labor and gender context,” “being normal,” and “issues specific to lesbian parenting.” These three categories, along with the four main categories from the pilot study; “securing parenthood,” “proactive parenting,” “controlling the environment,” and “membership in the gay community” contributed to the emergence of an overall model of “Alternative Family Socialization.” The three additional categories lend themselves well to the ethnographic framework of the study by helping to narrate the story of the lives of lesbian mothers in planned lesbian-headed households.

### **Issues of Rigor**

In research, rigor refers to the amount of time and effort spent insuring the quality of research conducted. In quantitative research reliability and validity are important terms for evaluating the rigor of a study. In qualitative research, other terms are used in evaluating rigor such as verification. Verification can be seen as a process occurring throughout this study. It occurs in the process of data collection, analysis, and writing. The purpose of grounded theory research is to develop a valid theory or model that is grounded in the data and that addresses the issues and concerns of the population studied. The term trustworthiness is used in grounded theory to describe rigor.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 290), the basic question of trustworthiness is “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of any inquiry are worth paying attention to?” There are four questions which Lincoln and Guba suggest researchers ask themselves in an effort to address trustworthiness. The first question asks whether the subjects chosen, in the context they

were chosen in, were appropriate sources of information on the study topic. The city chosen for this study is a relatively liberal city despite it being in the heart of a conservative state. There is a relatively large gay community in this region of Central Texas and there are a number of lesbian parenting groups in the area which made access to a sometimes hidden population easier to gain. While not all participants were members of the parenting groups, it did provide a stepping stone to other participants via friendship pyramiding.

In addition to emailing and visiting the parenting groups, posting information about the study on a website led me to participants unrelated to the parenting group interviewees. This allowed me to widen the study to include participants in two other large metropolitan cities, similar in terms of gay presence, in Central Texas. By widening the study and utilizing the principles of theoretical sampling, I gained a more racially and economically diverse sample of participants. Particularly through the website, I met participants who either adopted their children or had children within the context of a heterosexual relationship as well as some participants who used known donors.

After interviewing mothers who adopted and who had their children within the context of a heterosexual relationship, it was determined that, while there were some similarities to participants using artificial insemination, there were some very distinct differences that made them incomparable to the rest of the sample and they were therefore excluded from the final sample. There were a few participants who used known donors but the donors were not fathers or active members of the children's lives so they remained in the sample. Choosing subjects who would be appropriate informants was a

constant concern throughout data collection but also something that happened naturally in the research process. The 20 subjects who comprise the final sample are distinctive yet they give a similar representation of their experiences as members of planned lesbian-headed families. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 267), “the real merit of a substantive theory lies in its ability to speak specifically for the population from which it was derived and apply back to them.” Based on this, they also said, “the more systematic and widespread the theoretical sampling, the more conditions and variations will be discovered and built into the theory and, the greater the explanatory power and precision.”

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) second question is: “How applicable is the study to other subjects in other settings?” Based on the literature reviewed in this study, this study is applicable to other subjects in other settings. For instance, qualitative data collected by Gartrell, Hamilton, Banks, Mossbacher, Reed, and Sparks (1996), on families in Northern California is similar on similar topics parallels answers given by participants in this study. Gartrell’s participants discussed many of the same issues discussed in this study. The relationship between the patterns that emerged in Gartrell’s study were compared with patterns emerging in this study during data analysis. In grounded theory, relating data during the analysis to existing literature helps to ensure applicability.

The third question in meeting standards for trustworthiness relates to the consistency and replicability of the study. Reproducing social phenomenon can be very difficult because it is nearly impossible to conduct another study with the same variables and conditions as the original. One way to attempt replicability is to use the same

theoretical perspective of the researcher and to follow data collection and analysis procedures as closely as possible to the original study in similar conditions. In order to do this, the researcher should be able to follow decisions made through the study's documentation throughout the write-up. For this study, I discussed the sampling decisions I made in detail, the questions asked, how the data was collected and analyzed, and how I arrived at conclusions. My interview data was digitally recorded, then transcribed and analyzed by hand. All of these are stored on computer files presenting an adequate audit trail should someone desire to replicate the study.

The fourth and final question is in regards to confirmability. This refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate the neutrality of the research findings. Confirmability can be achieved through a variety of methods including an audit of the raw data, notes, and preliminary developmental information. I also achieved this through triangulation which involved gathering evidence from multiple sources including referring back to existing literature. I utilized other standards of quality and verification such as negative case analysis. There were two somewhat negative cases in regards to several themes such as "controlling the environment" or "membership in the gay community." After reviewing these two cases extensively and requesting a peer review, it was determined that the common factors between these two cases that was different from the majority was the age of the children and the political and social context during their early childhood years. They were not thrown out because their responses to the other five themes were consistent with the majority and their experiences added dimension to the study.

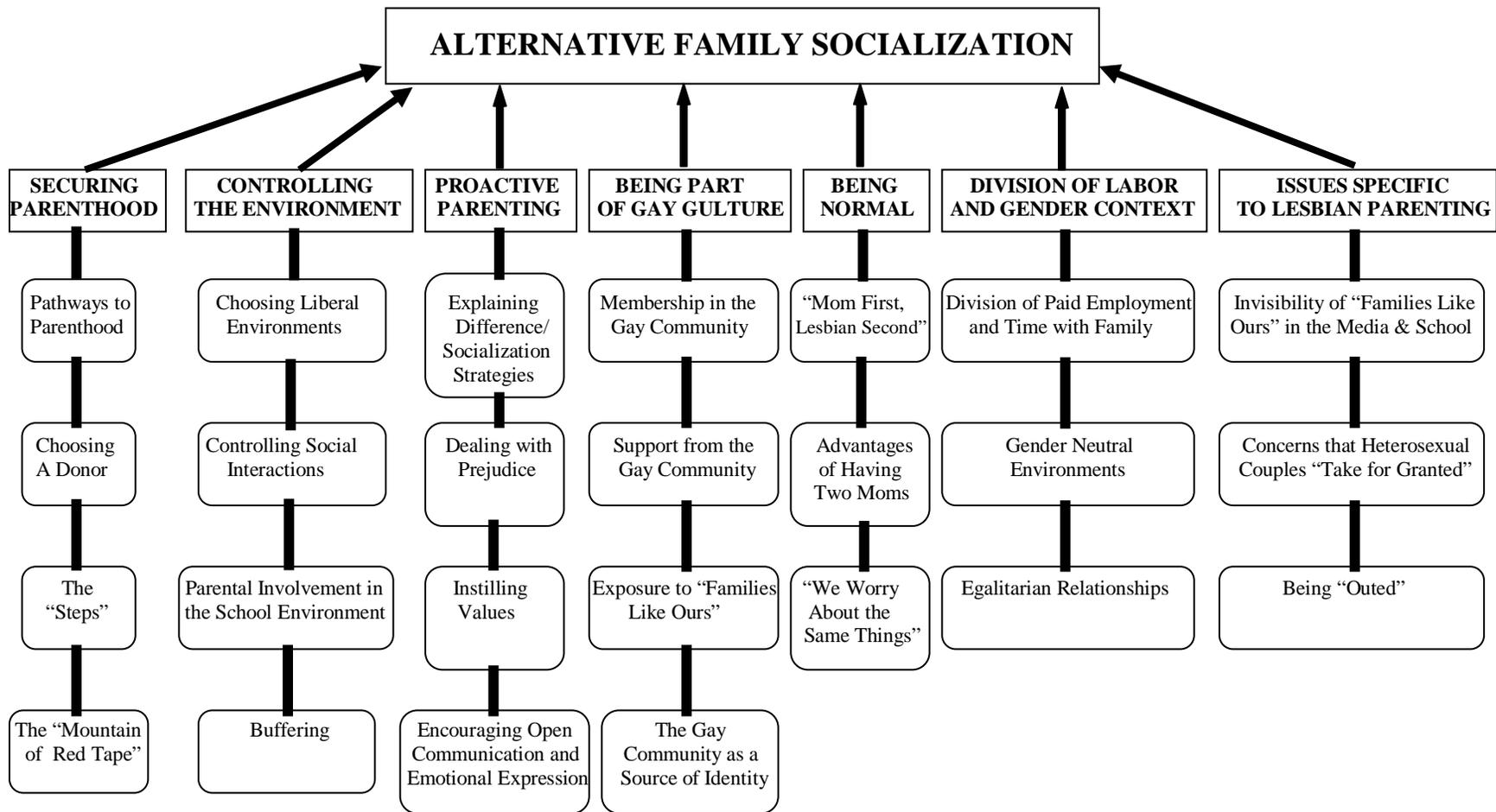
I made a point to clarify any bias I may have had prior to the study based on my own experiences as a lesbian and as someone who had gone through part of the fertility experience with a former partner. I utilized peer review as a safeguard against bias in my interpretations. I used thick, rich descriptions detailing the lives and voices of the participants in this study so that the reader has the ability to determine the transferability of this study. I used data displays to help identify patterns in the data. This allowed me to see themes or any gaps in the data so that adjustments could be made if necessary. It remained a priority throughout data collection and analysis to rigorously monitor the quality of this study as a whole so that its findings could be confirmed and reproduced if necessary and standards of trustworthiness remained at the forefront of the process. Therefore, I believe the answer to Lincoln and Guba's question is yes, this study is worth paying attention to.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the fact that all of the women in this study share the same sexual orientation, each mother was unique and distinct in her own way. The mothers came from a variety of social, educational, and economic backgrounds yet they almost all shared in some common experiences as lesbian parents. In interviewing these mothers, I focused on answering the following three research questions; 1) How do lesbian parents socialize their children? 2) What strategies do lesbian parents use to prepare their children for potential challenges? and, 3) Do lesbian parents consider their children to be members of the gay community, and if so what does that mean to their parents?

Throughout the interviews, the mothers expressed a variety of concerns and issues related to parenting as lesbians. These concerns and issues were the seven themes which emerged from the interview data. Four themes; “securing parenthood,” “proactive parenting,” “membership in the gay community,” and “controlling the environment,” best address the research questions and are most closely related to the core theme of “Alternative Family Socialization.” Despite the fact that the remaining three; “being normal,” “division of labor and gender context,” and “issues specific to lesbian parents,” are not central to the research questions, they were salient in explaining issues that were important to the mothers and their family lives. Each of these themes are used as the headings for and described in the following sections (See Figure 4.1). Following these sections, I use two case studies to demonstrate the dynamic interactions of these categories and how they are all woven together to make up the lives of these mothers.



**Figure 4.1 Model of Alternative Family Socialization.** Results of the primary study. Four level coding scheme, initial codes or concepts appear at the bottom, moving upwards to the seven major themes, and finally to a central theme of Alternative Family Socialization.

## **THEME ONE: SECURING PARENTHOOD**

### **Pathways to Parenthood**

Pathways to parenthood represent the various ways lesbian women can have children. These include adoption, foster parenting, having heterosexual intercourse, or through the use of artificial insemination with a known or unknown donor. All of the participants in this study conceived at least one child using artificial insemination. While pathways to parenthood have been researched in the past, these pathways were something all of the mothers in this study wanted to talk about and while not the primary focus of this study, it is very relevant to the lives of these women. Intentionality, as discussed in the review of literature, is one of the factors that sets lesbian couples apart from the heteronormative view of conception in which couples need to be prepared for “accidents” or unintentional pregnancy. The mothers wanted it to be known that there were no “accidents” in lesbian families. Carol, the 46 year old biological mother of a 17 year old son and a 14 year old daughter stated, “we didn’t have a night of passion that resulted in us getting pregnant.” Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin eight year old daughters, and her partner underwent 13 separate inseminations and years of trying before getting pregnant. She said:

I think of most of the people [lesbians] I know who have planned to have children together and we are all very deliberate and thoughtful parents. We have to be. We had to make the decision to have children and go through a lot of effort and expense, in many situations, in order to have children.

For most, multiple inseminations was not only emotionally trying and time consuming but very financially draining. The process of using fertility drugs and monitors, purchasing frozen sperm from a cryobank and having it shipped to their homes or

doctor's offices can become very costly. Before they were ready to begin the insemination process, most of these women spent years talking about, researching, and planning their families.

### **Choosing a Donor**

Most of the mothers in this study chose to use anonymous donors in the process of artificial insemination. They talked about the process of studying donor lists provided by the sperm banks in search of a donor who was not only healthy and intelligent but one who matched the physical characteristics of the non-biological mother. Because the non-biological mother would have no genetic ties to the child, they at least wanted them to have similar physical characteristics. Marty, the 43 year old non-biological mother of a three year old daughter said:

I thought it was real important to me that if I wasn't going to be biologically connected then I wanted there to be some physical, cultural connection. I mean he is full-blooded Arab and I'm full-blooded Arab. And that was a gift because we had looked for a year online [before finding his profile]. The woman we were talking to [at the cryobank] said that he and I looked so much alike that we could be brother and sister!

Oddly enough, in most cases the child looked more like the non-biological mother than the biological mother, especially when the non-biological mother and the donor were of a different ethnicity than the biological mother. Mothers talked about how extensive the donor lists were and how they felt that they were able to get a feel for who the donor was by either his writing or an audio tape of him answering questions. All of them who got this information kept it for their children when they got older in case they wanted to know something about the donor. None of the mothers who chose an anonymous donor chose one who agreed to optional contact after the child turns 18.

Marty said, “I feel like it’s not going to make or break her if she doesn’t have that father/father figure.” Mothers believed that knowing the donor was not very important as their purpose in using unknown donor insemination was to create a family with two moms, not to have access to the possibility of a father. Most had at least one positive male role model, often family members or friends, who would be there for the child through development.

All of the mothers who had more than one child through artificial insemination chose to use the same donor for both/all children, a decision that had to be made years in advance of having another child. This allowed the children to be biologically related as couples sometimes chose one partner to carry the first child and the other to carry the next. While these children may have different biological mothers, they would at least have some genetic link or similarity between them. Candy, the 39 year old biological mother of two, stated:

We also, because of the legal ramifications, wanted the two kids to be genetically related and we knew if we went the donor route, the anonymous donor route, that we could set aside the specimens we needed and get more later. I wanted the kids to be genetically related to one another so that if we each had one [if each mother were to carry one child] that at least they had some shared genetics.

Although the anonymous donor route can be quite expensive and not always covered by a mother’s insurance plan, mothers reported that the expense was worth the sense of security it gave them and allowed them to avoid legal entanglements. Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin 8 year old girls said:

We decided there was too much, there were too many unknowns with a known donor, if that makes any sense, in terms of what the legal relationships would be and you know, as you get older you realize that people who you are the best of friends with in college and people who you think you will be the best of friends

with for the rest of your life and now you can't even remember their names and we just didn't want to take the chance of using a known donor that we had a terrific relationship now and something goes wrong down the road, maybe he comes back wants to have custody of the kids or wants to have contact with the kids that we haven't agreed to initially. We just really wanted this child, at the time we thought it was a child but it turned out to be two, but we really wanted the child to be ours and no one else's, both in the legal sense and in terms of interactions so that was the decision that we made.

The three mothers that used known donors chose donors that they felt certain would relinquish legal ties to their child and had legal documentation to support this. None of the mothers wanted a "father" for their children. Two of the three mothers used known donors primarily for financial reasons. They had gone through several attempts using frozen sperm which can cost up to \$1500 per try before deciding to seek help from a male friend or acquaintance.

### **The "Steps"**

Mothers frequently referred to the "steps" involved in preparing to and having a child. Karen, the 39 year old biological mother of a seven year old boy and the non-biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter said:

I've always wanted kids. I guess it was going through the steps and talking to people. We knew somebody [lesbians] who already had kids and asking 'what did you do?' and 'who did you see?' and little steps like that.

In some cases, these steps started very early in the women's relationships. Candy, the 39 year old biological mother of two, stated "we had talked about children early on in our dating as something we both ultimately wanted to do and we had been together almost 7 years, I guess, before we got pregnant and went down that avenue." Candy talked at length about the years before getting pregnant. She and her partner Tina have been together for 14 years and have an eight year old daughter and a five year old son. Candy

knew that whoever she dated had to be open to the idea of having children. She and Tina talked about getting to a place where they were stable in their finances and relationship as being the first step to having children. After that they sought out a support group to gain information on how to go about becoming parents, what doctors in town were open to inseminating lesbians, what schools were accepting, and so on. Candy and Tina talked about taking the political environment into consideration when making choices about places to live that would be gay friendly yet close to their families. They wanted to make sure they would both have legal rights to their children where they lived. They talked about poring over books on lesbian parenting and artificial insemination and weighing every decision with care. Candy and Tina even sought counseling to make sure they were ready to start the process.

### **The “Mountain of Red Tape”**

Many of the mothers talked about the mountain of red tape involved in having children. Pam the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight said, “We were together for five years before we made the first real move on the idea [of having children through artificial insemination]. I think we would have acted sooner than we did if there had not been this mountain of red tape to go through.” This “mountain of red tape” includes the process of second-parent adoption. Almost all of the mothers in this study chose to pursue second-parent adoption. Although the political climate in the state of Texas is considered to be very conservative, Texas is, according to information published by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (2007), one of 25 states that offer some form of second-parent adoption. According to the NGLTF, “a second-parent

adoption is a legal procedure that allows a same-sex parent to adopt her or his partner's biological or adoptive child without terminating the legal rights of the first parent." These laws are not necessarily upheld from state to state and may have little bearing in custody debates but offer benefits to those granted the right. Second-parent adoption allowed the non-biological mother to pick the children up from school or take them to the doctor just as the biological mother could. Many of the mothers who had chosen to do second-parent adoption of the children by the non-biological mother talked about it legitimizing their families and giving them legal recognition. Monica, the 37 year old biological mother of twin infant daughters, stated:

We started that process while I was pregnant. Part of it, I have to say a big part of it, was for safety and security of our family. If something was to happen to me I wouldn't want a family member coming in and trying to take custody of the girls, to take them away from my partner. That was a big reason and we wanted to really solidify us as a family and make it, try to make it, as normal as possible for the girls. So we not only did the second-parent adoption but we got all of our wills and all of this documentation linking us together for the house, you know, all of our assets, who they would go to, we got all that stuff done at one time. And then we changed our last names to the same last name so that we would all have the same last name. That all was really important to us.

While providing them with security, the adoption process could also be costly and invasive. Just as with any adoption, families were required to obtain legal counsel and be subjected to home visits. While none of the mothers in this study reported any problems with home visits and caseworkers, most knew of someone who had encountered homophobia in the process. Erica, the 38 year old non-biological mother of a 7 year old son and the biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter said:

The social worker came to our house after our son was six months old. They asked a lot of questions making sure the environment was good for him. They

made me go through like a criminal background just as if I were a step-parent [seeking to adopt].

