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Lesbian women disrupting gendered, heteronormative discourses of motherhood, marriage, and divorce

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ABSTRACT

Despite shifts in societal attitudes, lesbian women who separate and divorce still must cope with recriminating societal messages that blame and condemn them for not conforming to the gendered heteronormative dictate of married motherhood. Guided by feminist theory, we conducted a qualitative analysis of narratives from 17 adoptive lesbian mothers who had dissolved their relationship. The women's narratives revealed five cultural discourses that they variously embraced, resisted, or disrupted: (1) the ideology of the good mother; (2) divorce is bad for children; (3) marriage is the ideal way to live; (4) couples should stay together for the children; and (5) lesbian ex-lovers should be lifelong friends. All women embraced the cultural belief in "the good mother," which is the linchpin of gendered oppression, but they were much more disruptive regarding the remaining four discourses surrounding marriage, divorce, and lesbian relationships. Their assessments of life after separation revealed that divorce can actually be better than marriage for their children; marriage is often overrated; having children can complicate a marriage; and remaining friends with one's ex-partner is not always desirable. The feminist tenet that oppression *and* agency coexist was revealed as the women both engaged and resisted dominant cultural narratives in order to navigate the dilemmas of crafting a new life for themselves and their children post-divorce.

KEYWORDS

Divorce; feminist theory; heteronormative discourses; lesbian relationships; relational dissolution

One of the attractions of a lesbian relationship for many women is the desire to join shared gendered histories of emotional intensity that can enhance intimacy and relationship quality (Goldberg, 2010; Krieger, 1996; Lewin, 1993). Although lesbian relationships tend to be characterized by equal or higher satisfaction than heterosexual relationships, they are also more likely to end (Balsam, Rostosky, & Riggle, 2017), including in the context of parenthood. Goldberg and Garcia (2015) examined rates of couple dissolution over a five-year timespan and found that lesbian adoptive

parents were six times more likely to break up than gay adoptive parents (12% versus 2%). Farr (2017) similarly found that lesbian adoptive parents were more likely to break up (31%) than gay and heterosexual adoptive parents (both 7%) across a five-year period.

Research on the qualitative experience of lesbian mothers navigating relationship dissolution documents several key challenges. As women, their lower earning power meant that they experienced considerable financial insecurity and hardship during relationship dissolution, as they transitioned from one household to two (Goldberg, Moyer, Black, & Henry, 2015). Lesbian mothers also emphasized parenting disagreements and inequities and dissatisfaction with the division of unpaid labor as reasons for their relationship ending (Goldberg et al., 2015), which is consistent with quantitative work linking dissatisfaction with the division of child care and less positive coparenting behaviors to relationship dissolution among lesbian parents (Farr, 2017). The salience of challenges related to the division of labor and coparenting in relationship dissolution may reflect the tendency for female same-sex couples to value egalitarianism in their relationships, leading to profound disappointment and stress when the egalitarian ideal is not realized (e.g., Farr, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2015). This disenchantment foreshadows possible tensions that may undermine the ability of lesbian ex-partners to maintain close familial relationships post-divorce, which runs contrary to the expectation in the lesbian community for ex-lovers to remain connected (Weinstock, 2004). Limited work has explored lesbian mothers' relationship dissolution experiences through a lens that explicitly incorporates attention to the role of gender and sexual orientation, whereby women who are sexual minorities face unique pressures and constraints that may impact how they manage, reflect on, and interpret their relationship dissolution and its aftermath.

Despite its commonality, divorce in general remains a stigmatized life transition (Coontz, 2016)—and this relational transition is further complicated by the prejudice and stigma that accompany sexual minority status (American Psychological Association, 2009; Riggle, Rothblum, Rostosky, Clark, & Balsam, 2016). Lesbian mothers who separate and/or divorce must cope with recriminating societal messages in the form of cultural discourses that blame and condemn them for not conforming to the heteronormative dictate of maintaining a marital (or marital-like) relationship—particularly if they have children (Allen, 2007; Farr & Goldberg, 2019). Motherhood nuances and amplifies the pressures that separating or divorcing lesbians experience.

