

Lesbian Motherhood: Using Oral Histories of the 1970'S and 1980'S to Examine How Lesbian Women Relate on Parenting

Emily la Bonte
History and Gender Studies Department
The University of Utah at Salt Lake City
215 S. Central Campus Dr. Suite 310
Salt Lake City, Utah 84112 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth Clement

Abstract

This paper will examine how lesbian mothers in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1970's to the early 1980's share a common threat of identity as mothers. Through interviews conducted [in the 1970's and 1980's] for a previous project by the author and professor Ellen Lewin, these women self-identify best with other lesbian mothers. However, they express their relatedness more with straight women who are mothers than lesbians who are not mothers. The lived experience of being a parent and a woman has much more bearing on these women's daily activities as well as lifelong perspectives. The interviewed women overwhelmingly surround themselves with other mothers who may not necessarily be lesbians. These women chose to associate with other mothers over associating with lesbian women who are either hostile or indifferent to children and child raising. Even the interviewees who did not first become pregnant as a matter of their own choice or planning align themselves with those who are willing to accept their children as part of their community. An important dynamic of this self-identification taking place in these interviews deals with socio-economic status. The sentiment that the respondents are better understood by other mothers tended to be most pronounced within working class households. The hardships of raising a child or children under financial pressures made the need for solidarity with other parents in their community and beyond that much more crucial. Drawing from these interviews, there does not appear to be a significant difference with these women's devotion to being mothers between having male or female children.

Keywords: Lesbianism, motherhood, feminism, identity

I. Introduction

Various fields of study have devoted scholarship to the intersection lesbian motherhood beginning in earnest since the 1980's, following what has been termed "the lesbian baby boom." According to Eileen Levy's article, "the lesbian mother occupies a marginal position within both society and the lesbian community."¹ She elaborates on how the lesbian community falls short for these mothers, that it "seemed to be a source of stress for the women who perceived that it was unsupportive of or ambivalent about their roles as mothers."² But as a social work researcher, she focused her analysis the connection the greater community had with lesbian mothers, not the other way around. As with much literature on the subject, she used fears of custody battles between homophobic and heterosexist ex-husbands as the unit of measure to determine the degree to which lesbian mothers struggled to relate to the outside world, with others who did not share their seemingly rare intersection of identity. She also highlighted lesbianism as the prevailing identity while placing motherhood as a derivative.

Amy Hequembourg and Michael Farrell's article goes into more depth of the relationship between motherhood and lesbianism and how two conflicting identities, one marginalized and the other mainstream take up such a unique space. Detailing this struggle "lesbian-mothers must construct and receive validation for their identities in a variety

of networks ranging from their nuclear and extended families to the health, education, and legal systems outside the family.”³

While this study looks more closely at lesbian mother’s lives and their interpersonal relationships, it does not expand on the relationship-based scope of the Levy analysis. We are left wanting for the introspective conversations going on in these mothers’ heads. The article also takes a decided stance that while motherhood was certainly not a minor identity, lesbianism was the bedrock of their identity. Their experiences as mothers was always presented vis-à-vis their lesbianism, not the other way around.

A differing theme, that of motherhood as a prevailing identity, arose from the oral histories Ellen Lewin gathered in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s with lesbian mothers. The interviews I will be using for this piece began in 1975 as research for her doctoral dissertation on lesbian motherhood. Lewin conducted the interviews in San Francisco, California and the surrounding area a few years later, from 1977 to 1981. They number over 100. They later became the central source base for her 1993 book *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture*. In the first chapter entitled “Lesbian Mothers,” she reveals her original research question in compiling these ethnographies. She asked if the assumption that motherhood burdens woman with a devalued status in most societies, then why do some women, namely lesbians through artificial means “purposefully propel themselves into this problematic situation?”⁴ These interviews have proven to be wonderfully rich sources of candid and frank personal exploration of what it means to be a mother, a lesbian, and how one influences the other. These women offer a glimpse into the practical and logistical experience of being a mother and belonging to a marginalized community. They provide unique and especially telling accounts of how much has changed (and not changed) for lesbian mothers since the late 1970’s.

