

**OPTING INTO MOTHERHOOD:
LESBIANS BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES AND TRANSFORMING
THE MEANING OF PARENTHOOD¹**

I feel that most lesbian couples have had to make it up as they go along really,
because even within the lesbian community there may well not be anybody
who is doing quite what they're doing. (Juliet)

The recent expansion of educational and employment opportunities for women, together with widening experience of the >plastic= nature of sexualities= (Giddens 1992:57) have enabled increasing numbers of women to construct independent identities and lifestyles beyond traditional marriage, motherhood and indeed heterosexuality (Dunne 1997a). The intransigent nature of the gender division of labour means that mothers continue to bear the brunt of the social/economic penalties associated with caring for children in capitalist societies (Dunne 1998a). The perceived contradiction between employment success and motherhood has led to a growth in the numbers of women opting into a paid working life and out of motherhood (Morell 1994:11, Campbell 1985:5-8). Given the way that motherhood represents a core signifier of femininity, and given the powerful social pressure on married couples to have children (Campbell 1985:2-3) academic interest is beginning to turn to issues around voluntary childlessness (see for example McAllister and Clarke 1998, Hird and Abshoff 1998, Campbell 1985, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim

¹ AUTHOR=S NOTE: I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Linda Edwards who graciously shared with me her story of mothering during the last few days of her struggle with breast cancer. Her courage and humanity was an inspiration throughout the study. I am extremely grateful to Shirley Prendergast for all her support and the many insightful contributions she has made to this and other papers.

1995, Morell 1994,). While in the context of heterosexuality women=s decisions to remain child-free can be framed in terms of resistance (for example, Hird and Abshoff 1998, Morell 1994), we need to remember that other groups of women are perceived to be excluded from the procreative equation². In common with gay men, lesbian women are popularly represented and viewed as barren (Weston 1991). At one level, lesbians, by virtue of their sexuality, represent a vanguard of women who escape social pressure to become parents. Indeed, for many, this freedom to `construct their own biographies= (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) without reference to children is understood as a major advantage of their sexuality (Dunne 1997a).

While contemporary women begin to see the demands of motherhood as conflicting with their newly won bid for autonomy, there has been a recent shift in attitudes to parenting amongst the lesbian population. The rising awareness of alternatives to heterosexual reproduction has led to a growing recognition that their sexuality does not preclude the possibility of lesbian and gay people having children. In Britain and in the USA we are witnessing the early stages of a `gayby= boom, a situation whereby lesbian women and gay men are opting into parenthood in increasing numbers. According to Lewin:

The `lesbian baby boom= and the growing visibility of lesbians who became mothers through donor insemination ... constitutes the most dramatic and provocative challenge to traditional notions of both the family and of the non-procreative nature of homosexuality= (1993:19).

² See Silva (1996) for a fascinating collection of theoretical and empirical work on single motherhood.

My own work on lesbian experience of work and family-life would suggest that an attentiveness to the gender dynamics of sexuality illuminates an even greater challenge - the possibility of showing what can be achieved when gender difference as a fundamental structuring principle in interpersonal relationships is absent (see Dunne 1997a, 1998a,b,c).

This paper draws on the experience of 29 lesbian couples with children conceived via donor insemination to provide some insights into why these women are opting into motherhood. These couples represent part (the majority) of a larger sample (n=37) of lesbian couples with dependent children who participated in *The Lesbian Household Project*³ - which took as its primary focus the detailed examination of divisions of paid and unpaid labour⁴. A range of methods were employed, including semi-structured in-depth interviews (joint followed several months later by individual) and the completion of time-task allocation diaries. Respondents were recontacted two years after their first interview. At the beginning of the joint interview, we discussed their pathway to parenting, and then respondents were encouraged to map out their social and kinship networks of support. To illustrate aspects of diversity and commonality in their experience of becoming and being parents the paper will focus on the stories of five couples. This will suggest a complex and contradictory situation. On the one hand, by embracing motherhood lesbians are making their lives 'intelligible' to others - their

³ We are grateful to The Economic and Social Research Council for funding the project, reference number R00023 4649

⁴ See Dunne (1998a,b) for information on methodology, and theoretical and detailed empirical analyses of the allocation of employment and domestic responsibilities in lesbian partnerships with dependent children. See Dunne (1997a) for theoretical context and discussion of these issues in relation to lesbians without dependent children.

quest to become parents is often enthusiastically supported by family and heterosexual friends. On the other hand, their sexuality both necessitates and facilitates the redefinition of the boundaries, content and meaning of motherhood and fatherhood. The absence of the logic of polarization to inform gender scripts, together with their parity in the gender order means that, to borrow Juliet=s words, lesbians `have to make it up as they go along=. In this, their similarities as women insist upon high levels of self-reflexivity and enable the construction of more egalitarian approaches to financing and caring for children. In this way some of the more negative social consequences of motherhood are transformed. I will, thus, show that beyond the confines of heterosexuality the motherhood experiences which many lesbians are opting into are very different from those which some heterosexual women seek to escape .

VIVIEN AND CAY=S STORY⁵

We do feel lonely and unsupported and isolated at times, but we also feel very confident and excited about the way that we've carved out our family, and the way that we go forward with it and the way that we parent. So although it's kind of a lonely path because there's not a lot of us to kind of reflect on each other, I don't see that as, oh, poor us. I see that more as, well, we're trying something out here and we've just got to get on with it. (Vivien)

Commonly lesbians are understood to have become mothers through a previous marriage or heterosexual relationship, having `come out= in later life. Interestingly, however, the majority of parents who participated in this study had conceived children

⁵ To maintain confidentiality the names of participants and their children, their geographical location and occupations have been changed. To give some sense of their employment circumstances I have chosen similar kinds of occupations.

via donor insemination within a lesbian relationship. This high proportion (76%) attests, in part, to the contemporary 'gayby' boom identified in recent North American research (Lewin 1993, Weston 1991). In some instances (n= 4), however, we find women who have had children in marriage starting over again with partners who have themselves wanted to have children. Two women parenting together was understood as offering the opportunity to experience parenting in new and exciting ways which were tempered by the wisdom that comes from already having raised children. Cay and Vivien are fairly typical of these households. When we first met they had been living together for six years in their small terraced house in inner city Birmingham. Vivien=s grown-up son, Frank, had left home several years earlier and Cay is the biological mother of two boys aged four and two. She describes her reasons for becoming a mother:

Cay: I think I have always known that I would have kids, always. And coming out didn=t alter that at all.

Vivien was very supportive of the idea although she did not want to go through a pregnancy herself :

Vivien: Well it was something that we discussed really early on as a possibility. I was very clear that I didn=t actually want to be the biological mother any more because I=m also quite a bit older than Cay and I didn=t really want to go through that. But I was very enthusiastic about having children.

Like the vast majority of respondents they organized donor insemination informally. They had little difficulty in locating a willing donor for both the children - an old friend of Vivien=s. John, a gay man, takes an interest in the boys= lives and sees them regularly:

Vivien: [It worked out well]. He's my oldest friend, and we've known each other since we were teenagers, and he has the same kind of colouring and stuff, that he could be my brother in terms of colouring and looks and so on. So we were looking for somebody who would be physically similar to me, and originally we asked one of my own brothers to donate, and he felt maybe he would want more of an involvement and more of a say in the children's lives, and we wanted somebody who would let us have the responsibility and would take on a sort of a kindly uncle role if we wanted to. And [John] agreed to do that.

In just under 30% of cases, donors had some involvement in their children=s lives. The description `kindly uncle= was fairly commonly expressed to describe the relationship. Like Vivien and Cay, the issue of involvement was a central feature in negotiating with potential donors. In some cases men were not chosen because they wanted too much or too little involvement. While it was not uncommon for heterosexual men to be donors, respondents had a clear preference for gay men. One main reason for this being their expressed belief that gay men were less likely to renege upon agreements over access or, in this event, to gain legal support in disputes.

Donor involvement was usually justified on the basis of concerns around children=s welfare: providing children with the opportunity to `normalize= their family arrangements by being able to talk to peers about doing things with a father. Rather than thinking in terms of children *needing fathers* an important issue raised by most respondents was a concern that their children, particularly boys, should have access to men whose qualities could serve to counteract dominant stereotypical images of masculinity. In households without involved donors, it was usual for respondents to actively seek out male friends who were perceived as fulfilling these criteria. Again there was a preference for gay men because respondents generally felt that gay men represented a more emotionally mature, secure and thought through form of masculinity.

