

Imagining Men: Lesbian Mothers' Perceptions of Male Involvement During the Transition to Parenthood

Much popular and professional literature has focused on the effects of father absence, particularly in lesbian parent households; yet, little attention has been paid to lesbian parents' preferences and intentions surrounding male involvement. This qualitative study of 60 lesbian women who were transitioning to parenthood explores this issue. Most women desired some level of male involvement, even before their children were born. Far from describing a desire for "father figures," however, they conceptualized male involvement in novel, diverse, and sometimes ambivalent ways. Having a boy enhanced some women's motivations to actively pursue male role models for their children. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for understanding of the kinship structure of lesbian-parent families and families in general.

Lesbians have often been excluded from the discourse on families (Weston, 1991). Yet, many lesbian couples do become parents, increasingly

through alternative insemination or adoption. Lesbian couples pursuing parenthood challenge the heterosexual monopoly of reproduction (Dunne, 2000) and stereotypes of gay adults as antifamily. At the same time, in becoming parents, lesbian mothers open themselves to many of the values that govern heterosexual families, such as the assumed need for both male and female role models. These values may contradict their own lived experience, such as the desire, implicit or explicit, to become parents without men. The subject we engage is how lesbians perceive and enact the cultural discourse about male involvement as they transition to motherhood.

The Influence of Male Involvement on Children's Gender Identity and Socialization

Theories of gender socialization typically address two related components: (a) gender identification through role modeling, which is the development of one's sense that one is a boy or a girl, accomplished via identification with the same-gender parent; and (b) gender socialization, which is an understanding of the rules and expectations associated with gender, typically achieved through contact with parents and exposure to other agents of socialization such as peers, teachers, and media figures (Sigal & Nally, 2004). Given the centrality of the same-gender parent in gender identification, this distinction is the focus of concern in discussing father absence. That core

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gender identity emerges early may contribute to this urgency: Some developmentalists suggest that children understand their own gender by 18 months, although children do not label themselves and others by gender until they are 2 or 3 years old (Coates & Wolfe, 1995). Gender socialization, however, is seen as less contingent on the gender of the parent than on the gender of the child. Boys are the recipients of more rigid gender socialization than girls, regardless of the parent's gender (Eisenberg, Wolchik, Hernandez, & Pasternack, 1985). Fathers tend to be more rigid socializing agents than mothers (Langlois & Downs, 1980; Tauber, 1979).

On the need for fathers. Fundamental to Western culture is the conviction that fathers are essential to the healthy psychological, moral, social, and gender development of children (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999), although the conduct and culture of fatherhood is situated within specific social, historical, and economic circumstances (LaRossa, 1997). Until the early 20th century, fathers were the primary parent, responsible for children's moral education. With the shift from an agrarian society to an urban, industrial society, the need for fathers transformed to that of breadwinner. A more nurturant view of fathers has taken hold today (Day, Lewis, O'Brien, & Lamb, 2005).

Two frameworks dominate social science thinking about the importance of the same-gender parent. First, classic psychoanalytic theory remains an underlying discourse that, despite contemporary challenges (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Gediman, 2005; Seil, 2000), continues to shape modern thought about gender development. Freud (1905) theorized that successful resolution of the Oedipal complex occurs when the male child develops feelings for his mother and hatred for his father but ultimately chooses to identify with his father out of fear. In the absence of a strong male parent, a boy turns to his mother as the object of identification, leading to less masculine behavior and to homosexual attractions. Father absence disrupts boys' same-gender identification process (less attention is paid to the consequences of mother absence for girls' development).

Social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Mischel, 1966) also emphasizes observation of, identification with, and imitation of same-gender models by children as they grow. This theory, however, places slightly less emphasis

on parents' gender as a crucial feature in the success of gender identification and highlights differential reinforcement: Children are reinforced positively when they imitate same-gender models and negatively when they imitate opposite-gender models. Such reinforcement results in further imitation of same-gender models.

Both theories posit that the absence of a same-gender parent may lead to problems in developing a stable gender identification and, from a traditional psychoanalytic perspective, possibly to homosexuality (Bieber et al., 1962; Eisold, 1998). The absence of a father, combined with the presence of two lesbian mothers, would presumably lead to a greater chance of developing a homosexual identity. Although scholars have questioned these claims (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Herdt & Boxer, 1996; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), clinicians and researchers continue to assert that the presence of an involved father figure is important for adequate child development (e.g., Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

Family structure and child developmental outcomes. Concern about the consequences of father absence has led to studies of the effects of father absence on children, particularly boys. This work has compared children raised in single-mother households with children raised in heterosexual two-parent households on a number of developmental outcomes. Research has found that children raised by single mothers fare worse in terms of emotional, academic, and developmental outcomes (Dawson, 1991; McLanahan, 1985), leading to conclusions about the "necessity" of father figures. But single-mother households have fewer resources and greater potential for stress; one parent is doing the work of two and is more vulnerable to overload and exhaustion (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1986).