All of these “steps” involved in creating and securing a family can be very time consuming, costly, and challenging for couples. Mothers believed that by surviving and overcoming these obstacles, they had proven to society and to their children how important it was for them to be a family. They felt that if they had gone to such effort and expense surely anyone could see that they were capable of rearing children in a positive environment and would do anything in their power to ensure that their children were healthy and happy. All of the mothers expressed how rewarded they were by their efforts and happy they were to have their children.

## **THEME TWO: CONTROLLING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Only twenty percent of participants reported that at least one of their children had faced discrimination as a result of their sexual orientation. The remaining mothers reported no incidents. Despite the fact that discrimination was not common, one of the unique aspects of the interviews was the degree to which mothers reported “behind the scenes” actions taken to ensure their children’s safety and happiness. The actions reported by these mothers may, in fact, be actions taken by all mothers to some degree. However, these actions are indicative of a conscious awareness of the need to constantly protect their children from a heteronormative worldview that can make them feel as if their families are abnormal or wrong.

### **Choosing Liberal Environments**

Almost all of the mothers talked about choosing liberal or progressive environments for their children including the areas where they live, where they attend

school, or where their extra-curricular activities are. They wanted to do everything possible to minimize the risk that their children would come in contact with any negativity as a result of who their mothers are. Marty, the 43 year old non-biological mother of a three year old daughter said:

Part of our responsibility too is to, as we start to look for schools and things like that, is to put her in places where she's not the only one. We try to let that help inform our decisions on where she gets schooling, if she is home-schooled, or goes to school somewhere or whatever, that she's not the only one.

Even after finding a school that is open to their family structure, parents talked about going a step further to ensure that their children are in an environment that is supportive.

Alex, the 28 year old biological mother of a three year old daughter and step mother to two teenage sons said:

We make sure to have conversations with all of the kids' teachers and administrators right up front beforehand. Most people don't have to go in and explain their family and justify their family to anyone. So we make sure to do that right away so that we're doing it and our children aren't.

One family went to even greater lengths to make sure their children were part of a more liberal, open-minded community. Pam is a 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight. She and her partner of 14 years moved from the central Texas area to a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland recently. Pam talks about their move to a "blue state" saying:

We found a new home that is extremely liberal in comparison [to Texas] and we are happy we made the change even though we left behind many friends and my half of the extended family. To me, you could always just move to the right neighborhood and you would be safe. I don't believe that anymore. Before I left, my younger sister pleaded with me not to leave and I tried to explain that I felt like we owed it to the children since we brought them into this world that holds a grudge against them, to at least give them an even playing field if I could.

In addition to moving to a more liberal state, Pam and her partner also chose to home-school their children. Pam and her partner are currently the only family home-schooling but most families chose smaller, more liberal schools such as Montessori because the student-to-teacher ratio is smaller than most public schools. Pam and her partner felt that home-schooling couldn't hurt and that during their formative years they would be in an environment that was totally accepting because it was almost exclusively under Pam's control. Pam explained:

You don't want a bunch of children teaching yours how to behave badly. Then when they get older, you can easily justify it in the same terms adding safety to the mix. It is also an advantage to be home-schooled since they are from a different kind of family. These years can give them the confidence and experience they need to handle being treated badly someday just because they're children of same gendered parents.

### **Controlling Social Interaction**

Patsy, the 43 year old biological mother of a three year old son and non-biological mother of an eight month old daughter said that she and her partner not only worry about the environments their children are in, but also about the friends that they will have. Jamie, the 45 year old biological mother of a nine year old daughter, an eight year old son, and a four year old son said, "we choose friends that are accepting. My daughter is nine so for nine years we have not had an incident and I feel good about that." Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight said of her children:

When they are around other children, whether in our neighborhood, church, home-school groups, we know the parents and they know us. They know because we are usually with our children, watching them and being a part of their lives.

Most of the mothers talked about wanting their children to be exposed to children who come from similar households in terms of tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Erica and Karen, who have a seven year old son and a 4 ½ year old daughter said they wouldn't want their child to be friends with another child whose parents might not agree with their family structure. They feel that if they have all of the latest toys and entertainment then they can encourage other children to come over and play at their house where they can control the environment rather than having to wonder what the rules are at the neighbor's house or what the adults in that household may say in the presence of their children. Erica said:

We're just really funny about letting adults [into our children's lives], I guess other adults in their lives who were not familiar with. And so we thought, let's just get, we got a hot tub first [in the neighborhood]. They learned how to swim and got a little bit older and I thought let's just get a pool. I'd rather [if the kids are all playing outside] say I'm going over to our house. And here in my house I know what the rules are here because I set them. So when we have people over the rule is we don't shut doors period, doors always stay open. So I feel like I have more control if they stay over here. And so we try to have everything that we possibly can have here so they don't want to go next door. You know, you're trying to protect them from somebody saying something like 'ooh your mom's a lesbian'. I think developing solid kid relationships now can kind of help bridge that.

Most of the mothers talked about encouraging their children to select good friends who may have more liberal parents or children who seem to exhibit similar values to those taught in their own households.

### **Parental Involvement in the School Environment**

All of the mothers are very involved at their children's schools, either through parent-teacher activities or as volunteers in the classroom. Greta, the non-biological mother of a three year old daughter talked about the school saying, "we're up there a lot

[school]. We both go up there. We kind of take turns going up there and dealing with different school things.” Carol, the 46 year old biological mother of a 17 year old son and a 14 year old daughter said “we make a point of going to every parent conference and we both sign everything because that’s our way of symbolizing one more time that we are both parents.” All of the mothers felt that if they were familiar with the faculty and staff at their children’s school, not only would the faculty see them as an ordinary family but also would be less likely to perpetrate or allow any discrimination against their children. Tracey, a 38 year old biological mother of an eight month old daughter and non-biological mother of a 3 ½ year old son stated:

I think it's our job to, you know, educate the teachers for whoever he's going to be in contact with about [our family structure] you know, and we have always been very upfront about it so that they know and hopefully people are going to react to that however they're going to react and hopefully we'll have some champions that will be supportive, not just tolerant but supportive of that and will be helpful to him if it comes up but that he can go to if it's at school or something like that.

And her partner Patsy stated, “we make ourselves very visible and we get to know the teachers and we’re both very friendly people. So we kind of want to be liked parents. We add that layer of personal experience.”

### **“Buffering”**

Many of the mothers talked about “buffering” as a “catch-22,” stating they realize they may be sheltering their children from some of the normal experiences of childhood but they believe it is important for them to be active in their children’s lives, especially during the formative years, in order to give them an opportunity to develop a healthy self-esteem and self-concept. Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight who home-schools her children, said:

They are definitely buffered. The fact that we supervise our children in most instances while they are very young helps them to grow and learn things at a more appropriate age and in more appropriate circumstances with the best slant.

Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin 8 year old girls, talked about choosing an accepting school for her daughters. She said, “so we have somewhat sheltered them in that regard that they have nothing but positive experiences and they’re very proud of their family.”

Mothers talked about taking all these steps in order to minimize any incidents their children may encounter as a result of their mothers’ sexual orientation. Several mothers talked about how unjust it would be if their children were picked on or discriminated against, not for something they had anything to do with themselves, but for who their parents were. They talked about the sense of helplessness that they would feel in that type of situation. These mothers may feel the need to overcompensate for their family structure by being more vigilant in terms of to whom or what their children are exposed. Carol, the 47 year old biological mother of a 17 year old son and a fourteen year old daughter said they have to overcompensate in parenting their children by ensuring that they get good grades, never disrespect adults, don’t watch inappropriate television or spend unsupervised time on the internet. Most of these steps take place without the child ever being aware. These are the “behind the scenes” actions that parents do as a sort of groundwork before their children even enter the environments. These activities often begin when the child is at a very young age and may continue into adolescence for some children.

### **THEME THREE: PROACTIVE PARENTING**

Unlike the actions taken by mothers in the “controlling the environment” category, the concepts or actions that make up the category of “proactive parenting” are interactive between mother and child. Mothers almost all talked about being open and honest with their children about their family structure and how some people may feel about it. Jackie, the 36 year old biological mother of two sons ages five and three stated, “I’m just really open and honest with the kids about it [being a lesbian-headed family] so that they don’t ever have any reason to think that it is something to be ashamed of or it’s not okay.” Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin eight year old daughters talked about being very open with their children including the story of how they were conceived. She said, “the kids’ favorite story when they were little was about how mommy and mama got them and we talk about going to see the doctor and they know that we bought the sperm on the Internet.” The children are encouraged to ask questions if they want to know something and all of the mothers reported explaining the process of becoming parents as it was age appropriate for the children.

#### **Explaining Difference/Socialization Strategies**

Mothers talked about explaining different types of families to their children so that they understand that there are all kinds of families. Erica, the 38 year old non-biological mother of a 7 year old son and the biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter said:

Initially the things that stick out the most are when they start realizing the differences in families so we tried to introduce that really early with our son. So we’re like ‘we don’t have a daddy in our family. We have two mommies in our family. We know other families are different. Some have grandparents living with

them. Some don't. Some just have a mom'. My sister is a single parent so it's really easy for them to understand the different families.

Karen, Erica's partner talked about how individuals see and react to different types of people based on what they were taught growing up. They want to teach their children not label and classify people but to appreciate diversity. She said:

And if it's just accepted and you just love everybody and you go through life and that's that. There will always be differences but to classify something, I think that comes from someone actually having pointed it out to you. So, I think to get them in that mindset of it's a person and that's what they choose to do, that's actually something that I think you have to teach from home.

Candy, the 39 year old biological mother of an eight year old daughter and a five year old son believes that differences should be celebrated. Even if society disagrees with lesbians rearing children, Candy said:

I think the other part of it is we decided very early on that it doesn't all have to be bad. Having parents who are different in any way can build character and can build resilience. There are a lot of good things that come along with who we are as well so we really don't try to just focus on the bad things that can happen for protecting them so much as try to really give them the whole view of what it's like to be human.

The actions in this category revolve around socializing children to be proud, happy, and confident members of a family headed by two mothers. These actions consist of mothers teaching their children about prejudice and diversity, trying to enhance self-esteem development through pride in their culture, and helping them to cope with negative experiences from the majority group. Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin eight year old daughters, reported a discussion with her children regarding the gay marriage debate. Her daughter was listening to the radio and asked why people were trying to write laws to hurt her family. Amy responded by telling her daughter that

different people have different religious and political beliefs. She then went on to explain the history of the gay rights movement and its impact stating:

We equate it to the black civil rights movement about how people used the Bible and religion to say that blacks weren't the same as whites and they didn't deserve equal rights and that when you're raised to believe those things it's hard to overcome them. And slowly over time society changes and that's what we're in the midst of right now is sort of a backlash because society is changing and it's changing so fast that it's scaring some people and their reaction is to hold on as tight as they can to what they know.

Like Amy, Tina, the 39 year old non-biological mother of an eight year old daughter and a five year old son, believes that it is important for their children to know what issues are impacting their family such as marriage legislation and for them to be informed of how people on the other side of such debates feel so that they are able to grasp the larger picture. When asked about preparing her children for discrimination Tina said:

I think it would be unfair not to. I think not telling them about other viewpoints, that's just living in general. I think it's totally unfair to only represent one point of view about anything in life. It's not fair. A lot of the time what we'll do is say this is the way other people would see our family and this is what they believe and this is what somebody might say. And we do that with other issues as well.

### **Dealing with Prejudice**

Only four of the mothers reported any outright instances of discrimination. Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight, reported that her oldest son had encountered a negative experience as a result of his family structure. Pam's son was giving out invitations to his birthday party to members of his swim group. His mother was aware that one family was particularly conservative so her partner asked this child's mother if they should give the child an invitation. The child's mother

explained her beliefs and stated that her son would not be able to attend. This left Pam and her partner to explain to her son why it wasn't a good idea to give him an invitation:

We explained to our son that the boy probably would not come to his birthday party. He was totally confused in the beginning but we slowly and carefully explained that people have different beliefs and that this boy's parents follow a belief system that says it's not okay for you to have two mommies. They believe that only a man and a woman should have children together and they only want the kid to play with other kids that have parents that feel the same way. We just told him the truth and he couldn't believe his ears. He thought that was terrible and he was sorry that the boy was being raised in such a closed system, in his own opinion.

The way that she chose to explain to her son is representative of how the other mothers explain discrimination to their children. It is important to note that many of the mothers are emphatic about telling their children that some people believe different things and regardless of how that makes the child feel, they shouldn't take it personally or fault them for having different beliefs. Amy, the 42 year old mother of twin eight year old daughters said:

So we just tell them you have to go forward and you have to be proud of who you are and proud of your family and stand up for yourself and just understand that if people are hateful to you it's about what's wrong with them and it's not about what's wrong with you.

All of the mothers talked about wanting their children to grow up with a knowledge that there are many different types of people with many different views and beliefs and there is nothing wrong with difference. They emphasize focusing on the positive aspects of their families rather than on how some people may judge and discriminate against them. Many of the mothers talked about how they would deal with an instance of discrimination against their child. Joy talked about dealing with the other child as well as comforting her

own child and, like many of the parents, giving her the tools to handle such instances.

She said:

I would probably be inclined to, if it was a kid we knew, I would probably be inclined to talk to the kids parents and say 'you know, it's going to happen but this is something that if you're willing to talk to your kid about this is...' beyond that, if that ever starts to happen I guess we'll deal with it with her directly the way that you deal with any type of situation where a kid gets picked on for being different. Every kid gets picked on for whatever it is that sets them apart. I think the way that we counter that is we find ways for [talking to our daughter] with a great deal of love and respect and we're trying to give her everything, all the tools she can have so that she has a normal self-esteem and sense of self-worth. It's those kind of kids that don't get picked on as much. So I think that's our main defense against any teasing of any kind. She's got curly hair. You know, there are a million things...she's taller than all the other kids. There will be a million things she could get picked on for and the lesbian parenting is one of them for sure. Especially in this climate and I hope that it keeps getting friendlier as time goes on. So one of the things is definitely to raise her with self-esteem and the other thing is to not shelter her from the world forever but we at least live in places where it is less likely to happen.

When asked how she would handle a situation in which one of her children were discriminated against Patsy, the 40 year old biological mother of a 3 ½ year old son and non-biological mother of an eight month old daughter, reinforces the idea of giving children the tools they need by saying:

It's going to be teaching them how to react to it, how to verbally react to it, to physically and verbally react to it. It's giving him the tools of either what to say or who to go talk to if we are not in the immediate vicinity. I think it's just like bullying. I think that's become more and more of an issue and schools are becoming more intolerant of that. Just teach them what to say or who to go talk to. I guess depending on the level of what's going on.

Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons talked about preparing their children to deal with the possibility of discrimination saying:

We realize that the day will come that they will hear the names and realize the possible ugly remarks that someone can make. We just want them to have some time and experiences and plenty of self confidence in place first, if possible.

## **Instilling Values**

In addition to building self-confidence and helping their children develop a healthy sense of self to deal with the possibility that someone may treat them badly, the mothers talked about wanting to raise children who are more tolerant and open to diversity and more in touch with their feelings. Mothers reported that they regularly had conversations with their children about individual differences, compassion, and acceptance. They wanted their children to understand that there are lots of different people in the world and that they are all a valuable part of the human experience. Many mothers talked about taking their children to impoverished countries or exposing them to the homeless in their own city so that they would see that regardless of how they are treated, there is always someone who needs more than they do. Dina, the 34 year old mother of twin 4 year old daughters said:

Some friends of ours that live in the same subdivision as this house, their kids think 'we're rich because we live in a big house' and I don't want our kids to ever get that perception and the minute they do I already have ideas of what I'm going to do. And if they say 'I want, I want' and 'you're so mean because you won't give it to me' I'm going to say let's go talk to somebody that doesn't really have anything. Let's go talk to the homeless guy on the street and see what he has to say and then you can realize how good you have it.

Mothers not only valued diversity in their own lives but encouraged their children to be open to and know the meaning of diversity. Many mothers talked about exposing their children to different cultures. Joy the 33 year old biological mother of a three year old daughter said, "we go to an African-American multi-cultural church that is African-American based. Our daughter is getting to know a lot of different kinds of people." Joy's partner Marty continued saying, "and that's important, especially for me. I mean I think

it's important for both of us but being a woman of color and being in the queer community where it seems to be pretty white [it's important to have diversity]." Talking about her choice of schools for her children, Jamie is the 45 year old biological mother of a nine year old daughter, an eight year old son, and a four year old son said, "I don't think I would put them in a school [that wasn't accepting of different families]. Well, like for instance, I would never send my kids to an all white school." Like Jamie, several mothers talked about the need to have cultural diversity in their children's educational environment.

### **Encouraging Open Communication and Emotional Expression**

All mothers talked about the importance of communication in preparing their children for the possibility of discrimination and in dealing with incidents as they happened. They wanted to instill in their children early on that they should talk about their feelings and concerns. They talked about always keeping the lines of communication open so their children never felt isolated or unable to talk to them or another family member if they were troubled by something. Expressing feelings and talking about them openly were family values shared by all of the mothers.

Mothers with sons talked about encouraging their sons to be emotionally expressive regardless of stereotypical beliefs about how males should behave. All mothers with sons reported that their sons were sensitive and more sympathetic, but just as masculine as their peers. Erica, the 38 year old non-biological mother of a 7 year old son and the biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter said of her son:

And you see that more with our son because he's a little bit more, he's definitely very sensitive. And I think that's because he's got two moms. But he's definitely

very in tune with his sensitive self. He's very intuitive and he is really careful about hurting somebody's feelings and our daughter is a little bit more, she doesn't care, so she'll stay stuff and he'll say 'that was really rude'. And for a little boy to say that is just kind of funny but he's real sensitive. He's very caring. He's very affectionate and that's because we are real affectionate. [It is] definitely because he's got two moms.

Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons talked about lesbians rearing sons. She felt there were some distinct advantages in terms of rearing more sensitive young men. She and her partner encourage their sons to be more in touch with their emotions. Pam said:

I see good things come from having these two lesbian moms like the children don't have a parent that might twist the meaning of gender into something that it shouldn't be. For instance, even though there is hard wiring in the male brain toward violence, they don't have to be taught that they shouldn't cry or that they must fight rather than turn the other cheek.

"Proactive parenting" is made up of many different techniques that mothers utilize in an effort to prepare their children for the potential to face the possibility that they may be discriminated against based on their mother's sexual orientation. These include helping their children to learn about differences in families, to take pride in their families, to respect the views and values of others, to develop a positive sense of self and gain confidence in themselves and their families, and to be more tolerant of diversity. All of these aspects of socialization represent the constant interaction between parents and children that is intended to provide them with a support system or buffer from the heteronormative world.