Like most of the couples in the study Vivien and Cay regard the younger children as a shared responsibility - a `joint project=:

Cay: It can't be anything but a joint project, I don't think. The way we've approached it is that if it's not totally agreeable between both of us, it couldn't have really gone forward, given the kind of relationship we have. We've seen other people, you know, where one parent has said, well, I want a child and that's it. But the other one says, yes, you can have one, but I don't want to have lots of responsibility. That's not our way.

They both describe themselves as mothers of the younger boys, although they express a resistance to taking on the label:

Vivien: Yes, [we are the boys= mothers] absolutely, yes. Very much so.

I: What do they call you?

Vivien: By our names... They very rarely use the word mother.

Cay: In fact [Frank] never used the word mother until he started going to school, and then, hearing the other kids saying it, it was just a kind of copying thing.

I: Have they taken one of your surnames?

Vivien: Oh, yes, they've got mine, ... Cay said that she would like them to have my last name.

In common with almost all of the women who had formed a relationship when children were older, there is no attempt to cast Cay in the role of mother in relation to Vivien=s son, Frank:

Vivien: Because it's a different dynamic, we have a completely different relationship with the older child, because Cay came into the relationship when he became a teenager.

Cay: So I'm not his mother. There is no way that I could move into that kind of a role. He didn't want it and I didn't want it.

Vivien: She wasn't cast in a sort of parental role, whereas I was. But he never called me mother either, because I think mother is a very loaded word and I always asked him to call me by my first name, and he only called me mum if he

had a complete panic, if it was really urgent. So I didn't have that kind of dynamic with him anyway. So it was an unusual relationship to start with, and Cay just came in and joined it.

Cay=s parents live abroad and are described as proud grand-parents. Because the boy=s father John is not `out= about his sexuality to his parents they have no knowledge about the boys. Vivien=s parents are dead but her immediate kin are actively involved in supporting their parenting:

Vivien: My brothers are thrilled, though. My brothers treat the children as if they were their own kids. They don't separate them, you know, they don't see them as any less their kids. And their cousins that they're totally unrelated to just are their cousins, and in fact Tom looks like one of my cousins in Ireland. He doesn't look like any of Cay=s. So that makes it even more [unclear].

Raising children as a joint project involves each partner taking an active role in the routine pleasures, stresses and labour of childcare. Cay is a self-employed illustrator of children=s books and supplements her income by working as a cleaner. Vivien recently acquired her `first real job= as a probation officer, after a period of being home-based as a full-time student. Over their years together they have held a flexible approach to the doing of domestic work and childcare tasks, describing their roles as inter-changeable and their home-life responsibilities as shared⁶. Vivien describes some of the advantages of the lack of demarcation lines around mothering:

Vivien: Yes, definite advantages because I could enjoy the mothering in a new and exciting way that I hadn't been able to before, because even though I was in a relationship I didn't have the sort of freedom and sharing that I have in this

⁶ See Dunne (1998b) for theoretical elaboration on ways that the `doing of gender= is mediated by sexuality.

relationship. So I had the weight of the responsibility for the child squarely on my shoulders *I: This was when you were married?* Yes. So I felt I couldn't allow myself so much time to actually enjoy just being a mother, which I can do now because I know that even if one - sometimes I just play with them, and Cay can come in and put them to bed or do something else. Whereas I wouldn't have expected that before.

Overall, respondents tended to conceptualize paid and un-paid work as a continuum. The job of mothering was viewed as essential and valuable work, generating both stress and pleasure. This viewpoint helps explain why the perceptions and diary entries of the majority of respondents indicate that the performance of domestic work was fairly evenly shared between partners regardless of how time devoted to mothering and paid employment was divided (See Dunne 1998a).

The very positioning outside conventionality which enables the construction of more creative approaches to parenting brings also the problem of lack of recognition and validation from the outside world. Vivien speaks for many in the study:

Vivien: I think we have to acknowledge that within this house we can sit down and we can talk about the roles that we do and the equality that we feel and the experiences that we have and the confidence that we have in our relationship and in our parenting. But very little outside of this house tells us that those things that we're talking about tonight are actually true. We don't get a lot of affirmation outside of our own house that we are good parents, there is not the acknowledgement of the equality and negotiation that goes on within the relationship. And I think heterosexual friends that we have tend to probably see our relationship in their own terms. They don't realise how much it really works out. I don't think they've got an insight into how much we really do work together. But like I said, there's not much affirmation for us, there's nothing out there, is there? You know, we have to work at it all the time, we have to forge links with the school, we have to forge links with this and forge links with that, we have to work hard at being good neighbours and making contact with the neighbours so that as the children come along they're not surprised and they can adjust. We're doing the work, we're doing the outreach, we're doing the education, and what we get back is the right to be ourselves, sort of, as long as we're careful.

Her words alert us to the obligations felt by lesbian parents (in common with other parents in unconventional situations) of the need to be seen as good parents. Their struggle for validation within the lesbian community suggests a need also to be viewed as a good lesbians:

Vivien: ... other lesbians I think may see us as trying to repeat some sort of heterosexual relationship, and that's not what we're trying to do. So we have to kind of justify it to our heterosexual friends and justify it to our lesbian friends.

The contradictions between being a lesbian and being a mother illuminated here serve to remind us that while it can be argued that assisted conception is an important expression of the ideologies supporting 'compulsory motherhood' it is less easy to apply this thinking to lesbian mothers. While it is hard for married couples to escape social pressure to have children and indeed a commitment to childlessness is almost incompatible with the institution of marriage (Campbell 1985:19), within lesbian culture there is no question that the absence of children within a relationships constitutes failure. In fact, research elsewhere (Sullivan 1996) supports much of what respondents said about their decision to have children going against established societal norms, specifically those of the lesbian and gay community. Until fairly recently, this community, particularly the radical/revolutionary wing, has been suspicious of motherhood and any attempts to reproduce the nuclear family (see Green 1997). Rather than entering motherhood in a taken for granted way, respondents' accounts of their decision-making process reveal years of thought. By going against the norm lesbians have to engage in a process of justification that makes their entry into motherhood a very self-conscious act.

THELMA AND LOUISE=S STORY

I think we go about things in our own way, we don=t have the role definition. We get the best of both worlds really. We get to continue along the road with our careers and also to spend time as a family and to enjoy the time with the children. Disadvantages? We could earn more money I suppose if we worked full-time, but then it takes away the point of having children I would say. (Thelma)

It was not unusual for both partners to have experienced biological motherhood as the result of donor insemination while in their relationship. At the time of first contact four couples were in this situation and, in a further seven households, co-parents were either planning or in the process of inseminating. At the follow-up stage two years later, the number of households where both partners were biological mothers in this way rose to seven. In these households the children were brought up as siblings and seen as a `joint project=. The experiences of Thelma and Louise, who have been living together for seven years, and currently have their own flat in inner-city Manchester, are not atypical of mothers in this situation. They both have half-time employment so that they can share the care of their two daughters⁷, Polly aged four and Stef aged two. They discuss their feelings about wanting children:

Thelma: I think when we met I'd always wanted to have a baby - it's something I'd always wanted to do.

Louise: You sort of arrived with that.

Thelma: Yes, with that idea lodged in my head.

Louise: We both knew we'd always have children and wanted children, you had

⁷ In as many as seven households (almost a quarter of the sample) we find that the sharing of childcare is operationalized by either both partners engaging in part-time employment, or one reducing her paid working hours to part-time (less than 30 hours a week) while her partner was on maternity leave (see discussion in Dunne 1998a).

the greater sense of urgency.

Thelma suggested that her desire to have children was such that had she not found the 'right relationship' she might have contemplated having a child on her own, while Louise admitted to lacking the necessary confidence to enter motherhood on her own. Both said they wanted to have children but they describe their decision about timing and who would go first as based on pragmatics. For Thelma, whose specialism was desktop publishing, this meant building up sufficient clientele to enable self-employment from home. In Louise's case it meant getting into a more secure employment position and saving up:

Louise: Yeah, I was a year younger and I wasn't really sorted out work-wise at all and you were.

Thelma: They were very pragmatic as well as emotional reasons why I should go first. It was when I started freelancing at this place and then I ended up freelancing because I got pregnant. But that seemed okay anyway. My state of mind, career, I'd kind of arrived like. I mean it was alright to take a break. I knew that I could get work.

Louise: And I hadn't got there. And there was time to save up as well. During that time we managed to save up quite a lot, to get over the time, you know, the small baby time. Before getting out to work again.