Lesbian parents and child developmental outcomes. Recent studies have sought to tease apart the effects of family structure from gender of parent. There is little evidence that children who live with same-gender single parents fare better than children who live with opposite-gender single parents (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998; Powell & Downey, 1997). This research also provides evidence that the developmental advantages observed in children raised by heterosexual married parents compared to children of single parents are not a function of the gender of parents but of the number of caretakers in the

home. Despite this research, many scholars and citizens alike believe that children's development is optimized by the presence of two happily married heterosexual parents. Wardle (1997) and Popenoe (1996) draw on the controversial literature on the putative risks of father absence to promote marriage initiatives and to deny same-gender couples the right to raise children (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Concerns about children raised by two gay or lesbian parents focus on the absence of a male/female parent and the potential effects of the parents' sexual orientation on the child. Studies have compared children raised in lesbian or gay parent – headed households with children raised by heterosexual parents (either two-parent or single-mother households). Children's socioemotional adjustment appears similar in both groups (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981), and these studies have found no significant differences in gender identity (Green, Mandel, Hotveltdt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981), gendered roles (Golombok et al., 1983; Green et al., 1986), or sexual orientation (Golombok et al.; Gottman, 1990).

Some differences in outcomes have been noted, however (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Kagel and Schilling (1985) found an association between father absence and less masculine gender identity among boys. MacCallum and Golombok (2004) found that boys in father-absent families showed more feminine but no less masculine characteristics of gendered role behavior. Golombok and Tasker (1996) also found that adolescents raised by lesbian mothers were more likely to consider a same-gender relationship than adolescents raised by heterosexual parents. Some have used this research to imply these children's "suffering" in the absence of a male role model. Golombok and Tasker suggest that these data reflect the possibility that children raised in female-headed households have internalized a flexible approach to gender, roles, and sexuality, which is an advantage of being raised in this family structure. Heterosexism, not parental sexual orientation, is a larger problem for children of same-gender parents (Ray & Gregory, 2001).

A Feminist Perspective on Lesbian Mothers Imagining Men

Feminists challenge the ideology of the monolithic family and the notion that any one family arrangement is natural, biological, or functional

in a timeless way (Thorne, 1992). Current changes in families constitute the emergence of new forms of family, not its disintegration (Cheal, 1993). Lesbian parenting deconstructs motherhood as dependent on heterosexual relations, offering new ways of thinking about family, parenthood, and child development (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). These family forms offer models of ingenuity (Stacey, 1997). Lesbian parents occupy an ironic space: They are aware of patriarchal notions about what constitutes a "real" family, but they actively challenge them. The assumption that every child needs a father is rooted in theoretical and historical perspectives that are inherently value laden. By choosing to raise a child together, lesbian couples defy the cultural imperative and present alternatives to the heterosexual, two-parent, nuclear family form. Given that lesbian couples live in a society that strongly values fathers and bemoans their absence, how do they negotiate the socially constructed nature of parenthood? Specifically, how do lesbian women who are in the transitional period of becoming parents, but for whom parenthood is still imagined, conceptualize male involvement?

Research Questions

We examined lesbians' perceptions about the importance of men in their children's lives. Little research has explicitly inquired about lesbians' ideas about male involvement. An exception is Gartrell et al.'s (1996) study, which quantitatively assessed lesbian mothers' preferences about male involvement and found that 76% of the sample wanted their children to have contact with "good and loving men." Dundas and Kaufman (2000) found that many lesbian parents were concerned about the lack of a male role model but did not feel that it would harm their child.

We investigated three major research questions. First, how do lesbians who are becoming mothers think about male involvement? Men do not need to be central in a family to be valued as socialization sources. In matrifocal Caribbean families, women combine caretaking, housework, and breadwinning; yet, men are still involved in their lives (Brunod & Cook-Darzens, 2002). In a study of single heterosexual women who used alternative insemination to become pregnant, Hertz (2002) found that women reaffirmed rather than challenged traditional notions of kinship: Although unknown, and physically

absent, donors came to be conceptualized by mothers as “fathers.”

