

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

<http://spr.sagepub.com>

Unscripted motherhood: Lesbian mothers negotiating incompletely institutionalized family relationships

Amy Hequembourg

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 2004; 21; 739

DOI: 10.1177/0265407504047834

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://spr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/21/6/739>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

[International Association for Relationship Research](#)

Additional services and information for *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://spr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://spr.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://spr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/21/6/739>

Unscripted motherhood: Lesbian mothers negotiating incompletely institutionalized family relationships

Amy Hequembourg

Research Institute on Addictions, University at Buffalo

ABSTRACT

In this article, I use Cherlin's notion of incomplete institutionalization as a conceptual tool for understanding the parenting stories of 40 lesbian mothers. Using data gathered from interviews with 40 respondents, I examine these issues within a framework that acknowledges the differences among the respondents based on their trajectories to motherhood. I also address the unique difficulties they face as they negotiate their roles and relationships within their families and the extra layer of problems they experience in their interactions with social institutions, such as the law. My analysis suggests that lesbian-headed families are faced with internal dynamics that are similar to heterosexual stepfamilies, but also different, in that they encounter problems in their interactions with institutions (e.g., schools, the law) due to their incompletely institutionalized status. I present three resilience strategies employed by the respondents, including normalization tactics, second-parent adoptions, and commitment ceremonies. I close with a discussion of the study's implications, limitations, and directions for further research.

KEY WORDS: alternative family forms • lesbian motherhood • lesbian stepfamilies

Despite a growing interest in 'alternative family arrangements' (Weston, 1995) in the United States, lesbian mothers continue to be overlooked in sociological analyses of contemporary family life (Allen & Demo, 1995). Although concern over the well-being of children in lesbian families has

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amy Hequembourg, Research Institute on Addictions, University at Buffalo, 1021 Main Street, Buffalo, NY 14203-1016, USA [e-mail: ahequemb@riabuffalo.edu]. Larry Ganong was the Action Editor on this article.

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships Copyright © 2004 SAGE Publications (www.sagepublications.com), Vol. 21(6): 739–762. DOI: 10.1177/0265407504047834

generated an abundance of research on childhood outcomes (for reviews of this literature, see Belcastro, Gramlich, Nicholson, Price, & Wilson, 1993; Parks 1998; Patterson 1995; Victor & Fish 1995; and for a critique see Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), fewer researchers focus on lesbian mothers' parenting experiences. Among existing studies on lesbian parenting, researchers (Hare & Richards, 1993) have found that differing trajectories to motherhood have an impact on parenting experiences. Hare and Richards, for example, discussed differences between women who mother as a result of a biological connection to their child and those who mother as a result of a stepparenting relationship with their partner's children. They noted a different level and quality of relationship between partners in families in which children were born or adopted in the context of a lesbian relationship and those families in which the children were born in the context of a heterosexual marriage. These two groups of mothers also placed a different emphasis on the role of fathers in their children's lives. Nelson (1996) revealed basic decision-making differences between lesbian couples who conceived using donor insemination and lesbian couples who formed stepfamilies. Other researchers have also focused on the differences among lesbian mothers by highlighting certain mothering experiences, such as stepmothering (Erera & Fredriksen, 1999; Wright, 1998).

Although greater numbers of lesbian mothers are visible in today's society, their presence is still contested in our dominant culture. 'Fundamentally, lesbian families must continually face the question of their viability. The society at large views members of a lesbian family as unconnected individuals' (Slater & Mencher, 1991, p. 376). Wald (1997) remarked that lesbian motherhood is sometimes considered an oxymoron. Hequembourg and Farrell (1999) noted the tensions that arise as a result of lesbian mothers' 'marginal mainstream identities,' which refers to the combination of their revered identities as mothers with their more marginalized identities as lesbians. In an overview of the literature on gay and lesbian parenting, Oswald (2002, p. 375) reported that family resiliency was based on lesbian mothers' ability to instigate strategies 'to create and sustain a sense of family within a societal context that stigmatizes homosexuality and fails to provide social or legal recognition for a variety of family network relationships' and to symbolically redefine situations.

Oswald's focus on the resilience of lesbian families is reminiscent of earlier studies of heterosexual stepfamilies. For example, in 1978, Cherlin proposed that heterosexual remarriages were 'incomplete institutions' in American society. He noted the void faced by heterosexual stepfamilies as they forged their relationships in a social context built on ideologies of the intact, nuclear, biological family structure.

... because of their complex structure, families of remarriages after divorce that include children from previous marriages must solve problems unknown to other types of families. For many of these problems, such as proper kinship terms, authority to discipline stepchildren, and legal relationships, no institutionalized solutions have emerged. As a result,

there is more opportunity for disagreements and divisions among family members and more strain in many remarriages after divorce. (Cherlin, 1978, p. 636)

Cherlin's conceptualization of incomplete institutionalization was an early indication of the great interest researchers would have about all aspects of heterosexual stepfamily life in the upcoming decades (see Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000, for a comprehensive review). However, despite the popularity of Cherlin's hypothesis, there have been surprisingly few studies to test his assertions about stepfamilies. Among the few existing studies, some (Jacobson, 1995) argue that he overstated the impact of incomplete institutionalization on heterosexual stepfamilies, whereas others (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998) support his assertions that there are fewer existing scripts to help guide stepparent expectations than there are for biological parents. Grizzle's (1999) research also supported Cherlin's conjectures about the widespread disagreement over parental expectations in stepfamilies and the subsequent conflicts that ensue over their role disagreements. Although not specifically focusing on the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis, other studies have also found that heterosexual stepfamilies face unique difficulties in areas of family development, such as the formation and quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships (see Coleman et al., 2000). These conflicting findings clearly indicate the need for further research to better ascertain the credibility of Cherlin's early hypothesis.

I argue that Cherlin's concept of incomplete institution is useful for understanding the experiences of today's lesbian mothers because lesbian-headed families face very similar difficulties as they attempt to forge families in a cultural context that often ignores or denies their existence. Like the heterosexual stepfamilies described by Cherlin in the late 1970s, lesbian-headed families lack institutionalized structures to help them solve everyday family issues and access many of the rights and benefits afforded other types of families. Some of the institutional structures lacking for lesbian mothers include legal recognition of their families, terminology to address family members, and support from families of origin. However, in addition to the similarities between heterosexual stepfamilies and lesbian-headed families, there are also some important differences. Few researchers have explored the similarities and dissimilarities between lesbian and gay stepfamilies and heterosexual stepfamilies. One notable exception is Lynch's (2000, p. 81) findings that show some similarities, but also notable evidence that suggests lesbian and gay stepfamilies adopt 'unique and flexible adaption(s) to becoming a family.' She notes that lesbian and gay stepfamilies and heterosexual stepfamilies have similar expectations regarding family formation, they all experience transformations in their identity as a result of forming a stepfamily, they make similar assumptions about parenting and stepparenting roles, and they have similar attitudes towards the children. However, according to Lynch, lesbian and gay stepfamilies are unique in the impact that their sexual identity has on

their family formation. Furthermore, they are more child-centered than their heterosexual counterparts, they exhibit greater flexibility and adaptability, and external forces impact their families in different ways than heterosexual stepfamilies due to their sexual identities.

Following on this underdeveloped aspect of family research, I use Cherlin's notion of incomplete institutionalization as a conceptual tool for understanding the parenting stories of 40 lesbian mothers. Using data gathered from interviews with 40 respondents, I examine these issues within a framework that acknowledges the differences among the respondents based on their trajectories to motherhood. I also address the unique difficulties they face as they negotiate their roles and relationships within their families and the extra layer of problems they experience in their interactions with social institutions, such as the law.

