

## Perceptions of Children's Parental Preferences in Lesbian Two-Mother Households

*This study explores how lesbian mothers perceive their 3½-year-old children's parental preferences in families in which one mother is genetically linked to the child. Thirty lesbian couples (60 women) were interviewed about their children's parental preferences, their explanations of why preferences for one parent existed (or not), and their affective and behavioral reactions to such preferences. Many women acknowledged that their children, as infants, preferred their birth mothers due to biological factors (i.e., breastfeeding) or differential time spent with the child. Despite this initial preference, most women perceived little stability in children's preferences over time, such that children preferred both mothers equally. Findings support the power of "social motherhood" in fostering maternal connections that transcend biological relatedness over time.*

Some research supports the notion that, on average, the parental role is more salient to women than to men: Women invest more emotionally in the parental role, and their sense of self is tied more closely to the parent role than men's (Arendell, 2000). Cultural ideas of mothering may make it difficult for women to relinquish responsibility for some of their maternal repertoires, and some mothers are ambivalent about

collaboratively sharing parenting (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Further, both women and men may regard motherhood and the mother-child bond as exclusive, natural, and biologically inherent. In turn, notions of bonding as resulting from biology and instincts are common and serve to validate the notion that biology equals destiny and that the (birth) mother-child relationship is primary (Walzer, 1998).

Lesbian parents disrupt and expand notions of kinship in that, among couples who choose insemination, only one parent is the biological parent of the child. Given that two-mother families exist in a societal context that treats biological ties and parenthood as inextricably linked (Hargreaves, 2006), of interest is how mothering (and partner) dynamics unfold over time in lesbian parent households. In a prior study using the current sample of lesbian mothers, Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) found that at 3 months postpartum, most women did not feel that the biological relatedness of one mother had shaped their parental roles. Nonbiological mothers who did cite the influence of biology sometimes experienced feelings of exclusion, and several women expressed feeling helpless because they could not nurse. These women expressed hope that as their children aged (and breastfeeding ceased), their children would prefer each parent equally. Given that society privileges biological ties (Hargreaves, 2006), theories of child development tend to emphasize the (birth) mother-child relationship (Winnicott, 1987) and nonbiological lesbian mothers lack legitimacy under the law, it is possible that birth mothers are consistently the "preferred" mothers. In turn, their partners may continue to

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experience feelings of exclusion. Although lesbian parent families possess the potential to transform family relationships (by virtue of their shared sex and sexual minority status; Dunne, 2000), they also may reify the discourse that prioritizes biological connections as central to child-parent connections.

The current study focuses on how lesbian parents perceive their 3½-year-old children's parental preferences. Of interest is how lesbian parents discuss their affective and behavioral responses to the parent-child relationship as it develops over time and to what extent they view their children (as they become increasingly mobile, verbal, independent, and willful; Marvin, 1977) as displaying clear preferences for one parent over the other. Data from 30 lesbian couples (60 women) were analyzed, and the following questions guided the study:

1. What patterns emerge with regard to children's preferences?
2. How do women explain children's preferences?
3. To what extent do couples' perceptions represent shared or divergent realities?
4. How do women feel when they are the chosen or unchosen parent?
5. How do couples cope with a clear parent preference? What strategies do they use, if any, in an effort to mitigate such preferences?

We next review the relevant literature so as to contextualize our major research questions.

#### *Children's Preferences for Parents: Patterns and Explanations*

Children's parental preferences have not been extensively studied in heterosexual families, perhaps in part due to the dominant cultural assumption that mothers are typically the primary parents and children only have one primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). A large literature exists on attachment, much of which examines mother-child attachment (Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2007). Fewer studies examine father-child attachment (Bretherton, Lambert, & Golby, 2005) and the differential bonding experiences of mothers and fathers (Ehrensaft, 1990). Lamb's (1977) observational study suggests that mothers and fathers may be *equally* bonded to their children (even if they differ in level and type of involvement), but mothers and fathers form *qualitatively* different bonds, which may impact how children develop

patterns of behavior that express their parental preferences. For example, if babies associate paternal contact with play and maternal contact with caretaking, they may respond more positively to playful interactions with fathers and thus display a stronger bond with them when they desire this activity.

The term "bonding," an analytical concept that is used in popular and scientific discourse, has been critiqued for being overly generalized and theoretically vague (Crouch & Manderson, 1995). Our emphasis on lesbian mothers' understandings of child *preference* speaks to this concern, and this study is a purposeful move toward delineating a particular kind of relational process, which mothers perceive as being behaviorally enacted by their children. Given that children can be equally *attached* to each mother but display various parental preferences, we focus our analysis on women's perceptions of their children's preferences rather than their understandings of broader bonding experiences and attachment styles. Furthermore, despite the paucity of research pertaining to children's parental preferences, there is evidence that parents are deeply interested in gaining more information about how to respond to children who prefer one parent over the other, as indicated by various online forums and blogs that address this concern.

The differential bonding experiences of parents and (more rarely) parents' perceptions of children's parental preferences have typically been examined in families wherein there is no obvious primary parent, such as families led by heterosexual couples committed to shared parenting (Deutsch, 1999; Ehrensaft, 1990) and lesbian parent families (Gartrell et al., 1999). Of interest is how lesbian parents (who share equal status as women and mothers and a strong motivation to parent) perceive the factors that contribute to their children's parental preferences during a developmental period marked by increased independence. The literature on shared parenting and on lesbian parent families sheds light on factors that may shape such preferences.

*Social factors* are frequently cited as influencing children's parental preferences. Studies of heterosexual couples who are committed to shared parenting suggest that children's differential parental preferences may relate to the fact that one parent may be more available (Deutsch, 1999; Ehrensaft, 1990). The impact of time

availability on children's parental preferences is further illustrated by the *presence of siblings*. Research suggests that after the birth of a second child, fathers often increase their responsibility for the first child (Kreppner, 1988). This shift in care may facilitate bonding between the father and older child. *Parenting twins* may lead to similar patterns whereby mothers and fathers are linked to different twins, in part due to the demands of parenting twins. In early childhood, fathers often take responsibility for feeding one child, while the mother primarily cares for the other child (Moilanen & Pennanen, 1997), facilitating a "father's twin" and "mother's twin" dichotomy (Trias et al., 2006). Similar processes might characterize lesbian-mother households such that having twins may help equalize parental roles, and in households with second children, nonbirth mothers might be preferred by first-born children.