Like many in the sample, each partner talked about wanting time to enjoy and care for their children thus they described the importance of arriving at a point in their working-life where they could achieve a satisfactory balance between home and paid work. Like women more generally, respondent's careers had rarely progressed in a planned linear manner. Instead their job histories have a fluid quality (See Dunne 1997a) - moving across occupations and in and out of education/training. However, in contrast to married women more generally where the gender division of labour supports the anticipation of financial dependence on husbands when children are young, an important consideration

in the timing of the arrival of children for most biological mothers in the study was the achievement *herself* of certain employment aims which would enable greater long-term financial security.

Like Vivien and Cay, they used their friendship networks to locate donors. After several miscarriages with an earlier donor, Thelma finally got pregnant:

Louise: He was just living with a friend of ours, it was just brilliant.

Thelma: Yeah, the second donor. And ended up being a really good friend as well... I got pregnant the first go really.

I: And then did you have any views on how much involvement he should have?

Thelma: I think we both wanted a known father and yes, if they wanted some involvement, that was fine. The clearly defined lines were we're the parents of the children - or of the child at that time - and so any kind of parenting decisions would always be ours.

I: And what will [Polly] call her donor?

Thelma: His name - and she calls him Daddy Paul. So I mean she doesn't ever really call him Daddy. Either she calls him Paul or Daddy Paul.

Louise: He is a bit like an uncle [to them both] she'd see now and again, you know, he'd be like this kind of uncle figure, who'd take her to the pics and take her to the zoo and that kind of thing. Give her treats.

Their desire for and use of a known donor was mirrored across the sample (in 86% of cases). A wide range of reasons were given. Regardless of whether any donor involvement in children's lives was anticipated, a common feeling expressed was wanting to know that a good man, in terms of personal qualities, had had a role in creating their child. More specific ideas about biogenetic inheritance also came up in some discussions. Another commonly expressed justification employed the metaphor of adoption - the idea that children should have the option of knowing their biological father at some stage in the future.

By the time Louise was pregnant she was in a much stronger position at work, having

gained a clearer sense of what she wanted to do job-wise and having undergone re-training. She had secured a permanent position in teaching and after maternity leave, arranged a job share with a friend. They had originally planned that Paul would be the donor for Louise, however there were difficulties in conception, so a new donor was found. Hugh, a gay friend of Thelma=s brother, who was temporarily living in England, agreed:

Louise: ... so it's lucky I caught him when he was living [here] and that it worked first time. So there was a two-year gap - we were planning on a one-year gap. It wasn't quite how we'd planned it. We wanted Paul to be the father of both... So basically they've got two Dads and - she calls Paul Dad...Hugh lives [abroad] with his partner and he just comes over here every couple of months.

I: What do you think the donors get out of it?

Thelma: I think Paul=s been amazed by it actually. As has Hugh - it's obviously a new thing for him. I think both of them are enjoying it more and more as the children get older. And the children give something back to them as well. I think they're finding it a kind of unique experience really.

While Thelma and Louise both felt the desire to experience of biological motherhood, the children are raised as a joint project. Their shared responsibilities have been legally recognized in their gaining of a Joint Parental Responsibility Order:

Louise: Yeah [they=re definitely a joint project]... - we don't just happen to have a relationship and happen to have two children. We always thought joint, that's why the court thing was important to us. They are sisters and I defy anybody to question that. That's very important to us and we also made it clear that if we ever split up, if I depart with [Stef] into the horizon and Thelma with [Polly], that we have joint care for them.

Thelma: They both call us Mum.

Louise: It started off that you were going to be Mum and I was going to be Louise, and then coming up to me giving birth to [Stef], it just got a bit kind of funny, so we thought it's not really going to work any more. Because if they're sisters how come? - it just all didn't work, so now we're both Mums. And they just call us Mum.

Thelma: Stef says Mummy Louise or Mummy Thelma.

Louise: And Polly mostly calls us Louise and Thelma doesn't she?

Thelma: Yeah she does. She calls us both Mum when she wants to, but mostly she calls us by our names.

Louise: The last couple of years she's started calling me Mum.

Some of the immensity of the creative project that lesbians are engaged in is revealed in the tensions in this discussion and the next. While they describe the children as having two mothers, Louise reminds us of the contingent nature of this. The rule of biological connection is un-questioned in the assumption that in the event of a break up each will depart into the horizon with their *own* child. We can also see difficulties as the couple and *their children* engage with the power of language - the taken for grantedness of the singularity of the identity 'mum'. Louise's struggle with the exclusivity of popular conception of mother is further exacerbated in their interactions with others:

Louise: It's a lot easier now because we've both had a child. I don't think I had any role models in terms of being a non-biological mother. We had stacks of friends doing it at the time and it just - I didn't find it particularly easy. There's a thing that if you want to be acknowledged as a parent, you just had to come out with it. It's the only way to explain that you're a parent. And even that is a very hard way to explain you're a parent. My inner circle at work would know... and it was just sort - it's funny I nearly wrote it down one day - because it was just like some days I'd be a parent and some days I wasn't. So it would depend on what day of the week it was and who I was talking to. I think I made it harder for ourselves by me not being called Mum [in the early stages]. Because as soon as people found out you weren't the Mum, then they'd just - it was like 'who the hell are you then'.

Thelma: There were lots of things we hadn't even thought about - lots of issues - that obviously there weren't people around for us to take a lead from. So there were lots of issues, like the issue of the word Mum being used. We'd never thought about it at all. All those issues did arise and we ploughed through them.

Again the family had interesting and extensive kinship networks. Paul was not 'out' to his elderly parents so they did not know about his child. However, Hugh found the

courage to tell his mother:

Louise: I think Hugh was terrified of telling his mother - he's an only child - had a very close relationship with his mother and he was terrified of telling her. And she was absolutely delighted with it - Al'm the children's grandmother≡ - she's Stef=s grandmother biologically, but she's also Polly=s socially. So she's just been this incredible grandmother.

Thelma: Paul=s parents don't know. His parents are quite old, they're in their late eighties and they don't know he's gay and I don't think he'd ever tell them. So for him that one's a secret. But his sister knows.

Louise: I think we'd be more worried by it, but I just guess by the time the kids are old enough - I think you've got to start coming out very confidently once you've kids, you can't be messing around really. And it would worry me I think if - if Paul explained to them [the children], that he's not been able to tell his parents. I'm just hoping that by the time it comes up, they won't be around any more.

This discussion raises several important issues that featured across the sample. Firstly, respondents were keen to avoid keeping secrets from their children about their conception. Secondly, and related to this, was the high level of positivity they felt in relation to their lesbianism⁸, their confidence in their sexuality was seen as essential for supporting their children in their dealings with the outside world. Thirdly, the desire to have their social bonds recognized as having an equivalency to blood ties by friends and kin. They expand on this thinking in the following discussion:

Louise: My mum's dead and Thelma=s parents are both dead, and I don't see my father.

I: Have you got any siblings between you?

⁸ I have been struck by the almost unanimous confidence of the sample in their sexuality - respondents saw their lesbian identity as a great source of advantage. Their identification as lesbian rather than gay was also evidence of their usual feminist inclinations. In a previous life-history study of lesbians who were generally not mothers (Dunne 1997a) there were more examples of ambiguity in this respect. I suspect respondents= self-assurance is related to a combination of factors including, historical period, being in fulfilling relationships, their achievement of motherhood and the process of soul-searching that preceded this.

Thelma: I come from [a northern city], so a lot of my family is still [there] and we don't really see them very much. But my brother, who lives [locally], who's gay, we're very, very close. He's amazing - he's amazing with the children.

I: And how does he see himself as having two nieces?

Thelma: Oh absolutely. All our friends...

Louise: and family that we see, all of them without exception treat both children equally. That's the deal basically, they're not allowed to pick and choose.

Thelma: It was the same with Grandma, either she - part of the deal was that Stef and Polly are sisters and if she took one of them, then she had to, by definition, take on the other one.

Louise: ... we were quite assertive with her, you can't just - and that's why I'm not seeing my Dad, it's because he's still kind of learning to do that, until he really gets his head around it. He cannot just send one of them a present and not the other one. Actually it looks like he's getting there, doesn't he? He's just about cracked it. We have friends and family [here] who just absolutely - my sister, when Polly was born, my sister just said I'm auntie [name], without any - biologically obviously it isn't, but in all senses of the word, she was.

I: And they wouldn't distinguish between the children?

Louise: No. Nobody that we see regularly would. Even school and things like that, Stef=s Polly=s sister... the kind of entry through schools is if you're a sibling and that's kind of high priority and Stef has entry into that school now, because she's Polly=s sister. Although biologically they're nothing.

