"I Don't Want A Lifestyle—I Want A Life": The Effect of Role Negotiations on the Leisure of Lesbian Mothers

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During the past several years a growing interest has surfaced in the recognition and acknowledgment of the diversity that is accompanying the changing nature of the family (Baber & Allen, 1992; Coontz, 1992; Kelly, 1994; Lewin, 1993). The purpose of this study was to explore the role negotiations of lesbian partners with dependent children as a way of understanding the meaning and importance of leisure within a non-traditional family structure. Qualitative interview data from nine lesbian couples with dependent children were gathered during the winter of 1994. Four themes emerged during data analysis related to household and childcare role negotiations based on interests, time, ability to buy help, and structured agreements for task completion. The concern for negotiation of household and childcare responsibilities had direct implications for their leisure as: leisure for self, for the couple, and for the family. Conclusions are drawn based on the findings.

KEYWORDS: *Lesbian family, leisure, negotiation, household work*

Introduction

I don't know what lifestyle means anymore. I mean it could be a key word for gays or it could be a key word for the lifestyles of the rich and famous. . . . it's like, what's a lifestyle? I don't want a lifestyle, I want a life. (42 year old lesbian mother with two children)

The United Nations declared 1994 as the "International Year of the Family: Building the Smallest Democracy at the Heart of Society" (International Year, 1994) in recognition of the struggles encountered by families throughout the world. This declaration reflected the growing interest in recognizing and acknowledging the diversity that is accompanying the changing nature of the family (Baber & Allen, 1992; Collier, Rosaldo, & Yanagisako, 1992; Coontz, 1992; Falk, 1989; Kelly, 1994; Lewin, 1993; Thorne, 1992; Weston, 1992). The majority of the work on family leisure, however, has focused on the institutional conception of family rather than a relational view that would include a broader range of options within family structures (Kelly,

1994). Although some research on families and leisure has been analyzed from a gender perspective (c. f. Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Shaw, 1985; Wearing, 1990), most researchers have not ventured into non-traditional family structures.

The purpose of this study was to explore the role negotiations of lesbian couples with dependent children as a way of understanding the meaning and importance of leisure within an alternative family structure. Feminism was used as the organizing framework for the symbolic interactionist approach to this research.

Background

The study on which this article is based evolved from issues raised during a previous project completed by Bialeschki and Michener (1994). Bialeschki and Michener found that traditional gender roles and an unequal distribution of power between men and women in a marriage often contributed to the mother's inability to experience the full meaning of leisure. Cultural expectations that perpetuate gendered power relationships (i.e., asymmetrical power relations based solely on gender) in heterosexual marriages have been described by several researchers (Dempsey, 1990; Thorne, 1982). New (1992) specifically documented how women abandon their own leisure in deference to their perceived need to conform to restrictive gender and mother role norms created by and within patriarchal societies. Bialeschki and Michener described the abandonment of leisure by the women in their study as "the manifestation of ideology surrounding motherhood (that) resulted in more obligations to others and fewer leisure opportunities for the mothers" (p. 66).

As a result of these past findings on mothers' leisure, the types of gendered power relations and the subsequent family roles that exist in families outside of traditional heterosexual family models became a point of interest which led to the conception of this project. A focus on lesbian families that included children offered the opportunity to study families that did not include gendered power relations between members of the family. Similarly, the study of lesbian families provided a means to explore issues surrounding individually assumed family roles relatively unencumbered by socialized gender-role expectations.

The Construction of Family

To explore the issue of leisure within an alternative family structure, traditional perceptions of the family need to be addressed. In her book, *The Way We Never Were*, Coontz (1992) highlighted particular myths and stereotypes most applicable to current debates about family life and gender roles. The often heard desire to return to "traditional family values" seems to be an amalgamation of idealized images, structures, values, and behaviors that have been selected from historical family contexts that never existed in the

same time and place. As a result, new questions have been raised about traditional family structures. For example, is the *traditional family* structure an extended family that includes grandparents and aunts and uncles, or is it the nuclear family of the Cleavers where the authority rests solely with the father? Is it the middle class Victorian family ideal where domesticity defined the roles of women, production resulted in *breadwinner* roles for men, and children were said to need time to play (even though this existence was built on other families too poor and powerless to attain the same family structure)? Does a belief in the traditional family mean that children must be a part of the structure?