Studies of lesbian parents suggest that lesbian women perceive both social and *biological factors* as influencing the parent-child relationship. Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) interviewed lesbian mothers of 3-month-old infants and found that one fifth of the nonbirth mothers and two fifths of the birth mothers felt that the birth mother was the primary parent, which they typically attributed to social factors (the birth mother's greater time with the child) as well as biological factors (breastfeeding, a special "bond"). Gartrell et al. (1999) studied lesbian mothers of toddlers and also found that time spent with the child and biological connections were the most frequently cited factors that influenced mother-child bonding.

Women's perceptions, then, closely mirror the findings of psychobiological research, which point to the role of maternal hormones in facilitating early attachment (Carter, 1998). They also echo cultural assumptions about the importance of breastfeeding in enhancing emotional closeness between the birth mother and child (Tarkka, Pauonen, & Laippala, 1999). Indeed, studies that compare breastfeeding and nonbreastfeeding mothers and their infants often find no differences in attachment quality (Wilkinson & Scherl, 2006), suggesting that it is not breastfeeding per se but the closeness that the act entails that facilitates attachment (Winnicott, 1987). Interestingly, men in Walzer's (1998) study of new parents attributed their less close relationship with their babies to breastfeeding,

as opposed to other possible (social) explanations, such as the fact that they spent less time with them. Biology may become the "fall back," seemingly indisputable (because culturally dominant) explanation that couples invoke, even in the presence of other viable explanations for children's preferences.

*Developmental factors* may also impact children's parental preferences. Research with heterosexual couples suggests that fathers become increasingly involved with their children as they grow older (Lewis, 2005); in turn, children may become increasingly connected to, and may more frequently prefer, their fathers. Children in lesbian mother families may demonstrate similar changes in their relationships with parents. Gartrell et al. (2000) reinterviewed their sample when the children were 5 years old and found that 68% of couples perceived their children to be equally bonded to both mothers. Of the 32% of couples who viewed their children as more bonded to one mother, all but 2 women felt that their children were more bonded to the birth mother. As birth mothers cease breastfeeding and children become more independent, children may shift their focus somewhat from the birth mother to the other parent (Morningstar, 1999), promoting more equal bonding. In turn, nonbiological mothers may feel increasingly needed, included, and appreciated.

Finally, *parents' gendered identities* may impact children's preferences. One mother may be perceived as inhabiting a more maternal, motherly role, whereas the other may occupy a fathering role (Gabb, 2005). In her qualitative study of 18 lesbian mothers, Gabb found that birth mothers often described themselves (and were described by their partners) as occupying a more maternal role and taking primary responsibility of caretaking, whereas their partners occupied a more paternal role. Such masculine/feminine gendering, however, does not merely mimic or reconstitute traditional gender norms. Rather, lesbian mothers' enactment of masculine and feminine roles calls attention to the social construction of gender by disrupting the idea that gender and sex are causally related (Gabb). Thus, we theorize that some lesbian mothers may describe their parenting roles in gendered terms and may describe a process in which their children come to expect and seek out each mother for a different (and symbolically gendered) need.

### *Parents' Feelings Regarding Children's Preferences*

Although many heterosexual mothers desire father involvement, some women experience jealousy or anger in response to father-child interactions (Ehrensaft, 1990; Ellestad & Stets, 1998). The expression of these emotions may discourage father involvement and inadvertently support and reinforce the social structure in which mothers are the primary caregivers. Mothers may be particularly jealous when fathers engage in "mothering" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Traditional notions of mothering tend to emphasize nurturance whereas fathering tends to emphasize certain activities such as roughhousing and play (Arendell, 2000; Chodorow, 1978). Ehrensaft found that when mothers and fathers shared child-care equally, women sometimes experienced feelings of exclusion when they perceived their husbands as dominating "mothering" activities.

Because lesbian couples tend to value egalitarianism (Patterson, 1995), sharing the activities of mothering might be desirable; however, two women parenting together may magnify feelings of jealousy. Heteronormative kinds of female socialization do not prepare women for the possibility of negotiating their gender performance and maternal roles in the context of intimate relationships with other women. Thus, lesbians (particularly those who embody prevailing ideas about mothering) may struggle with issues of control over parenting. Gartrell et al. (1999) found that although most mothers of toddlers considered themselves to be equal parents, 70% noted competition around bonding; in their 2000 follow-up, 48% reported such feelings. Such conflicts may reflect feelings of anxiety, guilt, and competition over nurturance that are activated by female intimacy (Rohrbaugh, 1992).

These struggles may be exacerbated by gender stereotypes and assumptions about parental roles that are based on a heteronormative nuclear family model, which assumes that there should be two different-sex parents, one of whom (the woman) must be primary (Heineman, 2004). Further, the absence of social and legal recognition for nonbiological mothers, and the centrality of biological ties in societal notions of kinship, may lead to greater privileging of the birth mother's role. Inadequate recognition of the nonbirth mother's parental role may result in feelings of invisibility and invalidation. In this context, the splitting techniques that young children may

engage in (e.g., announcing a "favorite" parent) may take on an added emotional impact whereby the nonbirth mother feels excluded from the birth mother-child dyad (Rohrbaugh, 1992).

No research to date has explicitly examined how lesbian couples discuss and interpret their explanations for and behavioral responses to their children's preferences. Our study extends research on how lesbian parents' relationships with their children unfold over time. Of note is that children's perceptions of parental preference may differ, perhaps dramatically, from their parents' perceptions. Thus, we do not assume that women's perceptions necessarily reflect any objective reality of the parent-child relationship that extends beyond their unique interpretive lens.

