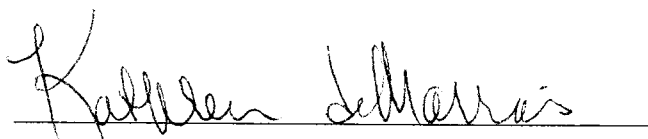


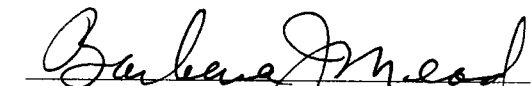
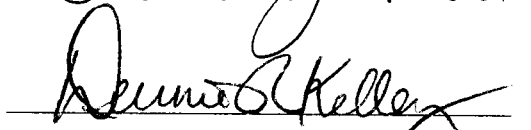
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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ellen P. Wolfe entitled "Our Children: Lesbian Mothers' Perceptions". I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of a Masters in Science, with a major in Curriculum and Instruction.

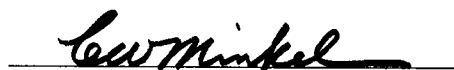


Kathleen deMarrais, Major Professor

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Associate Vice Chancellor  
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Our Children: Lesbian Mothers' Perceptions

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Science

Degree

The University of Tennessee

Ellen P. Wolfe

August 1995

Dedicated to  
My Children  
Katharine Wolfe and David Emerson Wolfe  
for loving and accepting me  
for the mother that I am  
and for giving me the opportunity  
to love two such creative, unique, special individuals.

To Sharon Jones  
for guiding me  
in the discovery of balance, focus, and acceptance.

and

To Dr. Suellen Alfred  
for her consistent spiritual and emotional support.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research discussed in the present study is to determine the impact a lesbian lifestyle has on lesbian mothers' biological children. I interviewed ten lesbians who experienced coming to terms with their lesbian orientation after spending a period of their life in a heterosexual marriage. I conducted an extensive review of the literature on changes in the relationship between the mother and her children as a result the mother coming out as a lesbian, the influences of homophobia on the children, the impact of the divorce on the children, the influence of living in a lesbian family on children's school experiences, and the children's adjustment to living in an alternative family. I used the qualitative research method of interviewing lesbian mothers, using open-ended study guide questions, to determine their perceptions on the topics found in the literature review. I contacted women from a broad cross-section through a networking process. The women ranged in age from thirty-six to fifty-three, with children ranging in ages from ten to thirty-two. Each participant has lived a lesbian lifestyle for a period of five to twenty years.

I transcribed the audiotapes of the interviews and used those transcriptions to identify major themes that emerged from them. Through an inductive analysis of the data I found that children of lesbians who had lived in a heterosexual marriage before coming out experienced greater anxiety over

the divorce of their parents than they did over the news of their mothers' lesbianism. In fact, they seem to be relieved that their mothers had found a measure of happiness within the lesbian lifestyle. Younger children appeared to accept their mothers' lesbianism more easily than adolescent children. In this study, more adolescent girls had difficulty with their mothers' sexuality than adolescent boys. Children whose fathers were critical of the mothers' sexuality had more trouble accepting it than children whose fathers were more tolerant. Most of the children had positive relationships with their mothers' lesbian partners. Only two children experienced harassment by homophobic schoolmates who suspected their mothers were lesbians. Lesbian mothers did not come out to their children's teachers and appeared to have positive relationships with those teachers.

The results are significant in that they show the struggles and challenges faced by lesbians and their children in an environment that does not accept lesbian-headed households as appropriate family structures. The implications of the study revolve around the need for schools and other institutions to affirm the lesbian-headed household as an acceptable alternative family structure, and the need for schools to incorporate into their curricula content that addresses the validity of alternative family structures outside the paradigm found in the heterosexual nuclear family.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980's an article by Audre Lorde appeared in a special double issue of the Bulletin on Homophobia and Education published by the Council on Interracial Books for Children entitled "There is No Hierarchy of Oppression" (Lorde, in Gordon 1983, p.171). In it Lorde stated: "If we truly intend to eliminate oppression; heterosexism and homophobia must be addressed." Her message was to inform society that as long as any one portion of the population is oppressed and/or considered fair game for name calling, stereotyping, violence, and other forms of bias that perpetuate discrimination we are all oppressed. This was the beginning of challenging educators and parents alike to deal with the topic of equity. Like the sound of a muffled fog horn to travelers approaching a rocky invisible coast, gays and lesbians heard this challenge as a welcome message, filled with apprehensive hope and vulnerable risks.

Homosexuals, unlike other minority groups with accepted distinguishable characteristics, must go to extreme lengths to repress their sexuality in fear of condemnation. They are familiar with dealing with the internal conflict of balancing a "dual identity" (Grayson, 1994, p.172). This stress is the result of living a life of personal awareness and development, only to have to expend enormous amounts of energy concealing the least likely part of human behavior to adversely affect society, one's sexuality. Lesbian

researcher, Bryant (1975) refers to this practice as being in a "double bind" because she says, "being a lesbian means having to appear to be something you are not in various settings, having to appear to be going out with men, and having to appear to be laughing at anti-gay jokes" (p.88). Such a challenge is oppression and such oppression adversely affects the healthy development of today's youth as well as all of society. Observing a culture that frequently develops and uses double standards, teaches young people that deceptions and fabrications are necessary in order to live one's truth and maintain society's acceptance. Youth struggling with their awareness of their homosexuality are deprived of positive role models. Gay and lesbian educators and other professionals find it frustrating and stressful to maintain their guise in a heterosexual culture. Being open about their personal lives exposes their vulnerability. Consequently, they often feel ostracized.

This oppressive environment profoundly affects the choices a lesbian makes for herself and her children in her community. These choices impact all areas of her lifestyle including choices regarding socialization, enculturation, and the education of her children. The reality of this situation is reason to research the impact a lesbian lifestyle has on the educational process of lesbians' biological children. Areas of conflict and stress as well as benefits and strengths will also be considered. Understanding children's position in a lesbian families necessitates redefining the term family.

### Viewing Changes in the Family

As the year 2000 approaches, the number of single parent families is rising. In the American social landscape a variety of family structures can be found. Among this variety of alternative options that are practiced, one such family is the lesbian-headed household. Accurate numbers are difficult to ascertain because of the perceived need of such families to remain as invisible as possible. Unfortunately, the hidden reality of lesbian homes results in not only supporting the belief that lesbian-headed families are invisible, voiceless, and invaluable to society, but it instills in youth the concept that such a household does not qualify as a family unit and therefore is unacceptable.

Within any given household, an entire range of human experiences takes place. These experiences within family units vary greatly because of environmental and socioeconomic differences and the changing definition of what constitutes a family unit. To understand a children's academic and social progress at school, it is necessary to understand the children's achievement and developmental processes in the home and the support dynamics between the home and school. Because of the rise in contemporary social problems seeking to understanding the dynamics that occur within the family unit can offer valuable information regarding the constructs within home structures which can lead to solutions to such problems. Leichter (1974) believes, "A central focus has been the attempt to determine the family's contribution to the

outcomes of schooling" (p.5). The mother's nurturing behavior with her children during the preschool years is significantly linked to the child's subsequent school achievement. The management and organizational behaviors in the home also contribute to a young person's success in secondary school (Leichter, 1974).

Regardless of the degree to which society remains homophobic and how invisible lesbian mothers try to be, statistics from 1989 show there are an estimated 1.5 to 3.3 million lesbian mothers in the United States (Gibbs, 1989; Pennington, 1989). Other studies report eight to ten million children are being raised in three million gay and lesbian headed households (Casper, Schulz, and Wickens, 1992). The National Sex Forum reported that in 1976 approximately ten percent of the general population are lesbians or gay men (St.Marie, 1976). Research suggests that one-third of these populations are parents. In one study, two psychiatrists reported that 79 percent of the lesbians studied had had heterosexual intercourse, and 26 percent had been married before they came out (Riley, 1975). The foregoing research led Leichter (1994) to challenge how the generic term "family" is used in research by stating:

Because of the variability of the family as a social unit, in terms of both the composition of the particular household unit and the definition of what constitutes the family, one cannot presume that in studying something called the family one is studying a constant phenomenon. It is unreasonable therefore, to presume that the experience in one unit called the family is necessarily similar in significant ways to the experience of other units called the family (p.26).

Children's self-esteem and sense of security are developed in direct proportion to internalized perceptions of child/parent relationships. Their well-being is in jeopardy and often sacrificed when his or her parents' sexual orientation becomes the target of discrimination.

Lesbian mothers operate from many of the same positions heterosexual mothers do in terms of child rearing trials, challenges, pleasures, and decisions. Some researchers find that lesbians provide as important a place in the lives of children as heterosexual role models do for children (Morin and Schultz, 1978; Nungesser, 1980; Riddle, 1978). Studies suggest that children benefit from a diversity of role models because they see non-traditional and multiple options as adult life style models that are independent of sexual-preference choices. "Much of the research to date effectively dispels the myth that lesbian mothers are unfit for motherhood" (Ainslie and Feltey, 1991, p.64). However, little research has been done addressing the impact of a lesbian lifestyle on children's school experiences. Lesbian mothers are women who have children through methods of artificial insemination, adoption agencies, and who have been married and subsequently recognized their lesbian sexual orientation prior to or after a divorce. Women from the latter group were

selected as participants for this study.

### Social Learning In the Family

The issue of how children are socialized in their families and in schools is crucial for lesbian mothers to discern. According to Parsons (1955), the human personality is not "born" but must be "made" through the socialization process available in family units. In his article, "The Family as Educator" (1974), Leichter addresses the need to understand how children and adults develop and balance learning within the constructs of a family structure. In that regard, Leichter discusses the process of socialization, enculturation, and development. Socialization is "the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to participate as more or less effective members of groups and society" (p.6). Furthermore, Brim in Leichter considers socialization as: "social learning, not only during childhood, but throughout the life cycle and within each of the various groups and organizational contexts that provide settings for behavior" (p.3). It includes what people learn, how they learn, and why they learn through the processes of instructing, coaching, demonstrating, modeling, and training. The verbal as well as unspoken thoughts and feelings, are picked up by the impressionable minds of children.

In Native American tradition, "The legitimacy of motherhood was determined by its very existence. A woman who

gave birth was a mother as long as she had a living child, and the source of a household's legitimacy was its very existence" (Allen, 1992, p.250). Mothers have innate knowledge to expose their children to an enriching environment. They know their children must become aware of the environment in order to survive and prosper.

The concept of enculturation refers to the process by which a child learns how to function in a particular culture. Enculturation includes exposure to the culture's language, religious beliefs, arts and aesthetic appreciation, environment, occupations, recreation, and a wide range of lifestyle choices. These opportunities are necessary and can be available for children growing up in any of the variety of family situations. The concept of development is concerned with questioning the natural limits of teaching and learning (Leichter, 1974). Conflicting views between society's preference of traditional heterosexual lifestyles rather than non-traditional lesbian lifestyle often becomes an issue. This dissension regarding the social definition of a family unit is detrimental to the healthy development of children. The physical and emotional welfare of children is perhaps the most vital issue to be concerned with, rather than the sexuality of their parents. Furthermore, lesbians raising and mothering children either alone or with another woman share similar positions with heterosexual women raising children as the heads of households and yet they are not accepted by society.

The attitude that educational institutions assume

regarding children with lesbian parents is critical to a child's socialization and development. Homophobia challenges the process of educators viewing lesbian-headed households as a viable family option. This study examines ways in which socialization, enculturation, and development of children raised in lesbian-headed households impact children's experiences.

It is my intent to explore the impact that being reared in a lesbian-headed household has on a child's social skills, educational experience, enculturation, and development of various behaviors. Another consideration will be a mother's perception of her children's adjustment to a divorce in relationship to her adoption of a lesbian lifestyle. The far reaching effects of homophobia inflicted on lesbians and their children from society at large can be detrimental to a child's sense of security. In this study I will attempt to understand the impact homophobia has on children. Children's school experiences and parental involvement in their education often suffer due to homophobic reactions; however, the long range educational development and emotional growth gained from a nurturing lesbian home environment often compensates for institutional homophobia directed at lesbians and their children. The resilience and independence of these youth are viewed through the eyes of their mothers. Within the home environment the value of a child's educational development is emphasized by the parents. Although John Dewey (1916) wrote on the topic of education nearly one hundred years ago, his message is relevant for educators and parents

today. His definition of education offers hope to the lesbian-headed household because beginning with the family, true education is the result of being open to new experiences. "The goal of education is growth and the process of growth has no end beyond itself, and furthermore, the ideal of growth results in the conception of education as a constant reorganization and reconstruction of experience" (p. 89).

At the base of any child's experience is the family, regardless of its structure. A child's educational development is directly affected by his or her family experience, whether it be in a home with heterosexual parents or with lesbian parents. A child's educational process begins with the organization and construction of values within the definition of each family unit. Recognizing the lesbian-headed household as a family unit, this study, among other purposes, is an attempt to look at how a child's educational needs are met. Lastly, researching a lesbian mother's perceptions of the impact her lifestyle has on her relationship with her children and understanding about the lives of biological children reared in a lesbian-headed household are crucial goals toward ending the oppression of such families.

### The Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it shows that:

1. Many children reared in lesbian-headed households are provided with similar nurturing guidance their peers receive in heterosexual family units.
2. Lesbians living alone or with a partner are a viable family unit capable of giving children opportunities necessary for healthy, appropriate development.
3. Lesbian mothers are often capable, competent mothers, worthy of the opportunity to parent their own children.
4. Biological children of lesbians have the right to a school experience free from the oppression of homophobia.

### Limitations

The study was limited by:

1. The varying ages among the lesbian mothers and among their children.
2. The degrees to which lesbian mothers can speak pertaining to their children's experiences.
3. The mothers' varying ranges of time spent between being married as heterosexual women with their children in a traditional nuclear family and living a lesbian lifestyle.

### Assumptions

The assumptions of the study were:

1. The participants had perceptions which they were willing to share relative to the effect of their lifestyle upon their children.
2. The participants provided accurate and honest information during the interview.
3. The interview guide provided data sufficient for conclusions and recommendations to be drawn.
4. The participants of the study all acknowledged and accepted their lesbian sexual orientation.
5. The children of the participants were aware of their mothers' lesbianism and have had conversations with their mothers regarding their lifestyle changes.

### Statement Of The Problem

The purpose of the study was to determine the impact a mothers shift to a lesbian lifestyle has had on her biological children's development and educational processes. Qualitative research methods were employed to address the following questions.

1. What relationship adjustments did the mothers' perceive occurred with their children as a result of the mothers' shift to a lesbian lifestyle?

2. When do mothers perceive the most significant adjustments occurred for their children as they experienced their parents' divorce and adjustment to their mothers' lesbian lifestyle?
3. What is the effect of homophobic messages on lesbian mothers' biological children?
4. What was the effect of a mother's shift from a heterosexual lifestyle to a lesbian lifestyle on the educational processes of her children?
5. What impact did the lesbian mothers perceive occurred for their children as the family adjusted to an alternative family unit?

#### Delimitations

The study was delimited by:

1. A sample of ten lesbian mothers ranging in ages from thirty-six to fifty-three years who reflected on the education and the lifestyle change adjustments of their children who were between the ages of ten and thirty-two years.
2. Interviews lasting no longer than two hours.
3. The use of an interview guide, developed by the researcher, which consisted of opened-ended questions to facilitate an open-ended discussion regarding the impact a lesbian mother's lifestyle had on her biological children's educational process and adjustment to the

alternate lifestyle.

4. Lesbian mothers who had all conceived and given birth to children by the children's fathers with whom they had been married and lived in heterosexual marriages for varying periods of time, ranging from five to eighteen years.

#### Definitions Of Terms

For this study, the following definitions apply:

1. Lesbian: " Applied to homosexual females, derived from the Greek isle of Lesbos, where the lesbian poet Sappho had a school in 400 B.C." Boston Psychologies Collective (Ed.),1987, (p.173).  
Ferguson (1981) defines a lesbian as:  
"a woman who has sexual and erotic-emotional ties primarily with women or who see herself as centrally involved with a community of self-identified lesbians" (p.198).
2. Homosexual: "A clinical term for one who has sexual and/or affectional responses and orientation predominantly for members of one's own sex." Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective (Ed.) 1987, (p.173).
3. Heterosexual: "A clinical term for one who has sexual and/or affectional responses and orientation predominantly for members of the other sex."Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective Psychologies Collective (Ed.) 1987, (p.173).

4. Gay: "A term claimed by homosexuals (mostly male) as a sign of pride. While gay is sometimes used to refer to both males and females, most gay females prefer to be called lesbians" Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective (Ed.) 1987, (p.173).
5. In the closet: The condition of lesbians or gay males who do not reveal their sexual orientation to others in order to avoid discrimination, rejection, humiliation, verbal abuse, and/or bodily harm. Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective (Ed.) 1987, (p.173).
6. Homophobia: "the irrational fear, dislike, or hatred of gay males and lesbians and/or of being labeled as such is a primary society's achieving gender equity.  
Most people agree that this fear is a primary factor in maintaining the traditional male role stereotype and that much of it is rooted in sexism, personal fear, or stemming from religious beliefs" (Thompson and Griffin in Grayson, p.172). "Homophobia depends upon sex-role stereotyping" (Chamberlain, 1985, p.175) and "sexism" (Pharr, 1988, p.175).
7. Family: The family is a concept, subject to change from culture to culture and through different periods of history. Family is intended to denote a cohabitive living arrangement involving two same-sex adults and their children, biological, adopted, or conceived through artificial insemination, from previous heterosexual relationships, marital or common-law. The relationship is characterized by mutual commitment, property sharing,

sexual intimacies similar to that found among cohabiting heterosexual couples (Baptiste, 1982, p. 113).

