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*Family Relations*, Volume 41, Issue 2 (Apr., 1992), 224-229.

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Mon Apr 21 13:45:46 2003

# Relationship Quality in a Sample of Lesbian Couples with Children and Child-Free Lesbian Couples\*

Leslie Koepke, Jan Hare, and Patricia B. Moran\*\*

*The purpose of this study is to examine the quality of lesbian relationships by three factors: presence of children, extent of disclosure concerning the nature of the relationship, and longevity of the relationship. Overall, findings indicate that solid and happy relationships existed for the total sample of couples. However, couples with children scored significantly higher on relationship satisfaction and sexual relationship. No differences were found by longevity of the relationship or disclosure. Implications for family life educators and family practitioners are discussed.*

Almost 40 years ago, Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard (1953) estimated that 1 in 10 American women is exclusively homosexual. Approximately 33% of these women have children (Moses & Hawkins, 1982). Currently, at least 1.5 million lesbian mothers reside with their children as a family unit in the United States (Hoeffler, 1981).

Despite the fact that information concerning the commonality of lesbian couples with and without children has long existed, very little is known about lesbian relationships. This is undoubtedly due, in part, to the devaluation of homosexuality in the United States (Bozett, 1988). Attitudes about homosexual parents are an amplification of the general societal disapproval of homosexuality. Indeed, "lesbian mother" is often considered a contradiction in terms (Baptiste, 1987). This bias may be attributed to a belief that lesbians lack the feminine qualities of nurturance necessary for adequate mothering (Kurdek, 1988; Wright, 1990). It may also be attributed to a belief that certain characteristics of lesbian relationships make them ill-suited for parenting children. While homosexuality continues to be generally ignored as a subject for research, an increasing number of family science researchers and practitioners are recognizing the need to better understand qualities of lesbian relationships and parenting in lesbian relationships. This change is due to new laws concerning post-divorce custody decisions when the mother is in a lesbian relationship, the increasingly open nature of homosexual relationships, and a trend in alternative insemination that is expected to substantially increase the number of lesbian families over the next decade.

The purpose of this study is to examine the quality of lesbian relationships by presence of children, longevity of the relationship, and degree of disclosure about the nature of the couple's relationship. Information about qualities of lesbian relationships and parenting in lesbian relationships can be utilized by family life

educators who have contact with lesbian families. This information also has broad implications for addressing social concerns about an ever-growing number of children who are reared in lesbian families.

## Characteristics of Lesbian Couples

Knowledge of lesbian relationships has emerged from studies which have focused almost exclusively upon child-free couples (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Kelly, 1972; Kurdek, 1988; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). No data have been gathered that identify the impact of children on lesbian couple relationships. This absence of data contrasts sharply with the research on heterosexual couples which suggests a generally negative impact of children on selected measures of marital satisfaction (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Nock, 1979; Schumm & Bugaighis, 1986; White & Booth, 1985).

Research characterizes lesbian couples without children as being more romantic, idyllic, fused, enmeshed, and merged than heterosexual couples (Burch, 1982; Kaufman, Harrison, & Hyde, 1984; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Roth, 1985). A review of the literature reveals two primary themes concerning lesbian relationships: (a) the importance of emotional intimacy and expressiveness and (b) the importance of egalitarian relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978; Ramsey, Latham, & Lindquist, 1978).

Although some clinical studies (Kaufman et al., 1984; Krestan & Bepko, 1980) have implied that lesbian relationships are enmeshed and possibly unhealthy, others have shown that lesbian relationships are exceptionally healthy. Zacks, Green, and Marrow (1988) compared the cohesion, adaptability, and satisfaction of 52 lesbian couples with those of 1,140 heterosexual couples who had responded