## **THEME FOUR: BEING PART OF GAY CULTURE**

### **Membership in the Gay Community**

When asked if their children could be considered members of the gay community some of the mothers answered with an immediate and definitive “yes” while others were more thoughtful or hesitant as if this were the first time they had considered it. Almost all of the mothers believed that their children were undeniably members of the gay community by virtue of their mothers’ sexual orientation. One mother stated, “they *are* a part of the gay and lesbian culture. They have a birthright to it and that will never change for as long as they live.” Regardless of the fact that they are not gay or lesbian themselves, children of same-sex parents benefit from membership in the gay community. Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight stated:

I think it's important for them to have a sense of connection to a community and to feel good about who they are and we've been doing that before they actually faced a negative but it's hard to be in our society today, even if you're not facing it directly and personally, worrying about everything that's going on with the legislative level and there's something in the news and the subtle message is that there something wrong with you or there's something wrong with your family and I think it's important to counteract that with a lot of messages about what a great family we are.

Another mother, Freda, the 34 year old mother of twin eight year old daughters, was a little more reluctant at first, thinking I was asking about the sexual orientation of her children. Her answer was somewhat different than most in what she chose to focus on in response to the question. Freda said:

It's funny that you asked that because just the other day, it was on the Internet, the lesbian moms [group] and someone said something about their kids wearing a political shirt, something about Democrats and Republicans, and why would you have your kid be your billboard. And I really thought about that because we have an HRC [Human Rights Campaign] shirt for each of the girls. And I thought you know that's kind of true although HRC is really different. Even though, it's really geared toward gay and lesbian rights I liked the name... Human Rights Campaign. That's what it's really about. Human rights not gay and lesbian rights, human rights. I don't want them to be a political billboard for us or some kind of extended expression that we could use to benefit us.

The question about membership in the gay community was then followed up with “do you believe the gay community will offer them any benefits?” Freda went on to say:

Oh absolutely. If they decided to be a part of something like that on their own, their own decision, then fine. They have our support to do that. Wherever they find that I think it's important. I think it's important to have those kinds of relationships and structures and that's fine but I'm not making the choice for them.

Pam's view that her children are definitely members of the gay community and Freda's view that it should be the children's choice, although they wear shirts with the logo of the largest lesbian and gay rights lobbying organization, represent both ends of the spectrum of responses. Most mothers responses fell somewhere in the middle. Tracey, the 38 year old biological mother of an eight month old daughter and non-biological mother of a 3 ½ year old son stated:

I've never thought of it. I think that our issues kind of become their issues because in an indirect way. I mean I would hope that they would be sensitive to those issues but then I hope my kids will be sensitive to lots of different issues to and not just this community. But I think... yeah. I guess just by virtue of how they're going to grow up and the kind of things that we'll talk about that indirectly, I guess they would be. I never really thought about it like that but it really makes sense.

## **Support from the Gay Community**

Many of the mothers in this study participated to varying degrees in a number of lesbian parenting groups throughout the central Texas area. When asked why they participated in the groups, most reported that it was a combination of the desire to participate in social activities and meet other families like theirs and to gain support from people who shared their experiences. None of the groups had a formal support group where mothers met without their children and sat and engaged in discussions about issues related to their families. All of the groups in which participants were involved were more social in nature with mothers bringing their children to play with other children of lesbian mothers. When visiting different group events, I often observed members talking with each other about issues their children were having. Some mothers talked about which schools were “gay friendly” or what lawyer was the best and most reasonable for second-parent adoption. It was evident that they created whatever support they needed.

Monica, the 37 year old biological mother of twin infant daughters, belonged to four lesbian parenting groups in her community as well as groups for mothers of twins. She found it helpful to monitor group events through internet postings and discussion boards which created a space for mothers to ask questions about issues specific to lesbian parenting. She said they occasionally went to events and anticipated going more frequently as her daughters become older. In terms of support from parenting groups and the gay community, Monica said:

I hope that it will mean for [my daughters] that they’ve got support if they ever need it. If there’s something that they are dealing with that they don’t feel comfortable coming to us about, I hope that they will seek out some members of our support group that we’ve taken in and become a family with.

Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin eight year old daughters, talked about the support her children receive from groups. They are members of a national group called Children of Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (COLAGE) which provides support specifically for children. She said:

I think it's important for them to have a sense of connection to a community and to feel good about who they are and we've been doing that before they actually faced a negative. I'm so excited that they're now old enough to take part in COLAGE and they get on the COLAGE website and read. They have like a pen pal program and they've started getting involved in that. So I think of that as being part of the gay community.

### **Exposure to “Families Like Ours”**

One of the most cited reasons for bringing their children to group events was to give them an opportunity to see other families like their own and interact with children who also had two moms. Candy, the 39 year old biological mother of an eight year old daughter and a five year old son talked about her family's participation in group activities. She said:

It's important to us. I mean just for that sense that it's normal. There are other kids. And we do things. We do campouts with other families and stuff and as the kids get older I see them interacting differently. It's important that they have other kids to talk to if they want to. Part of wanting two [children] for us was that built-in understanding of what it's like to have someone with a different family. So yes, it's important I think inasmuch as in any time you're different you need to feel a part of something larger.

Greta and Alex also talked about the benefits of exposing their children to families like theirs. They said when their children meet new people or they go to different activities that are not gay and lesbian family events their children stay close and are leery about interacting. When they go to gay family events, “you know [they] stay close for a

while but with that group it was like immediately they were just off and they felt really comfortable.” Alex went on to say “I think they feel comfortable because all the other, they share something with all those kids so they all feel immediately cohesive because they all share something.”

Most of the mothers reported that their children knew at least one friend with same-sex parents or were able to see families like theirs by attending gay events such as family pride or by being members of a gay parenting group or a support group or national organizations such as COLAGE. Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin 8 year old girls said:

When they're exposed to other families like ours, our types of families, then they can see 'oh so-and-so has two moms or there are two other girls and there is two guys' and they're part of the community because of us. I think the more exposure that they have to just the gay and lesbian lifestyle, to just diversity in general, I think the better off they'll be.

Candy, the 39 year old biological mother of an eight year old daughter and a five year old son said, “we are probably more active in the gay community just because we think it's real important to be around other lesbian parents and again, give some norm to that.” She talked about marching in the gay families section of a gay pride parade shortly after her daughter was born and how it was optional for their children to be a part of the gay community. She said:

Our daughter marched in the parade when she was about six weeks old for families. She was being carried. When it's things for families we've involved them but for the most part, if they choose to be a part of the gay community when they get older that's great. I hope they feel accepted and if they don't that's okay too. I mean, I don't think they have to be a part of it. Our church we go to just because we love the minister there and people are loving and accepting of the kids

and they are part of the community, the church community that happens to be gay, for the most part.

### **The Gay Community as a Source of Identity**

All of the mothers reported that their children were open with peers and teachers about their unique family structure. Some were more selective about when and to whom they came out about their families. This seemed to correspond to children's ages. Mothers reported that children were very out when they were little but became more selective as they got older. Some children felt the need to advocate for their family structure and educate peers. Greta, the non-biological mother of a three year old daughter talked about her 10 year old son from a previous marriage. She and Alex are parenting him and his 12 year old brother together. When asked about her children being members of the gay community and what it means to them she said:

I think it means a lot to them. I think for a while we didn't acknowledge or we didn't realize that's what it meant for them [a sense of identity or culture]. But [our son] really has pretty much told us [he feels that way]. And I said you shouldn't have to really fight those battles at school and he said these are my battles they're not just yours. He identifies as straight but he feels part of the gay community. He feels like an activist. He wants to educate people about it and he does. He does feel like he's part of the community and now this year he's very out-spoken. He's gotten a lot of bullying and teasing, people asking if he's gay. All the kids ask him if he's gay and he's obviously not. He gets that a lot just because kids know that he's an activist.

All mothers talked about the gay community as having the potential to be a source of support for their children, especially as they approached adolescence. Mothers stated that having access to the gay community served as a buffer for their children as well as a source of pride. If children had a sense of belonging to a community, they would be buffered against discrimination encountered outside that community. All of the mothers

felt like it was important that their children have the opportunity to interact with children from other families like theirs to reinforce the positive aspects of having two moms.

## **THEME FIVE: BEING NORMAL**

### **“Mom First, Lesbian Second”**

When asked the question “what is it like to be a lesbian parent?” mothers often had very strong reactions. Most of them emphatically replied that they were just like any other family. They were “mothers first and lesbians second.” Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin 8 year old girls said, “I’m not sure being a lesbian parent is any different. I mean I think of myself as a parent!” Alecia, the 50 year old biological mother of a 15 year old daughter said, “There really is no difference. It’s just like any other parent. The difference is really about perception.” And Patsy, the 40 year old biological mother of a three and a half year old son and non-biological mother of an eight month old daughter laughed saying, “well it’s the only kind of parent I’ve ever been!” Her partner Tracey, a 38 year old biological and non-biological mother of two continued by saying, “I think it's just educating those people that we come into contact with and for the most part I think people have been pretty receptive but I think sometimes people just don't quite get it.”

### **“Advantages of Having Two Moms”**

After getting comfortable with the interview process, mothers frequently talked about the advantages of having two moms in a household but their first reaction was definitely to defend the normality of families like theirs. Most felt their initial responses were a knee-jerk reaction to the sort of questions they receive from the heterosexual

world in which their rights and abilities to parent are frequently called into question because of their sexual orientation. Carol, the 46 year old biological mother of a 17 year old son and a 14 year old daughter stated that their children only felt as comfortable with their family structure as she and her partner did so they made it a point to talk about how their family was just like everyone else's except for the fact that they had two moms who loved each other and loved their children very much. All of the mothers talked about focusing on the positives. Monica, the 37 year old biological mother of twin infant daughters, talked about the need to make the children feel normal just like other families and how their difference can be a source of strength. She said:

Just talking to them about how we are. Just like every other family. And then just handling issues as they come up and trying to comfort them around discrimination if that happens. Letting them know that lots of people get discriminated against. You're not the only one. It allowed me, being a lesbian, to relate to a lot of different other nationalities because I can relate to their being discriminated against. It almost made me feel a little united with them. So teaching that and I think that in itself is empowering because... I don't know, it tends to make you look outside of your world and look at everybody, how everyone's affected. Once you've been affected by it or infected, it makes you look at how the world works and so they will... you know they will actually benefit from being different I think. And in the long run they're going to benefit from that. They'll fit in. They will be more accepting of people. They will be more understanding and empathetic. I think it's, overall, growing up in a lesbian household is going to be a good thing for them.

### **“We Worry About the Same Things”**

Another frequent response from mothers was that they worry about the same things as all parents. They wanted to emphasize the fact that, while their household consisted of two women parenting, the practice of child-rearing was very similar or the same as in any type of family. Regarding this duality, Amy, the 42 year old biological mother of twin 8 year old girls said:

We worry about the same things that all parents worry about. We worry about our kids being healthy and safe, and getting a good education and having friends and peer pressure and keeping them away from drugs and alcohol you know, and that whole when are they going to leave us and go to college you know. So day to day our focus is on all the same things that any parent would worry about but there is always that, I don't know, it's not like we set aside separate time like okay its pride in our family time. It just kind of gets rolled into discussions throughout the day you know. That's probably the thing that makes it different.

Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight state:

We really go through life as a family of four, basically. We do tell the children that they have two mommies and that they are lucky for that. I would also say that our family is very normal in terms of day to day activities.

And Erica, the 38 year old non-biological mother of a 7 year old son and the biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter compared issues her son was having at this particular age with issues his cousin of the same age was having:

I just think of it as being a parent not really a lesbian parent because we experience the same parenting challenges that any other parent would experience. In fact I was talking to my brother this past weekend and I was saying my son is really starting to read a lot. This is the kind of challenge that were having with him. And he said 'yeah his cousin is having the same' because they are almost the same [age]. From a parenting standpoint, I think we experience the same things with our kids.

It seems for these families being normal is more about ensuring that society doesn't see anything wrong with lesbian parenting than actually saying that their households are the same as heterosexual households. The mothers talked more about the things that made them unique rather than the things that are common to all parents. Even though there is more exposure to homosexuality and gay and lesbian families in the media, it seems that lesbian parents are still very cautious when it comes to how society will view their families.

## **THEME SIX: DIVISION OF LABOR AND GENDER CONTEXT**

Division of labor is one of the topics related to lesbian-headed families that has been researched fairly extensively by one of the most noted researchers of lesbian parenting, Charlotte Patterson (2004). Discussions of division of labor were more of a byproduct in this study rather than a focus. It is important to consider here because it is a portion of what makes lesbian-headed families distinct. It is a significant part of the story of the lives of these women. As noted in the review of literature, by and large, lesbian-headed families place more importance on time spent with their children than financial success.

### **Division of Paid Employment and Time with Family**

Many studies of mothers in planned lesbian-headed families are plagued by homogenous samples of white, middle to upper-middle class, highly educated women. This study was unique in that mothers of lower socio-economic and educational backgrounds were represented. This provided an opportunity to see what the division of labor was like in households where resources were scarce. The same ideal of focusing on time with the children was evident in these families. Both mothers either worked part time or one stayed home with the children so they would not have to be placed in daycare. This was a conscious effort as they could have afforded daycare if both mothers were working full-time. In these families, their homes may have been a little more modest or even cramped but they acknowledged that material things were of little importance compared to the love and nurturing they gave their children by being

available to them. Joy, the 33 year old biological mother of a three year old daughter stated:

We live very simply. We live very simply so that we don't have work a lot. We would rather spend time as a family and be our daughter's moms rather than work our butts off for a new laptop or whatever, a bigger house. We're pretty happy with our situation so it actually evens out pretty well because both of us have a lot of free time.

Joy and her partner live in a small two bedroom garage apartment in an older neighborhood. Their apartment is furnished with the necessities but, unlike some of the other mothers' homes, there was no room overflowing with toys. They felt like their daughter had everything she needed and most of what she wanted. They felt she would benefit more from them being together than from having material things. Many of the mothers who lived in bigger houses with full-time jobs talked wistfully about retiring and being able to spend more time with their children. All of them wanted to give their children advantages that they may not have had growing up.

### **Gender Neutral Environment**

Very few of the women in this study had issues with their division of labor. Most said that they were trying to create a gender-neutral environment for their children in which there were no jobs that were specific to males or females. They wanted their children to see that two people could perform all the tasks related to household functioning and work in a way that celebrated each person's specific talents and where no one felt put upon by doing more than their fair share of tasks. Karen, the 39 year old biological mother of a seven year old boy and the non-biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter said:

I don't know, it's one of those things where each person brings different aspects to the parenting, you know. I'm constantly cleaning and doing all kinds of stuff, doing the yard, you know, and doing the I guess what they would call the quote unquote man thing to go outside and mow the yard and clean the cars and do all that kind of stuff and the electrical stuff and we've built everything out here, we've built the fence and we built the deck and we've done all that and yet I'm the one that cleans the house and does the laundry and make sure that everybody has ironed clothes and... I guess it's not really a man or a woman type function it's just your personality and what you bring into the family. So I don't think because they have two of us that they are either lacking something or that they're getting something more because there's just so many different qualities that each of us have that round out the entire family.

When talking about whether tasks are divided based on gendered stereotypes of male and female tasks, Tracey, the 38 year old biological mother of an eight month old daughter and non-biological mother of a 3 ½ year old son stated:

I don't want him to think that these are the kinds of things that girls do and these are the kind of things that boys do or that women do and men do and that men can't do these things or women can't do those. We wouldn't teach that to either one of them. I think that there is some value in him seeing that women can do all kinds of things in our household. We want them to be exposed to all kinds of things. I think he's getting a pretty wide range of exposure.

### **Egalitarian Relationships**

Most of the women in this study were very satisfied with their division of labor and felt that the more egalitarian approach contributed to their success as a couple.

Monica, the 37 year old biological mother of twin infant daughters said:

Well one thing that, and I don't know if this is true of all parents, but my partner and I are a really good team. I think that one aspect of having to women is that it's like two moms, and moms typically, in relationships, do the brunt of the child rearing, and so they've got double. I know some lesbian couples fall into roles of this is your stuff but we really split right down the middle especially since we have the girls. Before we had the girls I probably did a little more of the housework and errand running and things like that because I'm out doing appointments so I can just stop in. Once I got pregnant and wasn't able to do all that my partner had to step it up and ever since then we've just continued to share.

Yeah, we're really the most balanced lesbian couple I know in terms of our division of labor.

Mothers reported having freedom to negotiate household and childcare tasks with their partner without rely on tasks dictated by gender. Many of the mothers stated that they couldn't imagine having the same kind of relationship with a man. One older couple talked about how they knew heterosexual couples in which the female partner struggled with feeling overwhelmed by the childcare and household responsibilities that her husband was not willing to participate in because they were women's duties. They said they never experienced anything similar in their own relationships because generally if a woman sees something that needs to be done, especially regarding her children, she just does it rather than telling her partner to do it. They talked about waking up in the morning and negotiating who would be able to take which child to school or soccer practice that day based on their schedule. Over the years they had cultivated a very equal distribution of responsibilities that was not only satisfying to them but accomplished all of their daily tasks efficiently so they were able to spend time together and with their children.

## **THEME SEVEN: ISSUES SPECIFIC TO LESBIAN PARENTS**

### **Invisibility of "Families Like Ours" in the Media and Schools**

In coding the interview data, I found several concepts that were mentioned frequently by most of the mothers that were not clearly related to one of the core categories but that were sufficiently salient to merit mention. All of these concepts were specific to parenting as lesbians but not necessarily part of the socialization process. One such issue deals with the social and political context of lesbian families in today's society. Mothers frequently reported that there was a lack of inclusion of different types

of families in school curriculum. They reported that there was little or no discussion of alternative families by the teachers and when children did projects such as mother's day gifts, they were only addressed to one mother. Greta, aged 57, and her partner Alex, the 28 year old biological mother, have a three year old daughter. When talking about the school, they said:

Alex: We took a little book for our daughter when they were studying families at her little daycare, we donated a book so they could read a book like that to make sure she's included.

Greta: The teacher also did a thing on families and had them draw pictures of what their families look like.

Alex: it's important for them to have representation like that at school because the majority of kids don't come from a family with a mom and dad who raised them until they were 42. The majority of families have step parents or grandparents or a single mom. I don't know how schools don't get it either when they come around with Mother's Day and Father's Day and how they still can't get out of the box of you get one craft for Mother's Day where most kids will have grandparents who take care of them or step moms.