8. Coming out: Being open about one's sexuality (Bryant, 1975, p.1).
9. Straight: an informal term meaning heterosexual.
10. "Biological mothers": refers to women who have been married and given birth to children during a heterosexual relationship.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Flourishing as part of our multicultural society is a population of women who find emotional as well as sexual preference within members of the same sex. Many have become visible among a predominately heterosexual society. This community includes lesbians who have been married. Approximately one-half have biological children as a result of their marriage. In 1979 (Lewin and Lyons) reported that there may be as many as 3,000,000 lesbian mothers in the United States. Approximately 14% of the lesbian population have been married during their life (Hedblom 1973, cited in Baker et al., 1980). Unlike heterosexual mothers who are free to be open about their sexual preference and family life, lesbians "are forced to voice their reality in order to represent the authenticity of their own truth" (Miller in Rosen, 1992, p.7). However, to "come out" in the midst of a homophobic society exposes their vulnerability and that of their children. Research reveals no reason to indicate that pathology has been identified as support that lesbians should not mother children. Consequently, being open as a lesbian mother challenges societies view on the subject. The predominant themes found in the literature focused on the impact of rearing children in a homophobic culture and the challenges of a lesbian lifestyle as an alternative lifestyle (Baptiste, 1987; Lewis, 1980). There has been little research done regarding the impact a lesbian lifestyle has on a

child's school experience. Therefore, the first section of the review of related literature focuses on redefining theory for lesbians with biological children. The effects of homophobia, divorce, looking at a child's school experience following the shift to living in a lesbian household, and a redefinition of the family are additional themes I concentrated on from the literature.

In her 1971 examination of the family unit Skolnick traced the interdependency between Industrialism and the nuclear family. She noted that "the nuclear family institution fails to assure children the care and protection they need" (p.18-22). Lacking in the ability to balance responsibilities, losing necessary boundaries, and suffering from unhealthy degrees of co-dependency places the nuclear family under attack Skolnick, (1971). Lott-Whitehead and Tully's (1992) states a "definition of a family embraces society's changing needs and satisfies emerging paradigms. This definition identifies a family as one's family of creation, as opposed to one's family of origin, and defines those members of one's social and emotional network who were related by blood, kinship, or emotional bond" (p.269). As the once secure nuclear family institution undergoes turbulent times, alternative lifestyles emerge. The visibility of the lesbian mother and her children makes research not only more readily possible but crucial.

## Developing New Theory

Theories offer specific interpretation and understanding of constructs and their impact upon behaviors. Theories are grounded in experience and are derived from cultural background, academic training, life experiences, and individual personality traits (LeCompte/Preissle, 1993).

As the visibility of lesbians rearing biological children increases, very little research has been done regarding the impact a lesbian lifestyle has on the children, including the children's school experiences (Golombok, Spenser, Rutter, 1983; Clay, 1990; Byrant, 1975; Patterson, 1992; and Sears, 1994). Several studies have focused on the child's sex-role development. Overall, the findings suggest that children who live with homosexual mothers are not likely to adopt their parent's sexual preference (O'Connell, 1990). Other studies have focused on lesbian mothers' competencies and nurturing abilities and have found "no significant differences in the level of ability to mother between the lesbian and the heterosexual mother" (Goodman, 1973; Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy, 1981; Lewin and Lyons, 1979; Pagelow, 1976). These studies have provided research regarding the impact a lesbian's lifestyle has on her children. The point at which a mother recognizes her lesbian sexuality has little to do with her mothering instincts and has much to do with her motivation not to lose the right to parent her own children.

Theory development is needed to accurately understand

the dynamics involved in a lesbian-headed alternative family. Theoretical work in the study of lesbian mothers has thus far focused on the child-lesbian mother relationships, testing involving elements in psychoanalytic theory, separation of children from their lesbian mothers, and children in lesbian step-mothered families (Miller, 1978; Bozett, 1987).

Before outlining specific a theory several assumptions will underlie the development of a lesbian family theory. The first is that a lesbian family is a legitimate family form deserving of study in its own right. Secondly, although using models tested from the heterosexual norm would not be appropriate for studying lesbian families, elements from preexisting family theory can be redefined to meet the specific needs within any family structure. Thirdly, the guidelines for values, codes of behavior, and the structure of boundaries for children must be established within the homosexual culture. Lastly, the role of educational institutions in the socialization of a child has a significant impact on the child's self-definition and values regarding the establishment of marriage, family, parenting, education, and religious rites within a lesbian culture. Looking at these theoretical perspectives establishes groundwork regarding lesbian families.

On the heels of blossoming alternative family units, growing literature has surfaced posing theories explaining the socialization process, cultural identification, and the evolution of self-concept for people functioning in the two cultures of homosexuality and the heterosexual world.

Researchers and social workers Lukes and Land (1990) believe the biculturality theory will help meet lesbians theoretical needs: "Biculturality holds greater promise in increasing the understanding of the impact of cultural and ecological components on human behavior than other theories previously used to describe the homosexual experience" (p.159). People in various cultures are socialized by the minority as well as the majority group dynamics. Biculturality is only a guide for understanding the experience of belonging to a minority group. Not all homosexuals participate in the openly identifiable activities of the culture. Practices vary depending on subcultures and environmental situations. "Many keep their sexual identity hidden, both publicly and privately" (Lukes and Land, 1990, p.156). They choose to live as the culture around them lives. However, especially in large urban areas, there are behaviors and traditions common to both cultures as well as distinct experiences specific to the minority culture (Lukes and Land, 1990). Identifying this subculture helps lesbians and gays during the process of recognition of their identity, provides opportunity for support, and offers a broader more encompassing conceptualization of this minority group. Simply on the grounds of their sexuality, homosexuals are often rejected from the values, norms, and ideologies of their native culture. "Legislation exists that attempts to exclude homosexual participation in major institutions such as marriage, religious rites, and child rearing" (Lukes and Land, 1990, p.156).

Therefore, bicultural theories are particularly valuable for lesbian mothers. The challenges, struggles, benefits, and need for support is as much a part of a lesbian mother's child rearing experience as it is for heterosexual mothers. The benefit from being part of both cultures offers specific multicultural support. In fact, various characteristics and needs that must be met are the same in a myriad of family structures whether they are lesbian, heterosexual, or single parent. Many issues overlap between the two cultures. As lesbian mothers merge into the heterosexual culture, their visibility provides the opportunity for greater acceptance. Consequently, the acknowledgment that their lifestyle is more "normal" than once thought becomes more and more evident Lukes and Land, (1990).

Therefore, building on the biculturality theory is one useful way to understand the lesbian lifestyle and its impact on children reared in lesbian-headed families. Using biculturality theory offers the option to redefine existing family theories. When Evelyn Beck (1983) stated that "warmth, care, and love are strengths in the lesbian movement," (p.9) she establishes the groundwork necessary for study of bicultural theory.

### The Impact of Homophobia on Children

The Gay Rights Movement, with its desire to bring about public attention to the deep-seated prejudices and

discriminatory actions against lesbians and homosexual men, opened the opportunity to question the validity of the assumptions underlying homophobia. Participating in this movement were lesbians, among them mothers with a particular burden, those who bore children while they had earlier been involved in heterosexual relationships. The rise of the Women's Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement has brought to light this previously invisible group of mothers and children.

Defining homophobia is the first step in moving beyond limited perceptions toward understanding where and why homophobia occurs. Society tends to be comfortable with familiarity, and it tends to fear that which appears different. Society's natural reaction to the homosexual lifestyle is to view it as an opposition to the norm. Based on a lack of understanding for this difference fear has led to distrust, and distrust to acts of discrimination, prejudices, and contempt on the homosexual population. For example, Grayson states "name-calling and labeling that challenges male and female sexuality prevent students from participating in nontraditional, sex-role "appropriate" courses and activities" (p.173). Living and working among open displays of prejudiced attitudes has forced members of homosexual communities to go underground or "in the closet". Consequently, gay and lesbian students are often being deprived of their right to a free and safe public education, a right that most courts and states acknowledge as one of the "fundamental rights and liberties which lie at the core of a

free and representative form of government" (Dennis and Harrow, 1986).

Unfortunately, studies are limited dealing with how homophobic messages affect children's school experiences. However, Falk (1989) uses Green and his colleagues' research to point out that no intelligence differences could be found between children with homosexual and heterosexual parents. Green's results found no differences between the two sets of children.

The authors Crumpacker and Vander Haeger (1987) state that an important way to counter attacks of homophobia and oppression are to affirm a lesbian's identity through positive representation. In the Golombok et al.(1983) study, children's contacts with adult friends of their lesbian mothers were also assessed. Effects of the age at which children learn of parental homosexuality have also been a topic. Paul in Patterson (1992, p.1035) found that offspring who were told of parental gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity either in childhood or in late adolescence found the news easier to cope with than those who first learned of it during early or middle adolescence. Research is conflicted to what degree tolerance and critical thinking will challenge stereotypes and oppression. Looking elsewhere for the source of homophobia, Chamberlain and Pharr in Grayson (1992) believe: "Homophobia depends upon something built into the institutions and the "something" is sex-role stereotyping" (p.175). Labeling women in sports "lesbians", accusing men of being gay because they wear colors typically worn by women,

and channeling people into the work force toward jobs that society deems are best suited to their gender are examples of sex-role stereotyping. None of these studies specifically look at the issue of the effects of homophobia on school-age children.

### Socialization Changes

As the family structure of the 1990's changes, lesbian-headed households have emerged. The socialization of children is impacted strongly by influences in their families. Such a family structure can have an impact on the socialization of children. Coming to terms with a lesbian sexual orientation does not detract from women's desire and qualifications to mother their children, (Moses and Hawkins, 1982). Court decisions concerning lesbian mothers' rights to the custody of their children are hampered by a lack of solid evidence regarding lesbian mothers competence (Goldyn, 1981). In courts across the nation the misery of losing one's own child is often rationalized in terms of "what is best for the child" (Goodman, 1977, p.45). Lesbian mothers are denied the right to mother their own children by conservative judges who fear children will witness unnatural sex acts that are assumed inappropriate (Goldyn, 1981). The courts also question how children develop naturally without male influence in the home. Furthermore, they fear the child's mother will force her homosexuality on her children (Riley, 1975).

Researching lesbian-headed households offers not only

the opportunity to examine the validity of lesbians as mothers, but also to view the success of a non-traditional family structure. The accepted structure of the traditional family fits the heterosexual paradigm (Webster, 1994) of the nuclear family. Lesbian mothers, by definition, deviate from this traditional paradigm. Women in all societies have carried out a multitude of roles with competence and efficiency, but living with an identity society deems as "deviant" creates tremendous stress for lesbians and their children. Using the social science definition of homosexuality to mean "deviance from the accepted norm of heterosexual behavior" narrows the meaning of lesbianism only to mean, women who have sex with other woman (Krieger, 1982; Weston and Rafel 1984; Healy, n.d.; Pennington, 1989). Such a definition not only limits the identity of a lesbian to one behavior, but suggests heterosexuality is the standard by which all family units are to be measured. Consequently, homosexuality is seen as a threat to a sexist system in at least two ways:

Two women together suggests that a man might not be necessary for a woman to be fully competent and functional; and two men together threatens the stereotypic and sexist assignment of gender roles in that it posits that one man in such a relationship is serving the devalued function of a woman (Rosen, 1992, p.5).

Operating from an exclusively heterosexual definition of a family often negates the opportunity for lesbian mothers to

be honest with themselves and their children. In other words, lesbians often feel it necessary to hide their sexual preference from others including their children. "When the alternative family unit is condemned, the sanctity of the nuclear family is reinforced and oppression continues" (Goodman, 1977, p.59).

As cultures merge, societies shift, and family structures develop new focuses, a reevaluation of the heterosexual paradigm is inevitable. Ferguson's definition of a lesbian has included provisions to identify with motherhood. She defines a lesbian as "a woman who has sexual and erotic-emotional ties primarily with women or who sees herself as centrally involved with a community of self-identified lesbians" (Ferguson, 1981, p.198).

#### Divorce Adjustment Traumatic

Lewis (1980) conducted study in which he interviewed twenty-one children from eight families with lesbian mothers. The study concluded that children's adjustment period to their parents' divorce is more traumatic than learning of their mothers' lesbianism and that families with teenagers appeared to have more of an adjustment problem than if children were younger when the mothers' came out (p.188). Psychiatrist, Kirkpatrick (1981), and her colleagues at UCLA Medical School compared the children of single lesbian and heterosexual mothers. Five of the forty children in the study, two with lesbian mothers and three with heterosexual

mothers, did have severe problems. In all the cases the problems resulted specifically from divorce issues. Furthermore, in support of Lewis' study, Kirkpatrick found that "the two groups of children could not be differentiated by their mothers' sexual preference, nor were they distinguishable by disturbed gender development" (Maddox, 1982, p.68). These studies show that biological children living in homosexual families who have experienced the heterosexual lifestyle and divorce who are also divorced, (Schwartz in, Maddox, 1982).

#### Lesbian Children's School Experiences

Although studies are consistent in finding no difference between children reared with lesbian mothers and those reared by heterosexual mothers, common sense points out that growing up in a lesbian lifestyle is different and challenging, especially for school-aged children. Children are faced with concerns about bringing friends home from school, discussing family activities with classmates, and sharing with teachers the extent of support they receive from home with school projects. Unfortunately, the socialization that takes places in a loving lesbian home is often countered by the ignorance and prejudice of school institutions that emphasize the ideal of a heterosexual family.

Children are victims of harassment in school and receive confusing messages concerning family structure. While interviewing seven lesbian mothers with biological children

in New York state, Webster, (1994) concluded that teasing is the predominate form of harassment. During the study Webster attempted to get a clearer perspective of how children are socialized within their families and the effect living in a lesbian lifestyle has on the children's school experience. Despite the teasing from other students, she states "The important issue, regarding harassment, is that all of the children internalized positive messages regarding mother's sexuality and their family's' structure" (p.15). The burden of affirming a child's self-esteem and countering homophobic messages is the responsibility of the mother. Crumpacker and Vander Haeger (1987) believe that an important way to counter attacks of homophobia and oppression are to affirm a lesbian's identity through positive representation.

#### Alternative Family Shift

As the turn of the century dawns, multicultural diversity flourishes within a variety of family units. Extended families that include grandparents or other relatives living in the home are examples of these family units.

Research pertaining to the increased rate of divorces and remarriages is well-documented. Societal interest and concern about step families has to date focused only on concerns and issues specific to heterosexual step families, parents, and children (cf. Einstein, 1982; Maddox, 1975; Nobel & Nobel 1977; Nobel, 1981; Sager et al., 1983; Visher &

Visher, 1979). Male or female single unmarried adults with one or more adopted or biological children or families based on relationships between divorced and remarried couples called the "aggregate family" represent alternatives from the traditional nuclear family unit (Goodman, 1977).

The idea of the so-called alternative family unit is as old as our non-European ancestors. For example, children of Cherokee Native American tribes belonged to their mother's clan. Clan members were made up of related families and shared the responsibility of teaching the children. The children's father belonged to another clan who assumed the responsibility with other clan members for the training of those children (Keith, 1990). "Families did not consist of nuclear units in any sense. There were clans and bands or villages, but the primary personal unit tended to include members of one's own sex rather than members of the opposite sex" (Allen, 1992, p.256). Women who became pregnant in Native American culture were not stigmatized, nor were those women labeled lesbian nor denied their rights to mother their children. Instead, "while sex between women probably occurred regularly, women also regularly married and raised children often adopting children if they did not have any, lesbianism was viewed in the context of the spiritual orientation of tribal life" (Allen, 1992, p.256-257).

In today's culture women who became mothers during a heterosexual relationship are not allowed the freedom that women in Native American cultures had to move into a lesbian lifestyle and still maintain their motherhood with the same

acceptance. The dynamics involving Native American divorces held different values from society today. "Among many tribes divorce was an easy matter for both women and men, and movement of individuals from one household to another was fluid and essentially unconstrained" (Allen, 1992, p.250).

Outside the Native American culture, an increasing number of divorced women with children are "coming out of the closet". The growing number of lesbians with biological children is becoming more visible (Baptiste, 1987).

### Merging the Two Worlds

The combination of motherhood as an experience and as a political institution offers the most powerful sources of identity a woman can have (Ainslie and Feltey, 1991). Many lesbians want to rear their children believing they are competent, nurturing mothers. The merging of maternal attitudes and care-giving behaviors has little to do with sexual orientation. The often stated assumption that appropriate mothering is only available through heterosexual relationships is discredited through the ability of lesbian mothers' practices (Golombok et.al., 1983; Green, 1982; Lewis, 1980; Riddle, 1979). The blending of these two minority roles of motherhood and lesbianism creates a double opportunity for fulfillment as well as discrimination. Muzio (n.d) quotes one lesbian's experience from the book Lesbian Mothers.

As lesbians, who are automatically placed on the fringe of society by the choice of our lives, we

can bring to parenting and to young children the positive aspects of being on the fringe of possibility instead of commercial homogeneity, and yes, importantly, a world of many families are changing and varied forms, not limited by the term 'traditional' (p.76).

Bryant (1975) conducted a study to explore lesbian mothers and motherhood in which a questionnaire was distributed nationwide to women's studies programs, lesbian, feminist, gay groups, and lesbian feminists' periodicals searching for lesbians who had been married and lived a heterosexual lifestyle. After analyzing data from 185 questionnaires, she showed that children from lesbian homes will become more comfortable with themselves and their sexuality simply by being reared by a mother who is comfortable with herself and is woman-identified. Lesbian and straight mothers' experiences are similar in regard to the absence of a male provider in the home and in the trials of being a single mother. Although there are lesbians who struggle with acceptance of their sexual orientation, this challenge tends to produce a group of women who develop strong, resilient, compassionate qualities. "Children from lesbian homes will become adults that are comfortable with themselves and their sexuality " (Bryant, 1975, p.33). Although being a lesbian mother presents a complicated' demanding role, these women are not as inclined as a heterosexual woman to give themselves away to their relationships, environments, or challenges. They often are able to balance these and other components in their lives in

a manner that allows the opportunity to understand and develop how best to meet their own needs while caring for the needs of others, including those of their children (Bryant, 1975). Because they represent a culture that must develop their own role models, disciplines, and principles based on intuition, self-direction, and need, their practices of child rearing are balanced and regulated from a perceptual framework (Bryant, 1975). This framework is individualized from their cultures.