### *Theoretical Framework*

We utilize a social constructionist approach in our analysis, which recognizes that families, sexuality, and gender are socially and materially constructed (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Of particular interest is how social constructions of gender and motherhood operate to influence women's experiences of shared motherhood. Gender is constructed through the symbolic and structural aspects of paid and unpaid work (Ferree, 1990). Behaviors, activities, and roles are assigned gendered meanings, and various social structures (families, the legal system) carry gender values and confer advantages on the basis of gender (Ferree). This perspective acknowledges that lesbians' common gender socialization may function as both a strength and a challenge in their relationships as partners and mothers. Lesbian mothers must negotiate the meaning and actuality of a two-mother reality without the guidance of dominant discourses and social structures that support their reality (Dunne, 2000). Further, feminist analyses of "the family" have demonstrated the cultural specificity of gendered roles that are often taken for granted as "natural" (e.g., mother/father; Glenn, 1994). Although Dunne and others have emphasized the revisionist potentialities of lesbian parenting (in the absence of sex difference, lesbians escape "doing gender"), Gabb (2004, 2005) cautions us to engage the possibility that an egalitarian model is not typical of all lesbian-mother families. The divergences among (and inequities within) lesbian-mother families must be acknowledged as part of family diversity.

Broadening this diversity are the multiple ways mothers view their roles, along with their varied reactions to their children's preferences (Gabb, 2005). Some couples may struggle with sharing the "mother" role. Yet, given their egalitarian tendencies (Patterson, 1995), some lesbian women may be motivated to resolve cooperatively feelings of guilt and jealousy and work toward an arrangement in which parental statuses are not defined as "primary" or "secondary." Alternatively, some women may feel comfortable with differentiated roles and may view their children's preference for one mother as unproblematic. Further, birth and nonbirth mothers may hold different ideas about motherhood; their various views on what it means to be a mother (and the perceived importance of a genetic connection) will necessarily shape their interactions and activities with their children, which in turn may facilitate certain preference patterns. Therefore, we seek to understand how lesbian women subjectively perceive and construct their parental roles.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 60 women in 30 lesbian relationships who were interviewed when their firstborn children were 3½ years old. These women had participated in two prior, in-depth telephone interviews, 1 month before their due date and 3 months after the birth. The current study is based largely on data obtained at the third data point, when children were 3½ years old, although we draw upon data from earlier time points in order to give context to these women's current lives. Most (94%) women were White, and the majority of the sample was highly educated and financially stable. Among birth mothers, the highest degree attained was a high school diploma for 4 (10%), an associate's degree for 4 (10%), a bachelor's degree for 5 (12.5%), a master's degree for 15 (37.5%), and a doctoral/medical/law degree for 6 (15%). Among nonbirth mothers, the highest degree attained was a high school diploma for 2 (5%), an associate's degree for 5 (12.5%), a bachelor's degree for 7 (17.5%), a master's degree for 9 (22.5%), and a doctoral/medical/law degree for 11 (27.5%). Birth and nonbirth mothers averaged 38 and 41 years old at the time of the interview. Couples had been together for

an average of 10 years. The average family income was \$90,900.

All couples had used alternative insemination to become pregnant. Given the high costs that alternative insemination procedures entail, the use of insemination as a means to becoming parents may be one reason for the privileged and racially homogeneous nature of our sample (Murphy, 2001). Birth mothers reported about 9 insemination attempts before conceiving (number of tries ranged from 1 to 33). In 13 couples, the birth mother carried the baby because she had a greater desire to do so; in 17 couples she was chosen to carry for other reasons, such as age (she was younger), health (she was healthier), and job-related matters (her schedule was more flexible).

On average, women decreased their paid work hours across the initial transition to parenthood (prebirth to 3 months postbirth), although nonbirth mothers worked more hours in paid employment at both time points: Birth mothers' hours decreased from 38 to 20 hours/week; nonbirth mothers' hours decreased from 49 to 36 hours/week. At 3½ years postbirth, all mothers' hours in paid work had increased: Birth mothers were working an average of 24 hours/week and nonbirth mothers were working 47 hours/week on average. Birth mothers did more chores pertaining to their first child ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) than their partners ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ). (Means are based on women's responses to 30 childcare chores using a scale from 1 to 5: 1 = 0-20% contribution, 2 = 20-40% contribution, 3 = 40-60% contribution, 4 = 60-80% contribution, and 5 = 80-100% contribution.) Among the 11 couples that had a second child since the first interview, birth mothers were also doing more childcare ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) than their partners ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) on average. In 10 of the 11 couples that had had a second child, the original birth mother gave birth to the second child.

### *Procedure*

All 30 couples were recruited during their pregnancy. Recruitment efforts were multifold. Study information was posted in the offices of gynecologists and midwives in Massachusetts and published in gay community newsletters. Calls for participants were posted on national websites and in newsletters pertaining to lesbian issues to obtain a geographically diverse sample. Interested

couples were mailed consent forms assuring confidentiality and detailing the conditions of participation. Women returned the consent form in the initial questionnaire packet.

Both partners were interviewed individually by telephone when their first child was 3½ years old and were sent questionnaire packets to complete within several weeks of the interview. Women were asked to be available at a time and place that would ensure that their conversations were private. Interviews lasted about 1 – 1.5 hours; the questionnaires took 30 minutes to complete. Women returned their questionnaires separately from their partners in postage-paid envelopes.

### *Open-Ended Questions*

Participants were interviewed by the principal investigator and by trained graduate student research assistants. Interviews were transcribed to capture participants' thoughts and feelings in their own words. Women's names were replaced with pseudonyms, and identifying information was changed. Data for the study are mainly derived from several open-ended questions:

1. Has your child tended to prefer one parent over the other at points throughout the past few years? Can you tell me about this? How have you dealt with this?
2. What feelings have come up surrounding this preference?
3. Have you felt that biology has shaped your parental roles over the past few years? Explain.