Without exception the couples in our sample believed that they were attempting to parent in ways that were different from the norm. They were redefining the meaning and content of motherhood, extending the boundaries to incorporate the activities that are usually dichotomized as mother and father. The immensity of this project being revealed in their struggle with both the power and limitations of language in relation of expressing the nature of identities, and social connections. Going against prevailing norms was never without difficulties and disappointments. In joint and individual interviews respondents usually singled out the ability and commitment to communication as crucial. They spoke of arrangements being constantly subject to negotiation in light of changing conditions, and the need to regularly 'check in' with each other so that routines which may lead to taking the other for granted could be re-thought and sources of conflict discussed.

BONNIE AND CLAUDIA=S STORY

We've had a lot of kind of interest and a certain amount of envy from a lot of heterosexual couples who had babies at the same time, because they just haven't had the breaks that we've had, you know, from the baby. They've had breaks, but they've felt guilty, whereas we don't particularly feel guilty because we know that Peter=s with Philip and they both want to be together. (Claudia)

In three of our 29 households, donors were actively involved parents, becoming a `junior partner in the parenting team=, as one father described himself. Bonnie and Claudia have been living together for nine years and have a two-year-old son, Peter. They live in a terraced house in inner-city Bristol. Philip, the boy=s father, co-parents from a separate household. They describe and contrast their feelings about having children. In this they illustrate another unique advantage for women who want to become mothers in a lesbian relationship - if one partner has problems conceiving the other may agree to go through the pregnancy instead:

Claudia: Well, I think it was something that I was looking for when I was also looking for a relationship. So I think it was just a more immediate thing for me. You were interested in principle. And I knew the father - this is Philip - although not with the view to having children. So you got to know him after we met really. And then the subject came up.

Bonnie: I think for you it had always been like a lifelong thing, and you knew you always wanted to have children.

Claudia: I always wanted a baby. I wanted us to have about two.

Bonnie: She was just obsessed with babies, weren't you? Whereas, I wasn't really like that, I come from a big family and I like having lots of people around me. It was more for me that I didn't want to have not had children. It's different, because I didn't want to look back and think, oh Christ, I didn't have any children. But I tend to get very caught up in whatever I'm doing, and I was busy doing my job and having this relationship and our friends. I don't know that I would ever have actually sat down and thought, OK, I'm going to have a baby now... So in a way it was Claudia= enthusiasm and sense of urgency about it that kind of actually pushed us to making a decision, taking some action. And the only reason I ended up sort of having the baby was because Claudia had had a whole series of problems, fertility problems. We just always decided, didn't we, that if one of us

had a problem the other one would.

There were three other examples in the sample of partners swapping in this way because of fertility problems, and several others had offered to do so in that event. In the process of negotiation with the donor, Philip, they arrived at a situation whereby he was to be an actively involved father:

Claudia: Philip wanted a child, and he, I think, was also looking for a kind of extended family relationship, wasn't he, with us and the children. But he also wants his freedom, I suppose, his lifestyle, a lot of which he needs not to have children around for. Yes, so it fits in the sense that what we get is time without Peter, to have a relationship, you know, that needs its own sort of nurturing and stuff, and he gets special time, you know, with Peter and a real bonding. I mean he's seen Peter every day since he's been born. So he has become part of the family, hasn't he, in a sense, or we've become part of his. But we live in two separate homes. People sometimes don't realise that.

After extended maternity leave, Bonnie was able to return full time to her successful career in adult education. Care of Peter is shared between Claudia, a teacher employed part time, Bonnie who works from home two days a week, and the boy's father, Philip:

I: And then you were saying that you very much look upon Philip as a kind of live-out co-parent?

Bonnie: He lives in the next street, and so he can just come round every day after work or pick Peter up from nursery and bring him back and do his tea and bath and things, and then we'll roll in about 6:30 or whenever, or sometimes one of us is here anyway.

Claudia: Yes, we try to work out that one of us is always at home, either with him or working at home. I'm with him Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Bonnie works at home Mondays and Thursdays. I work at home Fridays. But of course that doesn't always work because the sort of jobs we've got mean you have to go in extra days sometimes. Quite often there's days when we both have to commute, so Philip usually covers... He's the only one of us that works locally. And he's got a bleep as part of his job and it's ideal then because it means that nursery can call at any time if there's an emergency, whereas if they called me... would be completely useless, wouldn't it? Two and a half hours later I'd be back, you know! So I mean we try to cover it.

I: It strikes me you've got the most ideal situation!

Bonnie: Yes, well, we think so! [laughing]. We're the envy of the mother and

toddler group we joined.

Their experience with Philip provides an interesting alternative model of cross-gendered parenting based on a consensual *non-sexual* relationship with a man who is interested in expressing fatherhood. In effect, Philip is prepared to engage in mothering⁹, and in doing so he is sharing some of social penalties associated with this activity - all three parents collaborate in balancing the demands of childcare and employment.

While Bonnie and Claudia were aware that it was difficult to keep Philip abreast of everyday decision-making they were keen for him to be involved in more major ones and this seemed to work well in practice:

I: How has that all worked out in practice?

Bonnie: Mmm, extremely well. We keep being surprised. I mean we keep thinking, you know, when's the big difference of opinion and sort of half-thinking we're going to have a fundamental disagreement about something. But I don't think there has been really.

In this discussion we can see some of the risks associated with involving biological fathers in children's lives - the potential for disagreement and conflict. While respondents appear to have exercised fairly high levels of control over biological fathers in relation to the terms and conditions of their access to children, the gradual extension of legal rights to biological fathers (see Smart and Neale 1997) increases respondents' dependence on the integrity of donors. There were, however, no examples in the sample of major difficulties arising with biological fathers, although it must be pointed out that the majority

⁹ See Silva (1996) for discussion of distinction between motherhood and mothering.

of children are under five years old so these are early days in the relationship.

Again they came up against the limitations of language in relation to describing parenting relationships:

Bonnie: I've always been quite keen that he should know what our names are anyway. I think there's something completely depersonalising about the way women sit around and talk about a child's mummy as if she's got no identity, the adults start doing it as well. It's fine if there's a baby in the room and it's your child, but everyone will say, ask mummy, tell mummy. But you become this amorphous mummy to everybody. All women are sort of mummy, they don't have their own identity. So I've been quite keen that he should grow up knowing that people have roles and names, and that you should be able to distinguish between the two. But I also feel, completely contradictory, that there is something very special emotionally about having your own mummy.

Claudia: And then Philip had very strong feelings about it all, didn't he? He'd always been clear that he wanted to be daddy, and while we went on holiday together last summer for a week, he made it very clear that he thought that in some sense that you needed to be recognised as Peter's mother, that that was important, an important thing in terms of what the relationship meant, and that it would be wrong to deny Bonnie that... Yes, he [also thought] that Peter would, if we started him calling both of us mummy, sooner or later he'd be ridiculed by some of the other children, and then he would have a terrible conflict of loyalties, does he go with the crowd or does he protect us? And that we shouldn't put him in that position. Which again I've not experienced that but I partly agree. So we went for the mummy, daddy and Claudia. And then he started calling me mummy anyway. But now he calls me Addie. [everyone laughs]

Bonnie expresses a feminist critique of the label mummy, being hostile to ways which it can be employed to subsume other aspects of a woman's identity. Yet, her radicalism is tempered by her recognition and desire to celebrate her special connection with the child. She ends up becoming swayed by 'best interests of the child' arguments. Philip's desire for recognition as Daddy, is at one level less problematic. He earns this validation through his active involvement in parenting, and because he is not attempting to share fatherhood with a partner there are no additional complications in relation to exclusion.

However, the gender dynamics of this are interesting. While much of the social aspect of Philip's parenting involves the activities of mothering, he is content to make claim to the identity daddy. Further, as the women balance bread-winning and mothering, in common with the rest of the sample, there is no attempt mirror heterosexual arrangements by utilizing the identity daddy.

Once again their parenting is supported by a complex network of kin who had been encouraged to recognize and act upon social as well as biological ties. As they map out the main people supporting their parenting they discuss the input of kin:

Bonnie: That's my sister Holly and her partner Vickie, who is dyke as well, which is very nice, and they live round the corner as well. So in a sense they are part of our community, very much so, and Vickie was around for the birth. So they lead a different sort of lifestyle in the sense that they haven't got any children, so they're definitely sort of aunts that come in and do babysitting and things.. They're sort of busy but they're important, and we promote the relationship actually, don't we?

I: What about Philip's parents? Do they have any...?

Bonnie: Yes, there's Philip's mum and dad... They see him like two or three times a year. You know, it's only been a year and a half, but they've made a lot of effort. They came down just after his birth and they're very traditional grandparents, she knits things for Peter and makes clothes. He'll do things later with Peter when he's older.