In their review of the research on heterosexual remarriages, Coleman et al. (2000, p. 1301) concluded that 'new insights on stepfamily dynamics will be gained by focusing more attention on nontraditional stepfamilies, particularly cohabiting couples and gay or lesbian couples with children.' They also noted that the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis needs more research. My use of Cherlin's (1978) concept provides a mechanism for filling this gap in knowledge by better understanding how marginalized families forge strategies that aid their transition into societal institutions and relationships. My work builds on that of previous lesbian motherhood researchers by not only linking a discussion of lesbian motherhood to mainstream family research, but also bringing together into one article a discussion of different trajectories to motherhood and the strategies associated with differing parenting choices. The strength of this approach is that it provides concrete examples that illustrate the important linkages between macro- and micro-sociological family issues. The respondents' stories illustrate how institutional blindspots impact family relationships, but also how innovative strategies can be employed by families to address those institutional shortcomings.

Method

Forty self-identified lesbian mothers were recruited from two cities and surrounding areas in upstate New York. They were contacted through a variety of channels, including word-of-mouth, newspaper advertisements, signs posted in community stores, community service providers, and online listserves. Interested volunteers were sent an introductory letter that explained the purpose of the study as well as the background of the researcher (i.e., a heterosexual, married woman with no children). Twenty-two of the respondents were interviewed simultaneously with their partners (i.e., both were interviewed together in the same room) and 18 were interviewed on their own between October 1999 and November 2000. Half of those in the latter group were partnered (either they chose not to have their partner participate or their partner did not want to participate), and the remaining nine were not partnered at the time of the interview, or were not living with or co-parenting with anyone.

Prior to the interview, respondents were given a short story to read about a lesbian mother's experiences. Janeil Martin published 'The Lamp' in a 1998 edition of *Alternative Family Magazine* to relate her personal experiences of coming out later in life, including the trials and tribulations she and her new partner faced as they tried to form a stepfamily with her daughters. A copy of the story was mailed to each respondent prior to the interview and the respondent was asked to consider the similarities and differences between Martin's story and her own and how the respondent would devise her own story of motherhood. The purpose of this method was to provide a common ground to begin the interviews, which would subsequently allow each respondent the opportunity to relate her own experiences in an open-ended manner. Each interview was taped, transcribed, and supplied to the respondent for verification.

Data were collected during a two-hour-long unstructured, open-ended interview with each of the 40 respondents. The data were originally collected for the purposes of completing the author's dissertation. Consequently, the findings for this article come from a 'secondary analysis' (Glaser, 1963) of the data by which each interview was open coded using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thematic coding revealed the varying experiences based on differing trajectories to motherhood, as well as the strategies employed by the respondents. Cherlin's (1978) conceptualization of families as incomplete institutions provides a framework for better understanding the respondents' familial relationships.

Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 62 years, with a mean age of 41 years. The respondents had a mean of 1.5 children per household. Their children ranged in age from under 1 year to 30 years. Twenty of the respondents had been previously married before coming out and nearly half (19) of the women gave birth to their children during a prior heterosexual marriage. Five other respondents became stepmothers when they formed a relationship with someone who had children from a prior heterosexual marriage. These respondents will be referred to as 'stepmothers' in this article. Four respondents conceived via alternative insemination (AI) from unknown donors and four chose to domestically or internationally adopt their children. I refer to the nonbiological partners in these AI and adoptive families as 'co-mothers'. The remaining respondents had other trajectories to motherhood that included combinations of those already listed, foster parenting, or (in one case) a one-night-stand to get pregnant. One woman conceived after a member of her family raped her. Thirty-one of the women were currently living with partners who were co-parenting dependent children or who had co-parented the children before they moved out on their own. Five of the respondents were single and not currently dating, 31 lived with their current partners, and 4 were dating but did not live with the woman they were dating. Fourteen women had been with their current partner for 10 or more years, five for 5–9 years, and 17 had been together for less than 5 years. All women's names were changed to ensure confidentiality.

Given the nonrandom recruiting methods of this study, this sample of women is not unbiased and should not be considered representative of all lesbian mothers. Similar to most studies of lesbian motherhood (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Dunne, 2000; Hare & Richards, 1993; Lewin, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Wright, 1998), this sample predominately consists of white, middle-class, and well-educated women. Women-of-color and working-class women were

underrepresented. While many existing studies take place in progressive urban areas (e.g., New York City, San Francisco; Lewin, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Reimann, 1997; Weston, 1991) or other areas of the United States (see Hare & Richards, 1993, who collected their data in the Willamette Valley of Oregon), the current study draws respondents from small urban, suburban, and rural areas of upper New York State. Consequently, the respondents' narratives may reflect experiences that are different from those of lesbian mothers in other areas of North America.

It is important to note that, although I address the strategies employed by the respondents in this study, I did not measure or observe their actual practices; I am merely reporting their stories about these practices. Consequently, the data for this article consist of narrative accounts that are not entirely independent of practice, but by no means identical to practice. In addition, there is the possibility that the interview context may have influenced some respondents' stories; participants who were interviewed jointly with their partner may have framed their accounts differently than those that were interviewed individually. However, the analysis did not reveal any observable differences between the couples' responses and the individuals' responses. In order to allow the reader to draw his/her own conclusions, I identify all narratives from joint interviews with an asterisk next to their name the first time that they appear in the article.

Findings

The parenting stories of the 40 respondents revealed different trajectories to motherhood, which had a visible impact on the strategies they employed to negotiate their incompletely institutionalized statuses. Not surprisingly, the two groups' differences revolved around the means by which they conceived their children: some gave birth to children in the context of a heterosexual relationship and then formed a lesbian stepfamily, whereas others formed a lesbian-headed family together as a result of AI or adoption. I first draw on the narratives from lesbian mothers in stepfamilies to explore their parenting experiences. Common themes in these respondents' stories involve the difficulties integrating lesbian stepmothers into family relationships and the strategies they employ to overcome these problems. I then turn to the experiences of lesbian families formed as a result of AI or adoption.

Lesbian stepfamilies: Integrating stepmothers into stepfamilies

Denise and Kris were among the 28 respondents who had been in some form of lesbian stepfamily during their adult lives. They had been together for five years. Prior to their relationship, Kris had unsuccessfully tried forming a stepfamily with another woman. Her children had been extremely hurt by their former stepmother's treatment of them. Consequently, they resisted Denise's attempts to become their new stepparent. Denise expressed stress, sadness, and frustration over their reluctance to accept her as their stepmother.

Denise*: . . . when I walked into the relationship, I saw the whole picture and that's what I wanted. It was a situation where I probably wanted more than people were

really going to be able to give. (. . .) It has been kind of an up-and-down kind of thing and it got to the point where I really tried [but] Kris was put in the middle a lot and so, part of the time, we both put her in the middle: the kids for their reasons and mine because I wasn't supposed to talk to them about money things and I wasn't supposed to discipline and all that kind of stuff. (. . .) And that was hard because for me, co-parenting needs to be like a collective effort. So, I think that made it hard for me to communicate because I just thought that co-parenting was more inclusive than how it turned out to be.

Denise's desire to quickly assimilate into her new stepfamily is similar to the desire expressed by heterosexual stepparents (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994), as were the difficulties she experienced during the transition (Keshel, 1990; Papernow, 1993). Other respondents echoed Denise's surprise over the difficulty of stepmothering. Wilma (a birth mother who conceived her children in a previous heterosexual marriage), for example, described how contentious her relationship with her new partner became when Samantha tried to challenge Wilma's parenting decisions.

Wilma: In the beginning, Samantha wanted to be a co-parent. She *really* thought that that was what she wanted. But, Samantha's idea of parenting and my idea of parenting are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. (. . .) [My oldest daughter, Linda] just didn't want to understand that Samantha's upbringing caused her to see things a different way from how I saw them. (. . .) So, she tested and tested. And through that testing, she lost Samantha's trust. And Samantha began blaming Linda for everything and anything. Samantha just began losing trust in Linda. She said that Linda wasn't doing what she said she was going to do. That's so typical of a 16-year-old teenager. So, their relationship began to deteriorate and then it just got to the point where Linda would get so mad at Samantha that she would go on with her daily life as if Samantha didn't even exist. Which hurt Samantha. She didn't know how to react to it.