Second, why do men matter to lesbian women who are becoming mothers? Given concerns about the consequences of father absence for boys, lesbian mothers of boys might be more attuned to male involvement. In contrast, mothers of girls may breathe a sigh of relief and feel they do not have to worry about gender identification. Child gender and perceived scrutiny, however, may not matter. Women may view contact with men as valuable because it is a parent’s responsibility to prepare children for social interaction. Women may value men’s contribution with children in terms of their higher activity level, playful interaction style, and physically arousing play (Paquette, 2004; Teti, Bond, & Gibbs, 1988).

Third, who are the men that women want to be involved in their children’s lives? Close relationships with male friends and family members may lead lesbians to want their child to know *specific* men. Patterson, Hurt, and Mason (1998) found that 58% of children had regular contact with their biological mother’s father, 24% with their nonbiological mother’s father, and 62% with unrelated male adults, suggesting that both male friends and family members are valued sources of support. Known donors may also play a role in the child’s life: Gartrell et al. (2000) found that when children of lesbian mothers were 5 years old, 29% of known donors had regular contact with their children and 71% of known donors saw the children occasionally.

METHOD

Research Design

The current project utilizes data obtained from 60 lesbians who were interviewed twice during the

transition to parenthood. The 60 women were members of 30 inseminating couples. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected. In this article, we analyze and report primarily the qualitative open-ended data.

Because the sample consisted of couples, we examined the data to determine if it was meaningful to present the analysis by 30 couples or 60 individuals. We determined that the better method was to discuss lesbian mothers’ intentionality about male involvement as an individual, not couple variable. As the results indicate, women differed in their level of intentionality: Some were very deliberate about male involvement, some were flexible, and some were ambivalent. In our preliminary data analysis, we examined whether intentionality status varied by couple as well as by maternal status. We examined the extent of *agreement* in intentionality and the degree to which biological mothers and nonbiological comothers were categorized as deliberate, flexible, or ambivalent. As Table 1 indicates, in half of the couples, both partners were deliberate, and in half the couples, there was a mismatch in intentionality. Because partners did not talk about their male preferences and intentions as a couple-negotiated phenomenon, we focused our analysis at the individual level. In the results, we distinguish between biological mothers and nonbiological comothers, but we do not discuss the results at the couple level.

Selection of the sample. Inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: (a) women must be in committed (living together) lesbian relationships, (b) both women must be becoming a parent for the first time, and (c) at least one partner must be returning to work full time after the birth. This last criterion was important in that one of the study

Table 1. *Intentionality Status by Couple (N = 30 couples)*

Comothers	Biological Mothers			Total
	Deliberate (n = 19)	Flexible (n = 8)	Ambivalent (n = 3)	
Deliberate (n = 21)	15	5	1	21
Flexible (n = 7)	3	2	2	7
Ambivalent (n = 2)	1	1	0	2
Total	19	8	3	30

Note: *Deliberate* women strongly value male involvement and are conscious and intentional about pursuing it. *Flexible* women value male involvement, but are relaxed in their approach. *Ambivalent* women are unsure of their feelings about male involvement and/or whether they will actively pursue it.

goals was to examine how couples negotiated work-family issues.

Women who were becoming parents via donor insemination were interviewed in their third trimester (about a month before the birth) and when their baby was 3 months old. Couples consist, then, of a biological mother (the mother who carries and gives birth to the child) and a comother (the biological mother's partner). Given the geographical diversity of the participants—41% lived on the East Coast, 21% resided on the West Coast, 21% lived in the Midwest, and 17% lived in the South—phone interviews were conducted with all but four women (two couples), who were interviewed in person. Several recruitment methods were used. The study was advertised in newsletters, listservs, and Web sites pertaining to groups or organizations that reach a lesbian audience, such as Rainbow Families (a national group for lesbian and gay parents and their children) and the Human Rights Campaign (the U.S.'s largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender equality), and Unitarian Universalist churches in the United States. The study was advertised in the offices of midwives and gynecologists, and at prenatal education classes. The researcher's contact information was included with the study description, and women were asked to contact the principal investigator for more information. At that point, the study was explained to participants. If interested, couples were mailed consent forms assuring confidentiality and detailing the conditions of participation. Women were asked to return the signed consent form with the questionnaire packet.

Description of the Sample

Participants were in their mid-30s and had been in their current relationship for about 6 years, on average. Except for two Korean Americans, all participants were European American. About 10% of the sample identified themselves as Jewish, indicating some level of religious heterogeneity. Women tended to be highly educated: 14% of the sample had a high school diploma, 7% an associate's degree or vocational degree, 14% of the sample a bachelor's degree, 43% a master's degree, and 22% a professional degree (PhD, MD, JD). Couples' median combined (family) income was \$84,000.

Most women (59%) chose an unknown donor, a donor whose identity could never be known to the child (and who had waived all legal rights).