Gendered, heteronormative cultural discourses dictate the terms of women's engagement in private family relationships. These cultural discourses reflect the ideology of the nuclear, heterosexual, two-parent family as the

best way to raise children (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009; Smith, 1993). They stem not only from a heteronormative image of family (a husband and a wife who are legally married), but they are also rooted in a highly gendered perception of women as nurturers, caregivers, and protectors of children. These discourses are linked to an idealized image of heterosexual marriage as being the gold standard for conducting partnership and parental relationships, and thus condemn divorce as harmful to children. Stepping outside of the boundaries of idealized heterosexual marriage and motherhood, women (such as lesbian adoptive mothers divorcing their partners) who do not conform to this gold standard are judged as “less than,” and even deviant, in the hierarchy of motherhood (DiLapi, 1989).

At the same time, lesbian adoptive mothers have already challenged the patriarchal cultural pressures to conform precisely to the heteronormative ideal by choosing to form lesbian-parent families. Lesbian mothers, then, simultaneously engage with broader cultural discourses in agentic ways by resisting and disrupting them, but also are not immune to the pressures to embrace and conform to these broad mandates for how women should form and maintain families.

Theoretical framework

We examined the ways in which lesbian mothers who were in the process of dissolving or had dissolved their relationships were both oppressed by and disruptive of these gendered, heteronormative cultural discourses, given the intersection of their lesbian identity and their engagement with motherhood, marriage, and divorce. The study was guided by a feminist perspective to examine (1) the pervasive and oppressive cultural narratives experienced by lesbian mothers who are in the process of relational dissolution; and (2) the agentic ways they resisted the prescriptive mandates and condemnation in these discourses. We explored how women with a stigmatized identity engaged with and confronted dominant narratives that positioned their experience as lacking.

Drawing from feminist theory, we used the sensitizing concepts of oppression, agency, and resistance to focus the study. Oppression refers to the intersectional inequities of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, age, and the like, which accrue to minority status, and which offer greater societal privileges to White, wealthy, heterosexual individuals (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Agency refers to the social-psychological process of one's ability and desire to make choices within the constraints of social institutions (Allen & Henderson, 2017). Resistance reveals the political act of empowerment, when oppressed or endangered people turn their vulnerability toward the capacity to act on their own behalf (Ferguson, 2017).

Method

Sample description

Data are drawn from author Abbie Goldberg's longitudinal investigation of adoptive parenting, which includes 47 lesbian couples, originally recruited during 2005–2009 (Goldberg et al., 2015; Goldberg & Garcia, 2015). The current sample consists of 17 women from this set of lesbian couples who had adopted eight years previously and were now separated or divorced. These 17 women were from 13 of the original 47 lesbian couples. Given the divergence in their experiences, we report data for individuals, rather than couples.

All 17 women were White. They were from the western, southern, and northeastern regions of the U.S. Their mean age was 44.5 years (range: 35–53). Three had some years of college or an associate's degree, four had a bachelor's degree, eight had a master's degree, and two had doctoral degrees. Before separating, the women had been partnered for a mean of 12 years (range: 6–17.75). Seven women did not experience a legal divorce because they had not been legally married, six women had obtained a legal divorce, two women were in the process of divorcing, and two women were in the process of dissolving their registered domestic partnership. Most were navigating shared custody arrangements with their former spouse. Seven women had repartnered, and eight said their ex-partner had repartnered. Thirteen women sent their children to counseling, and nine women pursued counseling for themselves. Despite often contentious relationships with their ex-spouses, they were committed to seeking professional support for their families.