Another parent, Pam, the 51 year old non-biological mother of two sons ages five and eight talked about the how the media plays a role in emphasizing the heteronormative view of families by not featuring many alternative families in programming. She said:

Well they can't help but notice there's a difference [in their family structure]. Pick up any children's book or watch any children's movie and there is a social structure to a family that very rarely includes two mommies or two daddies very early on in a child's life. You have to hunt for those books and they are not very entertaining by nature. The conversation [about their family structure] comes naturally as the child is growing up and hearing something that is different over and over again from what they know.

### **Concerns that Heterosexual Couples "Take for Granted"**

In addition to the lack of representation in schools and the media mothers talked about concerns that heterosexual parents didn't have to deal with. When asked if there is

anything distinctive about being a lesbian parent Erica, the 38 year old non-biological mother of a 7 year old son and the biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter, replied:

You don't get a manual you know. And then probably another weird thing is that I'm sure other parents, heterosexual parents, wouldn't think about what if something happens to me, let's go see a lawyer. That's just a given. They take that for granted. That's something that you would never have to think about. But that's one of the first things that we thought about before we had a family and that's kind of sad, you know that you have to think about it in that sense.

Many parents talked about how there were so many things heterosexual families took for granted, particularly the legal concerns. They expressed frustration over the fact that they were often asked which one of them was “the real mom” or that they had to go to their children’s school and introduce themselves so that teachers and administrators would recognize them both as their child’s parents. Esther, the 52 year old non-biological mother of a 17 year old son and a 14 year old daughter talked about making it a point to be visible and active at their children’s school so that it reinforces to everyone that they are both the parents. Patsy, the 40 year old biological mother of a three and a half year old son and non-biological mother of an eight month old daughter said, “it’s a process of coming out all the time. You come out to daycare providers. You come out to other parents. You have to come out to doctors and you know, just anybody your children come in contact with.”

### **Being “Outed”**

In addition to having to “come out” all the time, mothers talked about their children constantly revealing their mothers sexual orientation to strangers or “outing” them. Karen, the 39 year old biological mother of a seven year old boy and the non-

biological mother of a 4 ½ year old daughter talked about how she and her partner laugh when their children “out” them in odd places when they aren’t expecting it. She said:

Of course, I'm the type of person anybody that wants to ask or say something I will be more than happy but I don't run around advertising it. It's just in plain and simple, and you're writing a check at the grocery store and you're not thinking about anything but let me do this, let me get the kids in the car and one of the kids will say 'my other Mommy is at work' and they look at them and then they look at me. You're taken back because you're, I'm so used to being able to say to someone 'oh yeah, that's my partner' so you get in this frame of mind of what are they going to think? But with kids you just, you know, that's their life. They don't see any gray area. They just see us as their parents. You know, 'those are my mom's.' So it's kind of just having to explain yourself where the typical parents would never have to go 'I'm a single mom and he's never going to talk about his dad', we have to do the kind of 'he has two moms' so that they understand... things like that. That's where I find the difficulties.

Several mothers worried about where their children would out them and were concerned about how people would react. Marty, the 43 year old non-biological mother of a three year old daughter talked about stopping at a rest stop in a small Texas town. She felt nervous in the ladies restroom with her daughter because her daughter was talking about her other mother. She worried for their safety and said she and her partner are generally very aware of things like this in their travels and try not to put themselves in those situations. Because of situations like this, many of the mothers talked about “passing” in certain contexts, by which they meant letting people assume they were heterosexual moms or single moms. Jamie is the 45 year old biological mother of a nine year old daughter, an eight year old son, and a four year old son. She talked about how, when she is with a male friend, people assume she is married to him and the children are theirs. She said it was just easier to let people assume this in some situations rather than correcting them.

## **Summary of Themes**

These seven themes, while not all central to the research questions posed in this study, are unique yet connected pieces making up the picture of the lives of mothers and children in lesbian-headed families on a daily basis. These are the issues they face as they go about their lives in a heteronormative world. These are the ways they socialize and protect their children so they are best able to insure that they grow up healthy and happy. Four of these seven themes were strong enough to be linked together to form the core category or model of “Alternative Family Socialization.” These themes are what make lesbian-headed families fundamentally different from other types of families. All of the quotations of these mothers throughout this section give voice to these marginalized families and help to create an ethnographic understanding of their differences and strengths providing a detailed view into these participants’ lives.

The following case studies are two couples out of the twenty mothers who participated in this study. Their stories are told here in more detail to show the dynamic effect of the themes such as “securing parenthood” and “controlling the environment” and concepts such as “choosing a donor” or “buffering” that make up the model of Alternative Family Socialization. These are not static categories but actions and events that represent the ways that planned lesbian-headed families are formed and function on daily basis. Through a more in-depth look at the stories of Erica and Karen and Joy and Marty, the reader can see how all of the concepts and themes (See Figure 4.1) interact with one another to solidify the narrative of the mothers in this study. Their stories are specific to their types of families; households created with two mothers using artificial

insemination with an unknown donor and no male father figure present, yet they are similar to the stories of all of the mothers in this study. The relevant concepts, categories, and themes are in italics.

### **Case Study One- Erica and Karen**

Erica and Karen have been together for over 10 years and have two children together. Erica is a 38 year old Hispanic woman. Karen is a 39 year old Caucasian woman. They both stated that they *always wanted to have children*. It was something they each knew going into the relationship so it wasn't a question of whether or not to have children but when. They had *been together for several years* when they started taking *steps to become parents*. They knew other lesbians who had children so they began to *gather information* about methods of becoming parents. Karen talked about *the steps* involved in preparing saying, "I guess it was going through and talking to people. We knew somebody who had already had kids and it was asking them 'what did y'all do?'" They chose to alternate carrying their children so they could both experience pregnancy and childbirth. In order to *minimize their legal risks* they chose to *use an anonymous donor* and conceive via artificial insemination. They talked to people and gained as much information about *the process* as possible before starting.

Karen decided to get pregnant first. She talked about how lucky she was that it only took three tries to get pregnant. Erica stated "on the third try we got pregnant, which is really neat because I know some couples it takes awhile, even heterosexual couples it takes awhile." Karen is the biological mother of their seven year old son. When Karen and Erica first started purchasing sperm from the cryo-bank they purchased enough for

multiple tries and for a sibling. They *wanted their children to share a genetic link* to each other so they have the same donor. Erica said “what we did was order more specimens and we used the same donor for [our daughter] so they are genetically linked...they’ve got some really neat features that are real similar.” Two years later Erica got pregnant with their second child. Erica is the biological mother of their 4 ½ year old daughter.

While Karen was pregnant with their first child, Erica and Karen decided to schedule an appointment with *an attorney to secure their family*. Karen’s father is a minister and her family is very conservative. They were concerned about what might happen to their children in the event that something happened to Karen. Erica stated, “we were really scared that [Karen’s] parents would jump in and maybe take him so we hired an attorney when she was still pregnant.” They *obtained second-parent adoption* so they would each have *legal rights* to their non-biological child. A social worker came to their home and evaluated them. Erica talked about that saying “the social worker came to our house after [our son] had been with us for six months. They kind of ask questions like ‘what’s his favorite toy?’ You know, making sure the environment is good for him, as if I were a step-parent.” They felt that second-parent adoption *gave them some degree of legitimacy as a family*.

Both Karen and Erica talked about how their family is *normal* except that their children have two moms. They talked about being *mothers first and lesbians second*. They talked about how they experienced all of the *same challenges* as their own brothers and sisters and their children, how they are *just like everybody else*. Erica stated:

We experience the same parenting challenges that any other parent would experience. In fact, I was talking to my brother this past weekend and I was

saying...this is the kind of challenge we are having. He said it's the same thing with his son. So from a parenting standpoint I think we experience the same things with our kids.

Later in their interviews they talked about *things that made their family distinctive* such as *being "outed"* by their children in social situations or having to *explain to the school about their family structure*. Erica said, "so right off the bat, we let the teacher know. [Our son] has two mommies so if he says 'my family has two mommies' he's really got two mommies!" Erica and Karen talked about their family being distinctive in how well they *worked together as a team* compared to heterosexual couples they knew and how well they *shared tasks around the house, childcare responsibilities, and financial obligations*.

Erica and Karen talked about *things that heterosexual couples take for granted*. Karen said, "something you wouldn't do in a heterosexual family is talk about your family and what that entails." When their daughter started to realize that her family wasn't like others she asked about her daddy. Erica and Karen told her that some families have one mom or one dad, or a mom and a dad, or just grandparents. Erica told their daughter, "if you want a daddy in your family that means one of the mommies has to go away. Which one would you like to go away? And then she got it and said 'I don't want either mommy to go away.'" Karen and Erica both talked about how *lucky their children were to have two moms* to nurture and care for them and how sensitive and caring their son is because he has two moms. Erica talked about *lesbians rearing sons* saying, "You see that more with [our son] because he's a little bit more, he's definitely very sensitive and I think it's because he's got two moms."

They *emphasized the positive aspects* of their family. Erica and Karen talk about their *values* as a family and the importance of *teaching their children respect for others*, good manners, and charity. They *read books* to their children about *different types of families* and people and *encourage them to be tolerant* of other people. Karen talked about encouraging tolerance saying:

It's talking with them and explaining to them that there are other ways, so many different ways that people think. And this is what we believe and there's what other people believe and if they want to believe that, that's fine but that's not what we believe in. You only see difference when someone has pointed it out to you, you know?

Karen and Erica *talked about the positives* but they also *expressed concern* over bringing their children into a world in which they may very well be *discriminated against*. They talked about how unfair it would be for someone to say something negative to their children when it would be directed at their mothers. Erica and Karen are *careful about who has contact* with their children or the *kind of environments* to which they are exposed. Erica stated, "we're just really funny about letting adults, I guess other adults in their lives who we're not familiar with. I'd rather [the neighborhood kids] say 'I'm going over to [our son's] house' and be here in my house because I know what the rules are because I set them." Erica and Karen talked about *having all the latest toys*, a pool, a hot tub, and a playstation, so the neighborhood kids would want to *play at their house*. They encouraged their children to invite friends over to play at their house so they *wouldn't have to worry about what other parents might say or do* in front of their children.

Karen is estranged from some members of her own families because they don't want their children to hear anything negative about their family. Their children know they

have two moms but they haven't explained to them what it means to be lesbians. They feel that their children don't need to hear that kind of conversation from their own blood relatives. Karen talked about the loss of her sister in her life saying, "when I got pregnant [my sister] said 'I will not let my kids know [about how she and Erica conceived their children as lesbian parents]' so I haven't seen her or her kids for seven and a half years." She continued, "Why would I want to subject my kids to discrimination where, in a family, you're supposed to feel your most comfortable?" Both Erica and Karen have dealt with *discrimination on a personal level* from family members. The fact that they have had these *experiences contributes to their desire to prevent* their children from facing it.

Karen and Erica know that sooner or later their son is going to come home from school and ask what a lesbian is but they don't want to *deal with that until it happens*. They stated that they were probably *sheltering* their children but felt it was *necessary to keep them safe*. They talked about having an *instinct to protect* their children. They live in a neighborhood where families are a little *more liberal and diverse* and the schools their children attend are *more progressive*. Erica and Karen use a variety of *strategies to protect* their children and *buffer them from the potential for discrimination*. Erica talked about helping their children build friendships to serve as a buffer against negativity saying, "I think developing solid kid relationships now can help bridge that [in the future]." It is of the utmost importance to them that their children *never have to face discrimination because of who their parents are*.

Erica and Karen both work full-time so their children can have every advantage. They live in a large two-story home in a nice neighborhood. They talk about working to

be able to afford the things they want their children to have and to be able to *travel* with their children so that they *experience other cultures*. Erica stated, “every three months we take a vacation. We travel all over the place...so they see a lot of different cultures.” She goes on to say that by being exposed to different cultures their children “see what it is to have and to not have. I think [they] understand that [they] are blessed.” Karen goes in to work early so that she can pick the kids up from school and take them to extra-curricular activities and she also does homework with them. Erica goes in to work later so she can get the kids ready for and take them to school. They *make time with their children the priority* despite their busy schedules, even at the expense of their time together as a couple. When asked how they divide these tasks, Erica said, “we do it more from a salary perspective. Karen does the majority of the home stuff [because her salary is less] even though she’s probably just as busy.

Karen and Erica were recruited for this study through a friend of a friend. They don’t participate in any of the *lesbian parenting groups* in the area. When I asked Karen and Erica if their children were *members of the gay community* Karen said:

When they’re exposed to other families like ours, quote unquote, our types of families...they can see ‘oh so and so has two moms’ or ‘there are two other girls’ and ‘there’s two guys’ and they’re part of the community because of us...the more exposure that they have to, not just the gay and lesbian lifestyle, it’s just diversity in general, I think the better off they’ll be.

Erica and Karen talked at length about what their children’s role in the gay community meant to them. They felt it was *important for their children to see other families* with two mommies or two daddies. They talked about wanting their children to have a *sense of diversity and pride in their family*. They talked about wanting them to

have a *strong self-concept* and be able to *obtain support from families like theirs*. Karen and Erica felt their children are exposed to straight families on a daily basis at school or extra-curricular activities so it is *important for them to have friends who also have two moms*. They felt that the *gay community is part of who their children are* by virtue of the fact that their moms are lesbians.

### **Case Study Two- Joy and Marty**

Joy and Marty were recruited for this study through a post to a message board of a *lesbian parenting group*. They have been *together for eight years*. Joy is a 33 year old Caucasian woman and Marty is a 43 year old Lebanese woman. Joy is the biological mother of their three year old daughter. Joy and Marty live in a small garage apartment that is located in a downtown area of a large Central Texas city. They *live simply* and they both *work in part-time or flexible jobs* so they are able to *spend the majority of their time with their daughter*.

When asked to describe *the process they went through in deciding to have a child*, Marty stated:

I've always wanted a child and when we first met a friend of ours that had a six month old, we were at her birthday party and we were both kind of playing with the baby, a little brown baby, we both just looked at each other like 'you know?' Knowing that...I think that kind of set that in motion for us. It's just something that we've always wanted.

Her partner Joy felt a little different:

I didn't necessarily want a kid. I didn't really know much about kids when I got into this. But I knew it was something Marty wanted a lot and it was something that I figured that I would enjoy getting into...how could I know it would be anything but delightful?

Because she is younger, Joy decided she wanted the experience of carrying and birthing a child. They had a friend who they tried to work with as a donor but things fell through when they wanted him to *relinquish his rights* to the child. They then turned to the internet and began searching sperm banks for a *donor whose characteristics were similar* to Marty's. Marty talked about the search for a donor:

We had looked for a year online. We decided to take a month off because this is really just emotionally hard to go through all that with someone and the whole time looking online and not finding any Arab donors that are full-blooded or even half...I thought that it was real important to me that if I wasn't going to be biologically connected then I wanted there to be some physical, cultural connection. Two days later I snuck online and started looking at this sperm bank that was never online, had just put their website up, and their second to the last donor was a full-blooded Arab man...I sent pictures of me to the woman that I was talking to on the phone [at the sperm bank] and she wanted to make sure that I wasn't the one carrying because she said that he and I looked so much alike that we could be brother and sister.

Marty spoke excitedly about how much his baby picture looked like hers. Both Joy and Marty talked about how much their daughter looks like Marty's family. It only took Joy and Marty two tries to get pregnant. They talked about how lucky they were because the *process is so expensive*.

Joy and Marty talked about the *steps* they took to *secure parenthood*. They went through the *process of second-parent adoption*. They talked about how *expensive the legal fees were* and how happy they were to have that *feeling of security* that piece of paper gives them. They felt it "was the safest thing" to do. Joy and Marty expressed concern over the ways laws change and how second-parent adoption not only varies from state to state but from county to county in some instances. Marty spoke of their choice for living in a liberal environment and how that is affected by second-parent adoption:

We would never move anywhere else that would not acknowledge that law or allow me to do the same thing in a different state...It was more just for the legal security as much as it can be a security thing.

After *all that they went through* to have their daughter, Joy and Marty are *careful about who and what she is exposed to*. Joy stated, “Oftentimes when we come into a new community or new place, we are, maybe not defensive, a little more hyper-alert about where people stand with the whole gay thing.” Marty talked about traveling in a rural area with their daughter. They stopped at a rest stop and Marty took their daughter to the bathroom while Joy waited in the car. Their daughter began talking about her “other mommy” while in the bathroom stall. Marty described *feeling uncomfortable* that other people were listening and she began to wonder what they might think. She was *afraid* of what might have happened and tried to get her daughter out of the bathroom and into the car as quickly as possible without having to “shush” her or make her aware of Marty’s anxiety. Joy explained that there are times when they are “a little more *closeted*” and times when they feel it is okay to be *very open* about their *family structure* and part of taking care of their daughter is *knowing when to be ‘out’ and when to be more cautious*.

Joy and Marty also talked about struggling with “the *same things* as straight couples struggle with in raising a child.” They talked about dealing with discipline issues that are *similar for all families*. They felt that many *parenting issues are universal* regardless of race, ethnicity, or the gender of the parents. Joy and Marty talked about some of the things that make *parenting as lesbians distinct*, including the challenges. Marty talked about the *tension* that has been a part of their relationship because she feels that she is often forced into the *father role* in their family dynamic. Marty feels that their

daughter seeks out Joy for comfort and *nurturing* and Marty for protection and play and Marty feels the need to be more of a nurturer. Joy said of Marty, “she has such a deep nurturing instinct. There probably are a lot of men out there who have the same feelings yet they’re being cast into this ‘you’re the buddy’ role because they’re not the mother.” They talked about how this has been difficult for them but they are working through it together.

Joy and Marty discussed another issue that was a struggle for them as a family. They talked about dealing with the fact that they haven’t always had Marty’s *family’s acceptance* and this has been stressful and emotional for them. Joy reminded Marty of all of the stress they dealt with saying, “gaining your family’s acceptance was really [stressful] because we’re two women.” Marty explained that her family is first generation Arab and lesbians having children is a real conflict with their religious and cultural beliefs. Joy went on to say, “they did come around but it took a long time. It was a really big struggle for them. Even [Marty’s] siblings had a hard time. They used the word ‘selfish’.” It was important for Joy and Marty that their daughter know and have a relationship with her grandparents and they are relieved that the situation has improved.

Joy and Marty spoke about the *positive aspects of two women parenting*. They talked about how they are *both available* to nurture their daughter and they feel that the *equality of their relationship* provides a model for her. They talked about *teaching tolerance and acceptance of diversity* and giving their daughter “*the tools*” she would need to deal with a world that *discriminates* based not only on her skin color but also who her mothers are. When asked what those tools were, Joy said:

Every kid gets picked on for whatever it is that sets them apart. I think the way to counter that, the main way that we counter that, is we find ways for...with a great deal of love and respect, we're trying to give her everything, all the tools we can give so that she has a normal self-esteem and sense of self-worth...so I think that's our main defense against any teasing of any kind.