Thirty-one percent of women chose a known donor, someone who donated the sperm to them personally, and who often wished to maintain contact. Ten percent of women chose donors who agreed to be contacted when the child is of some specified age or who agreed that the family may contact the sperm bank when the child is of some specified age. The sperm bank then contacts the donor, who decides whether he wishes to be contacted. Eighteen couples were the mothers of sons, 7 couples welcomed girls into their lives, and 5 couples had twins (4 were mixed-gender twins and 1 couple had twin girls).

Data Collection Process and Open-Ended Questions

Each woman was interviewed alone. Interviews lasted about an hour and covered a range of topics, including relationship quality, well-being, and employment. Women also completed a packet of questionnaires (demographic data and quantitative measures) that were sent to their home; these also took about an hour to complete. Each woman was asked to fill out her packet separate from her partner, within a week of the interview. Women returned their packets in postage-paid envelopes.

For the current analysis, we address data collected on the following open-ended questions. At the first interview (1 month before the birth: Time 1), women were asked, "Some lesbian parents think it's important for their children to have men or 'father figures' in their lives, and actively make an effort to ensure that this will happen. Other lesbian parents feel that it is important for children to have men in their lives, but don't feel it's necessary to actively bring men into the mix: Children will be exposed to men incidentally in many ways and in many areas of their lives. Still others feel that children do not necessarily need men in their lives at all. What do you think?"

At the second interview (3 months after the birth: Time 2), women were asked, "Have your feelings about the importance of men in your child's life changed at all? How?"

Data Analysis Process

Methodological framework. A constructivist grounded theory approach allowed us to investigate the creation of both gender and family as they emerge in lesbians' narratives. A constructivist approach implies awareness of the mutual

creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of participants' meanings (Charmaz, 2003). We assume that our findings are shaped by and reflect the researchers' interpretive lens: The categories and theory that emerge are a function of our interactions with and questions about the data (Charmaz). We are interested not only in meanings but also in values, beliefs, and structures. This interest requires the researchers to listen carefully and openly to participants.

Coding. Both authors, who each read the participant transcripts multiple times, coded the data. We began the coding process with open coding or line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1978). This involves examining each line of narrative and defining events or actions within it. This approach led to refining and specifying emerging codes and broader categories. Then, we engaged in selective or focused coding, which uses initial codes that frequently reappear to sort the data. This coding is more conceptual than initial coding (Charmaz, 2003). After creating a coding scheme, we continued to apply it to the data, which in turn generated changes. We engaged in this dynamic process, reapplying the coding scheme to the data and making subsequent revisions, until we were satisfied that we had accounted for all the data.

The main question that was asked in the interview used the terms very important, important, and not very important. Not surprisingly, women tended to use these words themselves in their responses. An initial coding scheme was evident (e.g., very important, important, and not important) that appeared to distinguish among the sample. Upon closer reading and discussion of women's responses and through the processes of open and focused coding, a spectrum of perceptions and intentions emerged. We found that the code *very important* was much more elaborate in women who were "intentional, conscious, and deliberate" about male involvement. The *important* code was about women who were flexible but aware in their approach to male involvement. Those in the *not-very-important* category were actually ambivalent about men; their narratives about male involvement were full of tension and contradiction. Thus, rather than the neat typology suggested at first, a more complex spectrum of perceptions and intentions emerged through the continual analysis process.

To further understand how these three groups of women differed, we examined their reasons for thinking that men mattered. We made comparisons across the major coding categories to more fully analyze how they made distinctions between perceptions and intentions about male involvement. The feminist constructivist approach, as well as the research questions and interview guide questions, filtered women's voices so that we were able to reach a more complex understanding of their experiences and perceptions in the final process of coding. To test the emergent theory we generated to understand lesbian mothers' ideas about male involvement, we examined women's responses at the couple level, as noted above.

This process of reading the transcripts and working with the data led us to revise the coding scheme 11 times. During these revisions, some codes that initially appeared useful were combined with other codes or eliminated. By the 11th collaborative revision of the codes, we arrived at a scheme that included three major categories that best synthesize and explain the data, and thus answer our research questions. We organize the report of our findings around this coding scheme, which appears in three main sections. First, we discuss the spectrum of women's perceptions and intentions surrounding male involvement. Second, we discuss women's ideas about why men matter. Third, we address women's ideas about which men will be involved.

FINDINGS

Lesbians Choosing Male Involvement: A Spectrum of Perceptions and Intentions

How do lesbians think about male involvement? Women's responses revealed a spectrum of perceptions and intentions regarding male involvement. Three groups of women emerged, with properties along two dimensions: perceptions (are men important?); and intentions (will I go out of my way to ensure male involvement?). In the first group (*deliberate*), women expressed the view that male involvement was very important and intended to make special efforts to ensure that their children were exposed to men. A second group of women (*flexible*) felt that male involvement was important but did not intend to go out of their way to ensure male involvement. A third group of women (*ambivalent*)

appeared to be ambivalent and did not intend to actively pursue male involvement.