Each interview has drastically different perspectives. Some women, for example have one small child that they conceived of by artificial insemination. Others have many children in their late teens or early twenties. They offer a varied amount of perspective and hindsight. Some respondents identify as bisexual while others identify as strictly lesbian. Some are much more open to personal and existential questions, giving more information than the interviewer was prepared for. And still others resist questions as prying and imposing. By following Lewin’s scope, potential analysis on motherhood is perfectly packaged, awaiting the application of analysis.

The main theme from one history in particular is the struggles that she experienced being a mother as opposed to her obstacles being a lesbian. She, a graduate student in social work, expressed emphatically that “in my experience, I have more in common with women who have children, period.”⁵ She found some help from lovers at different intervals and even in some childcare collectives that her exposure to the feminist movement helped her find. But for most of the interview, this woman faced numerous challenges of being a single mother and could not always rely on any one person or entity for the care that her daughter, Corrine, needed. For this reason, she felt that her struggles and identity as a mother superseded her struggles and identity as a lesbian. Much like this woman, other oral histories of lesbian mothers show that practical issues of motherhood shape their identity so profoundly that many lesbian mothers have to prioritize motherhood over lesbianism in their identity and that they felt forced to do so because of the lack of support that they received from the people around them. Due to the daily needs that mothers experience, they are more likely to identify with other individuals who are parents themselves or at minimum respect and contribute to the care-giving process. While this mother-identifying tendency does not preclude lesbianism, it does not discriminate based on sexual orientation. The lived experience of being a parent and a woman has much more bearing on these women’s daily activities as well as lifelong perspectives.

2. Oral Histories

These women described their identity much more in the context of being a mother than anything else and this related to lesbianism only on a secondary level. When asked what the most important turning points in her life were, another woman, a student of women’s studies said, “My children were the most radicalizing turning point of my entire life, even more than being a lesbian, was being a mother.” She had experienced discrimination based on her sexual identity but it did not measure up to the difficulties that she experienced becoming a mother and having to learn how manage the consuming task of raising children.⁶ She was not out to her parents about her sexual identity because she knew they would not approve and she relied heavily on them for assistance with her four children.

Similar to the sentiment that the above mentioned mother shared, identifying with other mothers was undeniably part of many of these mothers’ identity formations. A social worker formerly for the Department of Welfare talked about her need to have mothers physically surrounding her. She says, “I have friends that my relationship with them is based on the fact that we’re mothers, we have children. So we relate to each other in one way. I need that so much – I need to be with other mothers.”⁷ She specifically identifies mothers: “People without children simply do

not understand what having children means. Not only on a day-to-day level, but just the responsibility, and the burden. There are certain things that I can only say to another mother about how I'm feeling, or certain problems I'm having with the kids. Only another mother could help me at all. How could anyone else really know?"⁸ Some of these friends are straight and some are not.

When asked who the most important people in each woman's life are, every single one of them listed other individuals who were active participants in their child or children's care in varying capacities. Eighteen out of the twenty-three observed interviews explicitly named mothers. For example, a former naval officer listed women she met in a mother's group. They take care of each other's children and even spend holidays together.⁹

Some of these mothers are lesbians. The mother majoring in women's studies was fortunate enough to have a group of lesbian mother friends that she described as "real terrific."¹⁰ A midwife and self-described active participant in the women's movement worked at keeping past romantic and non-romantic bonds with lesbian women alive through their sharing their experience of motherhood through a chain of exchange of children's items like clothes and toys.¹¹ She also belongs to a lesbian mothers group that she attends every week. When asked about how much help it provides, she said "The group is getting more cohesive, getting closer and so I consider it a very important resource for me of support."¹² But most of these cases of cohesion and support came from non-lesbian women.