to an earlier study by Olson et al. (1983). Lesbian couples reported significantly higher levels of cohesion, adaptability, and satisfaction. Zacks et al. (1988) suggested that the high levels of cohesion and adaptability experienced among lesbian couples may help them to function more successfully in a predominantly heterosexual world. Compared to lesbian couples, heterosexual couples have a broad base of familial, community, and societal support. Lesbian couples, in contrast, may be forced to rely exclusively upon one another. Consequently, lesbians may be perceived as having more permeable emotional boundaries and less rigid interpersonal boundaries in their relationship with their partners. Zacks et al. (1988) also suggested that the term enmeshment may have evolved from a traditional male-oriented view which values independence and strong boundaries over dependence and emotional closeness. Such enmeshment may also be related to the socialization of lesbians as women which, as numerous feminist authors posit, contributes to women being more relationship-oriented than are men (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Goldner, 1985).

A study by Kurdek (1988) supports the findings of Zacks et al. (1988). Kurdek found that lesbian couples reported higher relationship satisfaction, higher liking of their partner, greater trust and shared decision making than gay male couples. Kurdek (1988) suggested that lesbian relationships are not necessarily better

\*The authors gratefully acknowledge the couples who participated in this study. Thanks also go to Chris Ness for her assistance in data analysis, and Carrie Nelson, Denise Skinner, and Karen Zimmerman for their helpful comments on this article.

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Key Words: lesbian relationships, lesbian stepfamilies.

(Family Relations, 1992, 41, 224-229.)



than gay relationships, rather that higher scores for lesbians may be due to socialization which reinforces nurturance, expressiveness, and caring among females.

### *Characteristics of Lesbian Stepfamilies*

Baptiste (1987) used the term "step-family" to denote a cohabitative living arrangement which includes two adults and their children—biological, adopted, or conceived through alternative insemination from previous heterosexual relationships. The family science literature rarely identifies as stepfamilies two same-sex adults who live together and raise children who were conceived in previous heterosexual relationships. However, these same-sex relationships are characterized by mutual commitment, property sharing, emotional and physical intimacies similar to cohabiting heterosexual couples with children (Baptiste, 1987). Still, the family science and family therapy literature has all but ignored them, including the unique challenges they face and their possible similarity with the growing number of heterosexual stepfamilies.

The descriptive literature on lesbian stepfamilies identifies them as a unique subset of stepfamilies and describes typical parenting issues most likely to be faced by the newly formed couples. Custody problems, differing discipline philosophies, involvement of coparent, or disclosure to family, friends, and co-workers are among those issues being addressed by family practitioners (Baptiste, 1987; DiBella, 1979; Roth, 1985; Sagle, 1989; Wright, 1990).

### *Disclosure and Longevity of the Couple Relationship*

Some lesbian stepfamilies experience the need for secrecy about the lifestyle of the adults. While many children are informed of the parent's sexual orientation, they may feel burdened to maintain secrecy for fear of negative consequences to the whole family (Sagle, 1989). The isolation resulting from such need for secrecy would clearly be expected to negatively impact on relationship quality.

Also expected to impact relationship quality is the length of time a couple has been together. In a sample of heterosexual married, heterosexual cohabiting, and gay and lesbian couples, Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) found that the stage of relationship was a robust predictor of relationship quality, not related to the type of couple. Generally speaking, couples living together the longest reported greater relationship satisfaction than other couples (Kurdek, 1989).

## *The Present Study*

This study compares nonclinic samples of child-free lesbian couples and lesbian couples with children on various measures of relationship quality including cohesion, adaptability, and a variety of relationship enrichment variables. Conducting research in the gay community is fraught with methodological problems (Morin, 1977). Obtaining representative samples of lesbians has been a continuous problem for researchers and has led to cautious interpretations of research results. The majority of the literature on lesbian relationship characteristics is based on samples of lesbian couples in therapy. An additional source of data is based on self-reports of individual lesbians responding to questions pertaining to lesbian relationships. These data often include retrospective perceptions of failed relationships. Thus, little nonclinic data are available from lesbian partners in a current, committed relationship and virtually no data are available on the impact of children on these relationships.