Wilma felt extremely conflicted as she tried 'to keep both of them happy.' She finally distanced herself from Samantha and Linda's antagonistic relationship and gave up hope that they would come to a workable compromise. Wilma's discomfort was similar to that expressed by both heterosexual biological parents in stepfamilies and biological lesbian mothers in other studies of lesbian stepfamilies (Lynch, 2000). Wilma's perceived failure to help integrate her partner into their family is indicative of the important role that birth mothers played in the success or failure of their newly constituted stepfamilies. The birth mother's role in forging family scripts becomes particularly revealing when we consider instances when there are differing opinions about the customs and conventions of family life associated with the proper disciplining of children in lesbian stepfamilies. Wilma clearly privileged her own role as a biological mother over that of her partner's role as stepmother. She explained, '... blended families are different though. Especially when one partner has never had children. And never been in a relationship with children. So, there isn't that – what I call – “umbilical connection” that a parent has with their child.' Wilma's words illustrate her struggle to negotiate new scripts for the formation of her stepfamily. Unfortunately, the lack of institutionalized scripts available for lesbian stepfamily formation resulted in the limiting of Wilma's partner's role rather than her assimilation into the family. Researchers (Fine et al., 1998) have noted that heterosexual stepfamilies experience similar ambiguities due to the lack of consistency in expectations about the stepparent role. Heterosexual stepparents are often uncertain about the role they should play

in their stepchildren's lives, but, unlike the lesbian stepmothers in this study, heterosexual stepmothers see themselves as friends to their stepchildren rather than parental figures (Church, 1999).

Lesbian motherhood researchers have found that lesbian birth mothers and stepmothers often have very differing expectations about the stepmother's parental role. For example, Nelson (1996) found that some of the previously childless parents in her study expressed shock or dismay over their partners' parenting philosophies, and many birth mothers were unhappy when they received criticism from their partners regarding their parenting strategies. Birth mothers and stepmothers in this study were left in disagreement about their role in the socialization of their children because they lacked scripts to help guide their daily parenting practices. Intense disagreements over parenting philosophies often resulted in the dissolution of the family unit or the limiting of stepparental authority in everyday family situations.

Other birth mothers in the current study also expressed reservations about their partners' abilities to parent. For example, when I asked June if her partner helped parent her teenage son, she answered in the negative and added, 'I probably wouldn't want that. (. . .) It's like, "Don't tell my kid what to do."' In another instance, Hannah had given birth to children in a prior marriage and her partner, Ginny, had also given birth to her own children in a previous marriage. When Hannah and her children moved in with Ginny, Hannah was surprised to find that Ginny had not maintained any ties to her own biological children after she divorced their father. As a result, Ginny envied Hannah's close relationship with her children. Hannah believed that Ginny's jealousy hindered the creation of their stepfamily. Hannah's dislike for Ginny's parenting philosophies further complicated this situation. She explains, 'Ginny was not intended to be a parent fill-in or a father substitute or a parent substitute. They were my children.' Thus, Hannah denied Ginny any authority over the children.

Hannah: So, there was no way that I wanted her to have any say-so. That's not to say that she wasn't supportive and that's not to say that we didn't do things with the kids, but as far as raising them, I didn't want her to have any responsibility in that. (. . .) I didn't want a second parent for my children. I didn't think it was fair.

Victoria, another birth mother in the study, separated from her ex-partner because they disagreed about discipline:

Victoria: And I couldn't let Mary discipline him because she couldn't do it with a clear head and you can't do it from a real emotional state and that really was essentially the thing that broke us up in the end. She did not understand and I had explained to her my philosophies many times and that it differed from hers and it's just different and this is the way that I choose to have it done.

Victoria's break-up with her partner over parenting disagreements is not surprising; researchers (Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1997) have found that heterosexual stepfamily adjustment is often related to the clarity of and agreement over familial roles. Furthermore, in heterosexual stepfamilies, stepmothers have a more difficult time assimilating than stepfathers (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Heterosexual stepfathers are often able to fill the void left by a departed biological father. Heterosexual stepmothers, on the other hand, have a more difficult time because they must inhabit the space and role that is already occupied by the birth mother. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994, p. 458) note that heterosexual stepmothers 'may judge themselves according to the

culturally dominant view that mothers should play the major role in rearing children; if so, they may fall short of these high standards.' Lesbian stepparents' parenting experiences are even more complicated because they must forge their role as a second mother within the presence of the children's biological mother – a process that is difficult and ambiguous given the lack of pre-scripted guidelines available to aid them. The lack of scripts available to lesbian stepmothers underscores the incompletely institutionalized status of lesbian-headed families. Although the stepmothers in this study clearly wanted to help parent their stepchildren, their partners – the children's birth mothers – did not help write the scripts necessary for their integration into the stepfamily. In some cases, the continuing influence of the children's biological father further complicated this process.

Biological fathers and their impact on lesbian stepfamilies

Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) identified the presence of the biological father as one factor complicating the formation of the heterosexual stepfamily. Likewise, in her study of lesbian mothers, Nelson (1996) noted,

In those rare cases in which the child had a father with whom he or she had a relationship, the role of the second woman became even more problematic, especially given that she was attached to the mother instead of the father. In a sense, the presence of a father further displaces the second woman . . . (p. 80)

Among this current study's respondents, Belinda and Sara's parenting experiences illustrate the unique stepparenting dilemmas that can arise when the children's biological father remains actively involved in his children's lives. Belinda and Sara began dating while Sara still lived with her husband, Neil. When Sara finally disclosed her lesbianism to her husband and asked for a divorce, Neil was extremely supportive. Belinda quickly moved in with Sara and her two children, although she expressed reservations about becoming an 'instant parent.' However, she quickly adjusted to family life and, with Sara's encouragement, began actively parenting her stepchildren. Todd, Sara's 4-year-old son, quickly bonded with Belinda and expressed a desire to call her 'mom.' Belinda expressed reservations when Todd called her 'mom' because she feared it would somehow undermine Neil's integrity as Todd's parent.

Belinda: Probably the biggest challenge we had was with Todd. He couldn't understand why I couldn't be his mom too. Because both of the kids will slip and they will call me 'mom' sometimes which is no big deal, but at one point, Todd was saying, 'I've got two mommies.' And we had to have a little chat with him and tell him that 'Todd, you really only have one mommy and one daddy.' (. . .) I'm *not* his mom. I'm an adult that lives here that he needs to listen to and respect and that he knows that I'm mommy's girlfriend and that we have our bedroom and that I'm always going to live here and stuff like that. But, I think that if he were saying he had two mommies, I don't think that is fair to Neil. Todd has *one* mother and *one* father.

Sara and Belinda feared that Neil's confidence in his role as parent might be undermined if the children began referring to Belinda as their other mother. The lack of terminology for familial roles in lesbian families is indicative of their lack of institutionalization. Belinda hesitated to embrace the label 'mom' because she feared that it would undermine the children's biological father's status in the family. However, she lacked other linguistic devices to identify her relationship to her stepchildren. Furthermore, Belinda, Sara, and Neil were

faced with a lack of role models that would help them create a family that included two mothers and a father. Sara's mother was particularly resistant to Belinda's presence in their lives and blamed her for destroying Sara and Neil's marriage. Her active resistance manifested itself in outright verbal displays of aggression toward Belinda and manipulative tactics aimed at turning the children and Sara against Belinda. Cherlin (1978) indicated a similar problem in heterosexual remarriages:

The term 'stepparent,' as Bohannon (1970) has observed, originally meant a person who replaced a dead parent, not a person who was an additional parent. And the negative connotations of the 'stepparent,' especially the 'stepmother,' are well known (Bernard, 1956; Smith, 1953). Yet there are no other terms in use. In some situations, no term exists for a child to use in addressing a stepparent. (p. 643)

Almost 25 years later, heterosexual stepfamilies still suffer this legacy. However, researchers (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991) have noted that lesbian families remain particularly vulnerable due to their newly visible status and ongoing struggles for legitimacy in American culture. As the following quote exemplifies, Belinda felt torn between wanting to claim the recognition of her newly forged motherhood status and her inability to envision a way to do that without marginalizing the children's father.