It is no simple act, however, for extended family to claim kinship ties in these kinds of non-traditional situations which require coming to terms with a relative's sexuality. While part of being lesbian and gay is about learning how to 'come out' to self and others, I think we have given scant attention to the work involved when heterosexual family members, particularly elderly parents, claim kinship ties that require 'coming-out' on behalf of others. For Philip's parents it was easier to explain his entry into fatherhood to other family members by inventing an extremely complicated story about Philip and

Bonnie being/having been heterosexual lovers:

Claudia: [Philip=s parents] told all their family that Bonnie and Philip have a kind of relationship.

Bonnie: They lied, basically.

Claudia: [The story being that] They're not living together any more because Bonnie is already living with this other woman who is a nurse and has got a mortgage and it would be too complicated to change things.

Bonnie: They absolutely want Peter to be their grandson and they love that, and I think in their own head they're dealing with it, they're very nice to us both, aren't they? They send us joint cards and progress reports.

Claudia: We even slept in a double bed in their house once.

Bonnie: Yes, they accept it, you can see, on one level. But obviously they can't fully accept it, they can't tell their friends. So that's how that goes.

Bonnie=s mother could see distinct advantages in her daughter=s parenting arrangements:

My mum is Peter's grandmother. She's very, very involved with Peter, totally supportive of this relationship, and thinks that - why hadn't anyone ever mentioned it before? It seems a great way to bring up children. Having brought seven children up without the help of my father, she now thinks it's wonderful not only to have a supportive woman partner but a father involved who lives up the road. It's great. Peter sees more of his father than most children probably do. So she's good.

As Claudia had been adopted herself, her family were not unused to the complexity of kinship relations:

Claudia: I mean [my family are] all interested and very supportive but there's no one nearby to pop in.

Bonnie: So Philip=s parents and my mum see Peter the most, and then Claudia=s got her parents. I mean she's got another set of parents. So you've got your biological mum and dad, haven't you? And then you've got your adopted M and D as well.

I: And you're in contact with both sets?

Claudia: Mmm. But I mean again they all only see him about twice a year.

Family

get-togethers, isn't it?

Bonnie: And you made an effort to go and visit and show Peter off.

Claudia=s biological parents treated Peter similarly to their other grandchildren, all of whom received little attention. Interestingly in the case of her adoptive parents, in common with many other respondents, the arrival of children helped re-build bridges after earlier estrangement over issues of sexuality:

Claudia: Well, [my adoptive parents] have much more difficulty with me being a lesbian than my parents do. And they've virtually rejected me really. Not immediately when I came out but later on. And then [my adoptive mother], since she found out that I was trying to get pregnant, has been completely supportive. I think [my adoptive father] finds it more difficult. She has been down a couple of times, which for her is quite a big deal really...

I: And she thinks of Peter as your son?

Claudia: Yes. And she describes herself as his adoptive grandmother.

Aside from a wide circle of friends, Bonnie, Claudia and Philip had relatively good support from parents and siblings, with their son Peter looking forward to birthday presents from four sets of grandparents.

So far we have considered arrangements that have developed through a commitment to parent as a shared responsibility and joint project. The vast majority of our sample viewed their parenting as joint, and most developed strategies to facilitate this including, each being involved in early care and, importantly, having time alone with children. Their often flexible employment strategies (each reducing their hours of employment, taking it in turns to have time out from paid work) attests to the high value attached to childcare for both parents.

Not all households, however, aspired to this 'joint project' model, usually because the mother-child relationship was already well established before the relationship began. Our discussion will conclude with two further stories which will help illustrate the thinking behind this different situation, although commonalities with the earlier case-studies will also be apparent.

ROSEMARY AND JULIET=S STORY

I think there=s a very material difference between a lesbian relationship and a heterosexual relationship, which is that there is that potential for complete equality, which there isn't in a heterosexual relationship, and I think that's my theory about where patriarchy comes from - it's actually trying to disguise the power of women, the power of women to have children. (Rosemary)

Rosemary and Juliet had known each other as friends and more recently as lovers for nine years before they began living together a year ago, when Juliet=s son Sean was born. They live in a large Victorian terrace house in the outskirts of Brighton. The household also includes Rosemary=s two teenage children, Frank and Heather, from a previous marriage. They do not, however, regard parenting as a joint project, instead responsibility is shared with the fathers of the two sets of children. Juliet=s feelings about wanting children emerged shortly after her father=s death. She had been very close to her father, but had had a difficult relationship with her mother:

It was like Archimedes. I was lying in the bath one day and I was thinking about my father and thinking about the quality of life that he gave me, which was unconditional love, which was very contrasting with my mother's kind of alternative love - perhaps I'm being generous to her. And it was like - I can't tell you. It was an experience I'd never had before. It was like a sort of light bulb being switched on in my mind and I just thought, I could do that. And then the next stage, you know, one second later, that I would like to do that.

Like almost all of the parents in the sample, an awareness of the desire to have children set in motion an extended period of soul-searching, decision making, planning. Informing this process was a great deal of research - reading the numerous self-help books that are available on lesbian parenting, watching videos on the topic and attending discussion groups. I would suggest that lesbian parenting is the `reflexive project= par excellence (see Giddens 1992:30) During this planning stage respondents in

partnerships began to work though how they proposed to bring up the children (attitudes to discipline, schooling etc), if and how far responsibilities would be shared and how this would be put into practice (employment circumstances and time availability). For some this process lasted as long as seven years, for Juliet it took five years. She grappled with her concern not to repeat her mother=s mistakes, and she struggled to improve her employment circumstances, having had a series of short-term poorly-paid jobs. Although Rosemary and Juliet were lovers during this time, Juliet=s decision to have children was an independent one. They were clear that they would not attempt to share parenting:

Juliet: Rosemary always said she had had two children and she didn't want to be a mother again, if I had a child she wouldn't be interested in that kind of stuff. And she jokingly calls herself the wicked step-mother!

I: So it's not so much a joint project?

Juliet: Not at all, no. Not at all. I think living together is a joint project, but Sean is not a joint project and neither are Rosemary=s children a joint project... So it's not like we're pretending to be two mummies, or actually being two mummies.

Rosemary: ... I think there's never been any question. Also you've always been clear that you wanted the father to be involved. I mean I think that, even if I'd wanted it, and I've always made it clear that I haven=t wanted to co-parent, I mean there's not been a role for me, and I haven't wanted it anyway. My children are too old to suddenly have another parent and they've got a father who is actively involved.

Juliet: But we talked about it together for a long time.

One reason for Rosemary=s reluctance to co-parent was that at age 48 she felt she no longer had the patience and energy to return home after a stressful day in her professional job in a hospital and keep up with the antics of a boisterous toddler.

Although parenting responsibilities were shared with fathers, the women provided each other with a great deal of emotional support in dealing with children=s problems. They

also benefited from practical domestic support at a level which would be unusual for heterosexual mothers in partnerships with men:

Juliet: ... we both keep things ticking over, and I think we've got a fairly agreed level of what needs to be done. You know, we're not the world's greatest cleaners, but things like the washing up, the keeping the kitchen clean, the cooking, the laundry I think we keep up together and keep up with those sort of day-to-day essentials. We both think the other one is doing more. So it's a constant thing as well to try and pull your weight and do your share and not leave it to the other person because it just wouldn't be fair. I mean who wants to spend their lives washing up? Nobody. So it's only fair that we do half each, you know.

The highly consensual arrangement between Juliet and Sean's father, Patrick, contrasted with the acrimony that characterised Rosemary's relationship with her ex-husband - on their divorce he had attempted to gain custody of the children because of her lesbianism. Patrick, a gay man, came into their lives when he answered Juliet's advertisement for an involved donor:

Juliet: Lesbian seeks gay man blah-blah-blah for the father to actively be involved in the child's life.

I: You specifically wanted a gay man?

Juliet: Oh yes, I prefer gay men's standards [unclear]. Also I mean it's quite a good recipe for friendship ... and there's no sexual complications whatsoever. And I thought my main wish was that it should be a relationship that could be cooperative without necessarily getting too deep... We met every Wednesday night for - it was in January that I met him and we met every Wednesday through to May, and then he said he would start and we decided to go ahead, we had talked over everything, and we started in the June, and in July it took.

I: So legally he has joint decision-making?

Juliet:.. We've done a parental responsibility form, and, you see, he's a social worker so he knows all about the Children Act which I don't have that much knowledge of, but we're both on the birth certificate. We've done a parental responsibility form to say that he has parental responsibility as well, because if we didn't, fathers have less rights now than they used to, and he was very concerned that we do that. But I amended the form to say that Sean lives with me and he has very good contact with his father.