The following research question is examined: Are there significant differences in the 10 subscales of ENRICH by presence of children, by level of disclosure concerning the nature of the couples' relationship, and by relationship longevity? This question is answered using a 2 x 2 x 2 Multivariate Analysis of Variance.

## *Method*

### *Sample*

Subjects were 47 lesbian couples, 40% of whom had children and 60% of whom were child-free. Couples were defined as women who perceived themselves as being "in a committed relationship with another woman." Respondents were residents of Washington, Oregon, California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Washington, DC.

### *Procedure*

Subjects were obtained using a non-random snowball sampling technique. The researchers identified eight individuals who had contacts in the lesbian communities of several cities in the above mentioned states. These individuals were asked to distribute surveys to lesbian couples within their network; all eight individuals agreed to help with the project. In addition, three feminist bookstores were willing to display a box of surveys labeled "Lesbian Couples/Families Research Project" which could voluntarily be picked up by customers. Surveys were paired and coded by state and numbers so that

partners could be matched. Each survey included a self-addressed, stamped envelope in which individuals returned the completed survey to the researchers. One hundred nine surveys were returned. Of those, 3 were incomplete, 12 were unpaired, and 94 were paired. Therefore, the final sample was 47 lesbian couples.

## *Measurements*

The instruments used in this study were ENRICH (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1982) and a 17-item researcher-designed questionnaire which included questions examining disclosure of the nature of the couples' relationship, relationship longevity, presence of children, education, annual income, occupation, and age. The ENRICH instrument was minimally reworded for use with lesbian couples; that is, "relationship" and "partner" were substituted for "marriage" and "spouse."

ENRICH measures the nurturing and enriching dimensions of an intimate relationship. Of the 12 ENRICH subscales, Egalitarian Roles and Children and Relationship subscales were omitted for this study. The remaining 10 subscales, each containing 10 items, included the following: idealistic distortion, marital (relationship) satisfaction, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, family/friends, and religious orientation. Internal reliability coefficients for subscales range from .48 to .92, as reported by Olson et al. (1983). The sexual relationship subscale has somewhat low reliability at .48.

The couple was the unit of analysis for ENRICH. That is, couple mean scores were computed for all subscales and for the total scale. According to Olson et al. (1983), the couple mean score is an important measure even though it may blur individual differences of the couple. Because the mean score falls between the individual scores of the partners, it may, in fact, more accurately reflect the behaviors of the couple as a unit.

## *Results*

### *Participants*

A total of 47 lesbian couples (94 individuals) participated in this study. Seventy-two percent of the sample reported their marital status as "never married," 1% as "married," 1% as "separated," and 23% as divorced."

Of the total sample, 19 couples (40%) reported that one or both of the partners were parents to biological, adopted, or alternatively conceived children. Twenty-eight couples (60%) report-



Table 1.  
Intercouple Reliability on ENRICH Subscales for Total Sample Using Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between First Persons in the Couple and Second Persons in the Couple

Subscales	r
1. Idealistic Distortion	.45**
2. Relationship Satisfaction	.68***
3. Personality Issues	.40*
4. Communication	.50***
5. Conflict Resolution	.52***
6. Financial Management	.60***
7. Leisure Activities	.22
8. Sexual Relationship	.48**
9. Friends/Family	.41*
10. Religious Orientation	.66***

\* $p = .01$ . \*\* $p = .001$ . \*\*\* $p = .0001$ .

ed that neither individual in the couple had children. Of the 19 couples with children, 4 couples identified themselves as parents of adult children and elected to respond to the questionnaire as a "couple" rather than as a "family." Therefore, results are based on 15 couples with children residing with them at least 6 months of the year and 32 child-free couples. Average number of children living with the 15 parenting couples was 2.3. Mean age of the children was 14 years ( $SD = 5.0$ , range 1-20 years old). Eighty-seven percent of couples with children indicated that children were aware of the nature of the couple's relationship.