Belinda: It would have been one thing if Neil were never, ever in the picture. *Then* two mommies I think would have been okay, but Todd was really intrigued, or really into it, about two mommies and a couple of times, you could just see Neil cringe. And I'm like, 'This guy is a good guy. This is his son and he had Todd with Sara. He didn't have him with me, didn't have him with anyone else.' The joke is that I'm the 'junior parent' around here. And I'm mommy's girlfriend. It's the understanding that I'm on the same level as mommy, so if mommy says something, what I say goes too. (. . .) But, I'm not mommy.

Belinda's story illustrates that when the children's biological father is actively involved, there may be greater constraints placed on the parenting scripts available to a lesbian stepmother. These mothers must forge relationships with their stepchildren, as well as consider the implications of their strategies for the familial scripts remaining from the children's once intact heterosexual family. Because current cultural constructions of family rely heavily on outdated notions of the nuclear, heterosexual, biological model, the respondents were left struggling to reconcile their own needs with available models that were insufficient to meet those needs. Ideologies of motherhood centralize a biological mother's role in her children's lives. Thus, not only must lesbian stepmothers negotiate their place next to their partners' central roles in their children's lives, they must also negotiate their positions in relation to the children's biological fathers. Resistance from other family members and a lack of institutional validation (e.g., no laws allow for children to have three legal parents) further complicate lesbian stepfamily formations. Lesbian stepmothers are faced with more ambiguities in the family formation process than those faced by heterosexual stepfamilies because they are *second* mothers and also a new addition to the family.

Not only must the birth mother, the children, and the new stepmother face 'linguistic inadequacies correspond[ing] to the absence of widely accepted definitions for many of the roles and relationships in families of remarriage' (Cherlin, 1978, p. 644) like those discussed by Belinda earlier, but the father's presence in his children's lives also forces lesbian stepparents to account for

their legal and social rights to parental status. As discussed later in this article, nonbiological lesbian mothers face unique challenges due to their lack of legal and biological ties to their children. Blatant homophobia from ex-husbands and their families clearly highlight the limited institutionalization of lesbian stepmothers' statuses in American culture. While Sara and Belinda were lucky to have Neil's support, other respondents related stories about custody battles and threats of physical violence from their ex-husbands. In some cases, nonbiological mothers must make themselves socially invisible in order to protect their partners' legal parental rights. In those unfortunate cases, the social ambiguities associated with lesbian families become clearly realized in concrete legal ways when traditional notions of family are used as ammunition to exclude lesbian families from cultural definitions of 'family' and the accompanying tangible benefits that accompany inclusion in that privileged status.

Like lesbian stepmothers, co-mothers in families who chose to have children together via AI also experienced a cultural reluctance to acknowledge the legitimacy of two-mother families. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of the family formation processes of AI and adoptive families and the challenges they face as they form their families.

Lesbian couples forming families via alternative insemination or adoption

In contrast to lesbian stepfamilies that form after their children are already born, increasing numbers of lesbian couples are choosing to have children together through adoption, foster parenting, or alternative insemination. Because lesbian couples cannot conceive without the help of a sperm donor, they face different challenges than heterosexual couples who choose to parent together. For example, the planning and execution of their pregnancy often involve costly and time-consuming interventions by others (e.g., known donors, physicians, AI clinic service providers). Sometimes, the difficulties associated with this process (or other reasons, such as age or health) compel lesbian couples to choose to either internationally or domestically adopt – a process that also involves costly and time-consuming interactions with various adoption agencies and birth families. Partners in the AI and adoptive couples in this study mentioned factors they considered when they decided to have children, such as their age, their economic status, their family and friends' reactions, legal issues, the sharing of parenting responsibilities, and the impact of their lesbianism on their children's well-being (e.g., not having a biological father, facing stigma at school). These concerns are sometimes similar to those expressed by heterosexual couples, but there are also several unique factors associated with a lesbian couple's decision to pursue adoption or AI. Some of these factors also clearly differentiate lesbian chosen families and lesbian stepfamilies from one another and highlight the different ways they manage their incompletely institutionalized statuses. Hillary and Vicky's narratives illustrate some of the struggles indicative of AI and adoptive families in the following section.

Negotiating resistance from families-of-origin

At the time of the interview, Hillary and Vicky had been together for 10 years and Vicky was pregnant with their second child conceived through AI by an unknown donor. They explained Vicky's parents' resistance to their decision:

Vicky*: Because they were very comfortable with us as a couple but then when we said that we were going to have kids, they back-slid. (...) So it was like we had to totally reeducate all over again. And then they struggled with the issues of their lack of a father figure: 'Would they be missing out on a father figure?' (...) 'What will you tell this child?' So, we had to reeducate our families about alternative insemination and how does the process happen and how are we going to raise/what are we going to tell the kids when they are older and they look for who is their dad. 'Who am I like?' And all those genetic type issues. (...) We worked *much* harder!

Vicky and Hillary believed their lesbianism forced them to spend more time and energy than their siblings when it came to convincing their parents that they would be good parents. Vicky explained, 'Then we would compare to times like when her brother was having a child and they didn't get any hassle. And here we get a litany of questions and concerns and our parents were really against it.'

Although both their parents wrestled with worries about the absence of a father figure in their grandchildren's lives, Hillary's parents were particularly sensitive to these issues because of their lack of biological and legal ties to their grandchildren.

Hillary*: My parents struggled significantly with children. (...) They thought they couldn't really be considered grandparents because it had nothing to do with me. [...]. 'Will they call us grandma?' and all that.

Vicky: And they actually chose not to be called that. They came up with their own names ... 'Nanna' and 'Gramps.' (...)

Hillary: And then it was this thing about the [lack of a] father. My dad struggled with that a lot. An awful lot.

Interviewer: How do you respond to that?

Hillary: Oh, boy. [When he said,] 'Why would you want children?' I said, 'Did anyone ever ask you why you would want children? What would your answer be if someone had asked you before you had had me? I'm your first born – what would you have said? Why did *you* want children?'

Vicky: We put it back on them.

Hillary: [I also said,] 'Any sort of answer that you would have would also be our answer as well.' And, I think that my mom went through this period where she felt that it was very selfish. Very selfish to do that to a child. To a child. 'You are just doing it to meet your own needs. It's very selfish of you to bring a child into that environment or realm.' And the thing that we *did* struggle with on both ends was this father issue and the issue of how do you present that to your dads who are very important to you and whose relationship you cherish? (...) It's a hard thing to get across. But, the reality was that we kept going with it because this is our only option.

In addition to their worries about the effect on their child and concerns about the absence of a father figure in the child's life, Hillary and Vicky's parents were also very concerned how others would react to their grandparenthood. Children increase the likelihood of comments from outside the family, exposing grandparents to questions they may not be prepared to answer. Grandparents may worry about how their grandchildren will cope with people who do not understand their family arrangement. In an attempt to avoid this dilemma, Hillary's parents encouraged the couple to adopt a child rather than have their own children via AI, because they thought an adopted grandchild would be easier to explain to their friends and acquaintances than a child who had been

conceived via AI. Hillary's parents' discomfort was particularly evident when all of them went out in public together and they found themselves faced with the task of making introductions to friends and strangers.

Vicky: They would struggle, like when we would go out to restaurants and her parents would see friends that they know. They would say all these things like 'Here's my daughter.' And then you would hear the hesitation, so we would just let them go with whatever they felt.