Patrick has regular contact with his son, and this will expand as Sean get older:

Juliet: He has him on Tuesday mornings. Thursday for three hours. About four hours on Saturdays. That's quite a lot. But he would like more. He wants to start doing overnights. The plan was that as he got older he would have him less frequently but longer, really.

I: And the father is able to cope?

Juliet: Yes, in terms of servicing his needs he does it as well as I do. He does it differently from me, and I just have to step back and say, that's his way of doing it and it's not worse than my way of doing it, and not be impatient, you know. Why are you laughing?

Rosemary: Well, just because I know what a struggle you have with that, that's all.

We can see in Juliet=s admission to having to `step back= and `not be impatient,= and in Rosemary=s awareness of the struggle involved, the way that mothers get cast and cast themselves as `experts=. Part of their strategy for enabling Patrick to become confident in recognizing and coping with Sean=s needs is to provide time and space for them to be together without Juliet. That it is such a struggle for Juliet suggests the immensity of the difficulties facing heterosexual couples who seek to challenge the boundaries around motherhood and fatherhood in such a way that would enable men to fully engage in mothering. Another unusual yet logical line of thinking was their approach to sharing the child. As Patrick viewed himself as an equal partner in parenting he takes responsibility for the expenses of childcare for two and a half days. Thus, Juliet can afford to continue half-time in her administration job:

Juliet: He decided that it's his responsibility for two and a half days and I'm responsible for two and a half days. And I don't work two days, so I have Sean for those two days. So I actually pay for half a day, and he pays for two and a half days. So I wouldn't be able to manage if it weren't for that.

Again this family is embedded in a complex network of kinship relationships. Juliet has a

difficult relationship with her own mother, Harriet, who engages rather half heartedly in the role of grandma. Despite Juliet and Rosemary not sharing parenting, they describe Rosemary=s mother, Lilly, as a more actively involved grandmother:

Juliet: Yes, your mum is much more like a grandmother, you know, interested in his development, chatting with him, buying him a balloon.

I: Does she send him presents or cards?

Juliet: Yes, she does.

I: What would she sign them?

Rosemary: Grandma Lilly.

Juliet: Yes, she's really nice. And your step-mother is also - I mean he's got four grandmothers, and my mother is the least...

I: Four?

Juliet: Yes, Patrick=s mother, who is a very, very, very devout Catholic.

Rosemary: She spent the whole of the pregnancy either crying or praying alternately, and within three minutes of him being born there were huge bunches of flowers from Grandma. He's her only grandchild. You know, she's got loads of children but only the gay son acknowledges having a baby...

Juliet: He's short of granddads. My father's dead, [as is Rosemary=s] and Patrick=s dad has a sort of health problem. He's a sweetie, and he's kind of loving towards him, [but because of a health condition] he is not at ease with Sean.

Rosemary: But he did make him that lovely highchair.

Juliet: Yes, he gives him love, but he's not at ease with him.

Patrick comes from a large close family and his brothers and sisters are very interested and involved with Sean - despite living abroad they visit regularly. Rosemary=s children have been frustrated with the constraints of language with respect to describing their connection with Sean:

Juliet: Yes, they [the children] really love him. It was brilliant, them coming to get me from the hospital the day after he was born and, you know, they had sort of grins from ear to ear.

Rosemary: Yes, fantastic, because we went off in the middle of the night. I mean I told them we were probably going to go in the middle of the night, and I woke them before we left. Frank couldn't get back to sleep because he was so excited.

I: And how do they refer to Sean?

Rosemary: Well, Heather said she had a baby brother when she went to school,

didn't she? And at one point she said, he's not really my brother but he is my brother. She gets very angry about the lack of names for their relationship.

ANTHEA AND CLEO=S STORY

I think it's important for children to see egalitarian relationships, to grow up with that, rather than to grow up with hierarchical relationships, where one person has power over another. I don't think that's healthy, the wrong lessons. (Anthea)

Finally, we turn to Anthea and Cleo=s story to illustrate other dimensions to the experience of lesbian parenting. Anthea and Cleo have been in a relationship for six years, and have lived together with Anthea=s eleven-year-old daughter, Diana, for the past four years. They live in a Housing Association terraced house on a quiet street on the outskirts of Northampton. Anthea=s career began in the voluntary sector and she is currently a freelance researcher working mainly from home. Cleo has just finished a masters degree and has recently begun a part-time job in counselling. Anthea=s journey to parenting is interesting for a number of reasons. First, in line with several other respondents, she had originally made decision to bring up a child as a financially independent, single woman. Second, having resisted motherhood when married (despite being involved with a man who she described as exceptionally egalitarian), her experience of opting in to motherhood as a single lesbian is highly suggestive - like the rest of the sample, she felt that mothering as a lesbian was qualitatively different from her perceptions of heterosexual experience:

Anthea: Okay. I was 32 when I got pregnant and I was... identified as a lesbian at that time. But previously I had been married to a man for seven years and I was very clear that in that relationship I didn't want to have children - not because I didn't like children, but because I was fairly convinced that I would end up in a classic wifely/motherly role, and that the kind of gender relations that we were

forced into really, would tie me down into a kind of life-style I didn't want. So I didn't have children, though I did get pregnant in that relationship and had an abortion... Because when I was living with my husband, I could see very clearly what would happen if I had had a child in that relationship, because there's so many people out there with heterosexual relationships who have children and it's the woman who gives up her work and stays home and the man continues to develop his career and that it becomes very polarised. Even though he and I had attempted, under my pressure, to have an egalitarian relationship... So when I left my husband, I then shortly after came out as a lesbian and within a number of years I moved to [major city] and by chance moved into a house where there was a woman who had a three-year-old son by self-insemination and she was part of a network of lesbians who had written a booklet about the method they used to get pregnant. Most of them had done self-insemination to conceive their children.

Her experience of learning about this possibility through friendship networks, illustrates a fairly common trend in the sample more generally - the importance of knowing another lesbian, a close friend or partner with children who helps clarify thinking about parenting options for oneself. Anthea=s thinking about and entering lesbian motherhood in the early 1980s constitutes an earlier wave to the majority of the sample who experienced motherhood in the late 1980's and early 1990s. Anthea=s networks included many of the trail blazing women who were opting into motherhood and limiting men to the biological rather than the social dimension of fatherhood:

Anthea: They were great advocates of lesbian motherhood and independent lesbian motherhood. They'd all used anonymous donors, so there were no fathers. In that context, the idea of having a child was very different, much more attractive to me and I was quite influenced

I: When you say independent, do you mean independent of men or independent of anyone else?

Anthea: Independent of men.

I: So it wouldn't preclude parenting with another woman?

Anthea: No. Oh I didn't want to have a child on my own. Some of them were in couples, some of them were single. But it was the idea of not needing a man for a relationship in order to conceive the child and not being caught up in the kind of messy situation where you divorce and then still have contact with someone that you may not want to be in contact with. I really was attracted by the idea of self-insemination where you could completely separate the sexual act from reproduction.

Timing was influenced by the experience of a close friend, in her early forties, who had desperately wanted a child but had been unable to conceive:

Anthea: So there were two things, seeing that it was possible, by meeting other women who'd done it, and seeing someone for whom it wasn't possible because she'd left it too late in term of her fertility. So I was 32 at the time and I thought, right, well for me it isn't exactly the right circumstances because I'm on my own - I didn't have a partner that I felt I could live with long-term, but I was in a job where I would get maternity pay, which is very important.... So I thought, right, in terms of my age it was a reasonably good time, I feel emotionally rich enough (laughter) and financially independent, because of having a job with maternity pay and I was in a network of - a ready-made network - of supportive women.

She viewed mothering with a female friend or partner as offering a positive alternative to the financial dependency which she believed would evolve in a heterosexual relationship:

I: So how did you feel being on your own or with a woman made a difference?
Anthea: I wasn't in a relationship with a man, so there was no danger of being dependent.

I: Right, so you could somehow fit having a child in with continuing to be financially independent?

Anthea: Yeah, and be my own person, and not at risk of dependence. I was very concerned about being dependent.