An artist and graduate student of education went through a handful of partners before she found someone who became a total mother to her daughter, Lisa. She regretfully conceded that because of her position as a mother, she felt like she related better to straight mothers than to lesbian non-mothers. She laments, "I guess on the negative side there would just be a regret about the lack of support I got from lesbians about being a mother. I think I have gotten more support from straight women, which makes sense, I understand it, but it still disappoints..."¹³ Two of the people the former naval officer described as the most important people in her life were two straight friends who helped her with her daughter.¹⁴ She chooses to surround herself with supportive people and in her social group this turns out to be her "straighter friends."¹⁵ A research psychologist describes this tendency well: "I've grown away from that where I'm not involved in what I would call a lesbian community anymore in the sense of all of the people in my life being lesbians. Like I've just evolved in different ways and I've formed relationships with people based on common interests and things like that, rather than strictly based on the fact that we're lesbians."¹⁶ One mother had devoted most of her time organizing and running an alternative elementary school that she continued to volunteer at after her two daughters had moved on. Nearly all the parents involved in the school were straight.¹⁷ These relationships outlived the school and she was still exchanging childcare with a straight single father she met while working on it.¹⁸

Associations with straight women brought many of these lesbian mothers into emotionally close friendships. One woman's straight friend Suzanne began doing an exchange "partly because we had feminism in common, and we had motherhood in common, it put us in a unique position."¹⁹ She spent most of her interview speaking of the dearth of discussion and support in both the lesbian community and the larger feminist movement for children and motherhood.

The research psychologist's only friend with children was her roommate, Emily. The two would spend their time together talking about their children. Because of her experience being a mother, she could relate to Emily as she raised her own daughter: "I've been able to relate to a lot of her issues because they were similar to issues that Jamie and I had when she was 8 and just dealing with being a single mother and issues of childcare and how to integrate your child into your relationship and lot of things like that you know I understand a lot of the issues that she has to deal with."²⁰ For a mother of a nine-year-old son, childcare was a primary concern. She roomed with a woman who also had a child and was willing to babysit for free. She describes her as someone who "kids just love...She's always doing stuff with the kids. She loves playing around with them. So he plays games and has a lot of fun there."²¹ She also became good friends with a straight woman from work who was also a single mother.²²

The women's studies student maintained a good relationship with her sister and utilized her services as an aunt to her four children: "Suzy really likes doing things with the kids by herself. She has them come and sleep over at her house and she's terrific. She's really wonderful."²³ She kept her sexuality concealed from her sister in order to avoid damaging their relationship and potentially losing her assistance with her children. She frequently spoke of her sister, not as a person who harbored homophobic tendencies and who this mother felt distance from, but as a sister to whom she felt warmly attached. So although she decided to keep her sister in the dark about her lesbianism, the bond they created over the children seemed to fill part of the void.

The issue of class comes out in these oral histories not only from the discussion about wages and child support but with the general demands of being a single mother. This status, over and above "lesbian mother" dominated the discussion about motherhood as an identity. A photographer with a graduate degree in sociology found an adaptive form of "non-traditional" (nuclear, middle class) family best suited her needs and the needs of her two-year-old son.

At the time of the interview, she had recently moved out of a house of two other mothers of young children to share childcare needs. But even in that advantageous situation, she was aware of the inherent subtext of aloneness single motherhood encapsulates. She felt like *she* was the mainstay in the raising of children and that she could incorporate other helpful individuals throughout the process of rearing her child. To her, this was the better option when compared to co-parenting model for child raising. How she came to this conclusion is based on her opinion of external support systems as permeable and often only temporary: "...these things [intense friendship support groups and lovers] kind of come and go. And in between when there's no support group, its you that keeps it together." Because she sensed a lack of a reliable network of help, she believed that ultimately it was her alone shouldered the responsibility of raising the children.²⁴