In addition to these questions, data pertaining to experiences raising and adjusting to a second child (where applicable) were examined to assess whether similar patterns of preferences had emerged with respect to the second child. Also of interest was whether initial reasons for choosing the birth mother (e.g., her greater desire to carry) had shaped patterns of perceived child preference. Also, the potential impact of legal protections (i.e., whether the nonbirth mother had pursued a second parent adoption for her child) on women's affective response to parental preferences was of interest: Perhaps women with legal protections experience less insecurity.

### *Data Analysis*

We used grounded theory methods in the current analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss,

1967). Specifically, we used comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss) to establish analytic distinctions by comparing data across participants to identify similarities and differences. We began by conducting line-by-line coding, attending closely to participants' interpretations. We were interested in the ways that women negotiated the issue of child preference within a two-mother family; thus, this broad question, and our interest in gender, framed our analysis and coding of the data. All three authors read and applied initial codes to the transcripts of the first five couples (10 women) and then discussed the data. Extensive discussion led us to identify a number of initial themes. We then read the transcripts of the next five couples, discussed new emergent themes, and compared our data to that of the first 10 women. This led to further refinement and specification of themes. We repeated this process until all data had been coded. We then applied focused coding, using the most significant codes to sort the data, which led us to integrate some codes and to discover new connections among the data. After we read and coded all the data, we applied the coding scheme to the data, which allowed for both the identification of more descriptive codes and the generation of themes for which there was the most substantiation. We reapplied the scheme and made subsequent revisions until all data were accounted for.

We organize our findings around our final coding scheme, which appears in three sections. First, we discuss the range of women's perceptions of (and explanations for) their children's parental preferences. Second, we discuss women's feelings about such preferences. Third, we discuss women's strategies for responding to them. Because some partners within couples perceived the same preference patterns whereas others did not, we report the number of individuals and couples in each coding category as a way to account for their similar and divergent perspectives. We also distinguish between birth and nonbirth mothers in order to highlight both similarities and differences in how they perceive and feel about their children's preferences.

## RESULTS

Before describing the patterns of perceived parental preference, it is worth noting that across categories many of the women articulated similar explanations for why such different kinds of preferences existed. Women continually invoked

biology (breastfeeding, biological bond), child factors (personality, development), and parent factors (time availability, personality, effort) to explain children's preferences. The variability among explanations *within* each category shows how such explanations and perceptions are far from objective reflections of reality but rather constructed processes that women enact as they develop multiple ways of understanding parent-child relationships. Thus, to contextualize the perceived preference patterns, we indicate within each category which explanations women utilized in describing their children's behavior.

*Perceived Patterns of and Explanations for  
Child Preferences*

Women in this sample articulated several distinct, mutually exclusive patterns of parental preferences. In describing their children's current preferences, they typically also noted the course that these preferences had taken over the past few years, articulating different but overlapping explanations for such preferences. We begin the analysis with a discussion of preference patterns whereby the biological mother is consistently or mostly preferred. We then discuss preference patterns that progressively illustrate the variable and shifting nature of children's parental preferences, in families in which biological relatedness is no longer perceived as the most salient or singularly defining determinant of such preferences.

*Clear and stable preference for birth mother.* Ten women (4 birth mothers, 6 nonbirth mothers; 6 of whom represent members of 3 couples) felt that their firstborns exhibited a clear, exclusive, and stable preference for the birth mother. These women perceived their children as preferring the birth mother fairly consistently over the past several years. Importantly, only 3 women (1 couple, 1 birth mother) were among the 13 couples that had chosen the birth mother because of her greater desire to carry a child. (Indeed, these 13 couples perceived a range of child preferences, suggesting that these early motivations did not activate longstanding patterns.) Stated one birth mother:

She definitely has a different connection with me than she does with Sue. We do this morning routine a lot where we'll lay in bed together and talk and giggle and stuff, and just very innocently the other morning she said, "I like momma best," meaning me. We asked a couple of questions to

clarify, and she said, "I love mommy, but I love momma best."

Women explained the reasons for such clear preferences in different ways. Biological or genetic factors were mentioned by 8 of 10 of these women as facilitating a greater bond. One birth mother explained: "We kind of attribute [his preference for me] to me breastfeeding, which is obviously a biological bond." Four birth mothers and 2 nonbirth mothers reasoned that this preference in part resulted from the fact that the birth mothers had been the primary caretakers for an extended period. One birth mother, Kay, attributed her son's continued preference for her to the fact that he had "cast [her] in the role" of the more nurturing parent. Thus, Kay did not perceive her son as passively responding to her personality, but rather, she understood him as actively constructing a certain perception of her. She also felt that her partner's tendency to hold back (e.g., not "jump in" with childcare) had contributed to this preference. In contrast, her partner, Marisa, perceived Kay's special bond with their son as resulting from breastfeeding. Their divergent perspectives demonstrate how women draw on different kinds of available social discourses concerning child development and biological influences on family relations as they construct understandings of child-parent dynamics that may or may not reflect their child's experience.

Of note is that 11 couples in the sample had had second children, who were all under 18 months and who were typically described as preferring the birth mother as a result of nursing. One couple, whose first child strongly preferred the birth mother, was aware of the potential for replicating this pattern, which they blamed on their tendency to have the birth mother comfort him whenever he was upset. They were trying to "do things differently" with their second child:

We have made more of an effort to have Rebecca comfort her when it's not hunger related which has helped a little bit. I mean . . . she's definitely still wanting me when she's upset, but . . . there's way more with Evan that Rebecca could have done.

*Stable but less exclusive preference for birth mother: "It's better now."* A second group of 15 women (8 birth mothers, 7 nonbirth mothers; 6 couples) emphasized that their children displayed a strong initial preference for the birth

mothers, and although they perceived this preference as lessening over time, they discussed how their children continued to more frequently prefer and seek out the birth mother. Stated Natalia:

In general I think he tends to lean towards me. But he now spends one time a week with her. And she will regularly point out to me that they have a very different kind of relationship when it's just the two of them. He's become much more attached and I've noticed like now when I am holding him and he'll cry because, you know, he bumps himself, sometimes he'll call out for her. It's gotten to be a much more even distribution. And we work pretty hard on that. We talk about it a lot. We used to talk about it more when it was a problem. It's not much a problem these days, so. . . . But we worked on it.