Hillary's parents struggled with the lack of terminology available for them to explain their relationship to their daughter's nonbiological children. At first glance, this problem may appear to be one experienced by the lesbian couples' parents and, thus, has little to do with the lesbian mothers' daily lives. However, as Hillary and Vicky's narratives illustrate, their relationships with their families-of-origin demand that these concerns are addressed in ways that appease their parents' insecurities and, thus, have a distinct impact on Hillary and Vicky's day-to-day family relationships.

The couple tried to be understanding of their parents' concerns, but found themselves caught between their own desire to be honest and open about their family and Hillary's parents' desire for them to remain hidden. Their fears surfaced once again when the couple planned to baptize their daughter.

Vicky: And that was an educational process, again. My folks were like, 'You mean two women are going to stand up there?' I was like, 'Well, yeah – she *is* the other parent!' But, 'What will people think? You have to have a man up there!' So, my mother wanted my brother to be my 'husband.' So, we stood up [to them] and said, 'No.' So it was like this whole, 'What will people think?'

Hillary: That drives an awful lot of everything. (. . .) Which is a big factor. You know – you struggle between creating our own identity and then also being respectful to find some sort of [middle ground].

Hillary and Vicky were out to everyone of importance in their social networks when they decided to have a child together. Hillary and Vicky's parents were very supportive of their relationship; however, they resisted Hillary and Vicky's plans to have children. In contrast to the parents of married heterosexual couples who are often thrilled when they hear that they might become grandparents, Hillary and Vicky's parents expressed fears and concerns about grandparenthood. Many of their concerns were grounded in the lack of institutionalized legal, social, and biological ties between their daughter and her children, which, in turn, had a direct bearing on their relationship to their grandchildren.

Their reaction illustrates the continuing pervasiveness of negative misconceptions about gay and lesbian parenting and the degree to which lesbian parents lack institutionalized structures to guide them in family formation processes. Hillary and Vicky's stories illustrate the important ways that concerns emanating from the couples' family-of-origin have a direct impact on the ways that lesbian families negotiate their familial lives. For example, the lack of appropriate terms for grandchildren in chosen lesbian families can clearly have negative consequences for family functioning. As Cherlin (1978, p. 644) pointed out, 'These linguistic inadequacies correspond to the absence of widely accepted definitions for many of the roles and relationships in families of remarriage.' Hillary's parents' resistance demanded a response from the couple. The strategies they devised to help forge scripts that fit their family's needs included educating their parents about AI and lesbian parenting, maintaining an open

and honest dialogue with them about their fears, and persistently reminding their parents that they were not going to hide their family in shame.

Strategies employed when managing an incompletely institutionalized status

The 40 respondents in this study employed a variety of strategies aimed at overcoming the difficulties they faced in their lives due to their incompletely institutionalized status. Lesbian mothers with different trajectories reported that they emphasized their similarity to heterosexual mothers and their families and participated in commitment ceremonies as a means of legitimizing their relationships. In addition, some of the respondents also pursued second-parent adoptions as a way to secure legal parental rights. These strategies resulted in improvised rituals and scripts that compensated for their inability to legally marry and access many of the privileges afforded heterosexual couples with children. The need for these strategies highlights the vital function that institutionalization plays in the everyday lives of families and suggests some ways that institutional structures could better fulfill the needs of lesbian-headed families.

Emphasizing the 'mainstream'

The most common strategy was the respondents' emphasis on the 'normality' of their families. Because they often faced opposition and misunderstanding by others in their social networks, it was common for them to emphasize the mainstream nature of their family lives. The respondents emphasized their similarities to heterosexual mothers and repeatedly indicated the insignificance of their lesbianism in their everyday lives as parents. Monica and Teresa, for example, explained that they strove to fulfill socially acceptable expectations about motherhood:

Monica*: Our experiences have been pretty mainstream because *we're* so mainstream.

Teresa*: Right. And it's been such a *normal* family.

Monica: Just normal family, living out in rural America. Nothing really traumatic. (. . .) And I think too, that as a parent, you have to *not* make it an issue. We never made it a big issue. We were never out there. I always thought it would be very difficult for the kids if I was on the news, like being this activist. (. . .) Because my father was out there during Vietnam protesting – getting on the news, getting arrested, being an activist. And I hated it! I hated it. It was so embarrassing to have this hippie father when everybody else's father wore a suit and was normal and so I didn't want to do that to them because I knew how hard that is to have that tension. Because parents are supposed to be all conservative and straight-laced. They are not supposed to be on the radical edge. So, it was important to me not to do that.

Emphasizing their similarities to other families was an important strategy for respondents because it centralized the positive attributes associated with their motherhood identities and obscured those aspects of identity that related to their lesbianism. This strategy was common among all the respondents regardless of their trajectory to motherhood and resulted in their propensity to assimilate into existing social structures. The respondents were particularly sensitive to criticism about their ability to parent and developed strategies to counter misconceptions about their parenting.

Monica*: I can't help that the kind of lesbian identity that the mothers have is also an issue as well. Because I do a lot of work on lesbian identity and I think that the farther out on the lesbian continuum the mothers are from mainstream women, the more difficult it might become. I think if your mothers are really radical lesbians, it can be really tough. So, how mom looks when she comes to school is a big deal. Kids want you to be a garden-variety mom. So, if you have a mom who's way out there with a crew-cut and pride chains and spiked hair and so for whatever orientation, that is going to be tough. And to add that in, I think it would be very difficult. So, I think the way the women, the way the couples present themselves, is a big factor.

Other respondents described their everyday parenting lives as 'mundane' and 'pretty "Leave-It-to-Beaver".' Hannah explicitly discussed her interpretation of 'normality' and the importance of presenting a certain problem-free version of self to society so that lesbian mothers are not all portrayed as radical or maladjusted.

Hannah: So, my personal opinion is that I'm not a negative role model for either parenthood or lesbianism and I like people to know that we're not always that crazy or strange or obvious or whatever. Because we are like anybody else. (. . .) I don't think people are going to get a good idea about us or a nice feeling until some of us actually talk and till society realizes that we are no different than anybody else. (. . .) I am only normal or we are all normal in the fact that we all want the same thing. Mostly everyone wants a nice relationship and so on and so forth. That involves respect. And sometimes gay marriages, when it's two males or two females, people think it's different. But don't you think we argue about bills and what color we are going to paint the front room like anybody else? So, I think that is why 'normal' is stressed. And just to stress that it is no different in my house whether it is two men or two women. And that's the part that I am more interested in people knowing. 'Hey – wow, we aren't different. Don't be afraid of us. Don't label us.'

Respondents were also quick to deride other lesbians for more radical demonstrations of lesbian identity. For example, Paula admitted,

Paula*: Yeah – that's what bugs me is that even in the media, they show the extremists as if the heterosexual population had *no* extremists. And when they show it in the gay population, it's like, 'This is what all these gay people are like.' That's why it's tough because I'm not the out-there protesting kind of person, but I like people to know that we are just your average-Joe.

Paula and many of the other respondents agreed that their responsibility to their children included a presentation of self that conformed to 'acceptable' (i.e., mainstream) articulations of motherhood. On one hand, their narratives indicate that they were reacting to 'out there' aspects of lesbian identity as a means of navigating their motherhood. However, more importantly, their distancing strategies indicate a desire to maintain their own close proximity to 'essential motherhood ideologies' (DiQuinzio, 1999). These ideologies provide ready-made scripts for respondents as they attempt to overcome negative stereotypes about lesbian motherhood.

In addition to emphasizing their 'normality,' respondents also devised other family rituals to help them manage their incompletely institutionalized statuses. Second-parent adoptions and commitment ceremonies closely parallel normalizing strategies because their ultimate goal is to forge a space for lesbian mothers within existing definitions of motherhood and family.