Initially she tried to get pregnant through the network. In common with informal women=s networks in major cities across England, women acted as intermediaries between donors in men=s groups (in this instance heterosexual men) and lesbians (and in some cases heterosexual feminists) seeking to become parents without the involvement of fathers. These networks operate in such a way as to ensure strict anonymity for both parents and donors. This is a preferred option for some women because of fears that

donors might later seek custody of the child and for men who are concerned about possible financial demands such as child support payments. While five women in the sample made use of these networks at some point in the process of becoming pregnant, most ended up using a known donor recruited either through an advertisement or via friendship networks. Like the majority of the sample, Anthea decided that she wanted her child to have the option of knowing who her biological father was, and so sought a donor through friends. Like other Jewish women in the study she was also keen to find a Jewish donor. Her lover at the time put her in contact with a gay colleague, Simon:

Anthea: So I went to his house and we discussed it at great length with him and what it was I was asking him to do and I was saying to him I wanted him to be a donor, but not to be an active father, not a social role as a father. And he agreed. I: Was he happy enough with that?

Anthea: He seemed to be happy, said he was happy, as far as he could think about it. He agreed and it was all very amicable and he was incredibly co-operative, making himself available when I needed him to be, and being very generous with his time. He's a very generous person.

Having agreed that Simon would have no contact with the child they parted company when Anthea became pregnant. Unusually, this agreement was to change:

Anthea: When she was born she looked exactly like him (laughter) and - well I was quite besotted with this child I'd given birth to and I wanted to share it with him as well. And I sent him a photo of her at a day old, saying if he'd like to meet her, you know, look at this amazing child. And he didn't reply. So I left it. I didn't think anything more of it, because it wasn't a very strong desire on my part that he should see her, it was like wanting to share this wonderful thing we both created.

However, having been open about the circumstances of her daughter's conception, and highly positive about the qualities of the father, it was not altogether surprising that Diana expressed an enthusiastic interest in meeting Simon:

I explained how she was conceived and that she was chosen and wanted and how he was this really nice guy who helped me to make her and she was very persistent and wanted to see this very nice guy. And I always described him as Daddy and told her his name. Which was what he and I had agreed. So she was talking like this, and I was thinking, oh, I could write to him again because I knew where he was. But in the meantime he had obviously been thinking about it quite a lot, but because of the arrangement we made he didn't want to invade our privacy really, and he didn't feel he had any right to contact me and say I'd like to meet this child. So he didn't. Being a very sensitive man he didn't want to impose at all. But he was talking to some friend and saying he knew he had this daughter, and he'd really like to see her, and this friend had a mutual friend - you know, it went through this telephone chain - and it got down to me, because my friends knew I would have been quite happy for Simon to meet Diana and that Diana really wanted to meet him... And so then we met without Diana and just talked about what does it mean that we're meeting up. Is this a one-off ... or starting some kind of relationship between them. And he said he'd like to have an on-going relationship, that she know him as a person...

I: So they saw each other fairly regularly?

Anthea: She was four when they met and they were seeing each other about once a month at first and then it got to about every week after a while, after a couple of years.

Sadly their relationship ended two years ago on Simon=s death. Interestingly, she speaks of having referred to the donor as `daddy= with her daughter. Respondent's were usually resistant to this idea, particularly when donors had no involvement in their children's lives. Daddy was seen to denote a social rather than biological relationship, and as such was an achieved status. One couple described a major row occurring when the biological mother inadvertently described the donor as daddy to their child.

Anthea and Cleo started their relationship when Diana was six years old. Cleo=s journey to parenting is interesting because of its similarity with so many of the parents in the study. She had strong desire to parent but had not felt able to contemplate a pregnancy herself. Fifteen women in the study expressed a longstanding desire to mother as a social experience but a reluctance to experience it biologically, while a further six had foregone biological motherhood because they believed that their sexuality ruled it out as

an option. The possibility of detaching motherhood from biology through the experience of social motherhood is yet another special feature of lesbian relationships:

Cleo: Right, well I put an advert in [a paper] for a partner - as you do - or as I did at the time. I was single for a number of years - but I put in the advert that I would welcome replies from women with children and I always say that... it should have said without children - but, no, seriously, I did feel that I would like to be in a family with a child and that was largely because of my own unfulfilled desire to be a mother. I mean I'm the eldest of a large family and family is very important to me, both my extended family and my nuclear family and I've never had a biological child myself for various reasons. I mean I've been a lesbian about 20 years now, and before I met Anthea I never imagined a situation where I could get pregnant and have a child - I'd never heard of self-insemination. If I had heard it would probably have been completely beyond the pale to imagine doing anything like that. And also, I suppose, it took me a long time to figure all these things out anyway, because I come from an Irish-Catholic background and there's lots and lots of issues over the years about, you know, not being completely open with my family and how to sort out all of that stuff. So it would have seemed impossible for me at the time to consider having a child of my own. So when I decided I wanted to try and actively look for a partner, one of the things I just thought about was maybe I should try and find a partner who already has a child. Of course, I didn't think through all the implications of what that might be like. Well, I did at the beginning, I was very serious and worried about the whole thing. And, you know, Diana was so charming and everything, I started to think well maybe I'm being overly worried and apprehensive and anticipating problems. But the reality of living with it of course is there's no way you can prejudge what it's really going to be like or know how to react to a situation.

Cleo's joke at the beginning alerts us, as we will see below, to some of the difficulties associated with step-parenting. They describe raising Diana as a joint project but an unequal division of responsibility, admitting that each have different kinds of relationships with Diana:

Cleo: Well she usually calls both of us by our name, but she will sometimes call Anthea Mum or Mummy or whatever, and I've never expected her to and I don't feel upset that she doesn't. But, you know, I feel a commitment to her and I've agreed that if anything happened to Anthea I would be Diana's guardian and I would make sure that everything was done in the best interest, but I think it's very difficult to make up for the fact that - or to compensate for the fact - that I missed

those first very vital years of bonding and there is this issue that, which is another dimension of being a lesbian family, is that also I'm a stepmother, I'm in that sort of position and it's taken - we've been together getting on for six years and it's taken really all that time to bond as a family. I mean not that it's ever final, but I think one of the things we've learnt the hard way is that it's very difficult for a third person coming to any relationship and I think the fact that Anthea and Diana were on their own together - I mean you didn't have a partner before me - meant that my coming in - I mean Diana was lovely towards me the first few weeks and months, wasn't she? I mean it was as if 'oh, who's this, you know, this is exciting' and then there came a time when she realised I was actually staying, and wasn't just a new playmate, and the trouble started, so that took a very long time. And so she's a joint - so yes, to answer your question, yes, we've very much a family and we're committed to each other. But I think that our relationships with Diana are very different.

Despite Cleo having been very involved in Diana's everyday care since the early days of their relationship, the child has found it hard to share her mother:

Cleo: I mean we've kind of tried to deal with it in the best way that we have and I think things are a lot better and I feel things are working out. Diana and I get on quite well together, but as I say, there isn't the closeness. We can go out together the three of us and have a nice time together - which at one time was very difficult, because Diana would constantly want to talk to Anthea and every time I opened my mouth I was glared at or talked over and I found that very difficult. But I think that's maybe where we do have an egalitarian relationship, you know, over the years I've talked to Anthea about all my feelings about it and you've never been rejecting over the fact that I have those feelings, which always astounded me, because I'm talking about her pride and joy sometimes in a way that's not very nice. But I mean it was important I could share those feelings... I mean I suppose the expression I use is sibling rivalry really, that's a lot of it was like.

Clearly, their difficulties will have resonances in most re-constructed families where there are older children who have been used to the undivided attention of their mothers. Their problems may well have been exacerbated by the usually positive feature of lesbian relationships - a more fluid approach to the organization of work in partnerships:

Anthea: I think we have a lot of differences about [approaching parenting] and one thing we've learnt gradually is that, mostly through stuff I've read about heterosexual step-families, in a way we jumped in too much early on and what we should have done, if we'd had the right advice.

Cleo: The right book.

Anthea: The right book - I'm a great believer in reading books on how to do it - Cleo should have kept a lower profile for the first few years really. But because I was working full-time initially, Cleo was home a lot, so it got a bit confused about authority, who had the most authority and I felt a bit undermined. Because we are very different in terms of boundaries. I'm much more fluid about boundaries. You see I think that's because you haven't raised a child from infancy, your views would be different. Because I thought I would be quite strict before I raised my own child. So I think it's a matter of experience. And also I do think there's a difference - I don't know if there's a difference in the biological relationship - or a difference in being around those first early years of infancy and toddler-hood. I think you do feel very protective - or I found myself very protective of her.

There is no easy way to enter a well-established close relationship between a mother and a strong willed child. While they have experienced difficulties within the family unit, extended kin have shown great acceptance and been a source of support:

Cleo: One of the things I've really been very pleased about is the way my own family, my extended family, responded and the fact that my niece and nephew come to stay with us a lot. They're like cousins together and my mother's very good and, you know, in some respects thinks of Diana as being her granddaughter... She doesn't really use that term with Diana but she said to me once, 'I feel like Diana=s another grandchild' and it's the treatment of Diana more than what she calls herself... She's very fond of Anthea, that helps a lot. But it feels important to me because, you know, because my mother and I have had quite a difficult relationship over the years and I feel it's her way of showing that she accepts my family . I think obviously it is complicated because she has two biological grandmothers, one of whom is Anthea=s mother, who's really the grandmother isn't she? So I think everybody understands that, so nobody else is coming in trying to compete with that - just as well really.