The mean age of the total sample of women was 36.3 years (range = 21-66). Mean age for couples with children was 37.3 years (range = 26-50) and 36.0 years (range = 21-66) for child-free couples. Over 87% (41) of the couples lived together. Of the six couples who did not live together, two couples had dependent children who lived with them more than half the year while four couples were child-free. Mean length of the couple relationship for the total sample was 5.1 years ( $SD = 3.9$ ). Mean length of the relationship for couples with children was 5.5 years ( $SD = 4.0$ ) and 5.0 years ( $SD = 3.8$ ) for child-free couples.

This sample was moderately disclosing about the nature of the couple relationship, that is, that the two women were

intimate partners. Disclosure was measured by 8 categories of people to whom couples could reveal their relationship: close friends, ex-spouse, parents, siblings, co-workers, employer, neighbors, and physician. Mean disclosure for the total sample was 4.4 categories ( $SD = 1.9$ , range = 0-8). Mean level of disclosure for couples with children was 5.2 categories ( $SD = 1.8$ , range = 2-8). The mean for child-free couples was 4.1 categories ( $SD = 1.6$ , range = 0-8). Highest ranking categories of disclosure for couples both with and without children were close friends (97%) and parents (59%).

The majority of this sample was college educated: 45% held a 4-year college degree; 27% held a masters degree; 13% held a Ph.D., J.D., or M.D.; 3% reported "other degree"; 10% had attended some college, and 2% had a high school diploma. Mean annual couple income for the total sample was \$55,687 ( $SD = \$21,495$ ). Mean annual income for couples with children was \$60,294 ( $SD = \$21,203$ ) and \$53,383 ( $SD = \$21,787$ ) for child-free couples. Respondents noted their occupations on an open-ended question which revealed that the majority of the sample were "helping professionals."

### Internal Reliability

Cronbach's alpha was used to check the internal consistency of the ENRICH subscales using couple's scores for the total sample. All subscales had good internal reliability with the exception of Leisure Activities on ENRICH. Coefficients for the ENRICH subscales were as follows: Idealistic Distortion = .71, Relationship Satisfaction = .91, Personality Issues = .90, Communication = .84, Conflict Resolution = .90, Financial Management = .86, Sexual Relationship = .92, Family/Friends = .69, Religious Orientation = .83, Leisure Activities = -.05.

### Intercouple Reliability

Intercouple reliability for this sample was checked using Pearson Correlation.

Intercouple reliability for the total sample for ENRICH was  $r = .68$ ,  $p < .0001$  (see Table 1 for intercouple reliabilities for ENRICH subscales). Differences on intercouple reliabilities for couples with and without children are noted in Table 2.

### Research Question

Are there significant differences in the ten ENRICH subscales by presence of children, by level of disclosure concerning the nature of the couples' relationship, and by relationship longevity? This question was answered using a 2 x 2 x 2 MANOVA. That is, the dependent variables (idealistic distortion, relationship satisfaction, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, family/friends, and religious orientation) were examined by presence of children, disclosure, and relationship longevity. Corresponding to the number of categories disclosed to, disclosure was categorized as high for scores ranging from 8-5 and low for scores ranging from 4-0. Relationship longevity was categorized as high for couples together  $\geq 5$  years and low for couples together  $\leq 4$  years.

A significant multiple  $F$  main effect ( $p < .0001$ ) was found by children (Table 3). Univariate  $F$ -tests showed that relationship satisfaction [ $F = (1,30) 9.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ] and sexual relationship [ $F = (1, 30) 4.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ] were significantly different by children. That is, couples with children experienced higher relationship satisfaction ( $\bar{X} = 41.6$ ,  $SD = 7.3$ ) than did child-free couples ( $\bar{X} = 39.3$ ,  $SD = 4.4$ ) and couples with children felt better about their sexual relationship ( $\bar{X} = 43.1$ ,  $SD = 7.6$ ) than did child-free couples ( $\bar{X} = 41.0$ ,  $SD = 5.1$ ). See Table 4 for a comparison of ENRICH subscale means for both groups. No significant interaction effects were found.