#### Summary

Although the topic of lesbian mothers with biological children is beginning to appear in the literature, research is lacking that deals with the issues of how a lesbian lifestyle affects the children's school experiences, school performances, and socialization skills. Existing literature suggests that homophobic messages and prejudiced behavior from society negatively affects lesbian children's educational experiences and that a mother's sexual preference are not indicative of her children becoming homosexual. Indications that lesbians are capable, sensitive, competent mothers are evident in the literature. The literature also points out that negative reactions from divorce have a more detrimental influence on children than accepting the fact their mothers are lesbians.

As lesbian mothers and their partners move toward supporting and participating in their children's education in the same manner as heterosexual parents do, their efforts will

challenge stereotypes and move toward ending oppression and promoting equity for lesbians and their children.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of qualitative research is to describe experiences, events, individuals, or situations within particular social contexts. The techniques employed in qualitative research are regularly used in the social sciences, education, and humanities (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p.8-9). Exploring a wide range of behaviors resulting from interactions provide a researcher with the opportunity to acquire information that is available and accessible (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p.4). Many feminist researchers prefer qualitative methods since "qualitative research methods are particularly appropriate where gender and women's issues are topics of inquiry because prominent experiences in women's lives are subtle and context-bound" (Sage, 1989 p.27). Reinharz (1992) accurately sums up this point by saying, "Even when feminist researchers rely on traditional methods of data collection, the very asking of feminist questions and the attempt to create knowledge in which women's experience is central can create subtle shifts" (p.218-219).

Feminist researchers have successfully used qualitative research to meet their needs. These research methods offer creative opportunities to go beyond traditional techniques and reach emotional, spiritual, and personal dynamics of women's experiences. Researcher and psychologist Bem (1987) created a scale to measure degrees of masculinity and

femininity for the purpose of determining the androgyny of people. Daly (1973) went to the extent of inventing an entire vocabulary linking the discovery of new forms of data with the new ways of naming pieces of women's spirituality.

"Ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan wrote an account of Iroquoian matriarchal culture, published in 1877, that heavily influenced Marx and the development of communism, particularly lending it the idea of the liberation of women from patriarchal dominance" (Allen, 1992, p.220).

Stemming from a desire to learn from lesbian's experiences first hand, I have chosen to use qualitative research methods for my study. Because qualitative research does not make light of social interactions, it is an effective method for examining and reporting accurately the seriousness of lesbian mothers' experiences. Open-ended questions are directed to capture the participant's experiences about a specific event, situation, or philosophy. This interviewing process is defined as "a powerful conversation, usually between two people directed by one person in order to get information for a specific topic. In the hands of the qualitative researcher, the interview takes on a shape of its own" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p 135). Interviewing in this manner allows thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and personal realities to come to the surface in a comfortable unthreatening way. This method of interviewing was used to go beyond traditional techniques and reach emotional, spiritual, and personal dynamics of women's experiences. Qualitative research methods offer creative

opportunities in the methodology of this study.

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of lesbianism on mothers' biological children's social development, school experiences, and their children's adjustment to the mothers' shift to a lesbian lifestyle. Using qualitative research methods, the questions that guided the research were:

1. What relationship adjustments do the mothers perceive occurred for their children as a result of the shift to a to a lesbian lifestyle?
2. Where do mothers perceive the most significant adjustments occurred for their children as they experienced their parents divorce and adjusted to their mother recognizing her lesbianism?
3. What is the effect of homophobic messages on a lesbian mother's biological children?
4. What is the effect of the mother's shift from a heterosexual lifestyle to a lesbian lifestyle on the educational processes of her children?
5. What impact do the lesbian mothers perceive occurred for their children as the family adjusted to a lesbian-headed household as a family unit?

The procedures for this section are presented as follows:

1. Identification of the population and the sample.
2. The technique for data collection.
3. Conducting the interviews.
4. Analysis of the data.

## Population

The population that was studied consisted of lesbian mothers between the ages of thirty-six to fifty-three living in and around a city with a population of approximately 200,000 in the Southeastern United States. The participants were selected for theoretical, not statistical purposes. This process is referred to by Bogdan and Biklen as a purposeful sampling (1982). "The researcher employs her or his own discretion to select the respondents who best meet the purposes of the study" (Robinson and Neutens, 1987, p.91). This type of selection requires that the researcher establish a set of criteria or list of attributes that the subjects selected for the study must share (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). Consequently, in qualitative research the subjects are not selected randomly; they must meet the criteria that best explains the topic being studied (Yin, 1988).

Based on the following criteria, a sample of ten participants were asked to participate in the study:

1. The participants acknowledged and accepted their lesbianism.
2. The participants had at least one biological child born while the participant was in a heterosexual marriage.
3. The participants were able to talk from the experience of going through a divorce after their children were old enough to be influenced by the event.
4. The participants were able to talk about their

perception of the shift their children made between a heterosexual and a lesbian lifestyle.

5. The participants were able to discuss their perceptions of how shifting to a lesbian lifestyle impacted their relationship with their children.
6. The participants had custody of their children a sufficient amount of the time during the school year to be able to discuss the events surrounding school issues.
7. The participants volunteered to participate in the study.
8. The participants signed a consent form as part of the study.

Through a networking sample from friends and colleagues, I was able to make contact with the participants and secure their agreements to be interviewed. All of the women had been married and lived in heterosexual relationships with their biological children for a portion of their children's formative years. During their heterosexual marriages, the participants lived in the "Bible Belt" in a socially and politically conservative city in the South-eastern United States.

#### Technique For Data Collection

The long interview technique was used to collect data because it provided a unique opportunity for in-depth responses. McCracken (1988) states several advantages in using long qualitative interviewing. The opportunity for the researcher to have a versatile instrument with which to

capture how the participant views and experiences the world is one advantage. As the researcher explores the familiarity of his/her own culture, the opportunity to ask better questions, listen more skillfully, and analyze the data with greater sensitivity is available. Using the long interview gives the researcher a means of collecting and handling qualitative data so that it is both abundant and manageable. This method presents the opportunity to set appropriate boundaries between the researcher and the participant while developing a sense of connectedness with people. Other advantages in using a long interview method in qualitative research is the fact that a high response rate is possible. The flexibility of further probing using possible verbal and nonverbal behaviors is valuable. The opportunity for spontaneity can be appreciated; control over the order of questioning and the element of time is also available (Rubinson and Neutens, 1987).

Following a thorough search and examination of the literature, open-ended questions were designed to facilitate a discussion regarding the participants' perceptions of their children's experiences in a lesbian-headed household (Appendix A). The interview guide was developed with the assistance of my committee chair, Dr. Kathleen Bennett deMarrais. The interview consisted of opened-ended questions composed prior to the interview. Identical questions were used with each participant in the same order for the purpose of increasing the probability of securing comparable responses. This method was also used to allow participants

the freedom to talk spontaneously about the questions they were asked.

The data were collected by audiotaping interviews which lasted between one and two hours. Afterwards the data were transcribed from the autotapes. The notes and transcriptions were then systematically arranged by topics in preparation for interpretations and analysis of the information. This process is a matter of screening the transcriptions for the most relevant information pertaining to the topics. According to Tesche (1990), categories are coded to allow the researcher to quickly identify, retrieve, and then group all the segments relating to a particular question or theme. After the data were coded into categories, conclusions were drawn. Data interpretation and analysis involves "making sense out of what people have said, and looking for patterns putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place and integrating what different people have said" (Patton, 1990, p.348). There are no absolute rules in analyzing and interpreting qualitative data as the researcher strives to use the data to represent the purpose of the study (Patton, 1990; Smith, 1987; Schempp, 1987).

Data from qualitative research is most commonly presented in a narrative form which allows the reader to be able to draw conclusions from the participant's own words included in the body of the paper. By developing a connection with the reader, the researcher's goal is to educate the reader, enlighten the reader with new information, and create opportunities for change.

## Conducting Interviews

Initial interest in the topic of lesbian mothers and their biological children stemmed from a qualitative research study I conducted in the fall of 1994 under the direction of Dr. Kathleen Bennett deMarrais. The study focused on the impact the acknowledgment of lesbianism has on a mother's relationship with her children. During the interviews and transcription of the data, I became aware of the high levels of frustration lesbian mothers experience regarding the impact of homophobic messages on their children. Although none of the mothers were out to the teachers of their children, the mothers were still aware of a low tolerance within the school system regarding lesbian-headed households. Mutual concerns arose in the conversation concerning an interest in finding ways to validate lesbian motherhood. The participants of these interviews referred me to other lesbians who would be willing to talk about the school experiences of their biological children as well as all aspects of how lesbianism had impacted their children.

To assure confidentiality, I chose a pseudonym for each woman. This pseudonym was the only means of identification used in the interview transcripts. The participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B). The participants had full knowledge of the procedure and gave their consent to be audio-taped.

During the interview I took notes of comments the participants made that reflected a new slant on the question

I had asked. I allowed the participants the opportunity to discuss the topic freely while guiding them to stay focused on the question being discussed. I concentrated on listening and responding with appropriate questions based on discussion cues taken from the participants' conversations, allowing flexibility for experiences related to the topic to be discussed. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted over a one month period of time either in the privacy of my home or the in homes of the participants.

### Analysis Of Data

From the taped interviews I transcribed accurate, verbatim transcripts for the purpose of analyzing the data. Punctuation was only added to assist in the flow and emphasis of the conversation without being overly concerned with grammatical requirements. All names and identifying information were removed from the text. I used pseudonyms for identification purposes. The pseudonym names were taken from a book discussing spirituality including names of Goddesses. A sample interview is included (Appendix C).

Data analysis revealed themes and categories that described the participants' experiences as related to the open-ended questions dealing with lesbian mothers and their biological children. Continued reference to the total structure of the topics aided in determining the most relevant experiences under each topic. The steps involved in the data analysis followed suggestions by several qualitative

methodologists: (McCracken, 1988; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Reinharz, 1992).

The process of data analysis began during the interviews as I probed for deeper answers by responding to significant pieces of the participants' conversations. The analysis continued as patterns arose during the transcribing. I wrote notes in the margins of the transcriptions and used color codes to underline sections of the transcriptions that corresponded with similar themes within each of the interviews. By rereading the transcripts I was able to sense similarities among the interviews. I found that similar feelings, attitudes, frustrations, and concerns were repeated in the transcripts.

### Summary

Chapter three provided a framework and rationale for the implementation of this research project. The use of the methodology is explained. The ten criteria used to determine the sample population is listed in this chapter. The techniques used for collecting the data are explained. An explanation of how the interviews were conducted and the process of data analysis are included.

The major themes that rose out of the literature review were developed into the five focus questions used as the interview guide. An explanation of how qualitative research is handled and used is available in this chapter. Also included are successful qualitative research references.

## CHAPTER IV

### PRESENTATION OF DATA AND FINDINGS

This chapter begins with an introduction of the ten women who participated in the study. The descriptions include mannerisms, communication style, and interesting characteristics unique to the participant. The descriptions based on distinguishing characteristics help the reader to visualize each woman, to personalize the participants and allow their character to come alive in the mind of the reader. They are listed in the order in which they were interviewed. I have chosen pseudonyms for each participant from names of spiritual Goddesses. The participants will be referred to by their pseudonym throughout the discussions.

Following the general descriptions of each participant, the six themes found in the data are discussed. I have used direct quotations to support each theme, giving readers an opportunity to hear the voices of the women I interviewed.

#### Participant Descriptions

The participants in this study are all women living in or near the metropolitan area of a Southeastern city with a population of approximately 200,000 (See Tables 1.1 - 2.2). Although the city houses a major university, its citizens maintain rather conservative values and support traditional views similar to ones found in cities located in "Bible Belt" regions of the United States.

**Table 1.1: Lesbian Mothers with Biological Children (Mariamne, Diana, Juno, Pele, and Themis)**

| <b>Data</b>                                  | <b>Mariamne</b> | <b>Diana</b> | <b>Juno</b> | <b>Pele</b>            | <b>Themis</b> |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Mother's age</b>                          | 42              | 36           | 42          | 53                     | 39            |
| <b>Number of children</b>                    | 1               | 2            | 2           | 4                      | 1             |
| <b>Current ages of children</b>              | G-23            | B-18 B-15    | G-15 B-28   | G-24 B-24<br>G-27 G-32 | G-13          |
| <b>Years mother married</b>                  | 5               | 5            | 14          | 14                     | 5             |
| <b>Years mother divorced</b>                 | 18              | 18           | 5           | 14                     | 11            |
| <b>Divorce a result of lesbianism</b>        | no              | no           | no          | yes                    | no            |
| <b>Children's ages at divorce</b>            | G-5             | B-5 B-10     | G-9 B-14    | G-5 B-5<br>G-7 G-12    | G-1           |
| <b>Mother's years as a lesbian</b>           | 13              | 5            | 5           | 27                     | 11            |
| <b>Number of children living with mother</b> | 0               | 2            | 2           | 1                      | 1             |
| <b>Custody settlement</b>                    | joint*          | joint        | joint       | father*                | mother        |

| Data                                     | Mariamne | Diana | Juno | Pepe  | Themis                |
|------------------------------------------|----------|-------|------|-------|-----------------------|
| Mother in a relationship                 | yes      | yes   | yes  | no    | no                    |
| Mother lives with partner                | yes      | yes   | no   | no    | no                    |
| Mother out to children                   | yes      | yes   | yes  | yes   | yes                   |
| Mother out to children's father          | yes      | yes   | yes  | yes   | N/A                   |
| Mother out to children's teacher         | no +     | no    | no   | no    | no but yes to daycare |
| Mother involved in children's school     | yes*     | yes   | yes  | N/A + | yes                   |
| Number and gender of homosexual children | 1-G      | 0     | 0    | 1-G   | 0                     |

B = Boy  
G = Girl

\* = Children of age; can leave custodial parent  
+ = Children out of school or in college.

**Table 1.2: Lesbian Mothers with Biological Children (Mari, Demeter, Dione, Bright, and Shekinah)**

| Data                                  | Mari   | Demeter           | Dione             | Bright    | Shekinah  |
|---------------------------------------|--------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Mother's age                          | 39     | 44                | 42                | 45        | 42        |
| Number of children                    | 1      | 3                 | 3                 | 2         | 2         |
| Current ages of children              | G-12   | G-17 B-19<br>G-21 | B-18 B-19<br>G-22 | B-15 G-18 | B-17 G-19 |
| Years mother married                  | 5      | 18                | 10                | 15        | 11        |
| Years mother divorced                 | 7      | 5                 | 14                | 9         | 12        |
| Divorce a result of lesbianism        | no     | yes               | yes               | no        | no        |
| Children's ages at divorce            | G-1    | G-12 B-14<br>G-16 | B-4 B-5<br>G-7    | B-6 G-9   | B-6 G-8   |
| Mother's years as a lesbian           | 7      | 5                 | 15                | 9         | 11        |
| Number of children living with mother | 1      | 1                 | 1                 | 2         | 0         |
| Custody settlement                    | mother | father*           | father*           | joint     | mother    |

| Data                                     | Mari                  | Demeter | Dione | Bright       | Shekinah     |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|-------|--------------|--------------|
| Mother in a relationship                 | yes                   | yes     | yes   | no           | yes          |
| Mother lives with partner                | yes                   | yes     | yes   | no           | yes          |
| Mother out to children                   | yes                   | yes     | yes   | G=yes B=no   | yes          |
| Mother out to children's father          | yes                   | yes     | yes   | no           | yes          |
| Mother out to children's teacher         | no but yes to daycare | no      | no    | no           | no           |
| Mother involved in children's school     | yes                   | yes*    | yes + | yes          | yes +        |
| Number and gender of homosexual children | 0                     | 0       | 0     | 1 bisexual G | 1 bisexual G |

B = Boy  
G = Girl

\* = Children of age; can leave custodial parent  
+ = Children out of school or in college.

Even so, each woman fully acknowledges her lesbian sexual orientation and is living a lesbian lifestyle. They have all been married, given birth to children during that marriage, and have lived as heterosexual wives and mothers for a portion of their lives. The point at which each one chose to live as a lesbian varied from woman to woman. They all recalled being brought up with the belief that such a lifestyle was simply not an option and furthermore, was very sinful. They all experienced intense periods of struggle and confusion as a result of their joining the lesbian culture.

#### Mariamne

Mariamne is a short stocky woman in her mid to early forties. Her jolly and cheerful mannerisms made interviewing her a pleasure. She arrived early one morning with her own bottle of water. She is an independent woman concerned with taking care of her health. Her work as a therapist has given her skills to remain focused during conversations. She openly expressed her joy in being a mother of a lesbian daughter. Coming to terms with her own lesbianism has made it easier for her daughter to accept her own lesbianism than might otherwise have been possible. However, Mariamne remembers her daughter having attractions for women before Mariamne had fully come to terms with her own lesbianism. She smiled as she recalled concerned faculty members from her daughter's high school calling her in for a conference with the hopes they would gain parental support in averting

the budding young lesbian's enthusiasm for her sexual preference. Mariamne chuckled as she described her own rather masculine appearance. "They took one look at me, and figured it was a losing battle," she said. Mariamne enjoys a quiet life with her partner of ten years.

### Diana

Soft spoken Diana moved with the gentle spirit of a nurturing mother as she settled herself comfortably in my sitting room for the interview. This was the first time we had ever met, but she was quick to explain she wanted to be part of the research because she hoped my work would help end homophobia and oppression of minority groups, especially lesbian mothers. She spoke of feeling alienated as a mother in a lesbian lifestyle because she knew that to be open about her lifestyle would put her and her two boys at risk. However, she explained that leaving a vindictive husband and shortly thereafter coming out as a lesbian had been a positive experience for her boys. She maintains that her children have been comfortable and content living with their mom and her partner in a loving environment for the last five years. Lately, however, the situation has become problematic. Her face showed her disappointment as she explained her frustrations with the recent effects of homophobia in her home. "It wasn't until the children's father told the boys I was a lesbian during this past Christmas vacation that we began having problems." Her oldest son became upset and

rebellious, blaming Diana's partner, with whom he had always maintained a positive relationship, for the problems he was experiencing. In time, she hopes the bond that she and her partner have developed with the children while living in their family unit will be strong enough to help the budding adolescents deal with the "negative" label that has been put on a lifestyle with which they had heretofore seemed very comfortable.