Natalia thereby indicates that the initial preference for the biological mother was indeed a "problem" that required collaborative work on the part of each parent to make things more equal.

Children's strong initial preference for the birth mother was often attributed to breastfeeding (6 women; 2 couples), the "biological bond" (3 women), and the fact that the birth mother spent more time with the child early on (5 non-birth mothers). Two birth mothers believed that their children's preference arose from the fact that they were more attached to their children initially, whereas their partners held back more (differential effort). Two birth mothers felt that they were the more nurturant parents, thus invoking "natural," personality-based characteristics. Finally, 1 birth mother interpreted her daughter's preference in this way: "She doesn't feel like she could love both of us, that she could be loyal to two people." This birth mother's interpretation of her child's behavior supports the dominant (but contested) notion that children can only have one primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969).

*Initial preference for birth mother gives way to activity-based preferences.* A third group of 8 women (5 birth mothers, 3 nonbirth mothers; 1 couple) identified a pattern in which their children's preference for each mother was "much more equal" compared to when their children were infants, although they tended to prefer each mother for "different things." They favored the birth mother for nurturing, cuddling, and comforting, and they preferred the nonbirth mother for play, roughhousing, and fun activities. Thus,

although emphasizing equality in their relationships with their children, women observed that the birth mother was preferred for more stereotypically "mothering" needs. An example of this is offered by Katie, a birth mother:

I think men are more rough-and-tumble and more fly-by-the-seat-of-their-pants, and in some ways, I think Sally approaches things more that way, so I think that in a lot of ways he is getting that opposite-sex parenting even though we're not opposite sex.

Katie and Sally have thereby differentiated their parental roles along traditional masculine and feminine kinds of gendered behavior. Similarly, another birth mother, Sarah, discussed the ways in which her child's preference was "activity based" yet also noted that she had a unique bond with her child that was essentially different than her partner's bond: "In the ways that children need their moms, it's me." Thus, Sarah articulates the idea that she embodies a very specific, maternal kind of mothering for her child that is inherently different from her partner's parental role. She thereby reifies the essentialist notion that appropriate, natural child development results from the child developing a unique bond with only one maternal figure (Franzblau, 1999).

Although women struggled to explain why their children desired them for different things, 3 women (2 nonbirth mothers, 1 birth mother) felt that their children were more "clingy" with birth mothers because they played a more nurturing role, whereas nonbirth mothers occupied a play-oriented role. Thus, they reasoned that their roles had naturally influenced their children's behavioral preferences so that they learned to expect and seek out different things from them. Of course, parents' roles evolve out of bidirectional processes. Parents do not simply create roles to which children respond, but rather, children's own behaviors and expectations elicit particular patterns of responses from parents (e.g., based on their personalities and abilities), which parents and children in turn construct (and subjectively interpret).

Women had less difficulty explaining their child's initial preference for the birth mother, as they primarily invoked biology (1 birth mother) and breastfeeding (3 birth mothers, 2 nonbirth mothers), culturally significant components of motherhood (Walzer, 1998). Additionally, 2 birth mothers felt that their initial role as primary caretakers facilitated their children's preference.



These women's accounts attest to the power of biology in understanding initial parent-child bonds, but their observation of shifts in their child's preferences over time ultimately moves them away from biological determinism.

*Initial preference for birth mother:* "Now it changes day to day, week to week." Many women perceived little stability in their children's preferences over time. Twenty-two women (10 birth mothers, 12 nonbirth mothers; 8 couples, demonstrating fair consistency in perspectives) felt that their child had exhibited a strong initial preference for the birth mother but currently preferred both parents equally. This preference, however, tended to fluctuate day to day, week to week, or month to month through a "back-and-forth" process, such that each parent was preferred "at different times." Stated Anne:

As he's grown, he's definitely gone back and forth. I think I'm the more consistent person here because Vivian is on these trips and for a little guy, a few days can be a long time. But, when she's around for awhile, I'll definitely see a difference. When she's more around, he'll prefer her over me a lot more. I mean, that's just the nature of the job.

Anne explains this oscillating preference as related to whoever is home more, reflecting prior research that implicates social factors, such as time spent with the child, in children's preferences (Gartrell et al., 1999). In contrast, 8 women (4 represent members of 2 couples) viewed it as a "random process" such that "it depends on how he feels day to day," and they were unsure *why* their children shifted their preference. Moira explained:

He's gone through phases. He'll really be into Erin, and I just don't know why. The next 6 weeks he'll be all about me. We'll never be able to put our fingers on it.

Three nonbiological mothers viewed their children's shifting preferences as related to their developmental stage—a period of increased willfulness, strong opinions, and expanding social horizons (Marvin, 1977)—and therefore regarded their children's behavioral inconsistencies as "normal and developmentally appropriate." As one nonbiological mother, Kelly, noted:

He's gone through phases where he preferred each of us and I kind of ride with that. I expected

it: I know women who said, "The kid only wants me, he doesn't want my partner."

Thus, Kelly's awareness that similar dynamics exist in other families with young children allows her to frame her son's shifting preferences as normative.

Another 3 women felt that their children tended to prefer them and their partners strategically: Their shifting preference reflected their desire to "manipulate" their parents and to "work the system." For example, in explaining her son's shifting preferences, 1 nonbiological mother observed that, "If he's mad at one of us about something, he's gonna go to the other one. If she told him to stop doing something, then I'm his best friend."

Four women explained that the birth of their second children had served to "equalize things" with respect to their children's preference: With the birth mothers occupied by their infants, their firstborns began to utilize their nonbirth mothers more often. This replicates a similar dynamic explored in heterosexual couples whereby the father adopts a more active role with the child after a second child is born (Kreppner, 1988).