### Discussion

#### Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Relationship

Results of this study show that lesbian couples with children scored significantly higher than child-free lesbian couples on Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Relationship. It is important to note, however, that the findings indicate that solid and happy relationships existed for both groups. The intent of this exploratory study of lesbian couples and families was not to compare them with heterosexual families. However, it is interesting that these findings are not consistent with studies on the impact of children on heterosexual relationships, which have shown a generally negative impact on

Table 2.  
Intercouple Reliability on ENRICH Subscales Using Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between First Persons and Second Persons in Couples With Children and Child-Free Couples

Subscales	Couples With Children (n = 30 individuals)	Child-Free Couples (n = 64 individuals)
Idealistic Distortion	.60*	.33
Relationship Satisfaction	.82****	.58***
Personality Issues	.46	.32
Conflict Resolution	.57*	.49**
Financial Management	.62*	.58***
Leisure Activities	.49	.20
Sexual Relationship	.74**	.29
Friends/Family	.90*	.53***
Religious Orientation	.68**	.77****

\* $p = .05$ . \*\* $p = .01$ . \*\*\* $p = .001$ . \*\*\*\* $p = .0001$ .



selected factors of relationship satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1983; Rollins & Feidman, 1970; Schumm & Bugaighis, 1986; White & Booth, 1985). Several explanations for this difference between heterosexual and lesbian relationships seem reasonable.

First, in the group of 15 lesbian couples with children, the majority of birth parents (16 individuals) had previously been in a relationship with their children's father. It is possible that these lesbian mothers did not recognize their primary sexual orientation at the time of their involvement in a heterosexual relationship. Therefore, their responses to relationship and sexual satisfaction questions might be inflated if, in fact, they were influenced by comparison to the heterosexual relationship which did not match their primary sexual orientation. This same comparison was probably not as strongly reflected in the scores of child-free lesbian couples. This explanation is supported by comments written on questionnaires by lesbian mothers such as: "I am very pleased with my relationship. After 19 years of marriage, I didn't know one could have such an intimate and fulfilling relationship. I'm so glad to be lesbian." "I would never again be in any relationship except a lesbian relationship. Even given all the problems, it beats by 100% being in a relationship with a man."

Another explanation of higher relationship satisfaction may be related to the length of relationship. Twenty-one child-free couples had been together for 5 years or less as compared to 8 couples with children. Seven couples with children had been together nearly 14 years in comparison to the 11 child-free couples, the majority of whom had been together less than 10 years. The couples with children represent lesbian families who were willing to risk substantial negative consequences in order to be together. Those consequences for lesbian mothers may include loss of custody and rejection by their children. For the partner who did not bring children to the relationship, the consequences may include a disrupted lifestyle as well as blame and rejection by the children. It seems reasonable that only highly satisfied and solidly committed couples would risk such consequences. Therefore, couples with children who were less satisfied may have decided early in the relationship that the quality of their relationship did not warrant taking such risks and consequently they would not have been included in this sample.

It was hypothesized that the presence of children would negatively impact a couple's sexual relationship, since the presence of children decreases a couple's time and privacy. Contrary to expect-

tations, results indicated that lesbian couples with children scored significantly higher on sexual satisfaction. These results may reflect differences between couples with children and child-free couples in terms of sexual relationship goals. Sexual intimacy may be a more significant focus of child-free couple's interactions. Interaction for couples with children may not be focused as much on sexual intimacy, simply because of the multiple distractions of family life. For these women, the success of their relationship may be related less to their sexual life and more to their ability to cope well with family life. A less intense focus on sexual intimacy may result in a more optimistic evaluation and thus higher scores on this variable for couples with children.