A woman, who ran a single mothers group through the YWCA reflected that "there are very specific problems that single mothers have that other mother's don't have." She echoed the photographer mother when she enumerated these challenges: "the logistical issue of managing your time, and supporting your family, and being yourself. All those things...If you're a single parent, you don't have anybody else, you just have yourself. You can build a support group around you – friends, babysitters, that sort of thing – but basically, you're on your own."²⁵ She also expressed her ideas about an ideal family having two or multiple parents but because of those specific problems, she came to not assume that anyone would "have a continuing connection" to her daughter other than herself.²⁶

These problems of single motherhood and motherhood more broadly rippled out into these mothers' frustrations around having and raising children within the lesbian and the larger feminist community. About two thirds of these women's histories shared their experiences of dislocation and rejection from their corresponding lesbian and feminist circles for already being mothers or becoming mothers. They faced everything from apathy to outright hostility. There were, however some experiences that were positive.

Some want lesbians and non-lesbian feminist activists that these mothers encountered were welcoming to children. One woman always knew she wanted to have kids but decided to never get married all before she knew she was a lesbian. She had some negative experiences with lesbians and her baby girl but she mostly recalled instances when their reactions were positive. She took her daughter to a demonstration with a lesbian group and one or two of them gave her an indication that "they don't really care for babies very much or something. But most everybody else – lots of people were just ecstatic about having her there."²⁷ Although she chose to highlight the supportive women friends of hers, the detail about other friends who did not "really care for babies very much or something" hits at both their hip and trendy disinterest in motherhood as well as her masked frustration with them. But her case of focus on the helpfulness of friends was rare. Nearly all other women had negative experiences as their motherhood conflicted with their respective communities.

The research psychologist got pregnant with her daughter Jamie when she was 18 years old. At first she planned to give the child up for adoption but later decided that her life did not have to end so she decided keep and raise the child. When her daughter as around six years old, a lesbian friend of hers expressed her opinion about the child. The friend "felt that Jamie was demanding" and that the mother "didn't take control enough" of her daughter.²⁸ The other lesbians that this mother encountered, although some of them friends, found children to be disruptive and overly needy to the point that they developed a low tolerance for children.

Another mother had almost an obsessive desire to have a child from an early age. She opted for artificial insemination to conceive her daughter, Adrienne. She was an avid communist lesbian as well as a separatist for about a year before she had daughter. Her friends were very thrown off by her desire for a child. She felt that becoming a mother caused the lesbian community to treat her differently, feeling cast off: "People don't relate to you the same after you've had a kid...They assume I'm married or something, or I'm straight because I've got a kid...If I don't say [I] was artificially inseminated, they won't give me the time of day."²⁹ Those who she associated with conflated her motherhood with patriarchy, staying truer to the separatist ideal that she had chosen was not for her.

The political ideology of radical lesbian separatism held great sway in areas like San Francisco and by this time, many women had taken serious forays into creating women only spaces that they defended militantly and without compromise. While some of these groups welcomed children and took on responsibilities of parenting, most of these groups only offered assistance to fully fledged members of their collective or colony. The Department of Welfare social worker had two children from a previous marriage and was an active organizer for a Feminist School for Girls. She found that within her smaller lesbian community, she could not find emotional or practical assistance with her children. She expressed that in her larger network "there's a sizable group of separatists that I knew I couldn't go to if I needed support."³⁰ These were the lesbians to whom she could not turn in time of need.