In explaining their children's initially greater attachment to the birth mother, 8 women (5 birth mothers, 3 nonbirth mothers) emphasized breastfeeding; 4 of these women also invoked the "biological bond." Six women (3 birth mothers, 3 nonbirth mothers) felt that the amount of time that birth mothers spent with their children facilitated their initial attachment. One birth mother felt that their child's early unequal attachment resulted from her partner's "holding back" more. Similarly, a nonbirth mother, Lois, described her partner as continually taking over, which precluded her from developing as strong of a relationship with her child. Lois noted that this became less of an issue over time as her partner learned to "back off":

Every time there was a problem where he would cry, she would come running in. And I just said, "Yeah, look, if I need you I'll call you." Because I sort of felt like, you know, I just don't like that. And we had to work on that for a bit, but it's fine now. So, just the other day something happened and she just said, "Do you need me?" and I said, "No," and that was it.

Lois voiced her desire to be recognized by her partner as an equally competent, involved parent,

and she recognized that creating this equality required intentional “work” between them. Research on lesbian parenting often emphasizes lesbians’ equal sharing but rarely examines women’s accounts of the “work” that such equality entails: the microlevel, daily negotiations that facilitate equality. Lois’s description calls attention to the ways in which women interpret and behaviorally enact the creation and maintenance of equality in their daily parenting activities.

*“Having twins equals things out.”* Five women (2 couples, 1 birth mother) described a unique pattern whereby having twins had promoted more equivalent parenting roles. Said a birth mother: “She was usually entertaining someone while I was nursing someone.” And yet each twin tended to have a “favorite mommy.” One couple jointly viewed this preference as remaining relatively stable over time. Although they did not have a good sense of why their children chose the mother that they did, Kris, the birth mother, viewed it as “developmentally appropriate.” Her partner also noted that a differential preference “makes sense,” but she struggled to articulate why:

Kris is Jake’s favorite mommy. I’m Maya’s favorite mommy. I don’t know where it comes from. . . . I don’t think it’s manipulative. I think it makes sense and it’s okay. I think that kids gravitate toward one person or another and you know, I don’t know. For all I know they just worked it out: “Well, somebody’s got to be somebody’s favorite mom. Why don’t you pick her.” Um, I don’t think that there’s anything wrong with that. Frankly, if they both preferred her or they both preferred me it might make it a little harder for one of us.

Three women (1 couple, 1 birth mother) also perceived each of their twins as having a preferred mother, but they saw this preference as shifting and dependent on both their specific developmental stage and their children’s personalities. Julia, a birth mother, explained:

They definitely go through that in phases; it hasn’t been just me all the time, or her all the time. They will definitely show preference for one or the other, and Madeline I think more so than Max. Max has more consistently shown a preference for me, sort of a little bit of a mama’s boy going on, but Madeline definitely goes in waves. And she’s in a preferring-Patty wave right now. We recognize that it’s just part of the growing up phase for them.

Julia is not actually called “mama” (but rather, mommy), and, thus, in describing Max as a “mama’s boy,” Julia suggests that she embodies a particular kind of maternal role for her son that is qualitatively distinct from her partner’s. And yet, these couples demonstrate how having twins provides a unique social context in which couples may develop parent-child relationships that are not differentially (and unequally) defined by one partner’s biological connection to the children.

### *Feelings and Behaviors: Responding to Children’s Preferences*

Of interest is how mothers tend to respond to their children’s parental preferences. What is it like to be the nonfavorite mother, and how do women respond to overt preference patterns?

*Affective response.* A minority of women expressed feeling deeply upset or hurt by their children’s preferences. Specifically, 8 nonbiological mothers reported intense feelings of jealousy, exclusion, and rejection (5 of these women perceived their children as consistently or more frequently preferring their partners). Three of these women emphasized that their children’s preference for their partners, and their own jealousy, had caused conflict, “because we both had this idea of what it meant to be a mom, and when she was the chosen one, that was a problem.” Another 2 women felt jealous not only of their children’s preferences for their partners, but of their partners’ status and privilege. Cara remarked:

There have definitely been times where we have gotten into conversations, confrontations over parenting. . . . It has come up where I have felt like Jen feels like she has the final say because ultimately Ella is hers, and I feel like sometimes Jen feels that way, and I think has maybe said it one time at least, “Well, I did have her, you know I wanted her more, and so there.” She feels like she is entitled to more decision making. So, there are feelings of jealousy in the context of decisionmaking. . . . It seems like maybe Jen has the final say.

Similarly, another nonbirth mother, Erica, experienced painful anxiety about the fact that her partner shared a special bond (biological, affective, legal) with their child that she lacked:

I have gone through periods of feeling very insecure. It stems from not giving birth and feeling

— it's about how our son will view me. I'd be lying if I said I haven't gone through a whole lot of struggle at times with feeling that she will always no matter what have this unearned privilege of being his mom. He can at any point decide, "You know what, I am not related to her." There is nothing that binds us as mother and son other than a piece of paper that's contestable. And I struggle with feeling like she has that link and I never will.

Erica expresses insecurity about her lack of privilege both within the domestic realm of relations between her and her son as well as within the larger legal system, which does not fully legitimate her parental role. Indeed, heterosexist legal inequalities serve to intensify her anxiety about how her son will symbolically perceive her and therefore behave toward her. Securing a second parent adoption was not enough to quell uneasy feelings: Of the 8 women who reported intense negative feelings, all but 1 had second parent adoptions. One factor that seemed to help to alleviate jealousy was having a second child. Emily, the only original nonbirth mother who conceived the couple's second child, observed that being the birth mother (and primary parent) to their second child had helped to ease the jealousy she had felt in response to their first child's preference for her partner. It also "freed [her] up" to feel happy when her child wanted her partner:

I'm definitely the primary parent, but now, if I'm holding him, and he sees her, he'll reach for her. Before—I might have felt hurt by it. Now, I don't care. It's not an issue.

Thus, Emily's shift in her emotional response to her child's behavior demonstrates the power of biological relatedness in impacting how women interpret the mother-child relationship.

Twelve women (10 birth mothers, 2 nonbirth mothers) felt badly for their partners whenever they were not preferred; of these, 7 were birth mothers whose children preferred them more often. They expressed empathy for their partners and tended to view their children's preference as a "couple issue"—something that they talked about with their partners. Said one woman: "It's not her problem, it's our problem when he doesn't want to be around her."