Interestingly, couples with children were in greater agreement about the sexual relationship subscale than were child-free couples (see Table 2). Olson et al. (1982) reported that the Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Relationship subscales have a correlation coefficient of .68. In this lesbian sample these two subscales were also highly correlated. Pearson correlation coefficient for the total sample was .77 ( $p < .0001$ ). For couples with children the correlation coefficient was .93 ( $p < .0001$ ); for child-free couples it was .58 ( $p < .0001$ ). Closer examination of sexual relationship items indicates that intimacy issues rather than sexual gratification seem to be what is measured. ("I'm completely satisfied with the amount of affection my partner gives me." "It is easy and comfortable for me to talk to my partner about sexual issues.") Therefore, it appears that Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Relationship may not be distinct variables (see Table 3).

## Research Implications

Clearly, findings from this sample of middle and upper middle income, highly educated lesbians may not be generalizable to the whole lesbian population. Limited variance among couples in disclosure about the nature of their relationship may have minimized the possibility of finding

Table 3.  
Multivariate Tests of Significance for Ten Subscales of ENRICH

Effect of Children		
Test Name	Value	Exact F
Pillais	.74131*	6.01775 <sup>ab</sup>
Hotellings	2.86559*	6.01775 <sup>ab</sup>
Wilks	.25869*	6.01775 <sup>ab</sup>
Roys	.74131	

<sup>a</sup>df (Hyp) = 10.00

<sup>b</sup>df (Err) = 21.00

\* $p = .0001$

significant results. Undoubtedly, the sampling technique which relied upon couples being known to the individuals who distributed surveys as a "lesbian couple" contributed to the limited variance.

The ENRICH scale used in this study was developed for heterosexual couples. Based upon the Cronbach coefficients, the instrument appears to be an effective measurement of relationship variables for lesbian couples. Nevertheless, this scale was particularly troublesome for the participants in this study. They were frustrated by the length of the scale and the fact that many items were worded as double negatives. For example, one item reads as follows: "I have never regretted my relationship with my partner, not even for a moment." Possible responses ranged from *Almost never* to *Almost always*. This item was so confusing to respondents that the researchers received several phone calls from participants asking to have it clarified. A few surveys were returned incomplete with well-articulated complaints which were generally related to ENRICH. This instrument could be improved by rewording several items to read more clearly. Furthermore, the Sexual Relationship subscale must be revised in order to reflect sexual issues rather than intimacy issues, thus making it distinct from the Relationship Satisfaction scale.

In spite of the negative comments about ENRICH, many positive statements were made about the purpose of the study. Specifically, couples with children were gratified that they were being recog-

Table 4.  
Means for ENRICH Subscales

	Child-Free Couples		Couples with Children	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
Idealistic Distortion	18.7	2.4	18.8	3.6
Relationship Satisfaction	39.3	4.4	41.6	7.3
Personality Issues (negative qualities)	16.6	3.9	18.4	6.8
Communication	40.1	3.8	38.7	6.2
Conflict Resolution	42.0	5.5	40.1	6.0
Financial Management	40.1	6.2	38.4	6.3
Leisure Activities	31.4	2.6	32.5	3.5
Sexual Relationship	41.0	5.1	43.0	7.6
Family/Friends	39.0	4.3	38.7	3.0
Religious Orientation	27.0	8.2	27.0	7.0

nized as a family. This supports the need for further study of lesbians in the context of family. In particular, future studies must be sensitive to the trend of alternative insemination within the lesbian community. Future studies must strive for larger samples which include subgroups of various types of lesbian families including families in which both women are biological or adoptive parents, only one woman is the parent, the child has been conceived by alternative insemination, and the children are grown.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