### Juno

Quiet and demure, tall and willowy, Juno settled comfortably into a chair in my home. She expressed her joy at discovering her image of lesbians as masculine military women with combat boots has been replaced with a new concept that includes all types of women. She talked about society's expectations of her to marry and to have children. She says her mother impressed upon her that there is nothing more important in life than to have children. Juno believes she made an honest effort to make her marriage work, especially for the sake of her two children. However, she recalls she and her husband could not have a conversation without arguing. "We were just growing worlds apart, although I did not know at the time it had anything to do with my sexuality." After the divorce she remembers experimenting with the lesbian lifestyle slowly but steadily. Now, five years later, she is comfortable in the lifestyle and so are her children. Juno is a physical therapist. She enjoys

outdoor activities, sports, and reading books. Juno is a soft-spoken, pleasant, spiritual woman. She is sweet-natured, sensitive and kind.

### Pele

Pele is a tall large-framed woman in her early fifties. She lives a quiet single life in a comfortable home on several acres of land in the country. Pele is a social worker and a director of a girls' program at a mental health institute. She is dedicated to helping willing adolescents develop positive attitudes about life, experience stable mental health, and learn healthy living habits. Talking about her decision to be honest with herself and live a lesbian lifestyle brought up sad memories, as she recalled having to leave her four children, banished from the small rural south Georgia town where she lived. "That was twenty years ago," she mused, "The children were told I was mentally sick and it was their fault. Back then in that area, the lowest thing you could be on the social ladder was gay. It was lower than being a thief or a murderer." Her story began as a heart-wrenching tragedy; however, her countenance shifted and her face registered a radiant glow as she spoke of the close bond she and her children have now. She was glad when her son came to live with her two years ago to attend the local university. She mentioned how strange it was getting to know him after not living with him since he was five-years-old. Now she chuckled, "I am ready for him to be on his own. He is

in his twenties and it is time to cut the apron strings." She talked proudly of her three grandchildren; the third grandchild is from a previous heterosexual marriage of a woman who has lived for six years with Pele's oldest daughter in a committed lesbian relationship. For Pele's oldest daughter, coming to terms with her own lesbianism was much easier than it was for her mother. Pele thinks it is because she has been a positive role model for her daughter.

As my visit with Pele came to a close, I knew I had been in the presence of a mother who had experienced monumental pain as a result of being a lesbian with biological children. However, Pele's life has led to a lifestyle and a personal philosophy offering her peace of mind for herself and her relationship with her children. She believes,

We are more normal than straight people because we have come to terms with who we are. We have made a choice to listen to ourselves. I was absolutely physically, emotionally, and spiritually sick when I was straight. The love we feel for women is spiritual and universal. Spirituality and sexuality are so much the same thing. Rules are made by men, and there is no way you can put love on a piece of paper.

### Themis

Red-headed and spunky, Themis was in a euphoric state after having just finished law school. As we pulled up chairs in her cozy living room she bubbled on about how good it felt to be out of school. Her comments naturally included her young daughter's part in her success by occupying herself while Themis was busy studying. Themis is a role model for

her child to pursue an education and follow personal dreams. She says the challenge of being a graduate student and caring for an elementary school-aged child has not been easy. However, her determination and zeal was evident as we discussed the trials and joys of being a lesbian mom. Themis lives alone, although occasionally has opened her home to friends in need of a room. She has been a single mother since her daughter was an infant. She has learned how to meet responsibilities head-on as she has dealt with her share of hardships and challenges. She says she is looking forward to turning the big "40" next year and is eager to establish a settled, less hurried life than graduate school has been. Themis is part of a large circle of lesbians in the community. Recently, she established a new relationship. She does not socialize much with lesbian moms but says her daughter is well-accustomed to her lifestyle and enjoys her friends. Themis is a determined, strong woman and a zealous leader in various circles in the community. She is eager to do her part as an attorney to support the end of oppression all minority groups including lesbian mothers with biological children.

#### Mari

Mari appeared comfortable and eager to talk as she curled her tall lanky body opposite me on the sofa. Her short feathered haircut, clear smooth features, and delicate nurturing mannerisms represented a lesbian who appreciated

and believed in womanly qualities. She spoke of rearing a daughter with muscular dystrophy as an extremely challenging and painful experience; but she adds, "I was thrilled when my little girl was born. I always wanted a daughter. If I had not had a heterosexual experience and had a child, I would have gotten pregnant somehow!" She was radiant as she discussed the joys of raising her daughter. She spoke of feeling alienated as a lesbian mom although she suspects her experience is not any more isolating than a heterosexual mother's experience of motherhood. She believes an accessible support network of lesbians with biological children exists for her in the community. Several other lesbians with children living in lesbians families came to mind. She said they occasionally get in touch. But, Mari admits with an endearing grin that her life with her partner of four years is the, "typical boring marriage filled with homework on school nights and going to bed with a bowl of popcorn and a movie. There is a strong measure of contentment in this sort of family centered life." Although she knows children require constant care and are often rather ungrateful until they get much older, her love for motherhood was apparent and heartwarming. She and her partner have a strong relationship. She had praise and gratitude for the responsibility and compassion her partner has for her physically challenged daughter. When Mari's nurturing spirit and love for children takes her away to her profession as a pediatric nurse, her partner compatibly juggles the challenges of rearing her daughter with equal pride and joy.

Demeter

After settling down for the interview early one morning in my sitting room with coffee and English muffins, Demeter talked about the balance between the intense love and commitment she has for her three children and the journey she believed she must follow as a lesbian. At forty-five, Demeter has only experienced the shift to a lesbian lifestyle for five years. It was five years ago that her religious ex-husband moved her to a large city in hopes of curing his wife of the sin of homosexuality. She was only able to endure the stress for one month before the reality that she could not ignore her lesbianism became too overwhelming to endure any longer. She remembers the day she packed the car, left the children, and drove the six hundred miles back to her community. It was a major turning point in her life. Her tall, strong, athletic body quaked with emotion as she recalled the day she left. Through tears she told me how devastated the children were. The emotion that she felt seemed to surprise her as she said "Sometimes I think I will get beyond that." I reminded her she was a mother and that being true to her sexual identity did not erase the deep love mothers feel for their children. Demeter said she never lost faith that the bond she and the children had developed during their growing up years would be strong enough to withstand this devastation. She talked of always enjoying sports and being proud of how successful her children had been in athletics. She spoke of her love for the outdoors and of how

she and the children would set the tent up in the backyard and roast hot dogs, watch fire flies, and listen to the night sounds during the summer. Her bright eyes had cleared from her onrush of emotion and the clear olive tone of her face rounded into a broad grin as she said:

They don't completely understand the lifestyle and are still conflicted about the church's view on homosexuality from their religious upbringing, but one by one as they graduate from high school they have moved back to be with me. My oldest daughter has been with my partner and me for the last two years and my son comes up in the summer when he is on vacation from college. My youngest has one more year in high school, and I know she will return, too. They like my friends and are glad I am happy. It is nothing short of a miracle.

Demeter says merging children into a lesbian household is not without its challenges, but she doubts it is any more stressful than blending heterosexual families.

### Dione

Dione is a strong and rugged woman with a gentle gracious manner. She has a number of characteristics stereotypically labeled as masculine. Her short graying hair is swept back in a cut away from her face. As we settled into her spacious living room with refreshments, she began the interview by telling me at forty-two she is at the place in life where she wants quiet and space. Dione works at a school for the deaf where she says it is very quiet and pleasant. She admits most of the partners she has been with over the

years have been much more nurturing than she is. She says she hates to cook and would rather be sure things are running smoothly and taken care of than do the domestic duties. However, her commitment and concern for her children have included allowing her daughter, who is a single mother with two small children, to live with her and her partner when her daughter has needed a place to stay. She says her home has been a pivotal stop-over for numerous friends of her two sons as they test their skills at adult responsibilities. Providing for her children has always been very important to Dione. She and her partner have just purchased a large new home in a modern, pleasant neighborhood. She says her youngest son lives with them, and there is plenty of room for the children to bring their friends home and feel comfortable.

### Brigit

Brigit arrived early one morning looking tan and cool in her casual summer outfit. She was enjoying her summer break from school. In her mid-forties she spoke with endearment of her two teen-age children. Brigit is an analytical woman who enjoys reading and spiritual work. She was the only mother interviewed who has not told one of her children, a son, that she is a lesbian. She believes she will know when the time is right to explain her lifestyle to her son. Her daughter accepted the information very well just six months ago, after repeatedly mentioning that she was interested in dating

women. Brigit thinks her daughter is just experimenting with the lesbian lifestyle and is glad her daughter is willing to discuss her feelings with her. In the nearly ten years Brigit has acknowledged her lesbianism, her children have grown accustomed to their mom having women friends visit their home. She thinks it is important to be a role model for children and let them know that people have a variety of interests and that it is healthy for families to do things separate from each other. She has a close relationship with both her children while also doing an excellent job of balancing activities with her large circle of friends. Brigit is an independent woman who enjoys horseback riding, hiking, and all outdoor activities. She thinks the children have come to accept the lifestyle without having to deal with the homophobic aspect of homosexuality.

### Shekinah

Gracious and hospitable, Shekinah was the only participant who invited me for a meal. I found her home to be warm, with the presence of a woman that wound her life around nurturing activities. Besides caring for patients as a home health practitioner she opened her home for a time to a pregnant friend of her bisexual daughter. Her full body and kindly spirit were testimony to a woman who puts other people first in her life. Although she spoke of trying three husbands before coming to terms with her lesbianism ten years ago, she says she has always been attracted to women but

knows she was meant to be a mother. She shares a home with a partner of one year in her hometown, an adjacent city that is more affluent and supposedly more progressive than the general metropolitan area in which the other participants live. However, even in this upscale progressive city homophobia thrives. Over the years she says many of her friends have left her because of her sexuality, but the ones who are opened-minded and not ignorant have remained. She has a hard time understanding why people are fearful of homosexuals. She related the story of being in the grocery store with her daughter and overhearing two heterosexual "red neck" young women conversing. One woman said to the other, "Those God-damned lesbians that live upstairs! It just plain scares me. I don't want them to break in and rape me." Shekinah and her daughter walked away and mused, "Is that really the way people think we are? That we are uncontrollable men, that we are going to break in their houses and rape them? It is so hard to understand where ignorance comes from." Shekinah is trying in her own community to subtly break the ignorance. When one of her co-workers mentioned that she just didn't know how people can work with "those lesbians," Shekinah responded, "You know what, you probably work with a lot more lesbians than you think you do because they are people, too." She says the woman looked at her rather intently and has treated her with more respect ever since. Shekinah was glad to have the opportunity to share her experience as a lesbian mother. It is an experience she is glad she has finally come to

accept, and she finds it much more satisfying than being a heterosexual mother.

Throughout all of the interviews, the lesbian mothers kept consistent eye contact and constant willingness to share their stories. It was a time of intimate reflection coupled with memories of yesterday as well as hope for a more liberal, accepting tomorrow. The nature of the questions caused moments of anger and pain, as well as joy and happiness to be reflected. Their responses reveal unique circumstances connected by similar thoughts, concerns, and perceptions.

### Findings

In the following sections of this chapter the participants' perceptions regarding their children's adjustments to their parents' divorce and the mothers' shift to a lesbian lifestyle are described. The mothers' responses evolved from eight open-ended questions listed in the interview guide (Appendix B). The questions address the purpose of the study as outlined in the problem statement. Analysis of the data revealed five distinct themes from an inductive analysis of the interview transcripts:

1. The effect of mother's lesbianism on the mother/child relationship.
2. Awareness that the divorce had a greater negative impact on the children than the mothers' shift to a lesbian

lifestyle.

3. The impact of homophobic messages on the children.
4. The mother's degree of involvement in her children's school experience after "coming out" as a lesbian.
5. The children's acceptance of the redefined family as an alternative family unit including the children's acceptance of their mother's partner and friends.

#### Mother's Relationships With their Children

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was the effect of the mother's lesbianism on the mother/child relationship. Four of the ten mothers reported they continued their lives with women around their homes as if nothing was unusual. In three of the ten cases the children were young when the mothers recognized their lesbianism. The mothers believed giving the children time to observe the lifestyle reduced the possibility for the children to develop prejudiced attitudes and allowed the children time to become comfortable with the changes. In all cases this scenario played itself out positively. Shekinah reports:

I was a lot more uptight and scared about telling them I was a lesbian than I needed to be. My son told me that whatever makes me happy is fine with him. Both children are cool with it, and it has stopped them wondering if I am going to try another man.

Eight of the ten women interviewed said their children responded to the news of having a lesbian mother with ease and acceptance. Mariamne and Dione both remembered that

being honest with their children strengthened their relationships with their children. Dione said,

The biggest difference with coming out to my kids has been that I am honest. The fact that I am honest and that there isn't anything they don't know about me has allowed them to be more honest with me and in their other relationships. I came out to my children just three and one half years ago because my partner and I were planning a Holy Union and I wanted them to be part of it. They were accustomed to my partner being at the house and the news was no surprise. My boys gave me away and my daughter was my maid of honor. It was a very important time for us all.

Mariamne also supports the idea of honesty and being straight forward with her children.

I think if anything, after I came out to my daughter our relationship actually got closer. There was a long period when I didn't think I was being a good mom but it had to do with the fact I thought I was crazy, when indeed I was struggling with my sexual identity. Once I said, 'Okay, I am a lesbian, that's it. I am not crazy, just a lesbian.' I could be more honest with her and she became more honest with me.

Mariamne proceeded to recall stories indicating that her daughter at last felt comfortable to tell her mother adventures from her high school years.

However, breaking the news of their lesbianism was not as rewarding for both Pele and Demeter. Being honest to their husbands about their desire to pursue a lesbian lifestyle was just the beginning of a long and painful separation from their children. The most heart-wrenching story came from Pele, who recognized her sexual identity twenty years earlier. She experienced the pain and anguish of losing the

right to mother her children. After a time, a peaceful smile replaced the sadness in her face, "It has taken a lot of time and talking but we have worked through it. My relationship is very good today with all four of them now," she explained. I was encouraged that at least time has a way of healing the wounds that result from the ignorance society instills in the minds of children. "I had problems with the oldest two, but we have worked around all that," she added with a smile. Today, the oldest of the women interviewed enjoys a close relationship with all of her children. She says she talks to her three children who are out of town at least once or twice a week. The isolation she felt as a banished lesbian mother is not part of the experience her oldest daughter had to endure as she came to terms with her own lesbianism six years ago.

Although the time frame was different, social attitudes remained the same. Demeter's experience was repeated in much the same way nearly fifteen years after Pele's. She realized being honest with her husband regarding her attraction for women left her only one option. To live the truth of her sexual orientation meant leaving her three children with their father. Reliving the devastating decision filled her with painful emotion as she spoke. She said she never gave up hoping that the bond she and the children developed in their growing up years would be strong enough to get them through the crisis. Although the children's religious training still has them confused, she reports "They accept me for who I am." Demeter smiles as she speaks,

My son is not sure that what I am doing is right, but he knows it is my life and he likes my partner. He understands or at least he sees what I wasn't getting out of the marriage. My youngest still struggles with how this all fits together with what she was raised to believe. She totally buys into the belief that I am on the road to Hell but it hasn't affected our relationship. She likes to come visit and likes my partner. She is the most outspoken of the three. I hope to get her in a college that will challenge her mind. My oldest has the most trouble with my lesbianism. Although she has lived with us for two of the five years my partner and I have been together, she is still very quiet about her feelings. She thinks it is disgusting [that] my partner and I get in the hot tub together, but I don't care.

Demeter is not unlike the other mothers I interviewed in regard to her decision to live her life with a companion who is a member of a culture that Demeter feels comfortable with, regardless of her children's discernment or disapproval. The mothers I interviewed appeared to believe that integrating their own sexuality with their lifestyle is the best testimony they can offer their children about living one's truth. For Diana the frustrations of dealing with her budding adolescent's disapproval of her lifestyle is a new experience. She recalls that until just six months before the interview, her two boys had never expressed any dissatisfaction with their home life. For the past five years she, the boys, and her partner have been living together as a family unit. During the Christmas holidays the children's father informed the boys that they were living in a lesbian household. As a result, Diana says her fifteen-year-old son has become particularly rebellious and angry. She hopes the

close relationship and loving home she and her partner have created for the boys will be solid enough to withstand the contempt and ridicule to which the boys are now being exposed. She knows that she has found with her lesbian partner a quality of love and kindness which was missing in her heterosexual marriage.

### Children's Exposure to Lesbianism

For the children of three of the mothers, the reality of having a lesbian mom was not a new or shattering revelation at all. Themis says her child has always been around lesbians. "I don't believe my lifestyle has impacted her at all. She has been highly exposed to all my friends, although it was at just last year's Gay Pride Parade my daughter asked me about the "queens" dressed in their "drag" (gay men dressed in typically women's clothes)." Themis said she answered the eleven-year-old's question, whereupon the child asked other gay-related questions ending up with the question of whether she has a lesbian for a mother. When Themis told her daughter that in fact she is a lesbian, she said her daughter already knew:

She knew because all my friends are women. I answered her question so it wouldn't seem negative but I wanted her to know all of society is not open-minded. She needed to know that some people do not understand and would not be alright with the news. I told her we fall in love with and choose to have a permanent relationship with a woman and gay men do with men instead pairing-off man to woman. I wanted her to know that some folks think that homosexuality is wrong so she needed to be aware she might get a negative reaction if she shared

with folks her mom is a lesbian.

Themis says the conversation brought them closer. Because her daughter did not have any preconceived negative notions about a lesbian household and has experienced her home as a safe normal arrangement, she took the news calmly without any reason to express fear or shame.