They felt that if they *normalized their family, taught their daughter the value of diversity,* and taught her that *what people say about you can't hurt you* if you *believe in yourself and your family* that she would be *successful* in this world. Joy and Marty talked about having a *responsibility to choose schools* where their daughter is *not the only minority or child of gay or lesbian parents* and about having a *responsibility to educate teachers and others about different types of families*. Marty said of that responsibility, "we try to let that help form our decisions on where her schooling is, if she is home-schooled, or goes to school somewhere or whatever, that she's not the only one." Joy continued saying, "so you know, a little bit of sheltering...for awhile. Just 'til the formative years are over and then we'll be able to relax."

Joy and Marty responded to a post on a lesbian parenting website but they rarely *participate in the activities* held by the group. They sought out the group on the internet as a *source of information and support*. They feel that it is important for their daughter to *see families like theirs* and believe that *the gay community is a source of support* for their family. They also stated that they have more heterosexual friends than homosexual friends but would like to build relationships with other gay or lesbian families so that their daughter has that *extended support/family network*. Joy and Marty want their daughter to grow up with men in her life. They have many heterosexual friends who serve as *male role models* for her. While Joy and Marty don't feel that having a *male role*

*model* will “make or break her” they do think it is *important to have all kinds of people* in their daughter’s life.

Joy and Marty talked at length about their *values* as a family. Marty recounted a time when she and her daughter met a homeless woman on the bus and her daughter invited her to their apartment for tea. They described themselves as “total hippies” with Christian values. They wanted to teach their daughter to have *self-respect, to respect the earth, and have a sense of responsibility* towards people or animals. They talked about teaching their daughter to *respect other people’s feelings and opinions* and to always be kind despite what people say about you. Everything in Joy and Marty’s world centered around the *time spent with their daughter* and how to rear her with an *emphasis on values over material things*. They were a very unique family.

All of the concepts and themes that make up the proposed Alternative Family Socialization model are intertwined in the day to day activities that make up the fabric of these families’ lives. Some themes and concepts represent the struggles Erica and Karen and Joy and Marty went through to create and secure their families. Other themes and concepts represent the specific actions they take to socialize their children, and others represent how they navigate within the world as a lesbian-headed family. For the most part their experiences are their own and while they may not be representative of all lesbian families, they are very similar to the overall experiences of the other 16 mothers interviewed in this study. This study is about a very specific group of lesbian mothers who chose to create their families through the use of artificial insemination, primarily using unknown donors or donors who are not the child’s father. These mothers wanted to

create a family headed by two mothers, not two mothers and a father. The model of Alternative Family Socialization may not apply if the specific characteristics of this sample are not represented therefore it is not generalizable beyond this study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this study, I explored a number of themes associated with the socialization strategies lesbian mothers use in rearing their children. All three of my research questions were addressed by the participant's interviews. This study makes a number of unique contributions to our understanding of functioning in planned lesbian-headed families. First, the sample of mothers who participated in this study were not only relatively ethnically diverse but also represented several different socioeconomic levels. Second, this is the first study to look at how lesbian mothers view their children in relation to the gay community. And finally, this study's primary focus was on understanding how lesbian parents socialize their children. This led to the development of a model of "Alternative Family Socialization" which describes the strategies mothers used to prepare their children for the unique challenges they face as members of a minority culture and successfully navigate mainstream society.

I will first describe how the participants' responses to the interview questions addressed my three research questions. I will do this by discussing the findings based on the seven themes that emerged from the data. I will then describe the parallels between these findings and racial and ethnic socialization literature. Then, in the conclusion section I will present in detail the unique contributions this study makes to the literature as well as to the field of child development. In this section, I will show how, based on the results derived from participant's responses and the racial and ethnic socialization literature, I came to the conclusion of a model of "Alternative Family Socialization."

Finally I will present the implications for practice, limitations, and future directions of this research study.

### **Findings by Themes**

The themes “securing parenthood,” “being normal,” “division of labor and gender context,” and “issues specific to lesbian parenting” are about unique characteristics of lesbian-headed families. They reflect the cultural aspects of lesbian-headed families and, in large part, represent the ethnographic aspect of this study. “controlling the environment,” “proactive parenting,” and “being part of gay culture” represent the more dynamic aspects of this study. These three themes consist of the parenting strategies mothers use to socialize their children as bi-cultural individuals.

### **Securing Parenthood**

When mothers in this study talked about the process of becoming parents they were explaining all of the time and effort they put into building and securing their families. The theme “securing parenthood” was a topic all mothers elaborated on in their interviews and it contributed to the core theme and model of “Alternative Family Socialization.” When asked about parenting their children, mothers wanted to emphasize the fact that their children were not accidents but highly desired and sought after. The need to emphasize the many steps taken by lesbian mothers to secure parenthood seemed to be about justification. Perhaps they felt that having gone to great expense and effort to have children surely they had the best intentions for those children. This kind of response and justification makes sense when viewed in the social and political context in which lesbian mothers live. Lesbian mothers are constantly required to justify that their sexual

orientation is not having detrimental effects on their children (Green, 1978; Golombok, & Tasker, 1996; Patterson, 1995).

### **Being Normal**

Most of the literature on planned lesbian-headed families compares them to similar samples of heterosexual couples rearing children. The mothers in this study were very aware that their parenting is under scrutiny in society and they felt the need to compare themselves with heterosexual parents. Under the theme “being normal” lesbian mothers frequently compared their families to heterosexual families saying there really is no difference. This contrasted with their emphasis on highlighting the distinctions of their family structure and the advantages it provided. It seems that “being normal” stems from issues which are central, not only to lesbian families but also in politics in general. The nature of the gay marriage debate forces gay and lesbian couples to compare themselves to heterosexual couples in an effort to prove that they deserve the same privileges and benefits. When mothers talked about “worrying about the same things as all parents” they wanted to portray their families as normal. The gay marriage debate hinges on the idea that gay and lesbian families are perfectly normal and therefore should be treated the same as heterosexuals (Lewis & Gossett, 2008). Whether that is true or not is irrelevant. What is relevant is that all of the mothers in this study were well informed regarding research on lesbian parenting and the politics of the gay marriage debate. While the mothers in this study were eager to have their stories told and to share the unique aspects of their families, perhaps they are still concerned with how their families will be portrayed in research and the media. The fact that lesbian parents, at this point in history,

are paving new ground comes with the responsibility of having to bear the scrutiny of the public. The actions taken under the themes “securing parenthood” and “being normal” are part of the overall picture of how lesbian parents socialize their children in a society that still marginalizes them. They are the most indirect, in terms of interaction with the children, of all of the actions represented in the seven themes that make up “Alternative Family Socialization.”

### **Controlling the Environment**

The actions which fall under the theme “controlling the environment” are specific socialization strategies used by lesbian parents not to prepare their children for the world, but to prepare the world for their children. Lesbian parents take specific actions to set the stage for their children so that they have the best possible chance of succeeding and the least possible chance of facing prejudice. In Chapter Two I discussed the tripartite model of socialization of Parke and colleagues (1994). This model demonstrates that parents socialize their children both directly and indirectly. The model shows that parents can be interactive partners with their children, they can serve as direct instructors, and they can be providers of opportunities. The actions under the theme “controlling the environment” are non-interactive. Often children are completely unaware of the actions taken by their parents to ensure their well-being. The parents serves as the managers of their children’s environments by organizing the child’s home environment, setting limits, and providing access to opportunities for socialization with others. Mothers in this study went so far as move to another state or city in order to locate positive and accepting environments for their children. Mothers did not feel it was unrealistic to have all of the latest toys at their

house so their children would want to bring their friends over rather than venture into some unknown environment in another parents' home.

Mothers also serve as monitors of relationships and friendships by encouraging their children to interact with other children whose parents may not be lesbians but who are open-minded and accepting of their family structure. These mothers talked about being selective about who their children are exposed to in an effort to prevent negativity. They admitted that they were probably sheltering their children but also talked about having a responsibility to do so because of their family structure. While the outside world might look at these individual actions of mothers as extreme, when looked at in the context of a lesbian-headed family, these are all quite normal actions that are necessary to keep their children safe and unaware of the prejudice of mainstream culture. Even though some of these actions may seem exhausting or complex, the mothers in this study felt they were normal in families like theirs.

The actions that mothers talked about under the theme "controlling the environment" are similar to actions reported in the few studies conducted on bullying of children with lesbian parents (Clarke, et al., 2004; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). They have never been looked at as socialization strategies. As was the case in previous literature, only 20 percent of the mothers reported any instances of discrimination yet all of the mothers described some form of "controlling the environment" (Clarke, et al., 2004). Regardless of the prevalence of discrimination, mothers were very concerned that their children will have to face discrimination because of who their mothers are. Based on participants' descriptions of their fear of prejudice, their concern was most painful for

them because if their child were to be picked on it would have nothing to do with the child. Mothers felt that they had put this burden upon their child so it was their responsibility to do everything in their power to ensure that this didn't happen. It was as though the actions taken here were to ease the parents' fears rather than those of the children.

### **Proactive Parenting**

The theme "proactive parenting" is the opposite of "controlling the environment" as the actions taken by parents in this category are about preparing children for the world. The actions taken by mothers under the "proactive parenting" theme correspond with the bidirectional approach portion in Parke and colleagues (1994) Tripartite Model. Unlike the actions taken in "controlling the environment" these actions were bidirectional in the sense that there was an interaction between mothers and children. The mothers taught their children about different families and cultures by talking to them directly, reading to them books about diversity, talking to them about people who are less fortunate, and travelling to places where diversity and poverty are evident. The mothers talked about how they responded to their children's questions about not having a father or why there are people living on the street, encouraging an ongoing dialogue about difference.

Some of the interactions between the mothers and their children were in response to events that happened to the children such as not being able to play with a particular child because of his or her parents' inability to accept their family structure. Parke and colleagues (1994), in their tripartite model of socialization, described this as the "parents as interactive partner" because the parent provides socialization in response to the needs

of the child and how the child responds to those socialization strategies dictates what the parent will do next. Mothers talked about dealing with events such as these as they came up but also about having discussions with their children on a regular basis that would promote pride in their family and a healthy self-concept so that they would be better prepared in the event that they faced discrimination.

Parents who take actions such as those in the “proactive parenting” theme also appear to be utilizing an “authoritative” style of parenting (Baumrind, 1991). The authoritative style has been found to be the most beneficial to positive child outcomes among European American middle class samples (Bronstein & Duncan, 1996). This style combines elements of authority with democratic child-rearing practices. Like parents in this study, authoritative parents encourage open communication with their children. They encourage autonomy while providing support for their children. Bronstein and Duncan (1996) found that supportive parenting provides children with a strong sense of self-worth and can serve as a buffer against emotional disturbance. Similarly, the mothers in this study talked about providing their children with the tools they needed to develop a positive self-concept. They felt that if their children had a healthy self-concept then they would be better equipped to cope with any discrimination they may face.

Bronstein and Duncan (1996) also found that parental responsiveness, which consists of empathy, altruism, responsibility, and open-mindedness enhances social development. Similarly, mothers in this study talked a great deal about wanting their children to be considerate and aware of those less fortunate. They talked about instilling values such as tolerance and acceptance. Mothers reported that their children were often

advocates for those less fortunate or children being picked on at school. The mothers who were rearing sons talked about this specifically. Almost all of the mothers with sons talked about producing more sympathetic and caring young men who were in touch with their emotional side. Bronstein and Duncan (1996) found that children whose parents encouraged emotional expression and empathy had higher levels of social competence. This is an area of research that needs to be further developed to see if this holds true for children with lesbian parents.

### **Being Part of Gay Culture**

All of the seven themes answered the first and most global research question, *how do lesbian parents socialize their children?* “Controlling the environment” “proactive parenting” and “being part of gay culture” more specifically address the second research question, *what strategies do lesbian parents use to prepare their children for potential challenges?* Like the explicit strategies or actions in the previous two categories, “being part of gay culture” involved some actions that were aimed at socializing their children, not only as members of a minority culture but also as members of the dominant culture. While children did gain support and identity from the gay community, by encouraging interactions with families like theirs lesbian mothers were creating relationships for their children. Similar to findings by Ladd, LeSieur, and Profilet (1993), mothers serve as monitors of relationships and friendships. In their study, Ladd and colleagues found that parents actively arranged playmates for their young children and encouraged friendship development. Similarly, mothers in this study sought out lesbian parenting groups that held “meet-ups” with other lesbian-headed families so their children would have peers to

relate to regarding their family structure. Parke and Buriel (1994) found that parents own social networks served as possible sources for playmates for their children. Corresponding to Parke and Buriel's findings, when parents encourage their children to make friends with children of their own friends, parents were able to ensure to some degree that their children were exposed to similar beliefs and values and are therefore similarly socialized. Mothers were less concerned with their children playing at the house of another lesbian family than playing next door in the home of a heterosexual family.

I asked mothers about their children as members of the gay community not only to understand how they socialized their children but also to gain an understanding of the ecological framework of their minority status. No research study on planned lesbian-headed families has ever examined mothers' feelings about their children as members of the gay community. While the children of these lesbian parents were rarely gay or lesbian themselves, they are considered to be a part of the gay community by virtue of their mothers. What does it mean to be part of the gay community? As part of the theme "being a part of gay culture," lesbian mothers describe their children as having a place in the gay community. They talk about the advantages of having a sense of belonging to a group or culture, about receiving support, and about exposure to families like their own. They talked about their children having a sense of pride in their families and an appreciation for diversity.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, socialization goals, values, and practices are shaped by the world in which we live. Families are embedded in a variety of social systems and cultural contexts that play a role in the socialization of the

child. Therefore, it is important to look at children of lesbian parents in terms of their connection to the gay community because it demonstrates the idea that children of lesbian parents are, at the very least, bi-cultural. They may be firmly rooted in the heterosexual community but they also straddle lives as active members of the gay community. They must successfully negotiate the dominant culture yet they may find a sense of pride and support from the gay community. This research question could stand alone in a study and further exploration of how children perceive themselves in relation to the gay community would be of interest.

### **Division of Labor and Gender Context**

The last two themes are “division of labor and gender context” and “issues specific to lesbian parenting.” Division of labor in lesbian households is one topic that has been well researched in lesbian family studies. Charlotte Patterson (2004), a noted authority on division of labor in lesbian couples, states that research has consistently revealed that lesbians make choices about division of labor based on different values than heterosexual couples. This study confirms that lesbian mothers are more focused on spending time with their children than seeking to advance career or financial goals. The mothers in this study talked about valuing time with their children more than having big houses or material items. They sacrificed prosperity for having at least one parent with their child. In some cases both partners worked flexible schedules in order to be available to their children. By spending more time with their children they are more attentive to their needs. Bronstein and Duncan (1996), in research on parenting styles, found that parental attentiveness, a component of authoritative parenting, related to higher ego

development and academic achievement in adolescents. Similarly, mothers in this study felt that if they were more available to them their children would be less likely to experience discrimination in a daycare facility and they would have more attention paid to their homework and learning needs. These were the reasons cited for one family's decision to home-school their children.

In addition to deciding how time is spent with their children, lesbian mothers are also able to negotiate household tasks based on a more egalitarian distribution of labor. For the most part, mothers in this study were very satisfied with their division of paid employment, household tasks, and childcare responsibilities. Again, this mirrors findings by Charlotte Patterson (2004) regarding satisfaction with division of labor. These questions were part of the interview in this study because they helped to develop the overall narrative of life in planned lesbian-headed families. The division of labor and relationship satisfaction in these families played a role in how children were socialized, particularly in regards to gender. By demonstrating that females can do all of the household tasks and that tasks are generally divided based on convenience and abilities, children are able to see that tasks do not have to be divided along gender lines. They are able to see that moms can do the dishes and change the oil in the car. This is particularly salient for lesbians with sons. The mothers in this study talked about wanting their sons to grow up to be better husbands by understanding that household tasks should be divided equally. The messages children receive through direct communication or by example are a key component in the overall socialization of the child.

## **Issues Specific to Lesbian Parents**

In “issues specific to lesbian parents” the mothers talked about how their families are perceived by the outside world. To continue relating to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model, this would be the interaction between the immediate environment and the social and economic context. Lesbian mothers talked about how little families like theirs are represented in school curricula and media. They encouraged their schools to include books about families like theirs so that all children will see there are different types of families. One family spoke about how, through participating in research and being open at school and in public about their family structure, they were “changing minds one person at a time.”

Under this theme, mothers talked about the things that heterosexual couples take for granted. They talked about the legal aspects of parenting. They spoke wistfully of how easy it must be for heterosexual couples not having to choose the DNA of their children, not having to go to great expense and effort to get pregnant, not having to secure the rights of the partner who did not carry the child, and not having to legally secure their family from conception. When they spoke of these differences between themselves and heterosexual families, it was similar to the way they spoke of “being normal.” They wanted it known that there were distinct advantages to their family structure such as the amount of attention they were able to give their children. They felt that a household with two women provided a child with greater opportunities for emotional expression and the development of sensitivity. They wanted to emphasize the

differences or strengths of their families without singling their families out as radically different from what society considers normal.

One of the most frequently mentioned topics that did not specifically fit in any other category was being “outed” by your children. Mothers talked about being in everyday situations when, out of the blue, their child would start talking about having two mommies to whoever they happened to be near. Most of the women in this study were open about their sexuality before having children. Lesbian women who are European American may not immediately be seen as a minority since, in a crowd, they are generally able to pass as white heterosexual women. Their minority status becomes more evident after they have children. The mothers in this study were often required to explain their family structure to schools or doctors or have had their sexual orientation announced in public by their young children. Sometimes the reactions mothers reported as a result of these incidents were not always positive. Because of this, a few of the mothers talked about how it was easier to just “pass” or operate under the assumption that they were a single heterosexual mother. How lesbian mothers choose to handle such situations has bearing on their own identity and the identity development of their children (Cass, 1979).

Internalized homophobia can result from non-disclosure of one’s sexual orientation (DeMino, Appleby, & Fisk, 2007). When lesbians assimilate societal bias against homosexuals, also known as heterosexism, they experience internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia involves how a person feels about themselves as a homosexual, how they feel other people perceive them, and the disclosure of their sexual identity. It involves recognizing exclusion from the social majority and can have

damaging effects on identity formation (Nungesser, 1983). The increased visibility that lesbian mothers face as a result of having children makes them more susceptible to dominant narratives that question their parenting. Heterosexism assumes that all mothers with children are heterosexual thereby making it easier for lesbian mothers to “pass” as heterosexuals (Rich, 1980). In the National Lesbian Family Study (Gartrell, et al., 1999) eighty-five percent of the mothers reported experiencing the assumption that they were heterosexual parents and twenty-five percent of them reported that they liked “fitting in.” While “passing” may create a feeling of fitting in with the dominant culture, it leads to incongruity in one’s identity (Cass, 1979). This, in turn, can affect how children feel about their family structure. The mothers in this study who reported “passing” were only selectively out and their children, a five year old and a seven year old, were not aware of the distinction between having two moms and having lesbian mothers. This may initially lead to shame for both the mothers and the children when the children become aware of what it means to be a lesbian.