Deliberate: “We plan to be very intentional about it.” When asked about the importance or role of men in their child’s life before the child’s arrival, the majority of women (40 women: 19 biological, 21 comothers) were highly conscious of the fact that their child will not grow up with a male parent and expressed concern about the absence of a male figure. Their concern fueled their intention to find potential male role models; these women were systematic and planful in their approach. Women had thoughtfully considered the *who* and *how* of male contact, and many had already spoken to male friends and family, or joined parenting groups. As Annie, a biological mother, stated:

I am concerned about this. We don’t have male friends and I think we’ll have to consciously join a parents group or ... we do have male relatives who will be very good. But, on a day in, day out situation ... I think we’ll have to work on that because I think that male-female balance does need to be there.

Flexible: “I think it’s important but I’m not sure if we’ll go out of our way.” Fifteen women (8 biological, 7 comothers) expressed feeling that there was value in having their children exposed to men but were not worried about male involvement. Rather, they were relatively relaxed about and open to how and when male involvement would unfold, and their narratives lacked the intensity and anxiety that characterized many of the deliberate women. In some cases, their flexible attitude derived from their sense that they already had sufficient men around. Terri, a biological mother, said:

I think it’s important but I’m not sure if we will go out of our way. We have a nice spread of male friends who we think can be role models. I do think it’s important. Some relief for me, it’s interesting—is having a girl, it seems a little less significant that there’s no male role model but who is to say it should feel less significant? I think that may be flawed thinking ... [but] I’m not concerned that she’ll be lacking.

Ambivalent: “It’s important ... but I don’t think men and women are necessarily different.” Five women (three biological, two comothers) ap-

peared to be somewhat unsure about whether they felt male involvement was important. Their narratives expressed tension and contradiction. For example, one woman wavered between explicit endorsement of the value of men and rejecting the notion that men represent a unique ingredient to family life, thus revealing tension in her perceptions of men. Another woman’s narrative revealed a mismatch between her perceptions and intentions: Like the deliberate women, she expressed anxiety about the absence of men from the household but ultimately concluded that she and her partner would not go out of their way to secure male role models. In three cases, women downplayed the importance of men but stated their intentions to find men. Their ambivalence seemed to reflect a tension between societal pressures and their own true feelings. Nina, a birth mother, said:

If we were on a desert island, we could do a great job raising Max. But we’re in THIS society. It’s an issue we talk about—how intentional it’s going to be. I’m not handing over the reigns to a guy just because he’s a guy.

Change across the transition to parenthood. Some women’s feelings, and in turn, their intentions, changed across the transition. Five women (three biological, two comothers), who were initially characterized as deliberate, grew more flexible once they became parents. Initially intentional, they became less concerned post-birth, noting that the issue of male involvement did not seem as important as anticipated. As their perceptions of male involvement shifted, their intentions also became more relaxed. They felt more at ease with the current availability of men, and they did not intend to go out of their way for the time being. Kristine, a comother, who at Time 1 noted her intentions to solicit male involvement, became less deliberate and more flexible:

I think it is important. ... I’m hopeful that the donor and my dad and my male friends will be accessible to the boys, but I don’t think it’ll make or break their development.

In contrast, four women (two biological, two comothers) evolved from being relatively flexible to being much more deliberate in their approach. Prior to becoming parents, they were relatively unconcerned about their accessibility to men.

Upon becoming parents, however, they realized that exposure to men might not just “happen.” Noted Sharon, a birth mother:

I think that before—I thought I’d foster relationships with him with men at my discretion—give him what he needed. Now I think, I’ll need to give him more access to men. This is part of the reason we are going to move to Minnesota, hopefully. My brother is there, and he’s already acting in a fatherly role; he has a child one year older. Because Joshua is going to be a man, maybe there are some things he needs to learn from men.

Furthermore, three of these four women noted that seeing their children’s reactions to the men in their lives had also made them more conscious and deliberate. Jess, a birth mother, stated:

I think it’s more important than I thought it’d be. When he sees the men I work with, and my brother and dad, there is something different in the way he responds to them. As he gets older, it will become more important.

Why Do Men Matter? Women’s Perceptions of the Importance of Male Role Models

Why do lesbian mothers feel that male role models are important? Several major themes emerged with regard to women’s accounts of why they felt that male involvement was important.