Eleven mothers adopted one child, four mothers adopted two children, and two mothers adopted three children. The children's ages ranged from 3 to 19 years ($M = 8.77$). Of the 25 children, 8 were White and 17 were of color, including multiracial or biracial; 12 were boys and 13 were girls. Fifteen children had learning disabilities, or a mental health diagnosis, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or depression.

Recruitment and procedures

All participants completed an online survey during the pre-adoptive stage, and then at various points after they were placed with a child. At the most recent assessment point, participants were asked if they had separated or divorced since their children's adoption. The 17 women who indicated that they had split up were sent a separate online survey with 26 open-ended questions and 9 close-ended questions about the legal nature of their relationships, the relationship dissolution, child custody arrangements, and

issues reflecting the social and emotional aftermath of separation. For example, the open-ended questions asked participants to elaborate upon ways their relationship with their ex-partner had become easier or changed over time and to describe the issues they had in handling separation, coparenting, custody, and new partners. They were asked to describe the hardest part of the separation process, and the individuals and services that had been most and least supportive to them. They were also asked to describe their views of marriage and same-sex relationships.

Data analysis

The two authors conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of the 17 interview transcripts using grounded theory principles of open, focused, and selective coding in order to generate an overarching storyline (Charmaz, 2014). During open coding, we created an exhaustive list of key words, theoretical concepts, and initial themes that appeared from the women's unique ways of describing their experiences. We wrote case histories of each participant's story (each woman was assigned a pseudonym), to cross-reference against the common themes that initially emerged. For example, participants expressed a great deal of emotional intensity about themselves, their ex-partners, and how they perceived that their children were faring during the divorce process. Also noteworthy, in response to some of the in-depth interview questions, the women articulated the ways they were crafting a new life (e.g., actively coping with loss of family and friends and their dreams of a "happy family life").

In addition to their responses to questions asked in the survey, a theme emerged that we had not anticipated, which we then pursued during the second phase of focused coding. We found that the women did not simply rail against their ex-partners, but, as they accounted for their own feelings and perceptions (Hopper, 1993), they invoked broader societal discourses about family life in which they, as lesbian ex-partners, justified their attempts to create stable, loving homes for their adopted children in the midst of their marriages ending. We focused on this theme that emerged from the women's experiences, and not from any question we asked of them, about the ways in which cultural narratives of "the good mother and partner" infiltrated their consciousness as divorcing lesbian parents.

The current analysis represents our interpretation of the focused code of the gendered, heteronormative discourses that were revealed between the lines of the women's narratives about their lives. These discourses echo commonsense understandings or value statements about marriage, motherhood, divorce, family, women, children, and lesbians. Our final storyline, then, consists of how women embraced, resisted, and disrupted cultural

discourses to describe how they navigated the dilemmas of crafting a new life for themselves and their children after separation. These five discourses comprise cultural mandates that the women collectively deployed and confronted: (1) the ideology of the good mother; (2) divorce is bad for children; (3) marriage is the ideal way to live; (4) couples should stay together for the children; and (5) lesbian ex-lovers should be lifelong friends. The diverse ways that women navigated, wrestled with, and pushed back against these discourses are the focus of this article.

Results

The 17 lesbian mothers in this study were experiencing, or had recently completed, the ending of their partnership with the woman who had been the co-parent to their adopted child(ren). As is the case with any major life transition, emotions were plentiful, with women expressing a range of regret and fear as well as excitement for new possibilities ahead. As they narrated their experiences with dissolving their partnership and working out how to coparent with a lesbian partner with whom they were no longer intimate, as well as finding new partners and avenues of career and personal growth, they deployed five broader cultural discourses that gave meaning and structure to their experiences and perceptions. We illustrate each of these discourses, and point to the ways that the women both engaged or disrupted them, thereby demonstrating the feminist tenet that oppression and agency comeingle.