My interview with Mari sheds a different light on the response of how children respond to the news they have a lesbian mother. Mari does not believe it is possible to hide lesbianism from a child:

Before I was involved in any relationship, my six-year-old at the time would say, 'Mommy, you love women don't you?' and I would say, 'Yes, I do.' She didn't know to ask me if I was a lesbian, nor did she put it on a sexual level, she just intuitively knew I liked women.

At eight-years-old the inquisitive child asked what it meant to be homosexual. Mari remembers telling the child that homosexuality is when women choose women to share life with or men choose men, and that it is the opposite of heterosexuality where men and women choose each other. When she finished the explanation, her daughter looked up at her and said, "Well then you are a lesbian." According to Mari, "We have always been very close and that hasn't changed since coming out. If anything I am a better mother because I am not ripping myself off and am willing to be true to myself."

Brigit is the only mother who has a teenage son with whom she believes the time is not yet right to share her sexual orientation. However she says,

My daughter has been making comments that she might marry a woman someday and I felt it was the right time to tell her about my attraction to women. She was fine with the news. We discussed her desire to experiment with the lifestyle.

Similar to the other lesbian mothers when explaining lesbian issues and lifestyle concerns with their children, Brigit also warned her daughter of the risks involved when following a homosexual lifestyle. She adds,

I think my daughter took the news so comfortably because she, like my son, sees a different side to me since coming to terms with my sexuality. I am more free spirited since coming out nine years ago. I have learned a lot about being a lesbian mom. Everyone does it different. I am a real analytical person but I also know you have to listen for a sign for the timing of when to tell your children. My children are accustomed to my lesbian friends visiting our house. I have been building a strong bond with them and am very close to them. That is important.

Juno, likewise, has two young adult children. She believes her lesbianism in the last five years has had positive results on her relationship with the children. She says she was reared in a very traditional home with a lot of emphasis on getting married and having children:

My mom said over and over there was nothing more important in life than to have children. I want my children to know there are many choices in life to choose from. I expose especially my daughter to a lot of positive women. I make it a point to explain what the women do for work and tell my daughter something about them. I want my kids to see my friends being independent, happy, and doing what they want to do. I think it is benefiting her.

Juno believes her children would not have the exposure

to such strong role models if she had stayed in the marriage. She adds, "I think my children have gotten a more realistic view of the world as a result of my lesbianism. I see positive effects in their socialization skills too."

All ten women have healthy loving relationships with their children. Although most of the mothers admit some of their children are still pondering the validity of the lifestyle they have chosen to follow, the decision has not dampened the children's devotion to their mothers nor obscured the reality that their mothers are their mothers regardless of sexual identity.

#### Divorce More Negative Than Lesbianism

In comparison to coming out as a lesbian, all ten participants unanimously agreed that the divorce had a far greater negative impact on their children. Pele, Demeter, and Dione spoke of the devastating abandonment issues their children suffered as a result of their mothers moving out of the home. In six of the families, joint custody is practiced. Visitation arrangements are set up to best suit the children's needs. The custody arrangement for Brigit's children began with the children spending three and then four months consecutively with each parent. Now that the children are older, they live where they choose to. Juno's joint custody arrangement allows the children to spend every two weeks with each parent. Both Juno and Brigit live in the same general vicinity as their ex-husbands in order to

maintain educational continuity for the children. Diana's ex-husband lives out of town. She keeps the boys during the school year and in the summer they go live with their father. During the year they visit him every other weekend as well. Themis has sole custody of her daughter because her ex-husband has taken no interest in his daughter's life since she was four-years-old. Shekinah and Mariamne agreed to joint custody arrangements when their children were younger. Now that the children have left the home and live independently, they know they are welcome to visit either parent anytime they choose. In all cases the relationship with each parent is an open and positive one. For reasons other than lesbian issues, Mari and Dione were not granted custody of their children at the time of the divorce. After a year Mari was awarded complete custody of her daughter and Dione later gained custody of her children without a court ruling. In both cases the mothers had recognized their lesbian orientation but the issue did not come up in court. Both mothers are especially grateful to have been spared having to deal with sexuality issues in court.

Even though Demeter took up residence over six hundred miles away from her children and the separation from her children was very difficult, she reflects, "The divorce and split was more traumatic on the children than the news of my lifestyle change. Their religious background is what causes the conflict." Dione believes the divorce was more difficult for her children also. "The boys had some problems in school and I can trace the problems back to the divorce and the

trauma involved with unstable homes, not the fact I had women with me. Women were like mothers to the children and they needed mothering." Pele remembers the day twenty years ago when she was forced to leave her children but she says,

The abandonment, the divorce, and the fact they thought I was crazy had the worst impact on them. They didn't know I was a lesbian and when they found out they didn't care. Lesbianism has just never been an issue with the children.

Mariamne's daughter was only five when the divorce happened. The little girl was accustomed to spending much time with both parents. The divorce was very difficult for her. At age eleven she and her mother moved several states away. She still visited her dad in the summer and on holidays; however, losing consistent contact with her dad was very difficult. Now, in later years, Mariamne and her daughter's relationships with him are very cordial and comfortable. Shekinah, Dione, and Juno all share the same cordial experience with their ex-husbands. After each woman proclaimed her lesbianism and the children healed from divorce abandonment issues the terms between these lesbian mothers and their ex-husbands involved to an amicable place.

Juno's divorce experience has a different twist to it.

I see the divorce as having a greater negative impact than my lesbianism, but the children see their father more now than they did when we were together. He takes more interest in them than he ever has. He takes them places and does things with them. I think the divorce was a positive thing for the children's father. It sort of shook him up a bit.

The divorce proceedings were long and messy. She says her husband accused her of being a lesbian before the divorce was final and that he threatened to use her lesbianism as leverage to gain custody of the children. "I was not acting on my interest in women and did not have a partner at the time," she admits. "On the day of the final court hearing he never brought up his suspicions and agreed to joint custody." She reports that she and her ex-husband are just now getting to a place where they can talk without having an argument. She suspects it may be because he just recently remarried.

Five of the ten women said their divorce was not the direct result of recognized lesbianism although they do remember having fantasies about women during their marriage. Concern for their children's welfare, strong religious values, rituals bound by tradition, and the patriarchal nuclear family structure kept the option of lesbianism at bay. Mari spoke defensively of her efforts to save her marriage.

My divorcing my husband had nothing to do with my lesbianism. It was never an issue. I used to have dreams and fantasies about women when I was married and it troubled me. I would pray and ask God to help me. There was a time in my life when the thought of being a lesbian was my worst nightmare.

Although only two of the ten women left their families because of their lesbian sexual identity, the rest reported that no more than a year passed between the time they got divorced and they began to act on a newly discovered orientation. Juno says she did not leave the marriage because

of lesbianism, but she had started associating with a lesbian friend from work before the divorce was final. For the majority of the women interviewed, their divorce was simply the catalyst they needed to discover their sexual preference for women. Although the divorce is difficult for adults and children alike, their mother's opportunity to find her true identity appears to have had more positive than negative results for the children of all ten lesbian mothers.

Often a concern arises that lesbian mothers deprive their children of male role models because of the absence of a father in the home. However, the literature indicates and my study supports that lesbians have homosexual and heterosexual male friends in their lives. Gay men often respond well to fathering instincts and enjoy spending time with lesbian mothers' children. Mari spoken highly of her gay friends and the influence they are around her home as male energy. "I just love my gay guys. They are so helpful and my daughter enjoys their company. I think it's important to have guys around. Gay guys are safe friends." Themis and several of the other mothers' have gay friends that their children also enjoy. Referring back to the study conducted by Kirkpatrick (1987) and her colleagues, findings indicated that lesbian mothers had more adult male friends and male relatives included in their children's activities than heterosexual mothers did.

The relationships between divorced lesbians and their ex-husbands are often more cordial and comfortable than the relationships between heterosexual women and their ex-

husbands. If the focus is directed to the lesbianism as the cause of the divorce, regardless of the mother's acknowledgment at the time of the divorce, the tension between the two parents is lessened because lesbians are not a threat to a new wife if the ex-husband remarries. Visitations with the children's fathers are no more or less frequent than would be otherwise if the mother were not a lesbian. Juno reported that her children and their father have more quality time since the divorce. Both Shekinah and Mariamne say they are close friends with their ex-husbands. Mariamne said, "Daughter and I even went up there for the funeral when his father died last year. We all get along fine now."

#### Homophobic Influences on Children

Biological children of lesbian mothers experience the effects of homophobic messages in a number of ways. The attitudes of the children's immediate families and peer groups are strong determining factors in the severity of the effects of homophobia on the children. The age and maturity level of the children were also factors in how resistant they were to adverse comments. The risk of exposing the evidence of living in a lesbian-headed household became reality for one child who decided to share such news with her summer day care peers. Themis remembers her daughter coming home and sharing the results of the negative reactions she received.

My daughter told me her little friend went hysterical after she told her friend her mom was a lesbian. The classmate ran and told as many kids on the playground as she could find. She told me the kids bombarded her with a lot of teasing and negative reaction.

Themis remembers being concerned that the Baptist Day Care director would ask her to take her child elsewhere, but such was not the case:

The director was very pleasant and simply told me I needed to have a talk with my daughter because she had informed a number of children that her mother was a lesbian. I was very surprised that that was all she said. I reassured the woman that I would talk to my daughter and when we did, I reminded my daughter of a previous discussion we had had when I had explained to her that not everyone will be accepting of a lesbian lifestyle. I don't think she has told anyone since.

Blatantly informing classmates of living in a lesbian-headed household was not the precipitating event that triggered blackmail threats and accusations experienced by Diana's son at high school. She says her family had been very close to the family of her son's friend for the past ten years. They had even enjoyed taking vacation trips together. She says that although the two families ceased becoming as intimate after Diana came out as a lesbian five years ago and moved in with her partner, the children continued to be friends at school. However, this situation changed this past year:

My son's friend threatened and blackmailed him, informing him he would expose the news of my lesbianism. I told my son that my sexuality has nothing to do with his social life, but it has been a real difficult year.

Diana believes the boys must have told their dad of the threats over the Christmas holiday because the children returned with the knowledge that their mother is a lesbian and that they live in a lesbian household. Diana's frustration is compounded by teenage demands and desires.

The friend says he is too uncomfortable to come to the house now, but if he wants a ride somewhere he is quick to ask my son to ask my partner to take them if I am at work. I have told them that is not the way it works. If the friends are too uncomfortable to visit in our home all of a sudden, he doesn't need to be chauffeured around by my partner.

She hopes the loving bond and stable background she and her partner have developed with the boys will be strong enough to carry them through the years of adolescent confusion.

In spite of the negative reaction to their mothers' lifestyle, some of the children of the participants became more compassionate about other people who were the subject of homophobia and gossip. Two mothers reported examples of their children finding themselves in situations to offer support to individuals experiencing sexual harassment. Perhaps because of living with an awareness of the risk factors involved in living a homosexual lifestyle, children from both families became allied with different educators that were experiencing critical comments pertaining to suspected homosexuality. Brigit told me her teenage son came home from school and explained to her that he had supported a female physical education teacher when other students were critically accusing her of being gay:

For a child to take up for a teacher, especially in this age group there has got to be something major that I have gotten through to him about prejudice. I think he suspects about me and on some level I think he understands about me or wouldn't have taken up for the lady. I have taught both my children always to take up for minorities and people that are different because you are not in that person's shoes. I have told them not to put anyone down. It is not just a lesbian/gay issue, just people in general.

Mari told a similar story of her twelve-year-old daughter that supported a male counselor at summer camp who was experiencing harassment from some of the children about his suspected homosexuality. Mari said her daughter returned home with the report that, "He was a little effeminate Mom, but I thought he was delightful and fun and I just wanted to be his friend." Mari suspects her daughter's sensitivity to marginalized people may be the result of her own diagnosis of muscular dystrophy and the fact that she must spend a great deal of time in a wheel chair. She says her daughter has a good sense of humor and recognizes ignorance when she sees it. Mari fears the future for her adolescent daughter:

I fear what other adolescents will tell her. I have told her people who feel alright about their own sexuality and sexual identity are not going to be trashing gays and lesbians. Those people who are into that are not real clear about who they are and are not real comfortable with their sexuality. That is a tough pill to swallow when you are a young adolescent, but she hears it and I think she understands on some level.

Mari says she knows some kind of discrimination is experienced by nearly every child in their middle school days. "My daughter is not going to be spared from the experience just because her mom is a lesbian. I know she doesn't join in the jokes she hears at school, but she doesn't rally for gay rights either."

Among the lesbian mothers I interviewed, the most frequently discussed examples of homophobia were being in situations involving homophobic reactions to the gay and lesbian lifestyle and hearing related jokes in school settings were Juno, Shekinah, and Mariamne all referred to the teenage years as being the most difficult for their children in a homophobic environment. Although they agreed that insulting jokes about all minorities seem to be part of adolescent life, the mothers all agreed that their young people were not negatively affected. They believed the shift to a loving relationship and a more honest lifestyle has made the difference in establishing for their children a positive influence and strong values in favor of an alternative family unit. Shekinah, whose daughter is bisexual, believes her daughter supports her, although she is not sure about her son. Mariamne remembers her daughter having a difficult time all through high school hearing condemning jokes and messages:

My daughter came out as a lesbian during her freshman year. She challenged the high school to allow her to take a woman as a date to the senior ball. She found it difficult to find gay friends to hang around with. I was called in by the officials to support them in curbing her "outness" at school. They took one look at me and knew it was

a losing battle. Now that my daughter is an adult, she worries about her job and wearies of hearing gay jokes at work. She has gay symbols on the car, but she is beginning to worry about her future.

The most detrimental affects of prejudice and ridicule for the children of lesbian mothers came from family members, specifically the father, especially when the values of strong religious training were prevalent in the home. In some cases the mother had shown strong guidance in the training of values. Demeter's shift to lesbianism five years earlier left no choice but to leave her children with their father in a very religious and anti-gay environment. She knows it will take time for the children to separate the strong opinions and principles they were reared with and accept their mother's liberal, open philosophies. She knows it is difficult for them, but she hopes her example of living her own truth will help the children develop boarder perspectives for their own values.

They get plenty of homophobic messages from my dad and from their dad. Now that the kids are getting older they will decide for themselves. My son is already turned off by the church. He only goes because his dad makes him. My dad lives here in town and has not spoken to me since I divorced. I was very worried for a while that he would come out to the house with a gun.

Juno's reaction to the question of the affect of homophobic messages on her children was a response shared by the other mother. "I am sure they see and hear all the homophobic messages that are out there but they see a strong positive argument for a lesbian life by the way I live."

Lesbian Mothers' and Children's School

## Mothers' Visit Elementary Schools

Interviews with the lesbian mothers reveal their visits and associations with their children's schools were comfortable and their presence well accepted. However, none of the mothers had revealed their sexuality to any of their children's teachers or to any school personnel. Although in some cases the participants said they assumed the school was aware of the lifestyle the child lived in, nothing had ever been said to confirm the school's suspicion. All the mothers agreed their children's socialization skills and academic achievements had not been negatively affected by their shift to a lesbian lifestyle. Pele, who had experienced the greatest loss of quality time with her children when they were small and was prevented from being actively present during her children's early school experiences, still testifies that her lesbianism did not negatively influence her children's school experience.

The divorce was the talk of the town but the children fared well. Their schooling was not affected. They did not live with me, but their socialization skills and academics were not at stake. My lesbianism was not an issue.

Juno, who has one child in college and one in high school commented:

My son is pretty much on his own doing well in college. My daughter plays the oboe in the band,

she is on a basketball team and is doing very well academically. My lesbianism has not negatively affected their grades or social life at all. I believe my shift in life style has been very positive for both of my children.

All children of the lesbian mothers I interviewed are active in sports, band, clubs, and hold down after school jobs. Shekinah and Diana both spoke positively of the asset their partners have been with helping their children with homework and school projects. Shekinah bragged on her partner for being the guiding hand behind helping her son get ready to finish high school:

When we got together three years ago my youngest son had failed the ninth grade twice. He has done lots better since moving in with us. Being in a relationship with someone who understands young people has really helped.

Diana also reported that her physician partner with all her resource books and willingness to help her son with his homework has been a lifesaver in helping him get through chemistry. She says she knows her son's grades are better because of all the help her partner gives to him. "They have both excelled in school because of her. They do all kinds of projects together. While I am cooking they are busy with their school projects. It is so nice, like a real family." Dione is hoping the years of bonding she and her partner and the boys have developed over the last five years will be enough fortification to deliver them through the present times of confusion for the boys.

The mothers that were interviewed had children in

elementary school, middle school, high school, and college. Themis and Mari both have elementary school-age daughters who spent time in after school day care programs. Both mothers reported that the day care employers are aware of their lesbian lifestyle and neither they, nor their children, have received any negative repercussions from the information. Their children receive the same care and attention offered to all children. Both mothers visit the school regularly for parent-teacher conferences, M-team meetings, programs, and PTA functions. They are greeted with the same cordial respect as the other parents. The children and the schools of both families are accustomed to the mothers' partners picking the children up or dropping them off. No negative questions or comments have ever been made. Although Mari's daughter is physically challenged, her partner takes an equal interest in her care and education. She has attended M-team meetings to stay informed of the best educational decisions for the child. The school recognized Mari's partner as someone who significantly shares in the responsibility of caring for the child. Mari says the focus at school is directed to what is best for her daughter.

Perhaps the school staff knows, but if they do I have never experienced any negative problem with any staff. When asked if I have a boyfriend I do not share the fact I am a lesbian but neither do I try to paint a picture that I am a heterosexual. I have on occasion told teachers I've gotten particularly close to that I have a life partner. My daughter is well-liked and sociable. She was voted the best looking and the friendliest of her sixth grade class last year. I am very proud of her. How we live our lives has not negatively impacted my daughter's school experience.