Societal norms. Eleven women (6 deliberate, 2 flexible, 3 ambivalent) noted awareness of societal norms and/or social pressures as a reason they felt male involvement was important. Aware of their status as a nontraditional family within the broader social context, they were concerned about how their family and child would be received should they shun or de-emphasize male involvement. Their consciousness of the societal belief that every child needs a mother and a father shaped their views about male involvement. For deliberate women, awareness of societal norms translated into active efforts to secure men; they did not want to be judged. Galit, a comother, said:

I think it’s important. We actually worry about it. We don’t have many close male friends. We have been talking about, How are we going to make sure our child has male role models? I don’t really know. ... We have to structure that more.

Flexible women also recited the socially acceptable discourse of the importance of men, noting

the value of male role models, but they were less responsive to social pressures. They did not wish to be judged, but they expressed no intention to “structure” male contact. Finally, ambivalent women both reified and resisted the societal notion that children need men. Their awareness of societal pressures pushed them to acknowledge the (relative) importance of men, but, in the same breath, they expressed a contradictory set of ideas in which they rejected this notion.

“I want to be fair to my child.” Fifteen women (11 deliberate, 2 flexible, 2 ambivalent) emphasized that men were important in that they wanted to be fair to their child. They felt that their child would be “missing out” if they did not have male contact, and they did not want their child to feel any different from other children or, for that matter, from themselves. Several women described close relationships with their own fathers and wanted to ensure that their children did not entirely miss out on such an experience. These women’s feelings about male contact were motivated by concern for their child, in contrast to concerns about being judged themselves. Debbie, a deliberate biological mother, said:

I think it’s important and we may have to actively work on it. There are a lot of men in this world and most of our friends are women so I think we’ll have to make more of an effort with making friends with men. I don’t want him to feel deprived.

Most women who wanted to be fair to their child were categorized as deliberate. They approached male involvement in the spirit of “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996): They were willing to push their own values aside to focus on how to get their children the exposure to men they felt they deserved.

“In the name of diversity.” Twenty women (12 deliberate, 7 flexible, and 1 ambivalent) situated their wish for male involvement in terms of their desire to have their child be exposed to a “diverse” group of people. Having men involved was important in the context of their wish to expose their child to “all kinds of people”: straight and gay, male and female, and with a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

About 30% of the deliberate mothers and about 50% of the flexible mothers named diversity as a reason men were important. Deliberate mothers who contextualized their desire for male

involvement in terms of diversity described ways they planned to make sure their child had this exposure. As Deena, a deliberate biological mother, noted:

We have lots of people set and lined up. Men touch and interact with children so differently; we're wanting to have diversity of experience for this kid; we've already made plans and have intentions of having family members and friends involved.

Deena suggests that there is something unique about men. In contrast, flexible women said that men are important in terms of diversity but added caveats that suggest they may simply be paying "lip service" because of strong values for diversity. Becky, a flexible birth mother, said:

It's important for the sake of diversity. I don't think we will go especially out of the way to include men in this child's life. But before conceiving, I felt strongly that our child know who his other biological parent is. We wanted him to have a relationship with his other parent. It is not an issue that he's male—it's just, it's like adoption: we don't want him to wonder.

Specific men. Another reason some women felt that male contact was important was that they had specific men in mind whom they wanted their children to know: Namely, 23 deliberate women and 6 flexible women named specific men as a motivation for wanting male contact. Not just any man would do; the men they wanted to be involved were men with whom they already had relationships: fathers, brothers, and other "healthy, quality men."

Four deliberate mothers said they had relationships with wonderful fathers with whom they were very close; such images of "real men" appeared to shape both these women's level of intentionality about male contact and their ideas about what kind of men they wanted involved.

The role of child gender: Having a boy or girl makes a difference. Child gender shaped women's perceptions of the need for and reasons for male contact, such that having a boy engendered greater reflection about how they would solve the "man problem," whereas having a girl elicited mild relief. At Time 1, two deliberate mothers and one ambivalent mother noted that male involvement was particularly important because

they were having boys. Three deliberate mothers who did not know the gender of their child anticipated that male involvement would be more salient if they ended up with a boy. These data suggest that for some women, whatever their values about male role models, having a boy exerted a powerful shaping effect on their thoughts and intentions surrounding male involvement.

Some women acknowledged that they hoped to have men involved in their potential sons' lives for pragmatic and stereotypical reasons. One deliberate mother and the ambivalent mother contextualized their wish for men in their knowledge that their child would need to use public bathrooms. Two deliberate mothers mentioned (both rather lightly) their hope of finding men who could teach their sons to fix things. Monica, a deliberate birth mother, wanted a man for her child "because of role modeling" and to be someone "he could talk to." She was the only one to mention the quality or type of relationship her future son might have with an adult man.