The ideology of the good mother

The ideology of the good mother reflects the highly feminized version of what a female parent is and should be (Lewin, 1993). “A good mother” is the linchpin of gendered oppression because it is designed “to keep women in their place.” This ideology is ubiquitous and women are unable to escape the cultural pressures of comparing themselves to this ideology and blaming themselves when they are unable to live up to its mandates (Baber & Allen, 1992; DiLapi, 1989). The women incorporated into their narratives the gendered ideology that a mother is responsible for providing a stable, secure family life for her child.

The discourse of the ideal mother places a heavy burden on women. Although the women also blamed their ex-partners for not being able to give their children a “perfect family,” there was no escaping the self-blame process. Adele explained that the hardest part of the separation process was “feeling like I had caused my children pain and sorrow. That has been the hardest thing to deal with; seeing my boys sad about this split is gut

wrenching.” Jade said, “I feel like I have betrayed my children in a way because they now have to endure an additional loss of a sense of family.” Gaby reflected with excruciating honesty that the hardest part of splitting up was not being able to give her three children the kind of family *she* longed for:

Knowing that we have failed already traumatized children and were unable to give them any kind of happy, nurturing environment. Every day wishing I had never been a part of this adoption, that they deserved better than us. The loss of what I believed my family would be like.

Freda explained that telling her child about the separation was so painful that she waited too long to do so, heaping blame upon herself:

Telling her about the separation is one of the worst memories of my life. It was a terrible heartbreak to her. Sometimes I think I would have stayed with my ex just to avoid that conversation. My ex and I did a pretty good job of hiding our problems from our child. That split really shocked her.

The pervasiveness of this cultural discourse meant that each woman had to first grapple with and account for how she did not measure up to the dictates of maternal perfection before she was able to validate her own agency in resisting such cultural mandates by creating a new life for herself and her family. At the same time, many of the women were cognizant of the extra burdens they faced, given their circumstances in some combination of a sexual and/or racial minority family, as other scholars have found (Balsam et al., 2017; Goldberg, Frost, Manley, & Black, 2018). Julia explained:

I think having children is harder in a same-gender relationship because we raise our kids in a tough, critical and cruel world where not everyone is supportive. We adopted both children and each of those experiences were very challenging in different ways. We are a transracial family which is also more challenging in this world.

Divorce is bad for kids

A second major cultural belief is that divorce harms children. Unlike the previous discourse of the “good mother,” many of the women took issue with this idea about divorce always being bad, often directly critiquing or objecting to it, and instead espousing that divorce was a better situation for their children and family overall. Betsy said, “We are all much happier now.” Regarding the consequences of the separation for herself, her ex-partner, and their son, Dina only had positive things to say, including, “[It was a] very good decision to split up.”

In describing how coparenting with her ex-partner was going after their separation, Leila explained that her three daughters were now much

happier that the parents have separated (although Leila did pay homage to the underlying pressure to be “perfect”):

The girls are doing well! It’s made them more comfortable not to have us unhappy with each other. I love hearing them sing around the house in a way they never would have months ago. Although we haven’t been perfect, we’ve both been able to keep the children first as we talk about how things need to work out and why. But seeing that they are so happy makes it all worthwhile.

Hazel revealed the complexity of divorce when parenting an adoptive special-needs child, in the context of being a woman who truly wanted her relationship with her ex to work out. Despite her disappointment that her marriage did not work out, and the guilt that she felt regarding her mothering, she concluded that her daughter would be better off post-separation:

Adopting a special-needs child contributed to the stress in the relationship. I ended up parenting largely alone and my ex now reports she did not feel prepared for our child’s needs. I wanted to stay together because I wanted my marriage to last. I do also feel badly for my daughter but believe overall she will be better off with having her parents be healthy.