Formalizing relationships through second-parent adoptions and commitment ceremonies

Cherlin (1978) noted the lack of legal provisions addressing the unique needs of remarried families. The same now applies to lesbian-headed families: 'Unfortunately for these families, particularly the children, the laws pertaining to families, whether defining rights, obligations, or bestowing benefits, are silent with regard to their particular needs' (Ettelbrick, 1993, p. 517). Dalton and Bielby (2000, p. 39) assert that nonbiological lesbian mothers are particularly disadvantaged in comparison to nonbiological fathers because of their gender.

The legal invisibility of lesbian two-parent families stems from the historical development of family law. In the United States, the law generally recognizes three types of person as legal parents: those who biologically reproduce a child, individuals who adopt the legal or biological child of their spouses, and men who are legally married to and living with women who reproduce a child. Because two women are unable to biologically reproduce a child together, and because marriage in the United States is limited to male–female couples only, nonbiological mothers in lesbian-headed two-parent families remain legally unrelated to the children they co-parent unless they successfully complete a formal adoption proceeding (Dalton & Bielby, 2000, p. 37).

Second-parent adoptions. Second-parent adoption and 'stranger adoption' are the only two avenues currently open to lesbian mothers wishing to become legal parents to their nonbiological children. 'Stranger adoption' is typically used when a child has no recognized biological parent and a legal 'stranger' wishes to adopt him/her. Stranger adoptions are not as useful for lesbian couples wishing to gain joint custody of their children because state statutes and administrative policies currently limit adoption to only one partner of a cohabiting couple or to a legally married couple. Furthermore, in some states, such as Florida, openly gay and lesbian individuals cannot legally adopt children.

In cases involving traditional adoptions by heterosexual couples, a child typically leaves his/her biological family to live with new adoptive parents and the parental rights of his/her biological parent are nullified. In contrast, second-parent adoptions by nonbiological lesbian co-mothers leave the biological mothers' rights intact and create legally recognized parental statuses for the second parents. In other words, it creates legal space for second mothers without nullifying their partners' (i.e., the biological mothers') rights. Second-parent adoption is important because it allows nonbiological co-parents to gain the legal rights and privileges of parenthood. For example, second-parent adoptions grant nonbiological co-parents several important rights: (i) the right to designate their children as heirs to their Social Security benefits in case they die, (ii) the right to petition the courts for custody and visitation if they separate from their partner, (iii) the ability to have their children on their health insurance, and (iv) permission to make medical decisions for their children.

New York State – the location of the respondents – is one of a growing number of states in the U.S. to allow second-parent adoptions by lesbian women. However, second-parent adoptions are only available to lesbian co-parents when the biological father of the children is either legally absent (i.e., in the case of AI by an unknown donor or domestic and international adoptions) or willing to rescind his legal fatherhood rights. The law does not

currently allow for a child to have more than two legal parents; consequently, the biological mother, biological father and the lesbian co-parent or stepmother cannot simultaneously have legal rights to the children. This is not usually a problem for a co-mother of children born in the context of a lesbian relationship, but it often prevents a stepmother from adopting her partner's children when they were born within a previous heterosexual relationship and their father still holds legal parental rights. In addition to the roadblocks faced by stepmothers trying to adopt their partners' children, second-parent adoptions also suffer from other limitations including limited availability in the U.S., high cost relative to other adoptions, intrusive home visits, long processing time, and the uncertainty of how custody claims will hold up in court (Dalton, 2001). Lesbian stepmothers are similar to heterosexual stepparents in that they both enter their new stepfamily without any legal parental rights and they must both sever the child's legal ties to his/her noncustodial parent in order to seek adoptive rights (Fine, 1994). However, for heterosexual stepparents who choose to pursue formal adoption procedures, their sexual identity is never suspect and, consequently, they do not have to fear the possible impact of hidden biases in the adoption proceedings that lesbian adoptive parents often face.

None of the five stepmothers in the current study had become legal second-parents to their partner's children born in a previous relationship. All of them expressed frustration over the legal restrictions that prevented them from sharing legal parenting rights with their partner, the biological mother, and the children's father. In most cases, the couples decided they would not feel comfortable asking the children's biological father to rescind his legal parental rights and, consequently, the stepmothers were invisible as parents in the eyes of the law. This became particularly problematic for those stepmothers whose relationships with the children's mother dissolved. These women had no legal recourse to claim their custody rights.

For example, one of the respondents in this study, Hester, was estranged from her son because she did not have second-parent rights. Hester's partner was pregnant from a previous heterosexual relationship when they began dating. After the birth of her partner's baby, Hester became the stay-at-home mother for the little boy. When the boy was almost two years old, Hester's partner ended their relationship. Although she promised to allow Hester visitation with the little boy, Hester found that her ex-partner became increasingly reluctant to do so as she rekindled her relationship with the boy's biological father. In her particular case, Hester would have never had the opportunity to pursue second-parent adoption rights because the biological father would not have rescinded his legal parental rights. Consequently, after their separation, the child's biological mother held complete control over Hester's interaction with their son. Despite the emotional ties formed between Hester and her son during two years as his stay-at-home mother, she was without legal recourse at the time of their break-up. Heterosexual stepparents are in a similar situation if they have not attained legal parental rights to their stepchildren. However, lesbians are even more vulnerable because most states refuse to legally validate their parental and relationship status. Although some judges have recently recognized nonbiological lesbian mothers' parental rights based on their status as a 'psychological parent,' many lesbian mothers never make it into the courtroom and then suffer the emotional damage of being separated from their children.

The AI or adoptive co-parents in this study who had secured legal second-parent adoption rights indicated that it had been an important step for them, not only in terms of securing valuable tangible rights, but also on an emotional level as it validated their connection to their children. Second-parent adoptions are necessary because lesbian-headed families lack the institutional validation granted other family relationships in our country. However, second-parent adoptions are a poor substitute for legal marriage because – unlike heterosexual parents who remarry and form a stepfamily – the two adults remain legal strangers to one another (Dalton, 2001).

Commitment ceremonies. The right to legally marry is one of the most important institutional supports lacking for same-sex couples. Marriage is a central organizing social institution in our society. It dictates a wide range of rights and responsibilities that include various state and federal-granted legal marriage rights (e.g., assumption of a spouse's pension, automatic inheritance, bereavement leave, child custody, divorce protections, domestic violence protection, joint insurance benefits, joint adoption, and foster care) as well as membership in a privileged institution. Same-sex couples' access to these benefits if through the legalization of same-sex marriage or unions has recently come under great scrutiny as various states or municipalities have begun issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The backlash against these initiatives is indicative of sustained attempts to maintain heterosexist definitions of marriage, which continue to deny gay and lesbian couples access to the institution of marriage and its accompanying rights and benefits. '(L)ack of (...) social support represents a constant reminder of society's view of same-sex liaisons as transitory, illicit, and not to be taken seriously' (Berzon, 1988, p. 11). In many instances in this study, second-parent adoptions – as discussed in the previous sub-section – were the respondents' means of acquiring the tangible parental rights the partners would have automatically received if they were able to legally marry one another. Marisa noted the lack of institutional supports for her relationship when she commented on same-sex marriage:

Marisa: I would like to think that if it were legalized, it would include benefits and everything including insurance and that type of thing. But the fact is that we both pay for insurance. Whereas if we could have one insurance policy, that would save a lot of money. It would certainly make things clearer with Krissie in terms of if something did happen to me. And I would say that the legal aspects of it are probably the biggest things to me. (...) But, I just like the idea of it, too. You know, if that means that someone else thinks that my relationship has as much legitimacy as anyone else's, then that's fine too. I'm not going to die if they don't think that too, but it's not a bad thing.