Less intense feelings were reported by a number of women. Ten women (8 nonbirth mothers, 2 birth mothers) acknowledged feeling slightly hurt or left out on occasion when their children

preferred their partners. Additionally, 3 birth mothers noted that, rather than feeling privileged, they felt burdened at times by their children's exclusive preference for them, which could be "exhausting" at times as it meant that they "can't get a break!"

Almost half of the sample emphasized that they did not experience any distress around their children's preferences. Rather than taking their child's preference personally, these 29 women (17 birth mothers, 12 nonbirth mothers; 8 couples) perceived it as "no big deal":

We just have to remind each other that these guys are little kids. There's gonna be a lot of times in our lives that they're gonna prefer one or the other, or you know, when they start saying, "I hate you," when they're little. Now see, that doesn't bother me a bit.

Most of these women had children whose preferences were fairly unstable and back-and-forth. Believing that "it balances out in the end," they made efforts to "take advantage" of times when their children preferred their partners by enjoying their free time. Women's diverse affective responses suggest that they often find ways to live comfortably with the uncertainties and ambiguities that arise when managing and responding to children's varying parental preferences.

*Behavioral response.* Women's different feelings were often associated with certain ways of responding. Women who viewed such preferences as "no big deal" tended to assume a flexible approach by not trying to alter their children's preferences. Thirty-six women (18 birth mothers, 18 nonbirth mothers; 15 couples, indicating notable within-couple agreement) endorsed this attitude. Stated Olivia:

He'll have days where he'll prefer her more than me. Like after our second child was born, he stuck around her a lot more because I was in bed. We just let it be, we didn't try to force a change. I think naturally on certain days he'll gravitate more towards one than the other.

In contrast to women who perceive the birth mother-child bond to be the "natural" outcome of biologically mediated processes, Olivia understands "natural" behavior as constituted by various (and at times, random) shifts in her child's behavior. Thus, she sees no need to change such perceived natural occurrences. Other women acknowledged actively working to correct,

adjust, "interrupt," or temper their children's preferences. These were mostly women who had experienced more intense feelings (or whose partners had experienced such feelings). Seven women (5 birth mothers, 2 nonbirth mothers; 2 couples) named efforts to have the nonpreferred parent spend time with the child (i.e., comforting their child when he was upset) to facilitate bonding. In addition, five women (2 couples) enforced certain routines to help promote equal exposure to both parents, such as alternating putting their child to bed. Said one nonbirth mother:

We try not to let him play us off of each other. He might not want me to give him a bath, he may want her, but, "It's my night, I'm giving him a bath" — you know, it's not his choice.

Seven women (2 couples) made active efforts to evenly split tasks and not undermine each other in order to minimize their children's preferences, but they described a more flexible approach that was less grounded in a set routine and more in an overall philosophy of teamwork and equality: "We have always been good about making sure that we're equal in our parenting, equal pretty much in everything," said one nonbirth mother. Finally, five women (2 couples) reported speaking to their children about the hurtfulness of their behavior. Said one birth mother:

So when he says, "Mama Beth, go away! I just want to be with Mama Joanne," we try to talk about how that's hurting her feelings, how that upsets me, and makes me sad. I think it's starting to click, but it is hard . . . with a 3-year-old, with his little egocentric world.

Thus, women expressed a range of behavioral responses to their children's preferences that varied considerably depending on how they interpreted the significance, hurtfulness, or developmental appropriateness of such preferences.

## DISCUSSION

This study represents the first in-depth exploration of lesbian parents' perceptions of children's parental preferences. By attending to the affective and behavioral components of women's experiences, this study revealed that lesbian mothers' experiences are nuanced, complex, and diverse. Their narratives point to factors that may mitigate and exacerbate children's initial preference for the birth mother and to the feelings that accom-

pany various preference patterns. Further, it is clear that women's interpretations of (and responses to) their children's preferences are indeed reflections of their various needs, fears, wishes, and desires as they negotiate their parental roles in the context of socially constructed images of motherhood and fatherhood.

Partners within couples often had divergent perspectives of their children's preference pattern, indicating that perceptions of child preference are subjectively interpreted and enacted by parent and child through interactive processes. Indeed, even the presence of shared perceptions does not necessarily suggest that the partners are witnessing some objective reality, but rather, reflects a process whereby "reality" is co-constructed via language, behaviors, and the relational context. Radically divergent perspectives, on the other hand, may result from poor communication regarding women's experiences, perceptions, and feelings. This may in turn compromise couples' ability to respond collaboratively to their children's (potentially hurtful) preference patterns.

It is notable that most women perceived little stability in their children's preferences. Such perceived variability points to the complexities of family roles and the ongoing processes that shape the preference patterns and role identifications of family members. Although women tended to acknowledge an initial preference for the birth mother, which they often attributed to biological factors and time availability, such explanations do not necessarily suggest that biology is the primary factor responsible for this preference. From a social constructionist perspective, biological phenomena are inextricably linked to socially imbued meanings about mothering. Women may draw on biological explanations that are readily available in the prevailing discourses concerning child development—discourses that attribute (birth) mother-child bonds to biology (Walzer, 1998). They may ascribe meanings to biology that raise their expectations for birth mothers' behavior (and children's reactions to them) and lower their expectations for nonbirth mothers.

Many women commented that this preference had lessened over time, evolving into a more unstable pattern that "equaled out in the end," and thereby did not tend to acknowledge overly negative feelings about their children's preferences. Because they did not feel threatened by (or guilty about) their children's preferences, they

did little to change them. And yet for some women, perceived instability in children's preferences was unsettling because it made it difficult to predict the child's behavior and act accordingly. Indeed, how women interpreted (and behaviorally responded to) such instability was in part influenced by whether they felt that it was necessary to control such preferences—for example, for the sake of maintaining equality and harmony in the partner relationship—or whether they took a more flexible, child-centered approach (Ehrensaft, 1990).