Marriage is the ideal way to live

A third discourse that the women deployed, and which some disrupted, was that marriage is the ideal relationship for which everyone should aspire. Isla, for example, who was now casually dating, expressed her ambivalence about marriage, given the reality of her separation experience, saying, “I like the idea of marriage in theory but I likely do not feel it is a realistic state of being.” Jade explained that the only reason she married her former partner in the first place was because “I wanted to make her happy and *she* [emphasis added] wanted to be married.” Jade, however, “always felt marriage is overrated.” Similarly, Evie said:

I am very skeptical about marriage now. I don’t see many that actually work. It is way more painful to go through another divorce than the benefits of getting married again and it not working out. I don’t know if I will ever do it again, it’s so ... dreamy. And I am too realistic right now.

Some women wished they had ended their relationships earlier, as Fiona revealed: “I wish I had left earlier!” Cary elaborated on her reasons for wishing that she and her partner had split up sooner:

I wish we’d moved out sooner than we did; we stayed living in the same 2 bedroom house for 9 months before moving into the duplex where we currently live. I wanted more space right away. I also wish we’d had more of the difficult conversations and really sorted it all out before deciding to split ... I became more of a whole person and have discovered myself in so many ways once I got out of that relationship.

Kate concurred, stating that “I wish I had divorced her two years ago while the children were younger and not as cognizant of what is going on,” and

concluding that “[m]arriage is for heterosexuals. Amen, never again. But I didn’t feel this way when the marriage was good. For that nanosecond it felt like we were really a part of that societal bond that holds communities together.” Thus, Kate acknowledged that her perspective on marriage shifted, from—at least for a “nanosecond”—feeling that she was part of a sacred institution, to feeling that this institution was “not for her.”

Many women were much happier with their new lives, being able to balance parenting responsibilities with having newfound freedoms for themselves. The disdain some women expressed about the value of marriage, given its allegiance to patriarchy, reflects the broader cultural critique of marriage by some within the LGBTQ community (Diamond, 2017). Claiming delight in personal fulfillment apart from marriage disrupts the gendered heteronormative belief that a woman’s place is in the home, sacrificing for her spouse and child. Instead, as Cora explained, she wanted more for her life than a typical marriage that was accompanied by an all-consuming devotion to mothering:

Parenting half-time means that I have space to attend to my own growth and wellness in ways that I didn’t before. Having time to myself allows me to grow aspects of my life that were entirely consumed by parenting 24/7 before.

Couples should stay together for the children

The fourth discourse the women deployed and disrupted is that couples should stay together for the sake of their children. The power of this discourse is one reason that some women said they stayed together longer than they should have, even after they realized that their relationship was no longer viable. For some, bringing a child into their lives irrevocably changed their intimate relationship with their partner, and they indicated that the relational dynamics of marriage changed when mothering responsibilities became more salient. The demands of parenting can make it difficult to prioritize the intimate partnership as central and/or keep it “fresh.” Resisting the cultural narrative to avoid implicating children in the decision to end a relationship, Adele shared that she felt that the demands of raising a family and putting the children first led to her break up:

We both became more complacent over time and put our children before everything else including us as individuals and then us as a couple. That is not a sustainable model.... When two people are in a relationship and that romantic relationship morphs into a best friend situation well eventually it may not work for one of the partners.

Freda explained that she and her ex-partner held two very different views about whether the spousal or the parent-child relationship should be the top priority in a family, indicating that the difference in which relationship

was more valued led to her break-up, stating, “She [ex-partner] would say that she is number 1, and I made our child number 1. After our daughter arrived, she and I became a team and my ex was the outlier.”

When your ex is no longer your best friend

Earlier literature about the lesbian community valorized the unique closeness that former lesbian partners were able to retain, even after they broke up (Krieger, 1996). More recently, the complex nature of lesbian ex-lover relationships has been explored, with some women able to transform their relationships to close family ties or best friendships, and others loosening or ending ties altogether (Rothblum, 2009; Weinstock, 2004). Still, the discourse of lesbian communities being “an army of ex-lovers” (Hoffman, 2007) remains, reflecting both the intensity of intimate friendships between women as well as the importance of building community among oppressed groups (Krieger, 1996). However, all of the women in this study were, at best, neutral about their ex-partners and, at worst, hostile toward them. Again, the divorce and separation process was, for some, still recent and/or emotionally raw, but the women were realistic about the quality of the friendship they could establish with their ex-partners at this relatively difficult point in their relational histories. Evie explained how her interaction with her ex-partner was easier now that they no longer lived together:

I really don't like my ex much and I have to just be “at peace” with who she is and how she is... and just focus on how much we love our son, since her and I don't agree on much else in life but how to raise him.