A nurse practitioner and a mother of a young daughter came at this issue of separatism and raising children from the perspective of their daughters. She stated that her problem with separatists what that someone needs to teach boys and men to be more sensitive and to treat women well for their daughters' sakes. Their daughters will most

likely live in a world with men and even be heterosexual so if feminists refused to educate boys on how to fight sexism, the vicious and destructive cycle of patriarchy would continue.³¹

This issue of raising male children brings the debate on separatism and its incompatibility with motherhood into focus. Many respondents pointed to the mutual disinterest of separatists and mothers of boys sharing the same political space. A graduate student of psychology and a mother of two sons described her boys as being part of her family no matter how difficult it became. She equated the militant separatist notion of rejecting male children as trying to return a dress to a store that did not satisfy you, showing how these women trivialized the existence of certain children because of their sex. In the past, she had tried to attend concerts and the women's groups running the events would turn her away because she had her sons with her. From these experiences she decided "I'll keep my kids away from that...I would never have separatist over here even. Cause I resent it. I mean in terms of my boys."³²

This ideology caused personal relationships between women to become strained and break down. A social worker and mother of four children, two of whom, were sons, shared a story of her close friend who she pushed away because of the friend's separatist beliefs. She recalled, "I wondered if I could still be her friend so we were talking about this and she was defining what she meant and she said 'one of the things I meant by that was that your male children are not particularly welcome in my house' and I was really wiped out by that. I understand why she says that but it really created a barrier with me with her." She went on to explain her subsequent reaction to separatism all together after this experience with Ida: "realistically I think that it's a real elitist, as a political strategist...I've got sons. I can't be a separatist if I've got sons. That's crazy and I just feel like a lesbian separatist state is not any kind of a political strategy to deal with world oppression so I'm politically opposed to separatism."³³ To her, separatism distracted from other issues by focusing too fanatically on male oppression. The social worker for the Department of Welfare felt that "to have a male child know[ing] that there's a sizable group of women that I identified with very closely, that would not support my having a male child was painful to me."³⁴

Hostility towards raising boys did not just come from the extreme camp of lesbian separatists. Many feminists pushed mothers with sons away. The midwife had since her son's birth withdrawn from the women's movement. She saw a general rejection from the movement when women parented sons. She explains other lesbian mothers like herself "have been women who have been very much heavily involved in the women's movement, have felt a lot of withdrawal from other lesbians and stuff, because they decided to be a mother, and also if they had boys, that was another thing." She goes on to elaborate on this topic expressing "I feel that to me it doesn't make the world a better place...It's a double standard. If you feel oppressed by another sex, and then you say you're gonna oppress that sex, to me that doesn't make any sense. To me it doesn't go anywhere, doesn't move forward, doesn't get us together."³⁵

A number of the previously married mothers showed hesitancy about identifying as lesbians after their marriages ended because of the conflation lesbians they knew made between motherhood and patriarchy. The mother who spoke about the lack of discussion of motherhood in lesbian and feminist circles had "always wanted to have a child." But because of this desire, she says, "for a long time I was hesitant to call myself a lesbian. I thought that automatically assumed you had nothing to do with children."³⁶ She internalized the idea that lesbianism and motherhood are both practically and ideologically incompatible. The graduate student of psychology described her view on how the community needed to evolve in their feelings about children more generally: "...the lesbian community in general needs something to educate them more about children in general, that they're not intrusions."³⁷

As a result of all the community's distancing from motherhood and treatment of sons, the interviews revealed feelings of being a marginalized group within an already marginalized group. As their children grew and they grew accustomed to their new life as a parent, many expressed their decision to disassociate with active gay and lesbian organizations and lean more towards groups such as childcare exchanges, baby-sitting co-ops and mother-child centered consciousness raising groups.

The hesitantly identifying lesbian went into great detail about how the mainstream lesbian rhetoric excluded children and mothers. She discussed how mothers are undervalued within the movement and explained that "you feel you have to do something else to prove you existence. You can't just say you're just a mother."³⁸ She called for more credit to be given to women who are full time mothers as child-rearing is a legitimate and worthwhile job, regardless of whether they chose it or not, which interestingly is present in much feminist writing about motherhood. But she apparently did not find this in her real life feminist circle. She used to read a lot of women's literature but had since abstained because, as she explains, "I realize how that I never read about the women's experience around children...I wish there was more feminist literature being written about children."³⁹

When these women could not find adequate support networks or ideological justification for their identity as mothers, they tried to find non-hostile lesbian women who were either mothers themselves or at least open to the

idea of co-parenting and assisting in childcare. The mother who spent most of her interview felt a certain “lack [of] recognition” because she was a mother; “Women who are lesbians, and then decide to deal with men and have a kid, are not given the same kind of support.”⁴⁰ What she is alluding to here is that non-lesbian mothers *and* lesbian mothers who do not associate with men get more support than otherwise. She has becoming a rock in a hard place but because of the demands of parenting, these interviews express the need to find help wherever they can acquire it.