Some women described a pattern whereby their children preferred themselves and their partners for different activities and needs, which were described in gendered terms. In this way, although it may be argued that lesbian mothers necessarily disrupt the heterosexual model of parenting (Dunne, 2000), lesbian mothers may also differentiate their parental roles according to traditional masculine and feminine kinds of behaviors and activities (Gabb, 2004). Further, they may consciously or unconsciously facilitate their children's gendered preferences (e.g., by selectively responding to their children's bids for nurturance vs. play) in an effort to ensure that their children get "that opposite-sex parenting." These women are enacting family in the context of heteronormative assumptions about the meaning of family and what it means to be a "good family" (Oswald et al., 2005), which influences how they construct and enact their parental roles. Yet, even if they perform "opposite-sex parenting" at times, they do so in the context of a same-sex relationship. This apparent paradox exposes, and ultimately deconstructs, the notion that parental roles are naturally differentiated according to sex differences.

Women who perceived their children as consistently or mostly preferring the birth mother deserve special attention. Such preferences are sometimes accompanied by intense, negative feelings on the part of the nonbirth mothers, who struggle with feelings of inadequacy that may ultimately result in tension in their relationships. As women, they have been socialized to mother (Rich, 1976), and many women do not expect to feel "unnecessary," a feeling that fathers may experience (Walzer, 1998). Such feelings may be especially painful in light of the social and legal inequities that lesbians—particularly nonbiological mothers—face. Indeed, children's preferences for birth mothers may exacerbate their partners' existing feelings of invisibility as

they continually work to establish their role as rightful parents. In addition, birth mothers may find such exclusive preferences by their children to be burdensome as they may intensify the stress accompanied with parenting. Further, a child's exclusive preference for the birth mother may thwart some birth mothers' desires to create family arrangements in which their status as biological mothers does not impact how their children perceive them. Indeed, couples in which one or both partners perceive their children as exhibiting strong parental preferences may seek to alter these preferences. It is unclear whether this is a successful (or easily implemented) strategy, as the reasons for pursuing it are parent centered as opposed to child centered.

It is telling that tension arose as a result of children developing a stable preference for one mother, for this suggests that lesbian couples' desire for equality can be a source of conflict if their child does not prefer each parent equally (Patterson, 1995). Being the preferred or nonpreferred mother may carry very different meanings for women depending on how they interpret the significance of their roles. Further, although lesbian mothers may not all experience mothering as their most salient identity, the women in this sample generally felt passionately about being closely bonded with their children. In this way, the child's preference for one parent is a source of conflict when both parents embody traditional notions of mothering such as intensive caregiving (Singley & Hynes, 2005). Although lesbian mothers may subvert the socially sanctioned and differentiated roles of mother and father, they are not free of social pressures and heteronormative discourses that emphasize the importance of a primary relationship between one maternal figure and child (Bowlby, 1969). Thus, dominant notions of motherhood, in conjunction with the social and legal inequities that lesbians experience, may make it difficult for some women to create new and satisfying meanings of family that stretch beyond the limits of traditionally defined roles. Such results have implications that extend beyond the experiences of lesbian couples: Indeed, heterosexual couples may benefit from family arrangements that subvert restrictive gender norms, thereby allowing for more fluid enactments and understandings of parent-child relationships.

Members of couples with twins appeared generally to circumvent feelings of competition and other preference-related stressors because both

parents felt chosen and special. The time and energy constraints of the birth mother, coupled with the presence of an attentive nonbirth mother, created situations in which each child was "paired" with a mother, a dynamic which mirrors preference choices of children with heterosexual parents (Trias et al., 2006). Such "pairing" within lesbian parent families demonstrates that children may develop parental preferences that have little to do with the sex or gendered behavior of their parents.

Given that lesbians are marginalized in society and that nonbirth mothers are further devalued by cultural norms and social discourses (Morningstar, 1999), of interest is how so many of the women in the sample, including nonbirth mothers, managed to not feel threatened by their child's lack of preference for them. Although it is possible that these women do not experience hurt feelings, it is also possible that, due to the psychological stressors that they face as a result of heterosexism, they feel the need to publicly project a more idealized version of the potentially ambivalent feelings they experience as parents. Alternately, given that traditional notions of parenting presume one primary (female) parent (Heineman, 2004), they may not find their child's preference for one mother to be problematic *precisely* because of the prevailing heteronormative context in which parental roles are generally perceived as "naturally" differentiated.

### Limitations and Conclusions

There are several limitations to the current study. This study examined lesbian mothers in which one mother biologically conceived, and it did not include lesbian adoptive parents. In the absence of a biological connection with their children, adoptive parents do not need to consider the effects of biological relatedness in their efforts to explain their children's preferences. Tensions around preference may still arise, however, in situations in which only one partner has legally adopted. Research is also needed that explores how gay men negotiate child preferences and how men draw on and transform traditional notions of fathering. Also, most women in the sample are Caucasian and financially secure; we do not explore how differences in race, ethnicity, or social class may impact women's experiences of child preference. To avoid overgeneralizing or essentializing the experiences of lesbian mothers, we recognize that the privileged nature of the

sample shapes women's perceptions of their lives. Financial vulnerability or racial discrimination may lead couples to experience greater stress related to their children's preferences. Further, given our study's focus on lesbians' perceptions of preferences, research might explore how children interpret their parental preferences. Observational data would also add to knowledge of how children enact preferential choices. Lastly, our study does not examine how children's gender may impact preferences. Given that parents shape their children's gender identities (Peterson, Bodman, Bush, & Madden-Derdich, 2000), research might explore how such gendering impacts the way lesbians interpret and help construct their children's preferences. Despite these limitations, this study expands research on parent-child bonding. Although we did not examine children's parental preferences *from children's perspectives*, women's narratives demonstrate how children are actively involved in the creation and maintenance of family relationships as they behaviorally express their desires for different levels and kinds of connections. Further, our findings suggest that the perceived role of biological connections often diminishes as children grow older (Morningstar, 1999). These women demonstrate the power of "social motherhood" (Rich, 1976) in creating maternal connections that transcend biological relatedness over time.

### NOTE

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