In many cases, couples appropriated and modified traditional wedding ceremonies to fit their own needs. Similar to heterosexual weddings, the respondents' commitment ceremonies were an important ritual that allowed them to gain validity and legitimation in the eyes of their friends and families. Ritual has been long identified as a powerful mechanism that 'transforms group attitudes, abolishes differences between otherwise competing members, and articulates common rules for coexistence' (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 407). In their study of the lesbian family life cycle, Slater and Mencher (1991) noted,

Rituals serve to delineate life cycle transitions, to create a family context for sharing individual reactions to events that affect all family members, and to locate the family in the shared social scheme of family life. Ritual, and the knowledge of which

rite lies next on the horizon, generates the momentum that moves a family through life. It assists in the very establishment of family identity [. . .]. The public component of family ritual is particularly important. Through ritual, both public and private, the culture sends a message of connection and validation [. . .]. Such validation can bestow a sense of legitimacy in the world. (p. 374)

Rituals, such as commitment ceremonies, therefore, provide a mechanism for lesbian families to overcome existing institutional shortcomings. According to Oswald (2002, p. 379), rituals provide ‘a kind of symbolic scaffolding to strengthen relationships.’ Nearly half (18) of the lesbian mothers participating in this study had a commitment ceremony with their partner. Vicky and Hillary, for example, planned a huge, elaborate ceremony that included hundreds of their friends and family. In preparation for the ceremony, the couple spent several months coming-out to these people and making them feel comfortable about the idea of attending their commitment ceremony. Their ceremony became a strategy to disclose their lesbianism while also emphasizing the level of commitment they held to one another.

Hillary: We tried to be very cognizant of other people’s feelings and respecting traditions and that sort of thing and also, there’s this huge – I don’t want to say ‘backlash’ from the gay community – but there are activist groups out there that don’t want you to do anything that even resembles a heterosexual couple. And that wasn’t at all what we were trying to do. We weren’t trying to enmesh ourselves or confuse ourselves in all the traditions, but that is just something that was really important and valued by both Vicky and I. And that was something that we wanted for *us*, not for anyone else but for *us*. We wanted to remember that because we had always been brought up to remember that, to think about that.

Another respondent, Becky, explains how she and her partner also wanted to take advantage of the benefits of a commitment ceremony without unquestioningly accepting the misogynist and patriarchal assumptions underlying the rituals associated with heterosexual wedding ceremonies:

Becky*: When we had our ceremony, there’s a lot of things that people take for granted because it’s tradition. Brides and grooms do that and everyday gender roles. We didn’t have that kind of pre-written plan so Lucille would say, ‘Okay, let’s do this.’ And I would say, ‘Why are we doing that?’ I never envisioned myself getting married, so for me, I wanted to know the answer to everything. She always envisioned being part of that traditional kind of ceremony. But we sat down and talked about why does the father walk the bride down and she could let that go because the meaning behind that wasn’t something [we agreed with]. Some people just do it because they want to and it’s an emotional time, but if you looked at the meaning behind it . . . So, I think that, naturally, we question the meaning behind a lot of things. (. . .) But we end up questioning a lot more things because there isn’t pre-written guidelines out there and in some ways, I think it is probably better in the long run because in the short run, it’s sometimes a hassle.

Becky’s partner, Lucille, pointed out that there are not many ‘pre-written guidelines’ available for lesbian couples who wish to affirm their relationships. Consequently, they must adapt existing scripts to better accommodate their unique needs. Lewin’s (1998) study of lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies also noted the innovative ways that respondents embraced traditional wedding symbolism and beliefs while also interjecting their own unique transformations in the wedding ritual so as to avoid the inherent heterosexist biases. However, despite the powerful impact that these rituals had on creating a sense of group

cohesion and identity for the respondents, they ultimately still lacked the institutionally validated legal approval that comes with marriage.

Discussion

In this article, I explored a number of themes associated with lesbian parenting and family formation. These themes revolved around the incompletely institutionalized statuses of lesbian families and their attempts to devise strategies to attempt to overcome the limitations imposed by their incompletely institutionalized statuses. The different strategies addressed in this article illustrate some ways that families forge their own scripts when institutionalized structures are inadequate.

The respondents' stories of their parental relationships and relationships with relatives and formal institutions outside their families indicate differences among lesbian mothers with different trajectories to motherhood. In contrast to the difficulties faced by stepfamilies, the lesbian couples in this study who had children together via AI did not make parent-child distinctions based on biology. In fact, couples who had children together took active measures to blur the cultural emphasis placed on biological relationships. Vicky and Hillary, for example, sought second-parent adoption as a legal mechanism to overcome Hillary's nonbiological tie to their children. They also employed this legal strategy as a means to convince Hillary's parents that they should not worry about their lack of biological ties to their grandchildren. The AI and adoptive couples in this study shared parenting tasks, indicated that they equally bonded with their children, and constructed linguistic devices that discouraged others from placing any special emphasis on biological ties. In contrast, the stepfamilies indicated that they constantly struggled over the distinctions between the parenting rights of the biological mother and the stepmother. The biological distinction often formed the basis for territorial disputes over parenting decisions, such as discipline.

The AI parents and stepfamilies also differed in the sorts of relationships they had to negotiate with others outside the confines of their families. For example, I indicated earlier the impact that the biological fathers had on stepmothers' assimilation into their stepfamilies. In contrast, none of the AI couples in the study chose to have a known donor. They indicated that they chose unknown donors in order to avoid any threats to their custody rights by a donor. However, they also actively sought father figures for their children. The children's male relatives (e.g., grandfathers, uncles) were common choices. Sometimes, this was a more difficult tie to forge in the case of the nonbiological mother's father. As Hillary's story exemplified, the couple had to take active measures to legitimate and validate the father-figure relationship between Hillary's father and his grandchildren. In contrast, the stepmothers indicated that they had to take active measures to avoid disrupting their stepchildren's relationship with their biological fathers, while also finding a delicate balance that validated their own

parental relationship with their stepchildren. These instances suggest subtle strategic differences among the lesbian mothers in this study based on their trajectories to motherhood. It also indicates the complex interconnections that exist between the ways that the couple negotiate their relationships within their families and the resulting difficulties and challenges they face when negotiating relationships with others outside the immediate boundaries of their nuclear family; one's position within the family creates the impetus for the formation of relationships outside the family and shapes the perceptions and expectations that accompany those relationships.

These differences in experience also became visible in the respondents' stories about their relationships with their families-of-origin, especially their parents. All of the parents of the AI and adoptive mothers had been extremely supportive of their daughters' relationships before they decided to have children. However, as Hillary and Vicky's story illustrates, their parents became wary once their daughters decided to give birth to a child. Interestingly, these respondents' parents seemed torn about their daughters' decision to form a family: on the one hand, they expressed concerns and doubts about their role in the children's lives and the lack of rules and societal scripts available to aid the family in their everyday interactions, and, on the other hand, they were deeply excited about the prospect of becoming grandparents. The situation was quite different for the stepfamilies in this study. These respondents' parents did not have time to accept their daughters' lesbianism before they were introduced to the idea of grandchildren. Because the grandchildren existed prior to the lesbianism, it was often difficult for the grandparents to accept the terms of their daughter's new family. Among the extended families of the stepfamily respondents, few indicated any desire to view the stepmother as a parent of equal stature with the children's biological mother. This was the case for both the stepmothers' parents and the biological mothers' parents. Even when these kin accepted their daughter's lesbianism, they did so with reservations about the impact their daughter's lesbian relationship would have on the children. Consequently, many of the respondents in stepfamilies described contentious and strife-ridden relationships with their families-of-origin. Lynch and Murray's (2000, p. 16) research on the coming out processes of lesbian and gay parents and stepparents supports these findings: the respondents in their study related stories about resistant parents who were sometimes outright hostile to their new daughter-in-laws or finally agreed to an unspoken level of 'superficial acceptance.' Lynch and Murray's respondents also reported that few of the stepparents' families treated their daughters' stepchildren as grandchildren.