On the other hand, some women lamented the loss of their ex-partner, claiming that they no longer had their best friend. Jade said that the hardest part of splitting up was, “I lost my best friend.” Julia elaborated on how she felt about this loss:

In trying to find a way to co-parent and relate to one another, it has been hard not to fall into the familiarity we have with one another after being together for 15 years. I miss my friend, the person I could talk to about anything. I think we will be able to find a new way of relating, but it's still very new and very difficult. We both love one another very much, but it's just not working anymore.

Finally, Mari was far enough along in the divorce process so that life with her ex was “less contentious,” boding well for their future as coparents of their son, to whom both were devoted:

Hurt feelings have eased and the legal process has ended and we are both starting to move forward with our lives.... We are both supportive of making sure he is the priority. We have similar values and parenting goals and in some ways I think we are both better parents as we make the most of the time we have with him.

Discussion

Cultural discourses provide much of the content for how individuals take stock of their own behaviors and interpret their life experiences. In this study, we found that lesbian adoptive mothers who were dissolving their relationships confronted five cultural themes about the way that women's marital and parental relationships should be structured. Their lived experience as divorcing lesbian mothers of primarily transracially adopted children often differed profoundly from these cultural mandates.

The first discourse, the ideology of the good mother, was pervasive, and all of the women reflected on the uniquely stigmatizing attitudes about how they deviated from the culturally valued norm of a being a good mother. This norm was grounded in beliefs that appropriate motherhood involves raising one's children in a stable marriage (DiLapi, 1989). Yet, these women also resisted and disrupted the discourses that valorized heteronormative marriage and parenting (e.g., marriage is the ideal lifestyle, and couples should stay together for the children) and demonized divorce (e.g., as being bad for children). They challenged and transformed these heteronormative discourses by de-emphasizing the importance of being married and by acknowledging how the presence of children can reconfigure the balance of power in marriage and across family relationships. A commonality in their stories was the desire, mostly realized, to put their children's needs first, which sometimes meant distancing from their ex-partners. Finally, in the process of confronting these discourses, the women also confronted an expectation among lesbian women to convert ex-lovers to best friends (Weinstock, 2004). In the midst of divorcing, despite their best intentions, the personal upheaval of ending an intimate lesbian partnership, in the context of children, often curtailed the closeness or even amicability of a former lesbian relationship.

Limitations and future directions

Because our study included only White, mostly economically privileged women, future work should also identify the ways in which lesbian divorcing mothers of diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds navigate a different set or combination of cultural discourses surrounding motherhood, marriage, and sexuality. Future research should also examine if divorced lesbian ex-partners who are still coparenting eventually renew their friendship with one another, once the legal, residential, and parental changes have settled.

Implications for practice

Given that few social supports exist for lesbian women navigating a breakup (Allen, 2007; Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2015),

clinicians are in a unique position to help with the inevitable tensions, power imbalances, and reconfigured family ties that impinge on this often tension-filled transition. Clinicians can assist women in dealing with the disappointing or painful realities of losing not only their partner, but also losing the dream of an egalitarian relationship, against the backdrop of the structural constraints of heterosexism that place sexual minority individuals and families at risk. Clinicians can play a powerful role in validating women's efforts to resist and subvert heteronormative discourses, as they redefine the nature of relationship dissolution and divorce in ways that may bring greater personal fulfillment, meaning, and peace.

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