Themis also has experienced the same type of respect from her daughter's elementary school teachers and staff. Her time has been limited as a volunteer at school because of her own graduate school studies, but she adds, "There has been no discrimination when I attend meetings to discuss my daughter's ADHD disorder and her learning disabilities." Both Mari and Themis say their children have experienced more discrimination because of their personal disabilities than they have because the girls live in lesbian-headed households. Themis believes her daughter recognizes her own disability and her mother's lesbianism as minority issues and that the awareness has taught her to be tolerant of others' differences. Mari supports the theory when she says:

It is perhaps because of her own handicap and because of my daughter's own difference that she is better able to embrace others' differences and other minorities. She knows being a lesbian is different from what you usually see, but she has done just fine.

#### Older Students Hold Their Own

Mothers of children in middle school and high school found they had far more interaction with the school when their children were younger. All the mothers except Themis and Mari were living heterosexual lifestyles when their children were in lower elementary grades. Only in one incident was the mother deprived of taking an active part in her children's school experience. Regardless of how positive, supportive, and bonding the relationships had been

between the mothers and their children, changes occurred in behavior and attitudes as the children reached adolescence. Unfortunately, the turbulent times often were blamed on having a lesbian for a mother, and not on the normal upheaval of puberty. Of the twenty-one children represented among the ten mothers interviewed, the oldest son of Dione was exhibiting the worst teenage rebellion.

It has been real tough. Everything is blamed on someone else. I think it is so hard to separate being a teenager and how they really feel. I think he told his dad about the threats he received in school last year and that was the catalyst that promoted my ex-husband to announce to the boys that I am in a lesbian relationship. My son blames everything on my partner and the relationship.

Although her partner plays a very significant part in her children's educational progress by helping out with such needs as transportation, homework, and loving support, Dione admits, "I am the one that makes the appearances at school to meet with the teachers." Dione reflects sadly that she would like to be more open at school and feel free to take her partner with her to school functions, but she sighs, "I don't have the energy to fight the battle."

Half of the mothers expressed strong personal interest in sports. Consequently, many of their children have followed suit and developed an interest in physical activities. Even though Demeter lives over six-hundred miles from her youngest child, who is still living with her ex-husband, she travels to see her daughter every four or five weeks. She tries to schedule meetings with teachers during her visits and

enjoys going to watch her daughter play sports.

Brigit smiles as she mentions, "I have even taken my lovers with me to my son's soccer games. He likes my friends and is comfortable with me bringing them."

Mariamne reflects that she tried to be active in her daughter's high school experience but she recalls the general aura of the high school her daughter attended as very negative:

I got a real clear message it was not alright to be divorced, never mind gay. The school had a complete fit when my partner tried to take her to school the first day of her freshman year. I was in Virginia doing an internship at a hospital there. I had to leave the hospital and come all the way back home to prove I was my daughter's mother and it was fine with me for my lover to take her to school. I was fairly involved my daughter's first year of high school. I even led discussion groups for PTA. But after my daughter came out as a lesbian her interests changed, I was in graduate school, and battles between the school and our lifestyle continued.

Mariamne and the other mothers I interviewed indicated that personal involvement in the structure of bureaucratic institutions is low on their list of priorities. All of the mothers' primary concern and attention was directed toward rearing their children, developing intimate relationships in their communities, and establishing ways to deal with life as redefined families. They must develop strategies to cope with the variety of homophobic reactions from society that threaten the security of their lesbian-headed households.

An Alternative Family

Families are made up of people who care about each other's needs, enjoy each other's company, and support each other's interests. They are people living together who assist one another to feel safe, secure, and important. They offer unconditional love, consistent devotion, and the opportunity for all the members of the household to pursue their goals, meet their own needs, and develop their own interests. The mothers I interviewed presented evidence that their children believed these requirements could be found in a lesbian household; Mari declared:

We are a family. This house is very vital to my daughter. This family gives her a sense of well-being and security. She feels safe here. I know she accepts us as a family. She introduces us as a family. She doesn't use the word lesbian. She lets her friends figure that out, although she has told some of her close friends, and her friends are fine with the news.

Diana was quick to respond affirmatively to the family question.

Yes, the children see us as a family. We do things as a family. We function as a family. We make rules, assign chores, and go on vacations like a family. This rebellion my oldest son has been experiencing has shaken the serenity of our home.

However, Diana believes her son would be crushed if she and her partner were to end their relationship. She knows the consistent love and security her children have enjoyed in

their family unit is an experience they were not accustomed to sharing. Juno does not live with her partner. She shares joint child-custody time with her ex-husband, but she says the children feel comfortable with her and recognize her home as a family environment. They have their own space in the home and they enjoy doing things together with Juno's partner. Dione says it has not mattered who her partner has been or how long the relationship has lasted because her children have always treated the lover as a parent figure and have always considered the members of the household a family:

I had a partner for eight years once. The children were smaller then. They treated her the same as they did me. They have always accepted my lifestyle and now that they are older they know they are welcome to live here any time they choose. She says the children still visit her past partner and regard her a step-mom.

The influence of lesbian partners adds an interesting dynamic to lesbian households with biological children. Demeter thinks combining children and a lesbian partner presents similar challenges heterosexual families face adjusting to remarriages and blended families. Because her children are nearly adults, Demeter herself is trying to back out of her role as a parent. She says her children do not view her partner as a co-mom or parent.

My children don't need any more parents. The house belongs to my lover. She sets rules and acts as an authority figure. As far as a family goes, we function as one, and this is home.

Mari feels differently about the function of her

partner as a co-mom. She says her daughter does consider her partner a co-mother, even to the extent of giving her cards on Mother's Day that read, "To the Best Co-Mom in the Whole Wide World." Mari knows her daughter considers her partner an equal in decision making because: "When my daughter's friends call the house and leave messages on the phone inviting her to come visit, the messages will say, 'And don't forget to ask your mom and your co-mom.'"

Themis's young daughter has never known anything except a lesbian home. The exposure has always been positive, and her daughter knows her mother and her mother's friends are family. Her mom knows she is very comfortable bringing friends over and introducing them to her mom's friends. After a considerable amount of time alone, Themis has just recently started dating a woman. Her daughter, who is twelve and beginning to view the whole idea of relationships with a different slant, went through a three-day time of anger over her mother's attention for another woman. Through a mother/daughter talk, Themis discovered the child was fearful her mother would have less love for her if she loved another woman. She expressed fear of losing her mother's love, too. The child announced she wanted to be the only one Themis loved, even to the extent of moving into her mother's bedroom:

I reassured her I have plenty of love for her and others. That no one would ever take the place in my heart I have for her. I know the jealous reaction was normal and didn't have anything to do with the fact I am dating a woman. It was time to set boundaries and re-establish our relationship as a

family.

Mariamne had a different slant to add in support of alternative family arrangements. She says the media plays a powerful role in spreading ignorance and preventing the acceptance of alternative families.

I think it is a matter of talking about women's power. The Christian coalition had a program on TV the other day. A guy was talking against gay and lesbian families and saying the only right way to live is to have a highly educated mom and dad with high paying jobs, loving their children, and staying together forever. I think this is scary stuff. Multicultural living is the norm. There is no sense of belonging in the nuclear family anymore. We have never had a time in history that training children was the main priority. The focus is always on the mom and the dad, not on the family unit but on what mom and dad want to do with their lives. If we put too much power on men, women lose control. We need equality. But to get equality we need more money and the budget would have to be different. A lot of industrialization would have to cease. It's ludicrous what education is doing to our children. It is real lop-sided.

Pele's concerns for the future of the alternative family are also contingent on changes. She fears that changes will not happen as long as religious dogma prevail: "Here in the Bible Belt it is very patriarchal." She added

However, There is hope if we get get political and get people involved who believe the same way we do. And as to whether this is home to my son, he knows this is home and we are a family. We just had to get to know each other first, age twenty-two was not too late.

Summary

For all the lesbian mothers, being able to experience the joys of being a mother and live as a lesbian is a double miracle. The major difference between other lesbian homes and the families I visited in this study is the the presence of children, who like their mothers, have lived a portion of their lives as part of the traditional nuclear family unit. The children referred to in this study have all experienced the upheaval of a family divorce, an experience not uncommon for many young people today. Unique to the children of the participants, however, is the acknowledgement that their mother is a lesbian and that they live at least part of the time in a lesbian-headed household. Such a household constitutes a classic example of the redefined family unit, commonly referred to as an alternative family. My interviews with ten lesbian mothers who at some point in their lives gave birth to a total of twenty-one children among them (nearly the commonly desired number of 2.5 children in 'normal' family planning) gave me the opportunity to hear the mothers' views regarding their children's acceptance of the new lifestyle.

The most positive comment that repeated itself in the interviews was how much more comfortable the women feel as mothers once they became willing to be true to their sexual orientation. The children of these lesbian mothers saw firsthand the kind of courage and sacrifice required for one to be true to herself. A mother with that kind of integrity can be

a positive role model for children who will also face challenges and sacrifices as they seek their own identities. The children learned that their mother's care for them is not contingent upon a set of rigidly prescribed living conditions. Most importantly they learned their mother's love is not conditional under any circumstances; and though the pain of abandonment may have diverted children from believing that truth for a time, they eventually returned to a place where they believed their mother will always be there for them regardless of her sexual orientation or the partner with whom she chooses to live.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

#### Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of a mother's shift to a lesbian lifestyle on her biological children. A qualitative interviews were used to explore the following questions:

1. Based on the mothers' perceptions, what relationship adjustments did the mothers perceive occurred for their children as a result of the mothers shift to a lesbian lifestyle?
2. When do mothers perceive the most significant adjustments occurred for their children as they experienced their parents' divorce and adjusted to their mother's lesbian lifestyle?
3. What is the effect of homophobic messages on children reared in a lesbian household?
4. What is the effect of a mother's shift from a heterosexual lifestyle to a lesbian lifestyle on the educational processes of their children?
5. What impact did the lesbian mothers perceive occurred for their children as they adjusted to an alternative family unit? (See Figure 1).

The population for the study was ten lesbian mothers with biological children. They were selected through a process of networking and referrals. I interviewed each in

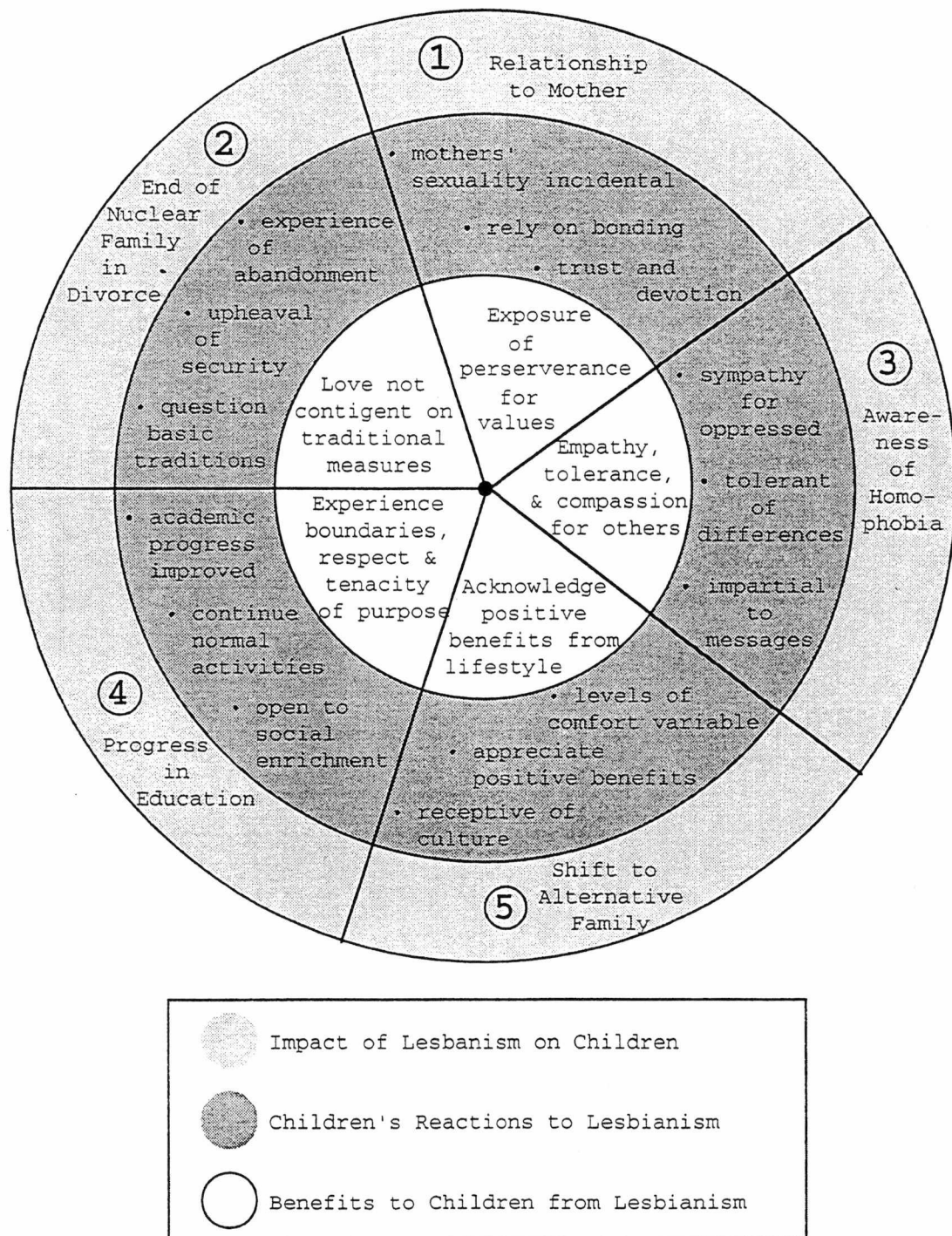


Figure 1

taping sessions lasting approximately one and one half hours. I transcribed the tape recorded interviews and used the responses to develop categories for analysis. I analyzed the transcriptions inductively for thematic patterns. I described the participants individually and as a group. I then described the findings of the study.

### Summary of the Findings

#### The Mother/Child Relationship

Being true to their lesbian sexual orientation gave all the participants a renewed sense of dedication to motherhood. Their mother's integrity gave the children opportunities to observe the value of such a characteristic. From their mothers' perception, children who lived most of their lives in a lesbian household expressed few negative reactions regarding their mothers' lesbianism. Years of bonding had established strong anchors of security in their mothers' love and commitment to them. The children who experienced the shift in lifestyle later in life were more inclined to act with rebellious behaviors. However, on the whole, mothers with adolescent children attributed their children's actions to normal adolescent rebelliousness and not to a negative reaction to her lesbianism. Each of the mothers expressed faith in the knowledge that their children, regardless of her shift in sexual orientation, trusted in her as a constant

support. Representing a positive role model for honesty and love was a primary concern of the ten mothers.

### Divorce Difficult for Children

The children from this study all experienced the upheaval of a family divorce, an experience not uncommon for many young people. A characteristic that sets these children apart from other victims of divorce is the reality that their mothers are a lesbian and they live at least part of the time in a lesbian-headed household.

The pain of abandonment resulting from the divorce is as devastating for these children as for any child. Repercussions from the divorce were in no case a reflection of the children's rejection of their mothers' lesbianism. In all circumstances, moving to a new location was an inevitable result of the divorce. Securing safe and comfortable living conditions were very important to all the mothers. The mothers were able to demonstrate the fact that their love for their children is not contingent on traditional relationships or lifestyles.

Negative persuasion against the lesbian lifestyle became burdensome for children with religious training that held negative beliefs regarding homosexuality. Unfortunately, their reaction to their mothers' lifestyle were more confused and negative than the reactions of children reared in open-minded environments.

### Homophobic Influences on the Children

The homophobic messages that were most detrimental to the children were ones that came from biological family members and close friends. The situation was especially difficult for children when their fathers lacked understanding for their former wives' need to pursue their lesbianism. Children experienced homophobic jokes and the display of prejudiced behaviors most often in school, especially in middle school and high school. Young people experiencing homophobic comments generally assumed neutrality and chose not to participate in discriminating behavior against homosexuals. In fact, on occasion they would defend teachers and/or counselors accused of being gay. However, they neither participated in nor outwardly supported their mothers' lifestyle. Younger children living in lesbian homes for extended periods of time and those whose home environments are free from prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behaviors were less affected by homophobic messages than children whose home environments are not as open-minded.

### Lesbian Mothers, Cautious at School

All of the mothers I interviewed were comfortable to go visit their children's schools, attend parent/teacher conferences, and PTA functions. None of the mothers, however, had confirmed to any teachers or school personnel their

lesbianism. One mother's partner attends parent/teacher meetings. Both of the lesbians are treated with respect and appreciation for their interest in the child's education. All the mothers in the study reported their children's academic and social development to be positively impacted as a result of living in a home influenced by nurturing, caring women. In no instance did a mother believe her children suffered as a result of her lesbianism. Except for one instance of attempted blackmail, the children's participation in their own social activities were generally not negatively affected by their mothers' lesbianism. The children were generally comfortable bringing school friends and peers to their homes. From the perspective of the mothers in the study, few negative examples were raised or problems caused because children have lesbians for mothers.

#### Alternative Lesbian Families Function

The major difference between other lesbian homes and the homes I visited for this study was the presence of biological children and women who at one time lived in, or as part of, a traditional nuclear family unit. My interviews with ten lesbian mothers who at various times during their lives gave birth to a total of twenty-one children among them (nearly the 2.5 number of children commonly desired in 'normal' family planning) gave me the opportunity to hear the mothers' views regarding their children's acceptance of a lesbian lifestyle. Such a household constitutes a classic example of

the redefined family unit, commonly referred to as an alternative family.

Six of the ten women I interviewed were in committed relationships and living with their partners. In all of the families, the children respected and appreciated the presence of their mothers' partners. In some instance the younger children referred to the partner as a co-parent. In all cases the home functioned and operated much like a traditional family. The members of the household enjoy each other's company and work for the success and upkeep of their home as other families do. All the women spoke of the loving environment the children enjoy because the mothers took the risk to live their truth as a lesbian.

One mother with three nearly grown children who remembers her nuclear family life, could only think of one confusion her children feel as a result of her lifestyle. It was the only negative reaction her children had expressed about her living with a woman as a life partner.