The naval officer who was the mother of a baby girl noted the difference in warmth and support from parenting groups versus lesbian groups: “I go to the parenting group...And the people are real good, anyway, during the meetin’. And it’s sincere support. It’s like – well, when I first came out five years ago, there was all this talk about sisterhood and all this stuff. But it was cold as ice, you know, coz everybody was gunnin’ each other down about the politics...This wonderful sisterhood that was hard to find.”⁴¹ She had an ideal in her mind of the lesbian community being women centered and supportive of uniquely woman experiences such as having children. But when she did find icy reception, she had to turn to parenting groups, with or without lesbian or feminist affiliations.

These women were unconcerned with the sexual identities of those they would look to for help raising their children. Above all else, willingness to assist in childcare was what mattered. This shift was at times described as something that happened only after having children but after coming out. The mother who came out as a lesbian with hesitancy because of her identity related how having a child has made her more accepting of people who did not share her sexual or even political identity: “I think it’s made me more accepting of people who have made different decisions than I did. I used to be a lot more judgmental, a lot more feeling that I was right and the rest of the world that didn’t agree with me was wrong. Now, I can more see that people do seem to do things from their own loving perspective – as much as I don’t understand it, sometimes.”⁴² Taking this into account, she began relating more to straight women when it came to her desire for a shared sense of motherhood: “I find women who are straight as whatever being very open, and talking about very personal things with each other. I find that very nice. Those are the women that at this time I feel aligned with. So I don’t want to go to a women’s event, where I don’t feel like I can walk up to a woman and say something, or I can’t be comfortable in that atmosphere.”⁴³

An electrician technician and the mother of a young son also experienced this feeling of isolation and dislocation. She first started attending predominately heterosexual consciousness raising groups following her first lesbian relationship after having her son, Ben. Her objective was to meet other parents: “I feel a little isolated from the gay community because um, most of the gay women that I know are single or in a relationship with another woman that aren’t really geared toward children, toward having children.”⁴⁴

A few interesting cases spoke to a compromise that a handful of mothers made in order to meet the needs of their children. They sacrificed a kind of emotional closeness for a practical one, born out of convenience. One woman joined the Quaker movement after having children and because of their non-judgmental attitude and had a roommate who was a straight mother of a 4-year old daughter. They moved in together because she was tired of looking for childcare. She described the relationship as not being super close and that their arrangement was utilitarian in nature.⁴⁵ A technician and mother of a five-year-old son had an even more interesting living situation. She lived with Alan, a straight single father who was an acquaintance of hers. They were both looking for new apartments and decided to move in together. When she secured a better paying job, she and Alan decided that he would stay home and care for the two children in lieu of paying rent while she worked. But their relationship on a personal level was very shallow. She blatantly regarded him in a very cold and functional sense. She said “If I like him better it might be easier to appreciate him...we’re not really friends.”⁴⁶

For all the discussion about what is wrong and what is missing in their respective communities, these women had as much to say if not more about ideal resources for women in similar situations. On a logistical level, the research psychologist felt that the issue of childcare was “primary,” and that “...the issue of finding someone you can trust, but something like if you want to have Saturday during the day to yourself, you don’t really feel comfortable leaving your child all day Saturday to just somebody that you just come in to pay them.”⁴⁷ In more of an abstract way a mother of two girls, believed that “motherhood needs to be shared. I feel that I deserve recognition for the difficult job that I am performing, and that it’s basically hard work.”⁴⁸ She struggled financially to support her two girls even being on welfare and receiving money from her mother. She performed various jobs to help her family survive and because of this she felt that what she was doing was hard work and that it was so hard that it needed to be shared with others up to the task.