Four flexible mothers were not as concerned about men because they were having girls and said they might be more proactive if they were having boys. Three deliberate mothers said that their child's gender was not important; they would be intentional regardless of whether they had a boy or girl. Two of these women did not know their child's gender, and one woman knew that she was having a boy. Two of these women noted that, boy or girl, they wanted their child to have "quality relationships" with men, to have "someone to bond with."

Elaborating Kinship: Real Men in Our Families and Communities

Beyond "imagining men," who are the real men that these women involve in their own and their children's lives? An extensive list of men emerged from women's narratives at Time 2. Women gave elaborate descriptions of the actual men who would be or who were playing a role in their child's life, typically mentioning multiple individuals. In addition to naming men in their families, male friends, and men in the gay community, they created new categories of men: potential goddads, husbands of heterosexual women friends, and a male pediatrician.

Brothers. Brothers were frequently mentioned as potential role models; in fact, brothers emerged as the unsung heroes in these mothers' kinship

networks. A total of 25 women (16 deliberate, 7 flexible, 2 ambivalent) named brothers as playing a key role in their child's life. Eva, a deliberate comother, was very close to her brother and wanted to give him a special role with her child:

We [talked about it] a long time ago. ... We thought, maybe we'd have a dedication ceremony and have my brother and my brother-in-law be godparents.

Fathers. In contrast to stereotypes of lesbians as having poor relationships with their fathers, women often spoke enthusiastically about the role they hoped their own father would play in their child's life. Eighteen women (15 deliberate and 3 flexible) named their fathers as an important source of male contact. Stated Shannon, a deliberate biological mother, "I think my dad will be very involved. He's very excited about having a grandson."

Male friends. Male friends were a frequently named source of male involvement. A total of 28 women (16 deliberate, 10 flexible, 2 ambivalent) talked about close male companions whom they hoped would form a bond with their child. Far from being casual male acquaintances, many of the men these women mentioned were important members of their friendship networks. Six women mentioned friends, and two women mentioned friends who would act as "goddads" to their child. Three male friends were explicitly described as gay. Gay men were sometimes mentioned in the context of the "role-breaking" function they would serve: Women hoped that their gay friends would help to break down stereotypes of men and masculinity.

One innovative friendship category was "friends' husbands." Five women (two deliberate, two flexible, one ambivalent) mentioned female friends' husbands as a source of male contact: "We have our best friend's husband," said Lillian, a flexible comother. "Our two best friends are heterosexual and in couples," said Nancy, a deliberate biological mother. Thus, lesbians' friendships with heterosexual women gave them access to heterosexual male role models.

Donors. Nine women (six deliberate, two flexible, and one ambivalent) mentioned the (known) donors as playing a role. These men were commonly referred to by name (five women) or as

"the donor" (three women), but also as "his birth father" (one woman). Monica, a deliberate birth mother, said:

The donor does have a role. He is totally great. Time will tell—Will I change my definition of family to include him? So far, he's been everything I could ever dream of.

Other men. Several other kin and friendship categories emerged: male family unspecified (8 deliberate, 6 flexible, 1 ambivalent), nephews (4 deliberate), neighbors (3 deliberate, 3 flexible), male colleagues (2 deliberate, 2 flexible), heterosexual men/"straight guys" (2 deliberate, 1 flexible), gay men (2 deliberate, 1 ambivalent), and a male physician (1 deliberate).

Six of the 15 flexible women named specific men as a reason for feeling male contact was important at Time 1; all 15 women named men in their lives who were playing a role at Time 2. Of the 40 deliberate women, 23 named specific men at Time 1, and 29 mentioned available men at Time 2. These data suggest that the availability of men is not driving women's intentionality: Deliberate women are not deliberate because of the absence of men, and flexible women are not flexible because they have men around (and it is easy for them). Most women name men, and many different kinds of men. Alternatively, that half of the flexible women do not cite specific men at Time 1 does not reflect a paucity of men in their lives, as evidenced by the large number of men they name at Time 2. Rather, it reflects their less intense feelings about the necessity of men.