As is evident by the many themes which emerged in this study, socialization in lesbian-headed households has many forms and is affected by the child, the parents, the environment, and the society in which we live. All of these themes contribute to the narrative of life in these unique families. The very nature of parenting in a minority culture makes it distinct, different, and incomparable to what is still considered the typical American family; a two parent heterosexual household. After exploring the socialization strategies used by lesbian mothers, I wanted to determine if the literature on

racial and ethnic socialization could be used as a framework. I will now examine the parallels between lesbian parenting strategies and racial and ethnic socialization.

### **Parallels with Racial and Ethnic Socialization Research**

According to the racial and ethnic socialization literature, minority group parents utilize four types of socialization strategies. These include “cultural socialization (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Hughes, et al., 2006; Hughes & Chen, 1999),” “preparation for bias (Hughes, et al., 2006; Hughes & Chen, 1999),” “promotion of mistrust (Hughes, et al., 2006; Hughes & Chen, 1999),” and “egalitarianism and silence about race (Demo & Hughes, 1990; Hughes, et al., 2006).” “Cultural socialization” involves transmitting cultural knowledge or practices from parents to children. This includes instilling a sense of ethnic pride, exposing children to stories about their culture and heritage, participating in holiday events, and using books about culture and heritage to educate children (Hughes & Chen, 1999). When the lesbian mothers in this study talked about instilling a sense of pride in their families and celebrating differences, they were utilizing “cultural socialization” strategies. The mothers in this study talked about telling their children about the history of the gay rights movement and the struggle for equality. They talked about taking their children to gay pride events and participating in family groups in gay pride parades. Most every mother talked about finding books on gay and lesbian families and different types of families and not only reading them to their children but making sure their children’s school had a copy. Like racial and ethnic minority mothers lesbian mothers clearly use “cultural socialization”- strategies frequently as a method of instilling pride and enhancing self-concept.

The second type of racial or ethnic socialization strategy, “preparation for bias,” centers on parents’ efforts to raise their children’s awareness of discrimination and prepare them to cope with the effects (Hughes & Chen, 1999). An example of this strategy is the Toddler and Infant Experiences Study (TIES) conducted by Peters and Massey (1990) with the parents of African American children. The mothers in that 1978 study reported they emphasized teaching their children to have a tough skin and to be more tolerant. Those mothers talked about teaching their children to have pride in themselves and their culture. They reported talking to their two and three year old children about their minority status and how to excel despite it. The parents in the TIES study talked about doing “special things” to prepare their children for discrimination. Peters and Massey labeled these “special things” as “racial socialization.”

Quite similarly, the responses of the lesbian mothers in this study that fell under the themes of “proactive parenting” and “controlling the environment” are about preparation for bias. Despite evidence indicating their children are not experiencing high degrees of discrimination, lesbian mothers are preparing their children to live in a society in which their family identity is marginalized. Like mothers in the TIES study (Peters, 1990), lesbian mothers actively promote their children’s awareness of the potential for discrimination as a result of their family structure through discussions about prejudice. Part of this discussion focuses on enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence and teaching effective coping strategies. Mothers talked to their children about people who exhibit prejudice or discriminatory behaviors saying they do so because they are fearful of people who are different than themselves. They emphasized that the children should not

take other people's insults as personal but recognize that some people believe different things and it is okay for them to believe whatever they want. The mothers in this study talked about giving their children "tools" to deal with being picked on whether that be knowing who to tell or knowing how to control themselves and process their emotions. Additionally, the numerous activities that parents are involved in "behind the scenes" such as selecting accepting schools, neighborhoods, or friends are all done in order to prepare their children for discrimination by minimizing the likelihood that their children will encounter such incidents.

The third type of racial or ethnic socialization strategy is termed "promotion of mistrust." This refers to the need to be wary of interracial relations including transmitting messages of caution and a need to maintain social distance (Hughes & Chen, 1999). This is the least frequently used type of socialization by lesbian parents. Some of the mothers talked about cautioning their children that they may be discriminated against by children from families not like theirs. This type of socialization is different from preparation for bias in that messages of caution do not come with advice for coping so this is more of a reminder to be skeptical of dominant culture. While there were very few mothers who expressed an "us against them" mindset, one mother did talk to her son about the way straight people are as if he were not a part of the dominant culture at all. Even in racial and ethnic socialization literature, this is the least reported type of socialization probably because it shows an inherent distrust of the dominant culture and people are less likely to reveal those feelings, if present. My study findings suggest that it only applies minimally to lesbian parenting.

And finally, the last type of racial or ethnic socialization strategy is “egalitarianism and silence about race.” This is often termed “mainstream socialization” (Boykin & Toms, 1985). Parents encourage their children to develop skills and characteristics essential to survival in mainstream settings. Lesbian parents talk about the need to overcompensate for any deficits their children may encounter as a result of their family structure. One family talked about making sure their children were well disciplined, always had their homework completed, and made good grades because they never wanted anyone to say their children weren’t doing well because they had lesbian parents. This is similar to the parents in the TIES study who talked about encouraging their children to do well academically so that people would not say that they didn’t do well in school because they were African American (Peters, 1990). All of the mothers emphasized education, cultural exposure, and extracurricular activities for their children.

There are a number of factors that predict racial and ethnic socialization. These factors are related to the contexts in which parents and children operate and by individual characteristics. These factors include children’s age, gender, immigration status, socioeconomic status, region/neighborhood, parents’ racial identity, and parents’ and children’s discrimination experiences (Hughes et al, 2006). Some of these are the same in planned lesbian-headed families. Racial and ethnic socialization messages shift based on the child’s cognitive abilities or age. Younger children generally receive more messages about preparation for bias than older children. The same is true in lesbian-headed households. Mothers talked about tailoring their discussions about family differences and discrimination based on the ages of their children. They reported talking to their children

from an early age about how their families were different and emphasizing more strategies for dealing with prejudice as they reached school age. There was less talk about difference and discrimination as children got older but more exposure to families like theirs and discussions of diversity and tolerance. Mothers talked about explaining difference and discrimination in terms that their children would be able to understand.

In racial and ethnic socialization, messages may be transmitted differently based on the child's gender (Hughes et al, 2006). This is not the case in lesbian-headed families. Boys and girls seem to receive an equal amount of socialization regarding difference. Of the other factors influencing racial and ethnic socialization messages, it seems that parents who are not only minorities because of their sexual orientation but also because of race may be more apt to prepare their children for bias. It stands to reason that if they have experienced more prejudice themselves, they are more likely to prepare their children for the possibility of similar experience. This is particularly salient in terms of parents' experiences with homophobia. Almost all of the lesbian mothers in this study reported having experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation at some time in their past.

Social bias is an issue faced by every lesbian regardless of whether they have children. Bias is promoted through heterosexism and homophobia by defining normative behavior as being entirely heterosexual (DeMino, Appleby, & Fisk 2007). Public policy that justifies and legitimizes discrimination against same-sex families are based on this heteronormative ideology. Based on such policy, same-sex families are denied over 1,100 federal rights and protections as well as countless other states benefits (Human Rights

Campaign, 2002). The way that lesbian mothers view themselves is shaped by their self-perceptions of social norms. This assimilation of social bias may create internalized homophobia. Some of the mothers talked about assimilation in terms of “passing” as heterosexual and how much easier it is. This kind of misrepresentation of oneself can cause an incongruity of one’s identity. Some lesbian parents talked about no longer receiving support from the gay and lesbian community after having children and feeling more welcome in the heterosexual community where they shared the commonality of parenting. Because the actual incidence of discrimination against children of lesbian mothers is relatively low, their fear that this will happen may be rooted more in internalized homophobia than actual experience (DeMino, Appleby, & Fisk 2007). Some of the mothers talked about feeling internalized homophobia and they felt that their past experiences with discrimination based on their sexual orientation did affect the way they parented. Mothers who reported having been the victim of more frequent or serious instances of discrimination talked about wanting to make sure their children would not have to face the same challenges. For gays and lesbians, identity formation is complex and encompasses a variety of steps (Cass, 1979). If lesbians have not come to terms with their identity prior to having children, they may engage in more preparation of bias in socializing their children.

Comparisons between parents in planned lesbian-headed families with racial and ethnic socialization literature show that there is, indeed, “Alternative Family Socialization.” “Alternative Family Socialization” is similar to racial and ethnic socialization in terms of “preparation for bias” and “cultural socialization” and,

according to the mothers in this study these socialization strategies appear to be having a positive effect on children reared in planned lesbian-headed families.

Despite the similarities between racial/ethnic socialization and this alternative family socialization model, there are important and distinct differences. The findings of this study indicate that lesbian mothers engage in some socialization strategies that are unique to their family structure. First, unlike some parents of racial minorities, none of the mothers in this study reported utilizing “promotion of mistrust.” Second, these mothers reported a desire to be perceived as “normal” yet emphasized their differences. While this may have some similarity to “egalitarianism/mainstream socialization” it is distinctly different. Unlike children from different racial backgrounds, children of European American lesbian mothers are visibly members of mainstream European American culture. Yet according to these mothers, their children generally also belong to gay culture. However, unlike most racial and ethnic minorities, they have the ability to hide their affiliation with a minority culture if they choose. Third, issues of division of household labor and amount of time spent with their children are salient in the daily lives of lesbian-headed families yet these issues are not as salient in minority ethnic group families. Finally, the legal issues lesbian mothers must negotiate to secure parenthood contribute to how they socialize their children and are unique to these families. Despite these differences, using racial and ethnic socialization literature as a framework for this study was a useful first step in developing a model to explain socialization in lesbian-headed families. The next step is to continue the development of the model of “Alternative Family Socialization.”

## **Conclusions**

Some of the findings in this study resonate with and provide general support for the literature that was reviewed for background. However, this study does make some unique contributions to the field. First, many studies on lesbian parents who conceived children through the use of artificial insemination are conducted using a sample with very high percentages of European American middle to upper-middle class, well-educated mothers. In this study four mothers were Hispanic and one was Lebanese accounting for twenty-five percent of the sample. This is the first step in an attempt to gain information about lesbian families who are not only sexual minorities but also racial or ethnic minorities. There did not seem to be any significant differences in this study but race and ethnicity were not the primary focus. It would be of interest to see how race and ethnicity affect the socialization practices of lesbian parents if the sample were all mothers with multiple minority status.

Another unique contribution is that this study specifically asks about mothers' feelings regarding their children's relationship with the gay community. No other study has focused on this aspect. When asked if their children were members of the gay community mothers had strong reactions. Most of the mothers definitively responded "yes." Occasionally a mother felt as if I were asking if her children were gay and she became very defensive. When I followed up with questions about the culture of the gay community and whether it provided a source of support all mothers were all in agreement that their children did derive benefits from access to the gay community ranging from seeing families like their own to identifying with the struggles of the gay community. The

questions about membership in the gay community showed that mothers are rearing their children in a bi-cultural world in which they are members of the dominant culture and derive the benefits of being such yet they rely on the support they gain from the gay community. The answers mothers provided to these questions opens up a whole new area for exploration in child development research.

The last and most important contribution this study makes is that lesbian parenting has never before been examined through the lens of socialization. By delving into the literature on socialization I began to read about racial and ethnic socialization. This literature sounded very similar to the information I was hearing from lesbian mothers about how they prepare their children for the possibility of discrimination. All mothers talked about their concern for their children and the possibility that they may one day face discrimination. By asking parents about how they saw their children in relation to the gay community, I began to see the gay community as a culture that, although not gay or lesbian themselves, children are born into. I came to realize that children in lesbian-headed families are straddling multiple worlds. They are bi-cultural individuals negotiating their way through mainstream society while deriving support from interacting with families like theirs in the gay community. An ethnographic approach lends itself to the exploration of a culture-sharing group. This emphasis on the culture brought to light the similarities between the socialization practices of lesbian parents and racial and ethnic socialization.

In analyzing the data seven themes emerged. “Controlling the environment,” “proactive parenting,” “being part of gay culture” and a combination of “being normal”

and “issues specific to lesbian parents” are each directly related to the four socialization strategies parents use in racial and ethnic socialization. “Securing parenthood” and “division of labor and gender context” also contribute to how mothers in planned lesbian-headed households socialize their children. The overall theme and core category that resulted from data analysis is termed “Alternative Family Socialization.” This is the beginning of the development of a model of socialization in lesbian families. “Alternative Family Socialization” encompasses all of the unique strategies used by lesbian mothers to become parents, prepare for and protect their children from discrimination, and gain support from the gay community. What makes this interesting is that unlike racial and ethnic socialization, which are generally strategies used by people whose skin color defines their cultural affiliation, children in the gay community come from all different races but are not, by definition, gay or lesbian themselves. They derive support from families that look like theirs in terms of their parents’ sexual orientation not their skin color.

The development of a model of Alternative Family Socialization is an important step in recognizing and valuing the differences in family life in households headed by lesbian parents. While lesbian mothers in this study talked about the normalcy of family life for them, they also talked about parenting strategies that are unique to their family structure. Further research on this developing model is needed to not only advance a theoretical understanding, but also to inform clinicians, teachers, and educators who work with this population.

## **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, it is important for clinicians to be aware of the struggles that lesbians who choose to conceive children through artificial insemination experience. The amount of time and emotional energy these mothers talked about expending to prepare for and start their families can cause individual stress and stress on their relationships. It is important that clinicians understand this process in an effort to avoid minimizing the impact of the numerous obstacles these mothers deal with in constructing their families. Clinicians can help minimize some of the anxiety potential mothers feel by being aware of what resources are available such as women's centers, fertility clinics, or support groups for mothers who choose this unique family form.

Some mothers in this study talked about the challenges they faced in dealing with their families of origin either before or after having children. While all gay or lesbian individuals struggle with the reactions and potential loss of their family, it seems that negative reactions to their family structure or loss of family may be particularly challenging for newly formed families. Many of the mothers in this study talked about the families they created as substitutes for either the loss of their own family or their family's absence due to distance. Families of choice are an important aspect in the lives of gays and lesbians. Clinicians may best serve these lesbian parents by offering them the strategies needed to attempt to bridge damaged family relationships or develop support networks which may serve as surrogate families. Also, recognizing that families of choice can be just as important and valuable as families of origin is essential to understanding these parents' perspectives and maintaining a therapeutic relationship.

After overcoming a variety of emotional, physical, and financial obstacles to conceiving children through the use of anonymous donor insemination clinicians need to be aware that these mothers still fear losing their children. Even with second-parent adoption, many of these mothers still dealt with issues of legitimacy and negation of roles. Many non-biological mothers talked about how they still had to prove to healthcare providers or schools that they were legitimate mothers. Non-biological mothers talked about being asked “who is the *real* mother?” and how this made them feel angry or minimized their role as their child’s other mother. One couple also talked about how the non-biological mother was resigned to the role of the father because the child sought out the non-biological mother for play or protection, not nurturing. Clinicians should be prepared to deal with issues of legitimacy and negotiation of roles and how this can cause stress to the mothers’ relationships as partners. This information can be helpful in dealing with how these mothers relate to one another as couples.

And finally, mothers in this study spoke in contradictions. They emphasized how much their families were just like any other family yet they spoke proudly of how they were breaking new ground and rearing more tolerant, accepting, and gender-neutral children. At the heart of this contradiction is the knowledge these mothers have about societal bias against their families. Although research and public opinion has come a long way, these mothers still talk about their families in socially desirable terms in order to keep their families out of the spotlight of radical difference. Knowing how to relate to these mothers and encourage their strengths may help them develop an increased level of confidence in their parenting and family structure.

## **Limitations**

While this study involved more participants than most qualitative studies on planned-lesbian headed families, to verify that this model is indeed accurate, it is important to continue gathering data using a larger and more diverse sample. The fact that the lesbian mothers who participated in this study live in a large, relatively liberal, area of Central Texas may have some bearing on whether these findings resonate with all mothers in planned lesbian-headed families. Almost all of the mothers in this study pursued second-parent adoption thereby providing some legitimacy to their families. This is not available in all states and all counties. The way these mothers socialize their children may be influenced by the fact that both mothers have some degree of legal claim over their children. Because children were not interviewed in this study, membership in the gay community is described by their mothers, not by the children themselves, so the mothers' impressions of their children's affiliation may be different from how the children see themselves.

## **Future Directions**

As stated previously, it would be useful to conduct a study that focused solely on the question of children's membership in the gay community. It is important to look not only at how their parents perceive their role in the gay community but to also hear from the children themselves. It would be of theoretical and practical importance to see if mothers' and children's perceptions of their role in the gay community were similar and to learn how children feel about negotiating between two cultures and what, if any, impact this has on them. In terms of Alternative Family Socialization, it would be useful

to develop an instrument for assessing socialization strategies in same-sex families. Ideally this would lead to the development of outcome measures to assess the functioning of children and see what effects Alternative Family Socialization may have on their self-esteem and other outcome measures. It would also be of interest to see how this theoretical framework relates to gay fathers. Do they share the same experiences of preparing their children to face discrimination and finding support from the gay community or are their experiences different?

## Appendix A

### Consent Form

Title: *Parenting Practices of Lesbian Mothers: An Examination of the Socialization of Children in Planned Lesbian-headed Families*

IRB PROTOCOL # 2006-04-0017

Conducted By: *Cynthia Gipson*

Of University of Texas at Austin: *Department of Educational Psychology, Area II*

Telephone: 251-680-8418

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent for your records.

**The purpose of this study** *is to conduct a qualitative examination of parenting practices of lesbian mothers in planned lesbian-headed families, with at least one child conceived through artificial insemination without ties to a father. The study will utilize semi-structured interviews to gather data about specific parenting practices used by lesbian mothers to socialize, educate, and facilitate coping strategies, particularly in regards to obstacles their children may face as a result of their family structure.*

**If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:** *Complete an interview*

**Total estimated time to participate in study** *is a single interview lasting approximately one and one-half hours.*

**Risks** of being in the study

- This [treatment, procedure, intervention, or describe other] may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable. If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now or call the Principal Investigator listed on the front page of this form.

**Benefits** of being in the study: *furthering research on lesbian parenting*

**Compensation:** *none*

**Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:**

- The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.