For the nurse practitioner, the answer to the question of what would be important for an ideal group for single mothers was simple: shared experience; “It’s nice to know that there are other people out there like you, who are going through the same struggles.”⁴⁹

A very clear division among these answers correlated with how young each woman’s children were and their corresponding needs, both of the children themselves, and of the mothers. Newer moms looked for an emotional

bonding between herself and other mothers as well as physical help and training in their new life as parents. Women with younger children need both emotional and practical support. In terms of emotional support, a former prostitute who had four children all in their early adolescence reflected back to when her kids were infants. She expressed that there needed to be a place “just for single mothers to come and get out of the house and be able to have somebody there to do childcare. You can do daffy looking at four walls with little babies. There’s only so much walking you can do.”⁵⁰ For her, isolation with young children was a problem. A mother of a son similarly expressed this need to get out of the house and find other mothers: “I think there’s a great deal of isolation in the woman, the first-time mother whose other half goes off to work, and there she is stuck all day long, feeling trapped.”⁵¹ For her the shared experience of actually birthing a child was something of importance and could not be shared with anyone else, even those present at the birth or women who did not have children. She equates this need for discourse to “the old consciousness raising stuff.”⁵² Both the midwife and electrician concurred on the desire to be with other mothers to escape the isolating feeling of being a mother with a new baby. The electrician specifically poignantly said that new mothers “need positive support from anybody and everybody that you can get it from.”⁵³

New mothers also talked about this need for concrete help with their newborns and adjusting to motherhood. When the student of social work had her first child, she did not have a network she could use to help her with the newborn. It was not until she joined a collective that she started receiving help from other people in a regular and reliable fashion. The electrician remembered her needs as a first time mother: “I needed help with adjusting to having a baby. Never having had any children before, someone to help me learn what it was like to have a little baby around, and how to take care of them and relax while I’m doing it.”⁵⁴

Once these mothers adjusted to the daily life of motherhood and as their children grew more self-sufficient, they had to reprogram their identity to reintroduce their lives as people beyond motherhood. It took the student of social work a few years to come to terms with being a mom: “I have just now learned how I can be Mom and still be me.”⁵⁵ In an extreme example, a poor mother of girl said that for her “a baby isn’t enough for anybody to do. I mean it’s enough to do for a year, but it doesn’t give you -being somebody’s mother is no identity at all.”⁵⁶ In terms of juggling romantic relationships and motherhood, the research psychologist found herself feeling torn: “...I felt torn, either I had to be the mother or I had to be the lover but it was always hard to be both and how much involvement we could have as a threesome and things like that.”⁵⁷

Once their children grew old enough to function fairly independent of supervision, the older women could focus on trying to sift back out their own identity. One mother talked a good deal about the importance of free time.⁵⁸ They still had need for emotional support but instead of support through the realities of child-raising, they looked for support *separate* from their identity as mothers. The technician who’s son was only five years old at the time, expressed her desire to move on from her social interactions and group settings that she participated in when her son was an infant. She said that “...sitting around and talking about our problems...I’ve had enough of that already, I don’t need that anymore...I would like to be in...an organized childcare co-op.”⁵⁹

Many other women expressed sentiment that had direct bearing on their personal identities. The volunteer at her daughters’ former alternative school wanted friends separate from her kids and childcare: “I want friends who are my friends for my adult reasons, not for a mutual family babysitting scene.”⁶⁰ The graduate student of psychology who had sons in their late childhood years did not want to hang out with women with kids because she wants to feel free from the atmosphere of raising children.⁶¹ But even though these women with older children felt that they personally wanted associations separate from motherhood, they recognized and remembered their difficulties as lesbian mothers and wanted to provide resources to younger mothers as well as change the lesbian community to be more receptive to children and mothers.