DISCUSSION

Rather than imagining the heteronormative family ideal and the corresponding presence of a live-in father, the lesbian mothers in this sample invoked the presence of men whom they know—men who will be involved not because of their embodiment of some father ideal but because they are good quality men, and will be good quality role models (Gartrell et al., 1996). In this way, the current study builds upon and expands the perspective of Weston (1991), Allen and Demo (1995), and others, who have argued that lesbian and gay definitions of family go beyond those on the basis of legal or biological ties. Oswald (2002) suggests that this ability

and willingness to “reimagine family” represents a form of resilience: Lesbians often expand their kinship base beyond biolegal kin to include friends, former lovers, and other individuals, a group that is characterized by diverse genders and sexualities, and is chosen rather than ordained. Consistent with Patterson et al.’s (1998) findings, male biolegal kin (particularly brothers) are often mentioned by the women in the sample; male friends, however, are mentioned just as frequently. Thus, these women were not imagining “fathers” for their children; they were imagining men.

The availability of men is present in all groups of women, whether they initially presented as conscious and deliberate, flexible and open, or were ambivalent about male involvement. The differences in these women’s thoughts about men appear to stem from different values and pressures associated with male involvement. For example, deliberate women who have conscious intentions to pursue male involvement often invoke societal pressures, a desire not to deprive their child, and having a boy, as reasons for their ideas regarding the importance of men. This underscores the tension that all lesbian mothers face in becoming parents: These women are highly motivated and reflective about the process of becoming parents, but they cannot escape the cultural narrative that children (especially boys) need male socialization to develop “properly.” Paradoxically, lesbian mothers are pioneers *and* traditionalists, forging new paths by creating nontraditional families but also capitulating to gender stereotypes by emphasizing the need for men to teach their child how to repair a carburetor. They resist and transform gender and family scripts but also recite and accommodate to the cultural narrative (Lewin, 1993). Thus, women’s responses reflect their own values and experiences (e.g., their personal narratives about gender; their experiences with their own fathers, brothers, and other men) as well as the pressures and scrutiny they face as *lesbian* parents.

Of interest is that some women became more deliberate across the transition to parenthood, whereas some became more flexible, illustrating the fact that women’s perceptions and intentionality surrounding male involvement are fluid and responsive to changes in context as well as the realities of parenting. Three of the four women who became more deliberate did so because they “perceived” their children to be

“responding” to men’s maleness. This experience can be viewed as highlighting the persistence of the heteronormative narrative, even for women who are intentionally creating families that exist outside of the mainstream (Oswald et al., 2005). Lesbians and gay parents cannot escape the broader society; ideas about gender infuse their thinking about their children’s development in conscious and unconscious ways.

Women’s narratives about the importance of men “for the sake of diversity” reflected their awareness of the fact that notions of gender and sexuality are entwined (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2002), as they cited their desire to include both heterosexual and gay men in their children’s lives. Lesbians are likely to choose gay men as donors because of legal concerns (gay men would be as vulnerable as lesbians in a custody battle) and because they perceive them as potentially more committed to their children (heterosexual men have many opportunities to conceive) (Ryan-Flood, 2005). Lesbian mothers may value gay men because they serve as a challenge to heteronormative masculinity. This sentiment was voiced by several women. Yet, some women in the sample also highlighted the involvement of “good straight men.” This tendency may reflect conformity to heterosexist family values; it may also reflect a true valuing of diversity, however, and their sense that many types of men can be good role models (Ruddick, 1992). Such comments may also reflect the tension these women face in trying to create families that will not be targeted with criticism, while also honoring their own values and ideals.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations of this study. The sample is homogenous in terms of race, education, and income, limiting its transferability: Poor and working-class lesbians may be less likely to pursue assisted reproduction because of the high cost (Murphy, 2001). Perhaps racial or ethnic minority lesbians have different ideas about male involvement. Another limitation is the short time frame: Actual male involvement will likely change as children age.

Despite these limitations, the current study makes an important contribution toward understanding how lesbian couples negotiate the issue of “father absence” across the transition to parenthood. Facing powerful messages that “children need a father,” these women balance their

own values and social pressures in approaching male involvement. Although few women denied that men have anything unique to offer, in becoming parents, they resist the notion that a father is necessary for healthy child development. Their existence challenges traditional notions of family and heterosexist norms that govern parenting roles, but their narratives also point to their awareness of these ideas and highlight the ways they navigate their journey as lesbian parents.

Of interest is how these families' lives continue to unfold. The children will likely be exposed to role flexibility. Raised by two women, they will also have many straight and gay male role models, and they may show greater role flexibility themselves (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Theories of gender socialization are often interpreted to mean that certain behaviors (e.g., heterosexuality, higher levels of masculinity among boys and men) are indicative of "normal" development. Freud (1905) himself, however, encouraged us to consider sexual orientation and masculinity/femininity as overlapping and continuous traits that coexist within individuals. These lesbian mothers challenge us to rethink developmental theories, to consider the potentially politicized nature of the assumptions that underlie these theories (e.g., every child needs a mother and a father), and to question the use of rigid gendered roles as proxies for normal development.

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