Cleo=s brothers and sisters are also very supportive:

Cleo: Well I have five brothers and as I say, my sister and I are very close... I'm very close to her two children and they come and stay with us a lot, Diana goes up there occasionally and they get on really well together, so they're like cousins and she's like an auntie to her. And of my brothers, you know, they're very accepting and when we all get together... they always Diana the same as all the other children.

I: Would any of your siblings' children see themselves as cousins?

Cleo: Yeah I think May and Harry would, that's my sister's children. They get on very well together actually.

Anthea: Yeah I think Diana treats them as family rather than as friends.

Another key person in Diana=s life is Paula, and old friend of Anthea=s who has been involved since Diana was a baby. Again, Diana had difficulties sharing Paula when she formed a long-term relationship :

Cleo: I think one of the main supports is Paula actually, don't you think? I mean Paula is the friend that Anthea spoke about earlier in the interview who - well - who's been the part-time Mummy, for want of a better word... Things have changed a bit. I think when I moved into the family, that made a bit of a difference. Paula and I have always gotten on very well together, but I think it did make a difference in terms of maybe the amount of time that Diana wants to spend with Paula...She still goes fairly regularly.

Anthea: It used to be once a week that Paula had her, from the time that she was six months old... It's more like a couple of times a month... - but she might not stay overnight. But they have a very special relationship. Diana feels very, very close to Paula. But I think the trouble is that Diana is used to having a one-to-one relationship with me, she's replicated that with Paula, they have a very intense one-to-one relationship and there isn't much room for her to involve Paula's partner. And so I think that's probably why they don't see as much of Diana because it's a bit uncomfortable for Sylvia, when Diana's there and ignoring her.

As this discussion clearly illustrates we must not forget a child=s agency in shaping his or her relationship with others. Further, if we seek to bring up girls to be confident and assertive we also have to contend with some of the more uncomfortable aspects of the exercise of their will.

CONCLUSION

Our five stories illustrate aspects of diversity and commonalities in the experience of lesbian couples with dependent children through donor insemination. They also expose some of the popular myths on this topic (see Alldred 1996), for example, the idea that

lesbian parenting takes place in a social vacuum. We have focused here on the involvement of donors/fathers and on the complexity of kinship relations, to show how like and unlike these families are to other sorts of family formations. In common with Lewin=s (1993:9) observations on the experience of single lesbian mothers in the U.S.A., biological kin featured strongly in respondents= accounts of their social interaction. We could equally have looked at the important friendship networks which supported their parenting, the presence of lesbian aunts and of heterosexual friends with children (covered so well in the `Families Of Choice= literature Weeks et al. 1998 and Weston 1991). Lesbian families are usually extended families which are supported by elaborate networks of friends and kin.

Our focus on couples reveals other interesting dimensions of kinship: the complexity of these relations and the importance respondents placed on having non-biogenetic ties recognized and validated by immediate and extended kin. Demanding recognition of kinship ties based on `similarity= represents an extremely radical departure from the economy of sexual `difference= underpinning conceptions of kinship more generally (see Butler 1990:38-43). It is no wonder that we noted the effort involved in achieving this end by all parties. One reason for their usual success in this respect, I believe, is that the presence of children helps make intelligible a lifestyle that can appear strange and `other= to wider heterosexual observers. This is supported, I think, by the way that often quite strained or difficult relationships between respondents and their parents were transformed as daughters became mothers and their parents became grandparents. It is also worth mentioning that many respondents experienced high levels of enthusiastic support in their quest to become, and their experience of being, parents from

heterosexual friends and siblings which often contrasted with the scepticism of lesbian friends without children.

Regardless of whether parenting was a shared project or not, mothering was usually carried out in a context where they experienced a great deal of practical and emotional support from partners, where routine domestic responsibilities were fairly evenly shared, and where there was a mutual recognition of a woman=s right to financial independence.

In the absence of a gender division of labour to inform decision-making around care and bread-winning the arrival of children was usually timed to suite the needs and circumstances of the biological mother. Beyond the confines of heterosexuality they had greater scope to challenge the connections between biological and social motherhood/fatherhood. By de-privileging the biological as signifier of motherhood and the capacity to mother (although this appears to be contingent on the relationship remaining intact), many were actively engaged in extending the meaning, content and consequence of mothering to include both partners (or even fathers) on equal terms. Thus, biological motherhood was a poor predictor of differences in income, employment hours or domestic contributions within partnerships (see detailed analysis in Dunne 1997b, 1998a).

In their everyday lives of nurturing, housework and bread-winning, respondents are living testimony to the radical potential of extending the boundaries of womanhood. They confound popular stereotypes of lesbians as manly and uninterested or even incapable of responding to the needs of children. By finding a way round the reproductive limitations of their sexuality they experience their position as gatekeepers between

children and biological fathers in an unusual way. Unhampered by the constraints of heterosexuality (emotional and sexual) - they can choose to include men on the basis of the qualities they can bring into children=s lives. It is no accident, I believe, that the women usually chose to involve gay men. These men were seen as representing more acceptable forms of masculinity, and their sexuality barred them from some of legal rights that have been extended to heterosexual fathers. Ironically, we find examples of highly productive models of co-operation between women and men in this project.

Their positioning outside conventionality and the similarities they share as women enables and indeed insists upon the redefinition of the meaning and content of motherhood. Thus, when choosing to opt into motherhood they are anticipating something very different from the heterosexual norm. Some felt that their gender parity and commitment to egalitarianism enabled a conscious recognition and articulation of the power that was perceived to derive from the actual bodily experience of creating another human being. Within the gender context framing their arrangements, they felt safe in identifying and celebrating this special biological/psychological connectedness with a child because it did not ultimately lead to polarisation within the partnership in relation to access to other sources of social reward, such as an identity derived from paid employment. Interestingly, when identifying actual or potential power imbalances in their relationship it was not unusual for non-biological mothers to cite this material connectedness of their partner with the child/ren. This awareness motivated some to seek to redress the balance by going through the biology of having children themselves.

At one level, motherhood bridges the gap between the known and the unknown. It represents a common currency where we can predict the routines, pleasures and concerns of parents, and sexuality can be sidelined. At another level, however, we have seen that their experience of motherhood seems quite different to that of most heterosexual mothers (Dunne 1998a). Importantly, by building bridges in this way friends, colleagues and extended family bear witness to these differences, and their experience reflects back into the lives of others. Much of the recent scholarship on sexuality, most notably that which falls within the Queer Theory paradigm, sees a radical future in subverting gender categories through practices of parody (Butler 1990). To this end, the influential philosopher Judith Butler (1990) asks us to rethink the transformatory potential of practices such as 'drag, cross dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities' (p137). However, my concern is that in our contemporary preoccupation with these exotic and exciting aspects of sexual radicalism, we ignore the challenge to the material world posed by ordinary lesbian women and gay men (see illustration in Dunne 1998a). In the prioritization of egalitarian ideals and in the re-negotiation of the boundaries, meaning and content of parenting they help to make intelligible the unimaginable to others. By building bridges between the known and the unknown, their lives represent, I believe, a fundamental challenge to the foundation of the gender order.

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**OPTING INTO MOTHERHOOD:
LESBIANS BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES
AND REDEFINING THE MEANING
OF PARENTHOOD**

Gillian A. Dunne

**OPTING INTO MOTHERHOOD:
LESBIANS BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES AND TRANSFORMING
THE MEANING OF PARENTHOOD**

Abstract:

This paper draws on the experience of 29 lesbian couples who have opted into motherhood via donor insemination. To illustrate aspects of diversity and commonality in the experience of becoming and being mothers I focus on the stories of five couples. This reveals a complex and contradictory situation. On the one hand, by embracing motherhood lesbians are making their lives intelligible to others (heterosexual friends, extended kin) - their experience as mothers represents a common currency which bridges the gap between the known and the unknown. On the other hand, their sexuality and the gender dynamics of their relationship, both *necessitates* the transformation of the boundaries, meaning and content of parenthood and *facilitates* the construction of more self-reflexive, egalitarian approaches to financing and caring for children. I argue that the experience of lesbians who have opted into motherhood represents a fundamental challenge to the foundation of the gender order.