The **records** of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin, members of the Institutional Review Board, and (study sponsors, if any) have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the **confidentiality** of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about the study please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of this page. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research please contact Lisa Leiden, Ph.D., Chair of The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, (512) 471-8871 or email: [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide**

#### ***Instructions to researcher:***

The following questions are driven by the original research questions: How do lesbian parents socialize their children? What strategies do lesbian parents use to prepare their children for potential challenges? Do lesbian parents consider their children to be members of the gay community, and if so what does this mean to their parents? While these are specific questions, they serve only as a guide to facilitate open-ended discussion from the participants. By no means are they meant to be read off to the participant and merely questions on a questionnaire. If participants are encouraged and free to tell their own stories, it is unnecessary to use a formal questionnaire. The questions begin by establishing rapport and attempting to put the participant at ease.

#### ***Demographic questions:***

Name, age, age and gender of child/children, occupation, income, educational background, length of relationship/relationship status, relationship to the child/children.

#### ***Opening questions (rapport building)***

Tell me what it's like to be a lesbian parent?

#### ***Background of decision and process prior to childbirth***

How long have you been together as a couple?

Describe the process you went through deciding to have a baby

Probe: How did you decide to use artificial insemination?

Probe: What factors did you consider in choosing a donor?

Probe: How did you decide who would carry the child?

Probe: Did you chose second-parent adoption or look into the process?

*Parenting style, socialization, and strategies*

Tell me about a particularly challenging/difficult day with your child/children

Probe: What's it like when your child/children has a behavioral incident?

Probe: How do you talk to your child/children about their behavior?

Probe: Do you punish your child/children for negative behaviors?

Tell me about a particularly rewarding/good day with your child/children

Probe: How do you feel when your child/children has done something particularly positive?

Probe: How do you talk to your child/children about positive events?

Probe: Do you talk to your child/children about your feelings for them and aspirations?

Are there any aspects of being a lesbian parent that you believe are distinctive?

Probe: How you divide childcare, housework, and paid employment?

Probe: Are you both satisfied with the division of labor?

Probe: Why do you divide tasks they way you do? Is it based on masculinity and femininity?

Probe: Do you teach your child/children about gender?

How do you talk to your child/children about your family structure?

Probe: Is your child/children aware of differences in families?

Probe: At what age did you explain to your child/children about your

family structure and/or sexuality? Why did you choose this age?

How open is your child/children regarding their family structure?

Probe: Does your child/children talk openly to peers, teachers, or others about having two moms?

Probe: How does having two lesbian mothers impact your child/children?

Have they ever had any negative experiences as a result of their family structure and if so, how have you responded?

Probe: Have you or your child ever experienced discrimination or prejudice?

Probe: How have you handle any such incidents?

#### *Membership in the gay community, culture*

Do you consider your child/ children to be members of the gay community?

Probe: Do you think your child/children to have pride in the gay community?

Probe: Do you think the gay community is a source of support for your family?

Probe: Do you attend any support groups with or without your child/children?

Probe: How active are you the politics and activism of the gay community at large?

#### *Closing, tying up loose ends*

Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would like to tell me about your

child/children or family? Have I left anything out?

At this point in the interview, the participant is reminded of the confidentiality agreement, thanked for their participation and encouraged to contact the researcher via email or telephone if they think of anything they may have wanted to add. They are also asked if the researcher may contact them if the researcher has left anything out or needs clarification.

## **Appendix C**

### **Pilot Study**

Often in qualitative research the researcher will conduct a pilot study prior to the full study in an effort to help provide a framework for the larger study and aide in the development of research questions. Based on the principles of grounded theory, research questions and hypotheses are data driven, requiring that the researcher collect data and then develop questions and hypotheses based on what is happening in the data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The pilot study might serve as a model for the full study or issues may develop during the course of the pilot study which can change the intended direction of the project as a whole.

I chose to conduct to a pilot study as a way of immersing myself in the data in order to gain insight into the perspective of the people I choose to interview. I felt that conducting a pilot study would give me an opportunity to hone my questions for my full study based on the responses from the participants. I had also questioned the idea of restricting my sample of lesbian mothers to include only those who had conceived through donor insemination. I had met people who felt that I was seriously limiting the study by not including mothers who had adopted or conceived a child within a previous heterosexual relationship. A lesbian mom is a lesbian mom, right? It would definitely be easier to locate more moms if I widened the sample. Another concern was my shyness. I am painfully shy and the thought of interviewing my first participant required some courage. Because my previous research involved children, interviewing adults seemed a little more difficult. If I could “practice” on an acquaintance that I had met in a class, I

could get a feel for interviewing adults and practice using my new digital audio recorder in a relatively judgment-free environment

I worked on developing my interview questions in a qualitative research class and after weeks of polishing them, I finally felt that I was ready to set up my first interview. I emailed the prospective participant and she agreed to meet on campus for an interview. I set up in a conference room in the social work building on campus and made sure my new recorder was charged up and ready to go. She was about 15 minutes late and I worried that she wouldn't show up. She finally made it and after unwinding a bit from her trip to campus, we began the interview. Peggy is a 42 year old mother of two children, a daughter aged 18 and a son aged 11. She was married, had her children in the context of a heterosexual relationship, and came out as a lesbian nine years ago when her daughter was nine and her son was two. She has been with her current partner for eight years and they are the primary caregivers for the children. Her husband has some interaction with the children but Peggy has custody.

Peggy talked rapidly, answering my questions in elaborate detail, telling intimate elements of her family life. I felt like I could hardly keep up and kept checking my recorder to make sure I wouldn't have to rely on the sparse notes I was able to take. When I finished with my questions, I asked if there was anything that I didn't ask that she might like to tell me and I got an additional 25 minutes of data. The interview lasted nearly two hours and was only cut short by her need to get to another appointment. Before leaving, she set up an appointment for her partner, to whom she referred to as her "wife," for the next morning.

I immediately went home and started transcribing Peggy's interview in an effort to learn from any mistakes I had made or questions I had failed to ask in the interview. I felt like the interview, as a whole, went pretty well but that something wasn't quite right. Although the principles of grounded theory state the researcher should transcribe one interview before conducting the next, I only finished about half of Peggy's interview before having to do her partner Laura's interview the next morning. I thought it would be wiser to interview while I had the opportunity rather than wait until I had finished the first transcription.

I interviewed Laura, Peggy's partner, in the same place I interviewed Peggy. The interview was very different because Laura talked about the children as being her "step-children." While she actively parented them, she dealt with issues of being a distinct outsider because their father was still a part of their lives to some extent. The interview questions didn't quite fit in some cases and had to be modified on the fly. The interview lasted about an hour. When I was finished I knew that there were issues involved in lesbian parented families that started out as heterosexual families that were distinct to this type of family. I knew that the issues that made these families different from donor insemination families were too great to lump together in one study.

Although I did transcribe both interviews and did find some similarities on some issues such as "membership in the gay community," these would be the only two interviews of lesbian parents who had conceived children in a heterosexual relationship. I also learned never to conduct another interview until I had transcribed the previous one in the event that modifications needed to be made prior to the next interview. In grounded

theory, the interview questions are constantly evolving and I found this to be a very important aspect of getting to the heart of what the participants were trying to tell me about their lives. I did end up using one interview from a mother who had adopted twins but I believe there are differences in adopted families and in order to get an accurate idea of what socialization is like in planned lesbian-headed families, I need to rely on a sample that falls within certain bounds. For the full study, I decided to select only participants from donor insemination families.

What follows here are the results from the pilot study without the two participants mentioned above, Peggy and Laura. I believe that conducting a pilot study proved very helpful. I feel that after refining my questions through several interviews my final set of questions are strong and get to the heart of my research questions. The themes that emerged from the interview data are very similar to themes in the racial socialization literature and I have since expanded my reading and literature review to reflect this. The core theme of an Alternative family or sexual minority socialization is an important contribution to the current literature on planned lesbian-headed families. I think that it could serve as a model for rearing tolerant children in an ever diversifying world. This pilot study has only sparked my desire to continue this project.

## **Pilot Study Methodology**

### ***Sampling and Recruitment***

Six lesbian mothers were recruited through two sources. Three were recruited through an email sent to a Houston gay and lesbian parenting group. The other three were recruited through personal contacts or “friendship pyramiding” (Clarke, et al., 2004,

2004), a commonly used sampling method in lesbian research by which participants are recruited by individuals who have already agreed to participate. All were contacted via email and then followed up with a telephone call confirming participation and scheduling of interviews.

Of the six participants, five were White and one was Hispanic (see figure C.1). Five were professionals and one was a graduate student. All six participants were of

### PILOT STUDY PARTICIPANT DATA

Role	Pseudo-nym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Education	Children's Gender/ Ages	Partnered/ How Long?
<b>B*</b>	<b>Peggy</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>Caucasian</b>	<b>Masters</b>	<b>female 18, male 11</b>	<b>9 years</b>
<b>S*</b>	<b>Laura</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>Caucasian</b>	<b>Bachelors</b>	<b>female 18, male 11</b>	<b>9 years</b>
A	Aubry	26	Caucasian	Masters	female 3, male 3	6 years
B	Amy	42	Caucasian	Ph.D.	twin females 8 ½	16 years
B/S	Jamie	45	Caucasian	Ph.D.	female 9, males 8 & 4	no
S	Pam	51	Caucasian	Masters	male 8, male 5	14 years
S/B	Erica	38	Hispanic	Bachelors	male 7, female 4 ½	10 years
B/S	Karen	39	Caucasian	Bachelors	male 7, female 4 ½	10 years

**Figure C.1. Participant Demographics.** In the “role” category, “B” designates the biological mother, “S” designates the social mother, “B/S” means they have conceived a child and are the social mother to another, and “A” designates the mother who adopted. The asterisk (\*) symbol designates the two participants who shared custody of the children one conceived within a heterosexual relationship. As mentioned previously, **Peggy and Laura are excluded from the data analysis, leaving only six participants.**

middle to upper-middle socio-economic status. Five of the six participants conceived children through artificial insemination and one participant utilized adoption. All

participants had at least one child between the ages of four and 11. All six participants were currently in the relationship in which they initially had their child/children, the shortest relationship period being seven years, the longest being 16 years.

### **Pilot Study Instrumentation/Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews lasting between thirty-four minutes and two hours were conducted with each participant. Interviews were conducted at a setting chosen by the participant; typically their homes, offices, or at a location on campus at the University of Texas at Austin. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were verbally informed of the information in the consent form and asked to review and sign the form. The consent form explained participant confidentiality, how the findings would be used, and that interviews would be recorded audibly. The interviews began by asking participants to describe their experiences as a lesbian mother. Probes were asked as needed to gain further understanding and rich descriptions. The remainder of the questions followed an interview guide which was modified throughout data collection in accordance with the grounded theory principles of Strauss and Corbin (1998). A key feature of grounded theory is that hypotheses or questions are under constant revision during research until they remain accurate for all of the evidence gathered through data collection and observation. So, while questions from the following interview guide (See Appendix B for complete interview guide) provide an initial starting point, they were flexible throughout the process of collection and analysis of data. Questions were asked in as broad a format as possible to facilitate an open discussion led by what the participants believed to be

important relative to the questions and to prevent the researcher from imposing any bias on their response.

***Original Interview Guide***

1. Tell me what it is like to be a lesbian parent.
2. Describe the process you went through deciding to have a baby
3. Tell me about a particularly challenging/difficult day with your child
4. Tell me about a particularly rewarding/good day with your child
5. Are there any aspects of being a lesbian parent that you believe are distinctive?

Following analysis of the first interview conducted, in order to better address the research questions, I determined that questions and probes exploring experiences related more to the children's experiences and mothers' responses were needed. I then added the following questions:

1. How do you talk to your children about your family structure?
2. How open are your children regarding their family structure?
3. Have they ever had any negative experiences as a result of their family structure and if so, how have you responded?

As a result of adding these additional questions and probes related to them, it was evident that issues relative to inclusion in the gay community were being expressed. An additional question was then added to the remaining interviews: Do you consider your children to be members of the gay community by virtue of having two lesbian mothers?

## **Pilot Study Analysis**

In grounded theory, data analysis begins at the time of the first piece of data collection and continues throughout the course of the study. By analyzing data from the start, collected data were used to guide the next interview. As an essential part of grounded theory, this method allowed the researcher capture data that were relevant to the topic as soon as they emerged. After transcription of the first interview, “open coding” began by breaking data down analytically in order to stimulate inductive thinking. In open coding, events, actions, and interactions were compared for similarities and differences and given labels based on concepts. From the six interviews analyzed, 110 concepts were labeled. Some of these concepts included “choosing progressive environments,” “connection to ‘families like ours,’” and “having to constantly explain yourself.” These concepts were grouped together to form categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

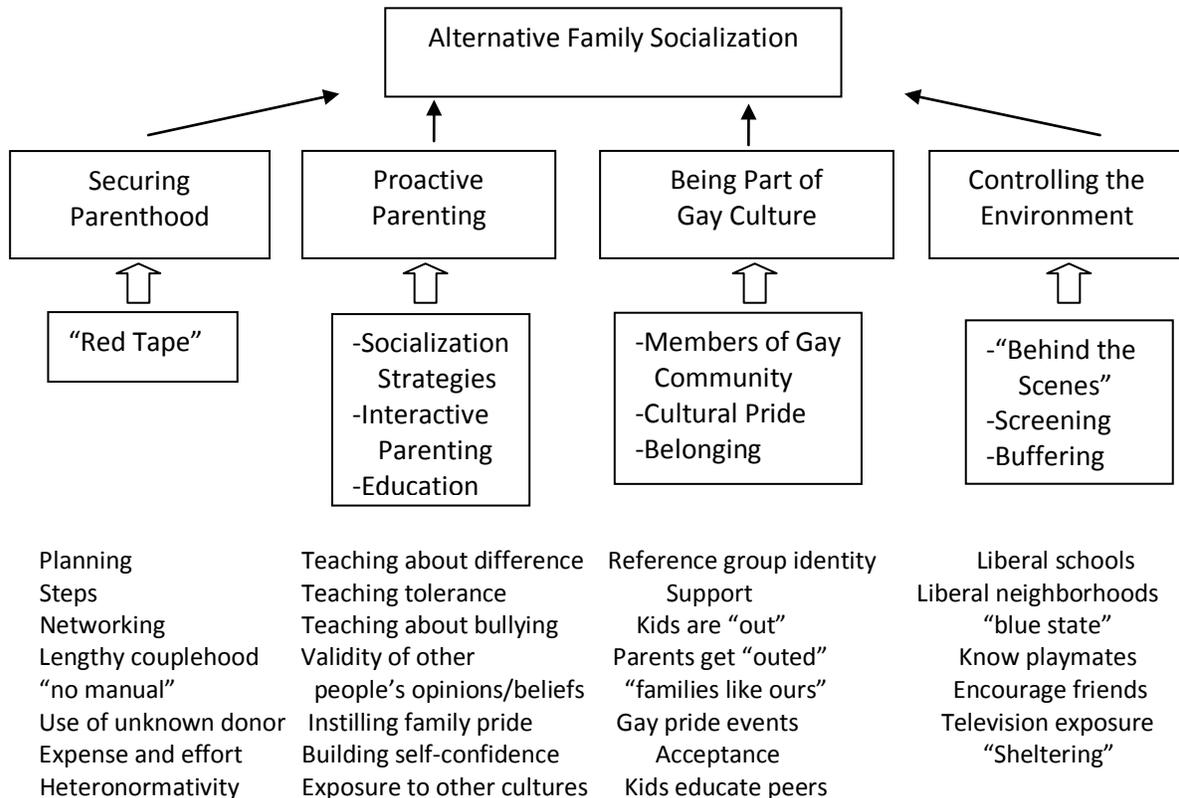
After open coding the process of “axial coding” began by evaluating categories and subcategories against data. Some examples of the seven subcategories included “screening,” “taking steps to minimize incidents,” and “advantages of the gay community.” Seven main categories were also revealed and examples included “proactive parenting,” “being part of gay culture,” and “controlling the environment.” Categories were related to each other based on their properties and dimensions. Axial coding allowed for the revision of questions or hypotheses based on new relationships or variations, making the theory more dense and conceptual linkages more relevant (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the final level, selective coding, four of the seven categories came together around the core category “Alternative Family Socialization” and was further developed and described. This provided an integration and refinement of categories to form a more central theory. Selective coding allowed the researcher to identify the relationship of the other categories in relation to the core category and allowed the researcher to return to the data to fill in the gaps. Three of the categories, while peripherally related to the core category, were not included at this time as they were unrelated to the research questions addressed in this pilot study. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that “sufficient coding will eventually lead to a clear perception of which category or conceptual label integrates the entire analysis.” This is indeed what occurred in relation to the core category of “Alternative Family Socialization.”

In utilizing ethnographic techniques in conjunction with grounded theory methods, patterns which emerged in the data were explored. Looking for patterns is a form of analysis. According to Fetterman (1998) data is collected, compared and contrasted, and sorted across categories until discernable thoughts or behaviors can be identified. Themes began to emerge and further sifting and sorting helped to classify meanings. Analyzing content and key events along with mixing and matching patterns helped to define and build the model of “Alternative Family Socialization.”

## Pilot Study Results

Based on the six interviews collected, certain patterns did emerge which were unique to this pilot study. Each of the four major themes or categories are used as the headings for and described in the following sections (see figure C.2)



**Figure C.2.** Four level coding scheme, initial codes appear at the bottom, moving upwards to concepts, leading to the four major themes, and finally to a central theme of Alternative Family Socialization.

### *Controlling the Environment*

Only one participant reported that one of her children had faced discrimination as a result of her sexual orientation. The other five participants reported no incidents. Despite the fact that discrimination was not prevalent, one of the unique aspects of the

interviews was the degree to which mothers reported “behind the scenes” actions taken to insure their children’s safety and happiness. The actions reported by these mothers may, in fact, be actions taken by all mothers to some degree. What sets them apart is a conscious awareness of the need to constantly protect their children from a heteronormative worldview that can make them feel as if their families are abnormal or wrong. Participants reported screening the people their children would potentially come in contact with in order to avoid putting them in a situation where there was even a remote possibility that they may face discrimination. One mother talks about their move to a “blue state” saying:

We found a new home that is extremely liberal in comparison [to Texas] and we are happy we made the change even though we left behind many friends and my half of the extended family. To me, you could always just move to the right neighborhood and you would be safe. I don’t believe that anymore. Before I left, my younger sister pleaded with me not to leave and I tried to explain that I felt like we owed it to the children since we brought them into this world that holds a grudge against them, to at least give them an even playing field if I could.