The children get real angry my partner and I can't hold hands in public. They get almost as upset as I do about the fact we can't go in a restaurant and be at all affectionate. They don't understand why we can't file taxes together. They can't understand why we can't live like heterosexuals do. My life with women around has been comfortable and right for the children. It has been a stable loving environment. The fact I am a lesbian and illegal is hard for them to understand.

## Summary of Findings as Related to Literature

### Relationship Issues

All ten mothers I spoke with experienced the words of Moses's and Watkins quoted in Falk (1989), "Sexual orientation has little to do with whether or not one wants to be a parent, but it has a lot to do with motivation because of the high costs of being a gay parent" (p.944). As lesbian mothers "come out" or come to terms with their sexuality, they do not necessarily lose their innate need or ability to nurture their children. Thus, gathering supportive evidence is of particular value to these concerned parents. The mothers expressed gratitude for the opportunity of motherhood. Mariamne's opinion on the subject supports the research findings that there are no substantial differences between lesbian mothers and heterosexual mothers in the areas of natural attitudes and care-giving behaviors; she said: "If I can say I did one good thing in my life, it was to be a parent." Miller, et al., in Falk, (1989), found that lesbian mothers, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, were more child-orientated, than task or adult oriented compared their heterosexual counterparts. Lesbian mothers often assumed the principal role in child-care responsibility (p.943).

The challenge of being a lesbian mother presented opportunities to develop self-confidence, independence, and self-sufficiency. However, the mothers are realistic; they understand the issues and problems that their lifestyle can

present for their children. Mari admits that because of the potential risks to her child she seriously considered her decision to live the lesbian lifestyle. She admits with a note of seriousness in her voice, "If I had had any professional sit me down and say, 'If you act on this you will be ruining your daughter.' I would have continued to be her mother and live my life in the closet because being a mother comes first for me. But no one told me that, and that has been a blessing."

Her experience is an example of what the literature means when it talks about a lesbian mother's concern for keeping communication lines open and staying aware of their children's emotional development. The other mothers I interviewed expressed similar concerns. None of the mothers developed feelings of resentment for their children as they merged motherhood and lesbianism. Pele and Demeter both wished circumstances had been easier for the children at the time they confronted their husband with the news of their sexual orientation. All of the mothers interviewed admitted that being a mother came first and foremost for them. However, they believed that choosing to be true to themselves made them better mothers. Brigit concluded our interview with a piece of her philosophy on the subject of motherhood.

My children come first, but I have told my children that whatever makes me happy will make them happy. I have tried to teach my kids to think about themselves first while they think about other people's feelings. If you center your life around what other people want, you are not going to be happy. I am being a role model for them as I teach them to take into consideration everything around.

I think we are in this world to serve, but we can't serve until we get in touch with who we are.

Numerous studies have been done with the intent of finding evidence that lesbian mothers should be denied custody of their children on the grounds of mental illness. Armon's study found "no differences in psychological adjustment between homosexual and heterosexual women" Falk, 1989 (p.943) and Siegelman's study found "lesbian women score lower on depression, submission and anxiety than heterosexual women," in Falk, 1989 (p.943). This evidence helped the American Psychiatric Association remove homosexuality as a mental illness. Thereafter, the direction of research began to focus on the dynamics of alternative families. The studies done by Kirkpatrick,, et al., (1981), researching lesbian and heterosexual mothers, twenty children, concluded that both lesbian and heterosexual mothers were very similar in the categories of maternal interests, lifestyle behaviors, and child-rearing practices. The same study also found no significant differences in gender role development between the children reared by lesbians and those reared by unmarried heterosexual mothers. In fact, Kirkpatrick et.al, also found that lesbian mothers tend to supply a more nearly equal mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine toys to children, exposing them to a more androgynous play experience.

For the mothers with older children as well as younger ones, communication is the key to continued open, warm, loving relationships. As the mothers I interviewed discussed

reactions to the news of their shifting life-style, three of the twelve girls (all teenagers) represented in the population, and only one of the nine boys, showed initial signs of difficulty with the news. This statistic agrees with the research to date that notes teenage daughters become more upset than teenage sons. Typically, sons are able to put more distance between themselves and their mothers, and thus not identify with them to the extent that daughters do (Lewin and Lyons, 1979).

#### Family Breaks-Ups Difficult

My study agreed with the literature that divorce is more detrimental to children's lives than the news of their mother's lesbianism (Lewin, 1993). Researchers conclude that children experience lifestyle upheavals when living in homes with parental marital discord which results in divorce. Moving to a new location, changing school districts, making new friends, and adjusting shared time with each parent are all adjustments children must make. Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981) examined ten male and ten female children living with lesbian and single heterosexual mothers. The mothers were matched for socioeconomic status, education, occupation, age at marriage, length of marriage, and other significant criteria. Psychological testing revealed no difference between the two groups of children on levels of pathology. The children had all undergone similar experiences regarding the divorce and circumstances preceding and following it.

Only a few of the children had regular or consistent relationship's with their fathers. The author attributed any emotional problems to the results of the divorce.

In eight out of the ten cases, I studied the mother is not aware of her lesbian orientation until some time after the divorce. Only two out of the ten women I interviewed left the marriage with the intent of pursuing a lesbian lifestyle. However, each of the other eight women began shortly thereafter to experiment with the lifestyle. None of them pursued a heterosexual course of action following their divorce.

#### Homophobia Can Lead to Tolerance

Resistance to dealing openly with the topic of homophobia has been due in part to the inflammatory nature of the topic and the limited amount of factual, research-based information available. As society moves into the 21th century the stigma associated with homosexuality issues is giving way to an ability to deal with this controversial subject. To live in a time that embraces multicultural enrichment while ostracizing a minority of the population on the basis of sexual preference is as absurd as offering cultural exchange studies to students from abroad and then not allowing them to benefit from the education. Homosexuality has always been part of society. For a nation founded on the precept of freedom and referred to as a "melting pot" responding with fear and contempt to a culture that is as ancient as

civilization itself is not consistent with the nation's principles. Responsible educators and leaders interested in equality can no longer ignore the effects of living a "dual identity." The time has come for lesbian and gay educators, who themselves can empathize with the oppression endured by lesbian mothers and their children, to help ease the tension of tortured adolescents who struggle with their sexual identity and the ignorance of society.

The definition of homophobia means nothing more than fear of homosexuality. After conducting interviews with ten professional women, dedicated to their family, jobs, community, and children, and as the researcher of this study, I have seen no evidence that these women are to be feared, least of all by children. Because I only interviewed ten women, my scope was limited, but I suspect that these women are quite representative of the vast majority of responsible, hard working gays and lesbians that are as harmless as the majority of heterosexual men and women. In-no-way does research, does not show homosexuality to be a detriment to society.

Gender-assigned roles are deeply rooted in our society. Parents promote sex-role stereotyping by not providing toys that represent both genders, suggesting to their teenagers only occupations that reflect their gender, and maintaining control over their children's clothes and hair styles. Too often, the fear of being accused a homosexual is a determining factor in a high school students' decision regarding class selections. Shop classes are considered

inappropriate for girls and home economics classes are deemed unsuitable for boys simply because of the negative stigma that arises from the results of sex-role stereotyping. Boys choosing not to participate in sports are called "wimp" or "sissies" and girls who are active in sports are called "tomboys" bringing their sexuality into question. Women who engage in jobs demanding physical labor or who attain positions in administration do not escape criticism. Their femininity and sexuality are challenged in a variety of situations.

At this point in the history of education, I echo Grayson's (1994) question, "How can we as educators and members of a democratic society continue to ignore homophobia and perpetuate the secrecy and silence?" (p.176). Crumacker and Vander Haegen, in Webster, (1994), give a partial answer when they state that "an important way to counter attacks of homophobia and oppression are to affirm a lesbian's identity through positive representation" (p.8). Tolerance and critical thinking will challenge stereotyping and support the knowledge that homosexuality is nothing to fear.

Unfortunately, "Hatred, whether it be expressed as racism or homophobia, is something that is experienced and internalized in a common manner by all groups affected (Lukes and Land, in Webster, 1994, p.22). There is no reason why oppression and social injustice must continue in a society that boasts of educational advancements and knowledge. Researchers and the voices of the mothers with whom I spoke, long for the day all people can meet each other on terms of equity and acceptance.

School, a Place for Education

Students enter school with a world view shaped by family, friends, church, and media. Children that have learned to be tolerant of differences will be less likely to be affected by negative stereotyping in school. Children with gay and lesbian parents often enter school unaware that the traditional nuclear family unit is the accepted representation of a family structure. A school's goal is to socialize children to follow mainstream cultural norms. This is sometimes a rude awakening to children who are asked to revise a story or art work that represents their family consisting of two mommies and no daddy. For children to hear that their work is wrong or that it deviates from the norm, is a devastating injustice. For the child, the issue is one of confusion more than definition. Failing to acknowledge the existence of lesbian families leaves schools open for harassment of children from these families by homophobic children who do not know better. Webster (1994) says:

The important issue, regarding harassment, is that all of the children internalized positive messages regarding mother's sexuality and their family structure. These children were all told at an early age that their mothers are lesbians and what that meant. None of the children have any reason to think that there is something wrong (p.15).

Small children from lesbian homes know the people they live with are their family. Unfortunately, in schools the child's exposure to heterosexism becomes a reality. The fear

and hatred of homosexuals that children see among many heterosexuals in schools creates a very negative learning environment in which children must manage very disturbing messages about the character of lesbian mothers. As Webster (1994) indicates, such an environment cannot be a very effective place for children's development in any domain of learning. Schools should be places of validation and edification, places to continue positive learning, not institutions of destruction. To intimidate a child because his or her mother is a lesbian is to destroy his/her sense of security.

A necessary goal of education is to provide for society boundaries necessary to maintain the secure welfare of the people. However, assuming the responsibility of stipulating who responsible adults can spend their lives with is not an educational issue or decision. While sexual preference should have no bearing on education, unfortunately, educational institutions insist on imposing inappropriate stipulations on the culture. As a result, the generation of positive support for a homosexual family should become a topic for open discussion. Developing tolerance for people's sexual preferences should be as much a part of education as tolerance for any minority group or individual with differences. The differences in society are necessary to its composition.

Another aspect of the impact of education is the influence of role models on children. Role models are individuals children respect. They are people children

appreciate and admire. It seldom occurs to the child to ask whether the admired adult is a homosexual. Such a question should not be any more of an issue than asking if an adult is a heterosexual. Instead, children should be encouraged to adopt role models from adults who display the virtues of self-discipline, compassion, and nurturance, regardless of their sexual preference. If young people were taught to accept individuals as sexual beings, without judging their gender selection, educators could present children with a more realistic view of the world, not as a few ill-informed heterosexuals think it should be. Schools that lack such an enlightened approach sow the seed of rampant homophobia, sexual harassment, and thus do great damage to a great number of children.

As lesbians feel safe discussing their lifestyle in daily conversations and in educational environments with the same freedom heterosexuals feel, society will come to recognize lesbians as "normal" mothers and to accept homosexuality as a normal part of society. However, the educational establishments must lead the way.

#### A New Family

Lesbian mothers and their biological children make up a viable, highly functioning alternative family unit. As part of the family, lesbian partners contribute significantly and carry out similar roles as the mother in child care and home duties. The home functions much the same manner as

heterosexual households. Diana refers to the experience of being a lesbian and a mother most adequately when she calls it the, "better of two worlds." Living in two worlds, lesbian mothers operate from a bicultural theories base, (Lukes and Land, 1990). They learn to function simultaneously in both the lesbian culture and in a heterosexual culture. Various aspects of both cultures are necessary to meet the needs of their family. However, aside from their sexual preference, there are few other differences. Establishing comfortable living conditions, securing adequate employment, and participating in recreational enjoyment are commonly shared by both heterosexual and lesbian mothers and their families. Lesbians and gays also conduct business through available establishments, attend similar places of entertainment, and develop extended relationships in the straight world. Because lesbian relationships are not accepted by society as a legal family unit, lesbian couples are deprived of many benefits offered to heterosexual couples; some traditional religious institution, insurance benefits, and the right to file taxes jointly with committed partners are often not available to lesbians. Such prejudice often drives lesbians and gays to seek community support for a sense of connection with their own culture. Thus lesbians function in the mainstream culture out of necessity, and in the gay subculture out of a need for support. While the need to manage discrimination against their mothers would seem to be a negative aspect of living with a lesbian mother, there is a positive outcome.

Lesbians and their children must identify particular

strategies to deal appropriately with situations involving prejudice and discrimination. Because combining problem solving techniques when encountered with prejudice is part of their reality, such children are well prepared to meet challenges and are able to empathize with other minorities. Thus, they are in a unique position to develop a strength of character that their peers reared by straight parents many never know. The positive benefits children acquire from exposure to a variety of cultures is wide and varied. Meeting the needs of the alternative families by the combined benefits of both cultures explains why bicultural theories are appropriate for lesbian headed households with biological children. Unfortunately, however, judges often rule against a lesbian mother as the primary custodial parent because evidence is not available to support her rights to mother her own children. Such thinking is not only erroneous, but does not consider children who are left in the custody of abusive parents, subjected to heterosexual sex abuse, or awarded to heterosexual women who also will live without male authority figures present in the home.

There is no specific timing to assume the status of a lesbian because accepting one's own homosexuality is an individually developed process. However, when this shift takes place, research shows there is reason to believe mothering children and loving women as committed partners can share commitment and devotion in the same manner as before. One mother from my study stated in desperation, "If we ever could come out, we could prove lesbians are just like

everyone else. Do you think that day will ever come?" I, with Mari ask the same question. Meanwhile, biological children are thriving in lesbian-headed households.

### Implications for Research

In this section, I discuss the findings I feel most deserving for further study. These recommendations are based on the findings of the study. I recommend the following research be conducted:

1. Further studies of the school experiences of children whose biological mothers are lesbians compared with school experiences of heterosexual children. Gathering responses from a large population of students would allow for discussion on the issues of homosexual alternative family units as viable options.
2. Studies examining parallels between prejudiced attitudes toward other minorities and homophobia, and recommending ways that both kinds of prejudice can be dealt with in schools. Only by understanding how and why prejudice begins can educators hope to find solutions to its oppressive results.
3. Studies of how homophobia impacts alternative families, how heterosexism and homophobia are perceived by lesbian families, and what coping mechanisms they use to deal with the ignorance and prejudice they encounter. Such research would not only offer lesbians support but create ways to

counteract the negative attitudes.

4. Research is needed that compares child training methods, values taught, leisure activities enjoyed, and the implications of other cultural differences in both heterosexual and homosexual lifestyles. Educators need to know more about how such issues impact children's school experiences.

#### Implications for Practice

1. The schools need to develop a curriculum and instructional materials representing the gay and lesbian lifestyle as viable option. When young children create projects depicting alternative family units, their contributions should be accepted as appropriate.
2. Recognizing homosexuality as an accepted minority would include using gay and lesbian art and literature as works worthy for study on all educational levels. Such recognition can assist students struggling with their sexual identity as well as broaden the educational base in multicultural education.
3. Developing support groups for homosexual and heterosexual professionals in on-site locations would help open communication between the two cultures and weaken the negative stigma associated with secrecy. Allowing homosexual educators to be visible would present the opportunity for them to become role models for adolescents struggling with sexual identity issues.

4. Educators need to create classroom environments that celebrate diversity. Major goals, for all schools should include development for an appreciation for diversity, provide educational activities, and teach our youth to accept all people regardless of differences.
5. Support groups for lesbian mothers should be providing groups for lesbian mothers exclusively and the opportunity to gather with heterosexual mothers should also be available.

Mari challenges the isolation lesbian mothers feel by saying, "I feel my life is different from other lesbians. My life is like other heterosexual mothers who are out there doing child-rearing. There is an arena out there that needs to be attended to. I think the isolation that lesbians feel as mothers is the same any mother feels. Fellowship and community are important."

### Summary

Included in Chapter Five is an overview of the project and a summary of the findings. The section is divided into five parts: overview, research and related literature, implications of research, implications for practice, and the summary. The overview contains a summary of the five specific topics that were present in the analysis of the data. In the research and related literature section I stated my interpretations of the data as they related to the research findings and my study. The section on implications for

research offers suggestions for further work to be done to disseminate more accurate knowledge about lesbian mothers. In addition, the implications for practice offer suggestions for lesbians.

This research project provides valuable information regarding the need for education to eliminate oppression against lesbian mothers and their biological children. It offers positive support in favor of the alternative family, comprised of a lesbian mother, children, and a committed partner. The study investigated causes of oppression against lesbian mothers who head one form of an alternative family, called the lesbian headed-household. It gathered data as proof that such an oppression need not exist and it offered challenges to existing paradigms regarding the minority culture of lesbians with biological children which included looking at children in a variety of educational and social settings.

In conclusion, my study illustrates that lesbian mothers are competent, responsible, loving women. They are mothers who hold the gift of motherhood as a honor and privilege that society has no right to deny them. They maintain concern for their children's safety, security, and development, at home, as well as in schools, and in the communities they significantly contribute to. As these families meet daily challenges from a society that claims to be founded on individual rights and freedom, their dream and mine is to see the day when the fear that society has of homosexuality, bred of ignorance will be transformed by the knowledge that

homosexuality is nothing to fear. Until that day I, the ten lesbian mothers who were willing to speak their truth, and multitudes of other lesbian mothers now living in oppression stand behind the words of Dolores A. Grayson (1994), "As long as our society is unsafe for any portion of us, it is unsafe for us all" (p.179).

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Tell me how your shift in lifestyle has impacted your children.
2. Talk about the cultural and social influence your lesbian lifestyle has had on your children.
3. Talk about how your children experienced the divorce.
4. Discuss your children's experience with homophobic messages.
5. Tell me about the impact your lesbianism has had on your children's school experiences.
6. Tell me about your involvement in your children's school experiences.
7. Talk about the effect your shift in lifestyle had on your relationship with your children.
8. Tell me about an experience with your children and your partner or lesbian friends.