These findings suggest a desire among lesbian mothers for institutional changes that will assimilate them into existing social structures. Strategies such as mainstreaming, second-parent adoptions, and commitment ceremonies indicate a shared valuation of the rights and benefits that accompany formal inclusion in existing institutional structures. Despite the fact that many of their actions may indirectly result in the transformation of existing social structures and ideologies about familial relationships, the

respondents' primary purpose was most often assimilation into the same ideologies that their existence seems to challenge. Their strategies were not aimed at radically altering these existing structures; rather, they expressed a desire to overcome the barriers that emphasized their differences from other families. Lewin's (1993) comparative study of lesbian mothers and heterosexual mothers indicated a similar desire for normalization among her lesbian mother respondents. However, the risk of such strategies always remains: those mothers who do not wish to conform to structural demands will be left marginalized as they struggle to forge identities that are 'different' from those identified as 'normal' by institutional measures. Based on the responses of the lesbian mothers in this study, these risks seem acceptable if they are to gain entry to various rights, privileges, and benefits conventionally associated with institutionalized arrangements such as parenthood and marriage. Changes such as legal reformations to grant nonbiological lesbian mothers parental rights help aid lesbian-headed families overcome the difficulties they face as a result of their incompletely institutionalized status.

The data from this study suggest that there are close similarities between lesbian families and heterosexual families within households, but lesbian families face additional difficulties due to their incompletely institutionalized status. Future research should more closely examine how different methods of institutionalization impact these families. For example, we need to explore how different legal ties to children influence parenting strategies. Many unanswered questions remain concerning the viability of second-parent adoption as a mechanism for institutionalizing lesbian-headed families. Are lesbian co-parents with second-parent rights psychologically better off than those who do not have second-parent rights? How successful is second-parent adoption as a strategy of legitimation in lesbian mothers' social networks (i.e., their families and friends, their co-workers, their children's school)? The implications of second-parent adoption rights could also be explored in the context of lesbian separations: How do the separations for couples that have legalized the co-mother's rights to their children differ from those who have not? More attention also needs to be paid to the potential impact of legalized same-sex marriages. For example, what impact have legalized civil unions had on lesbian couples residing in Vermont? How does access to the rights and privileges afforded legally united couples affect parenting plans and practices? Do couples' experiences indicate positive or negative outcomes for same-sex couples if same-sex marriage were to be eventually legalized at the federal level?

REFERENCES

- Ainslie, J., & Feltey, K. M. (1991). Definitions and dynamics of motherhood and family in lesbian communities. *Marriage and Family Review*, 17, 63-85.
- Allen, K., & Demo, D. (1995). The families of lesbians and gay men: A new frontier in family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 111-127.

- Belcastro, P. A., Gramlich, T., Nicholson, T., Price, J., & Wilson R. (1993). A review of data-based studies addressing the affects of homosexual parenting on children's sexual and social functioning. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 20, 105–122.
- Berzon, B. (1988). *Permanent partners: Building gay and lesbian relationships that last*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Cherlin, A. (1978). Remarriage as an incomplete institution. *American Journal of Sociology*, 84, 634–650.
- Cherlin, A., & Furstenberg, F. (1994). Stepfamilies in the United States: A reconsideration. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20, 359–381.
- Church, E. (1999). Who are the people in your family? Stepmothers' diverse notions of kinship. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 58, 656–667.
- Coleman, M., Ganong, L., & Fine, M. (2000). Family configuration and change – Reinvestigating marriage: Another decade of progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1288–1307.
- Dalton, S. (2001). Protecting our parent–child relationships: Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of second-parent adoption. In M. Bernstein & R. Reimann (Eds.), *Queer families, queer politics: Challenging culture and the state* (pp. 201–220). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dalton, S., & Bielby, D. (2000). 'That's our kind of constellation': Lesbian mothers negotiate institutionalized understandings of gender within the family. *Gender and Society*, 14, 36–61.
- DiQuinzio, P. (1999). *The impossibility of motherhood: Feminism, individualism, and the problem of mothering*. New York: Routledge.
- Dunne, G. (2000). Opting into motherhood: Lesbians blurring the boundaries and transforming the meaning of parenthood and kinship. *Gender and Society*, 14, 11–35.
- Erera, P. I., & Fredriksen, K. (1999). Lesbian stepfamilies: A unique family structure. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, May–June, 263–270.
- Ettelbrick, P. (1993). Who is the parent?: The need to develop a lesbian conscious family law. *NYLS Journal of Human Rights*, X, 513–553.
- Fine, M. (1994). Social policy pertaining to stepfamilies: Should stepparents and stepchildren have the option of establishing a legal relationship? In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Stepfamilies: Who benefits? Who does not?* (pp. 197–204). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fine, M. A., Coleman, M., & Ganong, L. (1998). Consistency in perceptions of the stepparent role among stepparents, parents, and stepchildren. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 15, 810–828.
- Fine, M. A., Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (1997). The relation between role constructions and adjustment among stepparents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 18, 503–525.
- Glaser, B. (1963). The use of secondary analysis by the independent researcher. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1, 11–14.
- Grizzle, G. L. (1999). Institutionalization and family unity: An exploratory study of Cherlin's (1978) views. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 30, 125–137.
- Hare, J., & Richards, L. (1993). Children raised by lesbian couples. Does context of birth affect father and partner involvement? *Family Relations*, 42, 249–262.
- Hequembourg, A., & Farrell, M. (1999). Lesbian motherhood: Negotiating marginal–mainstream identities. *Gender and Society*, 13, 540–557.
- Keshel, J. (1990). Cognitive remodeling of the family: How remarried people view stepfamilies. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 60, 196–203.
- Jacobsen, D. (1995). Incomplete institution or culture shock: Institutional and processual models of stepfamily instability. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 24, 3–18.
- Lewin, E. (1993). *Lesbian mothers: Accounts of gender in American culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lewin, E. (1998). *Recognizing ourselves: Ceremonies of lesbian and gay commitment*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lynch, J. M. (2000). Considerations of family structure and gender composition: The lesbian and gay stepfamily. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 40, 81–97.

- Lynch, J. M., & Murray, K. (2000). For the love of the children: The coming out process for lesbian and gay parents and stepparents. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39, 1–24.
- Nelson, F. (1996). *Lesbian motherhood: An exploration of Canadian lesbian families*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Oswald, R. F. (2002). Resilience within the family networks of lesbians and gay men: Intentionality and redefinition. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 374–383.
- Papernow, P. (1993). *Becoming a stepfamily: Patterns of development in remarried families*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Parks, C. A. (1998). Lesbian parenthood: A review of the literature. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 68, 376–389.
- Patterson, C. J. (1995). Lesbian and gay parents. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Volume 3. Status and social conditions of parenting* (pp. 255–274). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Reimann, R. (1997). Does biology matter? Lesbian couples' transition to parenthood and their division of labor. *Qualitative Sociology*, 20, 153–185.
- Slater, S., & Mencher, J. (1991). The lesbian family life cycle: A contextual approach. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, 372–382.
- Stacey, J., & Biblarz, T. (2001). (How) Does the sexual orientation of parents matter? *American Sociological Review* 66, 159–183.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Victor, S. B., & Fish, M. C. (1995). Lesbian mothers and their children: A review for school psychologists. *School Psychology Review*, 24, 456–479.
- Wald, J. (1997). Outlaw mothers. *Hastings Women's Law Journal*, 8, 169–193.
- Weston, K. (1991). *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Weston, K. (1995). Forever is a long time: Romancing the real in gay kinship ideologies. In S. Yanagisako & C. Delaney (Eds.), *Naturalizing power: Essays in feminist cultural analysis* (pp. 87–110). New York: Routledge.
- Wolin, S. J., & Bennett, L. A. (1984). Family rituals. *Family Process* 23, 401–420.
- Wright, J. (1998). *Lesbian step families: An ethnography of love*. New York: Harrington Park Press.