All six of the mothers talk about choosing liberal or progressive environments for their children including the areas they live, where they attend school, or where their extra-curricular activities are. Some talk about encouraging other children to come over and play at their house where they can control the environment rather than having to wonder what the rules are at the neighbor’s house or what the adults in that household may say in the presence of their children. They all talk about encouraging their children to select good friends who may have more liberal parents or children who seem to exhibit similar values to those taught in their own households. All of the mothers are very

involved at their children's schools, either through parent-teacher activities or as volunteers in the classroom. One mother and her partner chose to home school their children because they believe:

you don't want a bunch of children teaching yours how to behave badly. Then when they get older, you can easily justify it in the same terms adding safety to the mix. It is also an advantage to be home schooled since they are from a different kind of family. These years can give them the confidence and experience they need to handle being treated badly someday just because they're children of same gendered parents.

Some of the mothers talked about "buffering" as a "catch-22," stating they realize they may be sheltering their children from some of the normal experiences of childhood but they believe it is important for them to be active in their children's lives, especially during the formative years, in order to give them an opportunity to develop a healthy self-esteem and self-concept. They talked about taking these steps in order to minimize any incidents their children may encounter as a result of their mothers' sexual orientation. It seems that these mothers may feel the need to over-compensate for their family structure by being more vigilant in terms of to whom or what their children are exposed.

### ***Proactive Parenting***

Unlike the actions taken by mothers in the "controlling the environment" category, the concepts or actions that make up this category are interactive between mother and child. One of the participants acknowledged their children's awareness of difference in their family structure stating:

well they can't help but know that there is a difference. Pick up any children's book or watch any children's movie and there is a social structure to a family that very rarely includes two mommies or two daddies very early on in a child's life.

You have to hunt for those books and they are not very entertaining by nature. The conversation comes naturally as the child is growing up and hearing something that is different over and over again from what they know.

The actions in this category revolve around socializing children to be proud, happy, and confident members of a family headed by two mothers. These actions bear some similarity to racial or ethnic socialization in that mothers are teaching their children about prejudice and diversity, trying to enhance self-esteem development through pride in their culture, and helping them to cope with negative experiences from the majority group. One participant reported a discussion with her children regarding the gay marriage debate. Her daughter was listening to the radio and asked why people were trying to write laws to hurt her family. The mother responded by telling her daughter that different people have different religious and political beliefs. She then went on to explain the history of the gay rights movement and its impact stating:

we equate it to the black civil rights movement about how people used the Bible and religion to say that blacks weren't the same as whites and they didn't deserve equal rights and that when you're raised to believe those things it's hard to overcome them. And slowly over time society changes and that's what we're in the midst of right now is sort of a backlash because society is changing and it's changing so fast that it's scaring some people and their reaction is to hold on as tight as they can to what they know. So we just tell them you have to go forward and you have to be proud of who you are and proud of your family and stand up for yourself and just understand that if people are hateful to you it's about what's wrong with them and it's not about what's wrong with you.

As mentioned previously, one participant reported that her child had encountered a negative experience as a result of his family structure. The participant's son was giving out invitations to his birthday party to members of his gymnastics group. His mother was

aware that one family was particularly conservative so she asked this child's mother if they should give the child an invitation. The child's mother explained her beliefs and stated that her son would not be able to attend leaving the participant to explain to her son why it wasn't a good idea to give him an invitation:

We explained to Jacob that the boy probably would not come to his birthday party. He was totally confused in the beginning but we slowly and carefully explained that people have different beliefs and that this boy's parents follow a belief system that says it's not okay for you to have two mommies. They believe that only a man and a woman should have children together and they only want the kid to play with other kids that have parents that feel the same way. We just told him the truth and he couldn't believe his ears. He thought that was terrible and he was sorry that the boy was being raised in such a closed system, in his own opinion.

The way that she chose to explain to her son seems to be representative of how the other participants explain discrimination to their children. It is important to note that the participants are emphatic about telling their children that some people believe different things and regardless of how that makes the child feel, they shouldn't take it personally or fault them for having different beliefs. All of the mothers talked about wanting their children to grow up with a knowledge that there are many different types of people with many different views and beliefs and there is nothing wrong with difference. They emphasize focusing on the positive aspects of their families rather than on how some people may judge and discriminate against them. They emphasize instilling positive values in their children such as tolerance and empathy. One participant said:

And you see that more with Andrew, right? Because he's a little bit more, he's definitely very sensitive. And I think that's because he's got two moms right? ...but he's definitely very in tune with his sensitive self. He's very intuitive and he is really careful about hurting somebody's feelings and Maria is a little bit more,

she doesn't care, so she'll stay stuff and he'll say 'Maria that was really rude'. And for a little boy to say that is just kind of funny but he's real sensitive. He's very caring. He's very affectionate and that's because we are real affectionate. [It is] definitely because he's got two moms.

All of the mothers talked about wanting to raise children who are more tolerant and open to diversity and more in touch with their feelings and to do that, they reported that they regularly had conversations with their children about individual differences, compassion, and acceptance:

I see good things come from having these two lesbian moms like the children don't have a parent that might twist the meaning of gender into something that it shouldn't be. For instance, even though there is hard wiring in the male brain toward violence, they don't have to be taught that they shouldn't cry or that they must fight rather than turn the other cheek.

### ***Being Part of Gay Culture***

All six participants believed that their children were undeniably members of the gay community by virtue of their mothers. One participant stated, "they *are* a part of the gay and lesbian culture. They have a birthright to it and that will never change for as long as they live." Regardless of the fact that they are not gay or lesbian themselves, children of same-sex parents benefit from membership in the gay community:

I think it's important for them to have a sense of connection to a community and to feel good about who they are and we've been doing that before they actually faced a negative but it's hard to be in our society today, even if you're not facing it directly and personally, worrying about everything that's going on with the legislative level and there's something in the news and the subtle message is that there something wrong with you or there's something wrong with your family and I think it's important to counteract that with a lot of messages about what a great family we are.

Each participant emphasized the importance of seeing families like their own represented in the gay community and being able to access a part of their identity within the gay culture:

As they get older, I guess they will begin to learn who is gay and who is not but at this point, the only real advantage to being around other gay people is they see two same gendered people as a couple from time to time and some of them have children too. So they do get to see themselves represented in those families and we will definitely continue that type of exposure as I think that it is good for them to see and meet other kids raised by a couple of women or a couple of men.

Most of the mothers reported that their children knew at least one friend with same-sex parents or were able to see families like theirs by attending gay events such as family pride or by being members of a gay parenting group or a support group or national organizations such as COLAGE, which supports children with gay, lesbian, or transgendered parents by conducting workshops throughout country, maintaining local chapters in major cities, and through an interactive webpage:

When they're exposed to other families like ours, our types of families, then they can see 'oh so-and-so has two moms or there are two other girls and there is two guys' and they're part of the community because of us. I think the more exposure that they have to just the gay and lesbian lifestyle, to just diversity in general, I think the better off they'll be.

Mothers stated that having access to the gay community served as a buffer for their children as well as a source of pride. If children had a sense of belonging to a community, they would be buffered against discrimination encountered outside that community.

### *Being Normal*

In response to the interview question “tell me about being a lesbian mother,” participants all stated they are mothers first and lesbians second. They talked about the importance of having a “normal” life and that their families were no different from any other aside from the fact that it was headed by two women. One participant stated “we really go through life as a family of four, basically. We do tell the children that they have two mommies and that they are lucky for that. I would also say that our family is very normal in terms of day to day activities.” One participant compared issues her son was having at this particular age with issues his cousin of the same age was having:

I just think of it as being a parent not really a lesbian parent because we experience the same parenting challenges that any other parent would experience. In fact I was talking to my brother this past weekend and I was saying Andrew is really starting to read a lot. This is the kind of challenge that were having with him. And he said ‘yeah his cousin is having the same’ because they are almost the same [age]. From a parenting standpoint, I think we experience the same things with our kids.

While each of the participants reported distinct differences in their families when comparing themselves to traditional heterosexual households, they also made a point to emphasize the similarities. It seems that it is critically important to lesbian parents that society know their household may have some distinct advantages but is basically similar to anyone else’s in terms of day to day parenting:

We worry about the same things that all parents worry about. We worry about our kids being healthy and safe, and getting a good education and having friends and peer pressure and keeping them away from drugs and alcohol, and that whole when are they going to leave us and go to college you know. So day to day our focus is on all the same things that any parent would worry about.

## DISCUSSION

In this pilot study, I explored a number of themes associated with the socialization strategies lesbian mothers use in rearing their children. All three of my research questions were addressed by the participant's interviews. Using an ethnographic approach to answer the question of *how do lesbian parents socialize their children?*, a story about the lives of the participants and their children unfolded. I first looked at lesbian parenting as a sub-culture of gay culture or the gay community. While children of lesbian parents are rarely gay or lesbian themselves they are considered to be a part of the gay community by virtue of their mothers. What does it mean to be part of the gay community? When lesbian mothers describe their children as members of the gay community, they talk about the advantages of having a sense of belonging to a group or culture, about receiving support, and about exposure to families like their own. The participants in this study tell a story about what life is like on a day to day basis in their households. They talk about the particular challenges they face rearing children in a heteronormative world. Lesbian mothers believe that they face many of the same challenges as heterosexual parents but also must deal with things they believe to be taken for granted in the average household. They talk about having to explain their family to people they meet, to their children's schools and teachers, and the process of repeatedly "coming out." They talk about having to educate their children about difference whereas parents in ethnic or cultural majority households don't have to do so. Lesbian mothers have to explain to their children why books, movies, and the media don't show very many families like theirs. In making sure that their children do see families like theirs and don't encounter negative incidents, there

is a great deal of “behind the scenes” activity. These activities are unique to families with minority status and while time-consuming, they are a part of the day to day lives of lesbian-headed families.

I used grounded theory methods to answer the questions *what strategies do lesbian parents use to prepare their children for potential challenges?* and *if children of lesbian parents are considered members of the gay community, what does that mean to their mothers?* Concepts from participant interviews centered around a core theme of *Alternative Family Socialization*. Despite evidence indicating their children are not experiencing high degrees of discrimination, lesbian mothers are preparing their children to live in a society in which their family identity is marginalized. The emergence of a model of *Alternative Family Socialization* in lesbian-headed households bears a distinct resemblance to racial and ethnic socialization theory.

The participants’ stories of talking to their children about difference and discrimination showed that they are actively trying to instill values such as tolerance and acceptance in their children. The strategies mothers used in this educational and proactive component of parenting are very similar to a portion of racial or ethnic socialization which developmental and social psychologists have labeled *preparation for bias* (Hughes, et al, 2006). Like parents of racial or ethnic minorities, lesbian mothers actively promote their children’s awareness of the potential for discrimination as a result of their family structure through discussions about prejudice. Part of this discussion focuses on enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence and teaching effective coping strategies. For instance, one participant told her children that people exhibit prejudice or discriminatory

behaviors because they are fearful of people who are different than themselves. She told the children that they should not take other people's insults as personal but recognize that some people believe different things and it is okay for them to believe whatever they want.

As is evident in racial and ethnic socialization literature, parents who, themselves, may have experienced negative incidents or experiences of homophobia may be more likely to expect that their children will face discrimination and therefore spend more time preparing them for potential bias (Hughes & Chen, 1997). Each participant in the study reported at least one negative experience as a result of coming out as a lesbian. This was echoed in the extent to which participants reported a number of behind the scenes activities that they engaged in to create safe and alternative family friendly environments for their children. Strategies ranged from talking to prospective schools and encouraging positive friendships to moving to a more liberal state and screening out family members who didn't agree with their family construction.

A more positive aspect of racial and ethnic socialization that seemed similar in lesbian-headed households was what has been labeled *cultural socialization* (Hughes, et al, 2006). This aspect of racial and ethnic socialization teaches children about their particular culture including that culture's heritage and history. While children of lesbian mothers are not gay or lesbian themselves, all participants believed their children were members of the gay community. Participants reported benefits from membership in the gay community such as the visibility of other families like their own, support, cultural pride, and a sense of identity. One participant discussed a conversation with her children in which she discussed the history of the gay rights movement and equated it with black

civil rights. The participants talked about membership in the gay community as a buffer against discrimination for themselves and their children.

The emergence of a model of Alternative Family Socialization is an important step in recognizing and valuing the differences in family life in households headed by lesbian parents. While lesbian mothers in this study talked about the normalcy of family life for them, they also talked about parenting strategies that are unique to their family structure. Further research on this developing model is needed to not only advance a theoretical understanding but also to inform clinicians who work with this population. In the analysis of the six interviews conducted for this pilot study, three additional sub-categories and categories emerged. They were not included in this study because they were not directly related to the research questions addressed here. They do, however, shed light on socialization in lesbian-headed families and should be explored in-depth with additional interviews. The three categories were labeled “securing motherhood,” “division of labor and gender context,” and “issues specific to lesbian parents.” These three categories will be included in this researcher’s dissertation where they can be examined in more detail.

This pilot study used a small, relatively homogenous sample of mothers from the central Texas area. To verify that this model is indeed accurate, it is important to continue gathering data using a larger and more diverse sample. Future research needs to address the components of socialization more in-depth, as was evident in the later interviews conducted as part of this pilot. Questions became more centralized, as is customary in grounded theory methodology, around parenting strategies in order to obtain richer data

relative to socialization. Questions regarding the effects of lack of legal recognition of same-sex relationships may have an impact on parenting and may merit future exploration. A goal for future research is to gather data from lesbian mothers throughout the United States, increasing the sample size and ethnicity of participants through theoretical sampling. It is the intent of this researcher to use this pilot study as the first step in a larger project with this population and to continue examining lesbian parenting.

## **Appendix D**

### **Biographical Sketches of Participants**

What follows here are brief biographical sketches of the 20 participants that make up the sample for this study as well as a graphic representation of their demographic information and family structure.

#### **Tina and Candy**

Tina and Candy are both 39 year old Caucasian women. They have been a together for 14 years. They have two children, an eight year old daughter and a five year old son. Both are Candy's biological children conceived through the use of an anonymous donor. Candy always wanted the experience of childbirth whereas Tina was not as keen about carrying a child. Their socioeconomic status is middle class. Tina works full-time as a supervisor in the technology industry and Candy, a former school teacher is a stay-at-home mom. Tina has a master's degree and Candy has a bachelor's degree.

#### **Monica**

Monica is a 37 year old Caucasian woman. She and her partner have been together for 7 years. She is the biological mother of twin 8 month old daughters. The children were conceived through the use of an unknown donor of Filipino ethnicity. Their socioeconomic status is middle to upper middle class. Monica works a flexible full-time schedule running her own business and her partner is a school teacher. Monica has some college and her partner has a bachelor's degree.

**Greta and Alex**

Greta is a 57 year old Caucasian woman and Alex is a 28 year old Caucasian woman. They have been together for eight years. Together they are rearing two boys aged 10 and 12, from Greta's previous marriage and a three year old daughter conceived by Alex using a known donor who has little contact with them and does not serve as a father to their daughter. They chose to use a known donor after spending a considerable amount of money through the anonymous donor route. Their socioeconomic status is middle to lower middle class. Alex is in school en route to a master's degree and Greta works full-time in a service profession.

**Jackie**

Jackie is a 36 year old Caucasian woman. She is recently separated from her former partner and non-biological mother of her two children. Jackie is the biological mother of two boys ages three and five. The oldest child was conceived using a known donor who is not at all active in their lives and the youngest was conceived through the use of an unknown donor. Jackie's socioeconomic status is middle to upper middle class. She has some college and works a flexible full-time schedule in the insurance business.

**Joy and Marty**

Joy is a 33 year old Caucasian woman. Marty is a 43 year old Lebanese woman. They have been together for eight years. Joy is the biological mother of their three year old daughter. They used an anonymous donor with Marty's physical characteristics and the child looks very much like her. Their socioeconomic status is lower class. They both have

some college education and they both work in the health industry on a part-time basis. They have very flexible schedules and are home with their daughter much of the time.

### **Alecia**

Alecia is the 50 year old Caucasian mother of a 15 year old daughter. Her daughter was conceived through the use of an anonymous donor. Alecia separated from the child's non-biological mother when the child was a toddler and has reared her on her own since. Her socioeconomic status is middle class. Alecia has some college education and works in the communications industry.

### **Esther and Carol**

Esther is a 52 year old Caucasian woman. Carol is a 46 year old Hispanic woman. They have been together for 22 years. Together they have six adopted children and two children conceived through the use of an anonymous donor. They are a 17 year old male and a 14 year old female. Their socioeconomic status is lower middle class. They both have bachelor's degrees and both work as teachers.

### **Patsy and Tracey**

Patsy is a 40 year old Caucasian woman. Tracey is a 38 year old Hispanic woman. They have been together for 10 years. Patsy is the biological mother of their 3 ½ year old son. Tracey is the biological mother of their eight month old daughter. Both were conceived through the use of the same unknown donor. The donor's characteristics matched those of Tracey and both children look more like her than Patsy. Their socioeconomic status is middle to upper middle class. Patsy has a master's degree and Tracey has a doctoral degree. They both work in healthcare.

**Dina and Freda**

Dina is a 34 year old Caucasian woman. Freda is a 47 year Spanish woman. They have been together for seven years. Dina is the biological mother of their twin four year old daughters. Both were conceived through the use of an unknown donor. The donor's characteristics matched those of Freda. Their socioeconomic status is upper middle class. Dina has a bachelor's degree and Freda has some college. Dina works in real estate and Freda is retired from the military.

**Amy**

Amy is a 42 year old Caucasian woman. She and her partner have been together for 14 years. She is the biological mother of two twin eight year old daughters. They were conceived through the use of an anonymous donor. Their socioeconomic status is upper class. Both Amy and her partner have doctoral degrees. Amy is a college professor and her partner is a lawyer.

**Jamie**

Jamie is a 45 year old Caucasian woman. She separated from her partner and the non-biological mother of her children a year ago. She is the biological mother of a nine year old daughter, an eight year old son, and a four year old son. She used a known donor who has some involvement. He is Hispanic. Her socioeconomic status is middle class. Jamie is currently pursuing her doctoral degree in healthcare.

**Pam**

Pam is a 51 year old Caucasian woman. She has been with her partner for 14 years. She is the non-biological mother of their two sons ages eight and five. Pam home-schools the

children. Their socioeconomic status is middle class. Pam and her partner both have bachelor's degrees. Her partner works in manufacturing.

**Erica and Karen**

Erica is a 38 year old Hispanic woman. Karen is a 39 year old Caucasian woman. They have been together for 10 years. Karen is the biological mother of their seven year old son and Erica is the biological mother of their 4 ½ year old daughter. Both children were conceived through the use of the same unknown donor. Their socioeconomic status is middle to upper middle class. They both have some college. Erica works in accounting and Karen works in the service industry.

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## VITA

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