APPENDIX B

## PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

I understand that the purpose of this study is to determine the impact a lesbian mother's lifestyle has on her biological children's school experience. My participation involves responding to a series of open-ended questions. The interview will be audiotaped to assure the accurate recording of the responses.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw from participation at any time or refuse to answer any question without penalty. There are no risks involved. The benefits to me are in the process of reflecting and responding to the researcher's questions and also in the knowledge gained from the project's findings.

I understand that all of my responses will be held in confidence by the researcher. The use of pseudonyms will be used instead of real names. I understand that the principle investigator, Ellen Wolfe, is the only person who will know my real name.

I understand that I may contact the researcher at any time if I have further questions about the study or about my participation in it.

Ms. Ellen Wolfe and Dr. Kathleen Bennett deMarrais  
Cultural Studies in Education  
336 HPER Building  
University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, Tennessee 37996  
(615) 974-8555

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name (Please Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE INTERVIEW

I- investigator

P- participant

I.        Tell me how your shift to a lesbian lifestyle impacted your children.

P. I spent many many years struggling with that part of me that is clearly a lesbian. I can remember as a young adolescent having these warm loving feelings for my girl friends. It wasn't sexual in nature. It was just fondness. I saw it differently than what I saw my twin sister have with her relationships with her girlfriends. I didn't know what to call it. I couldn't put a name to it but I got a clear message that it wasn't ok. I just stuffed who I was. There were classmates that taunted me and called me queer, so I set a course in my life to fem up so of speak. I thought the way I looked was putting people off. They didn't understand. I spent many years struggling with this and then when I got sober these deep feelings I had for women began to resurface and I began to explore who I am and I realized this indeed is who I am. There were a lot of stereotypical notions that came up. I was afraid all women that I would encounter would look like men. I did not want that. I wanted to find a women who looked like a woman. That enjoyed being female. I didn't want to get into role playing. I did that when I was married to a man.

I. You mentioned stuffing, talk about what you mean.

P. When I say stuffed feelings, I truly stuffed them. This was not a part of my conscious being. Though in my late adolescent years I knew lesbians. I knew them through my work, I was always intrigued. Some of the lesbians I work with are the same ones I worked with then, and they kid me and tell me they knew I was a lesbian before I married and I ask them why they didn't tell me. They said because that isn't the way it works. This was my journey and I would find out when I found out. So the lesbians pinned me or knew long before I did and I think my self-medicating for years with alcohol and drugs did not help those feelings resurface until I got sober. It wasn't an issue during my marriage, although even on the day of my marriage I had a feeling it was a dreadful mistake. I didn't know why. I truly tried to work on my marriage. I tried to be a good wife and I believe I was. My divorcing my husband had nothing to do with my lesbianism. It was never an issue. I used to have dreams and fantasies about women when I was married and it troubled me. I would pray and ask God to help me. There was a time in my life when the thought of being a lesbian was my worst nightmare. I thought it was not compatible with being a mother. That was a big factor. The feelings became so prevalent. Women was all I thought about. How beautiful women are and how much I loved women and how much I loved being a woman and how much I wanted to hold a woman and it was

terrifying for me. But where there is a will there is a way. I set myself on a course to help me find someone who would help me explore this area of my life and I did. I got sober in July of 1988. I was separated in 1987. The divorce was not final until the fall of 1988. All the time I was married I was drinking. I came out as a lesbian just after I got in recovery. I was in my first relationship in December 1988 I knew I had come home. I knew that this is the way it is supposed to be. It was a journey to discover who I am and who I am suppose to be. Which was a journey. We all grew up hearing that this is wrong. It is a journey working through the idea that I can be a mother. I can be a good mother and my new life can be even more enriching for my child as a lesbian.

I.     You mentioned being a good mother. Talk about your desire to be a good mother.

P.     I absolutely was thrilled when I got pregnant and when I had my daughter. I wanted a little girl more then anything in the world. I wanted to have a baby. I certainly would have loved a boy but I wanted to raise a daughter. I was just thrilled. It has been an incredible blessing. It never occurred to me never to have children and I believe had I come out as a lesbian before I had children or never been married or never lived heterosexuality I believe I certainly believe I would still be a mother today somehow. That has just always been real important to me. I would have another

one if I had a uterus. I had a hysterectomy in August. My partner's hysterectomy will be two years ago this August and mine will be one year ago this August. That is a scream. The only viable uterus we have is my daughter's and we don't want that used. She has big breasts and all the pubic hair she will ever need. I keep thinking she will start her period any day. I think it is just a matter of time. If she follows in my footsteps though I didn't start until I was fourteen but she is certainly more developed at twelve than I was.

I. She is a beautiful child. You mentioned that the divorce didn't have anything to do with you recognizing your lesbianism. Talk to me about your experience as a divorced mother with a child.

P. I was married in June of 1981. The divorce was not final until November of 1988 which is seven years but we only lived together from June of 1981 until May of 1987. Which is five and a half years. My daughter was born in December of 1982 after we had been married a year and a half.

I. Tell about how divorce impacted your daughter.

P. The divorce impacts kids and adults. Lots of losses incurred but there are also gains, mainly happiness. My coming out as a lesbian didn't have any adverse effect. All of my worst fears did not pan out. My fears that my daughter would reject me, she would be embarrassed, all of those fears

did not happen. The bond between a mother and a child is so great that nothing can stop that.

I. Talk about the effect your lesbianism has had on your relationship with your child.

P. I believe or at least it has been my experience that no matter how much you think you can hide it from your child, well at least with my child, you can't. She has always been very aware. Even as a little child at six years old, before I was involved in a relationship, she said 'Mommy, you love women'. And I would say, 'Yes, I do'. Now she didn't know to say, Mom you are a lesbian, nor did she put it on a sexual level, she didn't see that. She just intuitively knew that I liked women. I read lots of books and talked to lots of psychologists and psychiatrists and talked to women who are lesbians who have children who know and gathered as much information as I could and when my daughter was eight we actually sat down and talked about it. She came out and asked me if I was gay. First she asked me what it meant to be gay and I explained that men and women, sometimes rather than a man choosing a woman or a woman choosing a man in a relationship will choose a man or a woman, someone of the same sex, to love and to share their time together and to be a life partner with. Women can choose women to nurture and share time with. That is what is known as a homosexual as opposed to heterosexual. She is very bright and she picked up on all of that. Then she said, 'Well then, you are gay.'

This was before my partner and I moved in together. We were in our relationship well over a year before we moved in together. We have now been living together for over three years now. We have been in a relationship over four years. Usually you hear to bring the u-haul on the first date but we didn't do that. It was because of my daughter. If I had had any professional sit me down and say, "If you act on this you will be ruining your daughter;" I would have just continued to be her mother and live my life in the closet because being a mother comes first for me. But no one told me that. And that has been a blessing. We have always been close and that hasn't changed since coming out. If anything I am a better mother because I am not ripping myself, and I am being true to myself and I am not depressed.

I. Like not giving yourself away?

P. Exactly, I am who I am and my daughter embraces me just as I am. I have always been very open and very honest. Just as with all minorities there will be people who will not be alright with this lifestyle. She knows there are people who say I am going to hell and who will say ugly hurtful things and what I want her to do is stay focused. Because that is ok for people to have different opinions. People will say things but I have encouraged her to just keep talking with me. When people say things that hurt your feelings just keep talking. I didn't want to paint this as a rosy picture where there would never be any conflict, because this isn't true.

I let her know that I share discriminately, I don't wave the flag that says, 'hear me, hear me I am a homosexual,' I didn't do that when I was a heterosexual. I share discretely and discriminately. I suggested that she do the same and she has. I didn't have to pound that into her. She just knew to do that. My daughter is clearly a heterosexual. And that's ok. I don't think my being a homosexual will influence her sexuality at all. She is a normal adolescent daughter.

I. You mentioned protect you, talk about the effects of homophobia on her.

P. She has been involved with hearing that kind of stuff, especially in middle school and she doesn't join but she doesn't rally for gay rights either.

I. I can see her with gay flags on the back of her wheel chair. (laughter) (The daughter has been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy).

P. I think this is an experience we have all had. Whether we are lesbians, gay men, or any minority. We have all experienced in our middle school days discrimination and prejudiced behavior from our peers. She is not going to be spared of this experience, just because her mom is a lesbian. She has been able to keep a good sense of humor and she has been able to recognize ignorance when she sees it. I fear what other adolescents will tell her. I've told her people

who are feeling alright about their own sexuality, their own sexuality identity, are not going to be trashing gays and lesbians. Those people who are into that are not real clear about who they are and are not real comfortable with who they are. That is a tough pill to swallow when you are a young adolescent. But, she hears it and I think she understands on some level. She is wonderful though. She sort of has her own radar. She is able to spot young lesbians in school. She shows me their pictures; I say she is right that she is, absolutely right this is a budding lesbian. I mean, I can tell. I can see it. One of the camp counselors at the camp this summer was perhaps gay, or she thought he was and there was some teasing that went on and she endeared herself to this young man and they were buddies.

I. Talk about the impact your lesbianism has on her school experience.

P. I have always been involved in the school. I do participate in school. I am not the room mother per se but I help out, I attend meetings, do field trips, I have been active, and a part of what is going on at the school. I have not shared with anyone that I am a lesbian. Nor have I hid the fact. I have not tried to paint a picture that I am heterosexual. When I get close to a particular teacher and am asked, do I date or have a boyfriend, I say no and I that I have a life partner. My focus is raising my daughter. I don't say I don't have boyfriends, I am a lesbian but my partner is

very present and part of my daughter's education and school experience. She has been to M-team meetings. She represents someone who is a very significant part of my life and my daughter's. Perhaps they know, but if they do I have never experienced any negative problem with any staff. So I am very involved and very active in the school. My daughter is very involved in the school. She has shared that her mom is a lesbian with a couple of her girlfriends and that is ok. That is her journey. She can share in there. It has been really an incredible experience; it is perhaps because of her own handicap, because of her own difference, she is better and more able to embrace other's differences and other minorities. She knows being a lesbian is different from what you usually see. This is fine with her.

I. Talk to me about the impact of living in a lesbian-headed household and her social life.

P. She has friends over. She has girl friends over to spend the night. We have had slumber parties. I don't sleep in a different room. Most recently she told one of her closest girlfriends and her mother and father know and we talked about it and it was fine. They were just fine with it. I have their child in our home, really more than I want. I do fear one of her girlfriends will say something hurtful, especially during these young adolescent years, while they are all dealing with their own sexuality. I think that will come up at some point. I think our experience has been almost too

good to be true. And that it will be ok. I always realize there may come a time when she may become embarrassed and as she furthers into her own adolescence I encourage her that whatever she feels is ok. And that we talk about it and whatever she feels that she doesn't have to protect me. I am sure whatever she feels, I have felt too, I will understand.

I. Did she tell the young man her mom was gay?

P. No, she didn't. She saw him as a really delightful young man, but she said to me, "He is a little effeminate, mom." But she said, "I just wanted to be his friend. Her heart goes out to discriminated people and to kids in the school who might be labeled queer or a dyke. We haven't had any problems with my lifestyle. Has anyone had trouble that you have talked to?

I. No, because no one comes out. No one goes into the school and announced they are a lesbian and they live a lesbian lifestyle. You are the first person to take your partner to the M-team meeting. No one has talked about what it is like to take a partner to a school program when the school knows they are gay. When lesbian mothers do take their partners to school functions, no one in their schools have come up and asked if the friend is a lesbian partner. Mothers take women to programs to see their children perform. The woman could be another mother. I would like you to talk about your partners' experience in your daughter's M-team

meeting.

P. At the time we were having some difficulty with my daughter's behavior. And we felt it had to do with her disability. The school wanted to know if we could all come together to work on the problem. We came up with a behavior program that has worked in school and at home. She has done beautifully. It was important to have my partner there, she is a parent as well. She has a lot of responsibility with my daughter. She does a lot with her. She takes it very seriously. We have it all set up. If something happens to me, she will take care of my daughter. It isn't always this way, to find a woman that will take the responsibility as seriously as my partner has. I am very fortunate.

I. Talk about your daughter and partner's relationship.

P. My daughter's handicap has never been an issue for her. She grew up with a handicapped mother. It is not by mistake she was reared by a handicapped mother and then a partner that has a child that is wheelchair-bound. I think I am more realistic about things, that is why we waited so long to move together. My partner knew from the very beginning that my daughter came first and would in our marriage. She always has. It has never been a problem. However, I don't think she realized how demanding parenting is as a whole though. I don't think anyone knows how demanding parenting is unless you are a parent. Like on school days during the school year we have to be home and bed time is at nine o'clock, we can't

be out late and we have homework, but this is something that she has accepted and taken on. There are a lot of things financially she has done for my daughter independently. I have just recently found out she has a big trust fund set up for my daughter. This is a very major big big big deal for her. She takes the responsibility very seriously.

I. Tell me how your daughter relates to your partner.

P. She usually calls her by her first name but sometimes with humor she calls her co-mom and on Mother's Day she gives her cards that say to the best co-mom in the whole wide world. This is her family. The three of us. "This is my family" is the picture and title of the story.

I. Speaking of family, talk to me about how your daughter experiences lesbian family lifestyle.

P. My daughter introduces us as a family. She doesn't use the word lesbian. No, she let's the friends figure that out. I've seen her do this but also the reason I know is because the messages from peers, on the phone will say, "Don't forget to ask your mom and ----." So I know they are getting this message we are a family to her friends. Whether they want to acknowledge we are lesbians is not so much the issue, we are a family unit and family units consult one another when we have an issue.

I. When you talked about stipulations being a parent has on making time to do things in your relationship, tell me about a time you felt isolated in the community because of having a child.

P. I do feel isolated somewhat in the lesbian community. Most lesbians don't have children. I have one friend who is also a mother and we get together occasionally. We go to dances sometimes. We didn't go to the gay rights March this year although my daughter will probably want to March. She is the political activist in the family. I feel my life is different from other lesbians. My life is like other heterosexual mothers who are out there doing children. My life is family centered. We have your regular boring basic life but there is comfort in that. I work, my partner works, we come home, we eat dinner, my daughter goes to bed, we eat popcorn and watch TV in bed and we enjoy that. We are just family oriented. She is most happy here. She isn't as much a people person as I am. She is just sort of a home body. She is really kind of shy. I really have more of a need to connect outside this home than she does and I get those needs met through some of my gay male friends that I just love dearly. I just love these guys. We get together with my sister and her husband. I connect with my mom some. My mom has made tremendous headway about her daughter being a lesbian. She was just chatting away with my partner when I came in the other day from work.

I.      Talk about your need for a support group among other lesbian mothers with biological children.

P.      I think there is an arena out there that needs to be attended to. Although I think the isolation that lesbians feel as mothers is the same any mother feels. It is just never ending. There is probably not another mother alive who wouldn't say, you just feel like you lose yourself in your children sometimes. Because it is such a demanding vitally demanding role. You don't get a lot of pats on the back. They are ungrateful little shits, you know. That don't express gratitude until they are grown, and some don't then. Yea, I think that, yes. It would be interesting to get mothers together. I am always interested in this. I do know a lesbian who has not come out to her children. It is interesting, I mean they are sure to know, but lesbians who have not told their children is real interesting. I'd like to talk to them. I am interested in this but I would have to see a lot of evidence that it is a good idea. I believe being lesbians is not going to influence that in our children. In my family, since my family father died I did a lot of study in his side of the family and I have three gay and one lesbian first cousins on my fathers side of the family. It was a big family but still. I was raised by a clearly staunch heterosexual mother and I just don't think we make our kids gay.

I.      Well, that is the issue. We were raised to believe we grow up, get married, have children, and be heterosexual.

In fact the term homosexual didn't come up in conversation. There was no option. I mean the research talks of sexuality as being on a continuum with 10% of the population is clearly heterosexual and 10% of the population is homosexual, the rest of the population falling somewhere in the middle. If we raise children to believe that there are options to their sexuality, it broadens the level of comfort in a variety of sexual awarenesses for young people. It isn't that we make our kids gay. We just allow them to explore the possibilities that will make them the happiest and most satisfied. When children reach adolescence, having a gay mom makes it easier for them to understand their feelings. Maybe it make it less confusing and painful.

P. I don't think the sexuality is a choice. I believe you can choose to experience the lifestyle or choose not to, but I think we are born what we are. Because I know, had it been a choice, I wouldn't have picked it. I would not have picked it because it is not an easy lifestyle.

I. Talk about your comfort level with your lesbian friends and in this lesbian lifestyle.

P. She accepts us as a family unit. She feels safe here. This house is so vital to her. This house is necessary to her survival. This family gives her a sense of well being and security. Her world is not easy, her handicap is devastating.

She needs this security. As grown up as she wants to be she is a child and she wants us to care for her. My partner is real firm about the fact that my daughter is her main focus. There are not many people that really know the connection between them. We are a family. She is much more involved in my daughter's life than her father. I make sure people make it to their meetings and get where they are going. My partner does not log all that in her brain, but she tends to it. It is more important she be a good provider. She is now thinking about moving my daughter into the bigger bedroom because her wheelchair will fit better. It may not be a matter of role playing but of interests, skills, talents, and not stereotypes. We are a family and my daughter trusts in that fact.

**VITA**

Ellen P. Wolfe was born in Kilmer, Wisconsin, on October 13, 1952. In June of 1970 she graduated from Keene High School in Keene, New Hampshire. In the fall of 1970 she attended Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City, Michigan. In September of 1983 she began an undergraduate program at the University of Tennessee and in June of 1987 she received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education.

Ms. Wolfe has taught elementary school for the past eight years. She is a certified teacher in the Knox County School System and is currently employed at Lincoln Park Elementary School in Knoxville, Tennessee, teaching fourth grade. She is a member of the Geography Alliance and the International Reading Association.

In the summer of 1994 Ms. Wolfe was accepted into the graduate program in education at the University of Tennessee and in August of 1995 she received a Master of Science Degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Cultural Studies.

Ms. Wolfe is particularly interested in working with minority groups, specifically mothers living alternative lifestyles. She has a strong interest in developing educational programs that emphasize well-rounded and healthful opportunities.

Ms. Wolfe presently resides in the Fountain City area of Knoxville, Tennessee. She has two grown children.