### Family Concerns

Comments written at the end of the questionnaire provide some evidence of the family concerns experienced by lesbian couples, with and without children. For example, the birth mother of a one-year-old son conceived by alternative insemination offered this: "It is stressful that we do not get the financial advantages automatically given to heterosexual couples (i.e., family membership at health clubs, tax advantages, access to family health insurance coverage and on and on)." Her partner wrote, "A lack of awareness and understanding of our relationship is painful." The co-parent of two school-age children (whose partner was the biological mother) commented, "There are times when having to work out time as a couple in between time with children and work is hard. Also time alone is scarce. But we are a family and we work things out as such." One child-free woman reported that the greatest difficulty of being in a lesbian relationship was "not being able to be legally married. We would like children, but are fearful of the way society will treat them." Written comments by the participants in this study illustrated a recurring theme of wishing to be recognized as a valid, effectively functioning family. There has been some activity at state and local levels with respect to addressing family concerns such as these. For example, communities such as Seattle, Minneapolis, Madison, and San Francisco have passed domestic partnership ordinances which permit non-traditional families access to benefits and programs that are ordinarily reserved for traditional family models (Wisensale, 1991).

### Suggestions for Practitioners

Practitioners can also address these concerns at a more individual level by considering the following suggestions related to working with lesbian families (Baptiste, 1987; Hare & Koepke, 1990; Roth, 1985; Sagle, 1989):

- An examination of personal values and attitudes may reveal possible bias. Special attention should be given to attitudes concerning child rearing in gay and lesbian families. Even individuals who believe that same-sex relationships are a legitimate choice for adults may feel that children will suffer from being reared in such families. Recognizing negative attitudes and stereotypes may help the practitioner avoid projecting those stereotypes onto the lesbian family. For example, if a teacher perceives the child as coming from an "abnormal" home, that teacher may provoke problems where none exist. In addition, therapists who have a deep conviction that heterosexual families are superior to gay families will not be effective with lesbian families.

- The family members' experience can be normalized by reminding them of the wide diversity among American families. Children, in particular, may need to be reminded of all the ways people can be a family.

- It is important that therapists and educators avoid automatically linking the family's problems, especially those involving children, to the sexual preference and lifestyle of the adults. Family difficulties may more likely be related to personality differences among family members, normative developmental issues, or problems that are common to stepfamilies.

- Familiarity with gay community organizations and resources may benefit lesbian families. A gay parents' support group may be more effective than professional therapy in providing information about how to be a lesbian parent in a straight world. For some families, such groups may be a beneficial adjunct to therapy.

- Finally, it is vitally important for helping professionals working with lesbian families to fortify them against external stressors by identifying for all members of the family that supporting each other may be especially important. Reminding them that their family is legitimate, and that sometimes what may appear to be a stressor operating within the family may actually have its source outside the family may serve as valuable buffers against difficult social situations.

### Lesbian Relationships As a Context for Raising Children

A further implication of this preliminary examination of the quality of lesbian relationships concerns the suitability of lesbian relationships as a context for rearing children. The quality of the relationship between heterosexual caregivers has received much attention in the literature on child development (Maccoby,

1980). This literature indicates that children generally thrive in an environment in which there is a stable, loving relationship between caregivers. Children benefit in such an environment both in terms of having a model of a healthy, loving relationship and in terms of adults reaching their full parenting capabilities supported by their partners. Although this study did not measure the well-being of children, it provides evidence that, in terms of relationship qualities between adult caregivers, lesbian families can provide a positive context for child rearing. Drawing this implication from the findings of this study does not dismiss the often stressful social stigma of having a homosexual parent. However, it is important that educators, clinicians, and practitioners who work with lesbian families understand that lesbian relationships can provide a positive family environment for child rearing, and that such an environment is likely to buffer children from the negative consequences of living in a socially stigmatized family.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to investigate a variety of relationship qualities among lesbian couples by presence of children, longevity of the relationship, and disclosure concerning the nature of the couple's relationship. Lesbian couples with children scored significantly higher on measures of relationship satisfaction and sexual relationship. No differences in relationship quality were found by longevity or disclosure. Overall, this sample reflected well-adjusted and happy couples in both groups. Future research should explore child outcomes in terms of relationship qualities in a variety of family forms including lesbian and gay families, blended heterosexual families, and intact heterosexual families.

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