A handful of these histories gave some direction and hope for the lesbian community to improve their understanding of the complexities of child-raising. The psychology graduate student hoped for sons of other lesbian women that there could be “some resources to help lesbian mothers understand and how different like attitudes toward men may effect their boy children because it seems to be the hardest for boy children.”⁶² One mother of two girls wanted to see concerns of parents and for childcare integrated into the concerns of the lesbian community as well as the whole community: “I’d like to see it more as a sharing process, so that the kids – I like to be able to take my kids with me when I go to functions, and have them feel accepted, and have shared responsibility for their well-being when I’m there, so that there’s sort of a broad sense of caring for children.”⁶³ A mother of a son expressed similar sentiments: “I keep thinking, if there’s any hope for the gay community either way, lesbian or – obviously, these heavy-duty separatists, the only hope for improving some of the relations is going to be to have boy children who are not going to be as much the oppressor as everyone’s feeling that men are...If I can teach him some gentle values...teach him that he doesn’t have to be this oppressive person, and having to prove that he’s better than every woman that’s around – he won’t be the threat that men are now.”⁶⁴

3. Conclusion

This broad sense of care for children regardless of how old the children were, when the mother identified as a lesbian, or class differences was seen in every single one of the histories. Even if a particular woman was fortunate enough to afford quality childcare, had a group of reliable co-parents, or was in a relationship with a partner who assumed the same responsibilities for raising their children, there was still a sense of what was missing and what could be improved beyond their own family. These women were acutely aware of all the obstacles that lesbian mothers felt, truly being a marginalized group within a marginalized group. And their experiences speak to how this wrinkle of discrimination could be dealt with and solved. Although the scope of this piece is not to look at today and how much has changed but I encourage this comparison as an example of what we can learn for oral histories of women and mothers of the past.

4. Endnotes

- 1 Levy, Eileen, "Lesbian motherhood: identity and social support," *Affilia*, 40, no. 4 (1989): 49.
- 2 Levy, 50.
- 3 Hequembourg, Amy and Michael Farrell, "Lesbian Motherhood: Negotiating Marginal-Mainstream Identities," *Gender Society*, 13, no. 540 (1999), 553.
- 4 Lewin, Ellen, *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 1993, 6.
- 5 601, Ellen Lewin Papers, The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco, 52.
- 6 307, 149-150.
- 7 309, 67.
- 8 309, 71.
- 9 610, 64.
- 10 307, 110.
- 11 616, 37-38.
- 12 Ibid, 73.
- 13 603, 41.
- 14 610, 68.
- 15 Ibid, 99.
- 16 501, 28.
- 17 315, 48.
- 18 Ibid, 26-27.
- 19 618, 107.
- 20 501, 87.
- 21 304, 35.
- 22 304, 46.
- 23 307, 94.
- 24 604, 11-12.
- 25 303, 136.
- 26 Ibid, 84.
- 27 606, 44.
- 28 501, 105.
- 29 612, 20-21.
- 30 309, 84.
- 31 503, 120.
- 32 313, 94.
- 33 307, 111-112.
- 34 309, 84.
- 35 616, 97.
- 36 618, 24.
- 37 313, 78.

38 618, 52.
39 Ibid, 149-150.
40 Ibid, 71.
41 610, 54.
42 618, 4.
43 Ibid, 74.
44 608, 112.
45 305, 30- 31.
46 502, 60.
47 501, 134.
48 301, 127.
49 503, 127.
50 605, 79.
51 620, 71-72.
52 Ibid, 74.
53 608, 40.
54 608, 22.
55 601, 45.
56 606, 74.
57 501, 117.
58 618, 54.
59 502, 76-77.
60 315, 67.
61 313, 52.
62 313, 77.
63 301, 118.
64 620, 61.