Perhaps as much as society wants an ideal, the reality may be that no standardized definition of family currently exists that fits the modern life of women, men, and children. The *American family* is likely to be of diverse forms that reflect human diversity such as race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and physical and mental states as well as environmental diversity including economic, political, and social conditions (Ferree, 1993; Germain, 1994). As pointed out by Coontz (1988), the distinctive family strategies, organized through the sexual division of labor and often equated with the traditional family, were new in the nineteenth century and purely transitional.

Currently, a paradoxical approach seems to have developed where American families express satisfaction with their own families but fear that other people's families are falling apart. This fear, however, does not necessarily indicate intolerance for varied relationships. As Coontz explained (1992), most Americans seem to welcome the expanded tolerance for alternative family structures and reproductive arrangements, although they are perplexed by the difficult boundary disputes that accompany new family definitions. For example, in 1989, only twenty-two percent of the people polled defined family solely in terms of blood, marriage, or adoption; seventy-four percent declared that family is any group whose members love and care for one another (Coontz, 1992, p. 21).

Construction of Lesbian Families

The splintering of perceptions over family structures has provided acknowledgment of kinship through "chosen families" (Weston, 1991, p. 109; 1992) found in gay and lesbian relationships. As articulated by Weston (1992):

> Relocating the straight/gay boundary within the mediating domain of kinship made it possible for the establishment of a gay family to signify not assimilation but a "point of exit" from heterosexuality. . . In the context of the symbolic contrast between straight and gay families, kinship effectively bridges the opposition of straight versus gay by providing a third term capable of relating each to the other (p. 124).

Weston described the concept of chosen families as a symbolic move of gays and lesbians out of isolation and into kinship where a recognition is de-

manded for ties to lovers and other chosen relatives who could not otherwise be located on any biogenetic grid. This process of constructing an alternate kinship form undercuts procreation's status as a master term that has served as a basis for all past kinship relations. Gay and lesbian families are visible symbols of resistance to institutional forms of kinship because they are moving society toward a future where the traditional biogenetic dictates of family cannot always be assumed.

This construction of an alternative kinship structure has not developed without complications. Lesbian and gay families have additional dimensions that often become problematic within the dominant heterosexual paradigm such as parenting children in a heterosexist society and risking kin ties in "coming out" to straight relatives. Lesbian couples with children have to assert the importance of their family since their relationships lack social status. In many cases, no vocabulary even exists to describe them (Baber & Allen, 1992; Clunis & Green, 1988; Krieger, 1985; Munzio, 1993; Sohoni, 1993; Weston, 1992; Wood, 1994a). Until recently, most people believed the concept of lesbian motherhood was an oxymoron; one could be a lesbian or a mother, but could never simultaneously be both (Slater, 1995).

Culture works to persuade and prepare both males and females to fulfill couple relationships based on the existence of gender differences between the partners. Social messages conveyed through virtually every aspect of social interaction depict images of *normal* heterosexual family life. As surely as heterosexual families receive social validation and support, lesbian families are powerfully excluded from society. Formal rejection of lesbian families includes laws against homosexuality, legally sanctioned discrimination against people who are gay and lesbian, and exclusion from family membership rates and privileges offered through various agencies in the leisure service delivery system. Lesbian families are inundated with social rejection as others ignore their existence by pretending all families are heterosexual and by a specific and forcible refusal to grant basic rights to all lesbian families.

As a result of the social rejection aimed at lesbians and their chosen families and the social vulnerability they experience, lesbian families often struggle to survive. Without knowledge of a well-mapped pathway of family life like that enjoyed by the heterosexual family, lesbian families often exist without fundamental supports and social reinforcers (Slater, 1995). While negative consequences certainly exist due to the current lack of a lesbian family model, a sense of freedom or liberation is found in the struggle to survive. Obviously, lesbians cannot base their assignment of relational and family roles on gender; however, the resulting responsibilities may reflect their socialization as females. As two women, lesbians negotiate from scratch all aspects of partnered roles and distribute and redistribute power and responsibilities based on factors other than gender differences. Many lesbians feel free to consider radically different and more personally satisfying relational patterns, and as a result, often place great value on achieving equity between partners in all aspects of their joint lives (Lynch & Reilly, 1986).

An exploration of the daily lived experiences of lesbians and lesbian families has been relatively absent in the literature until recently (Lewin, 1993; Rothblum & Cole, 1989; Slater, 1995; Weston, 1991). As Laird (1994) suggested, little is known about the social contexts of lesbian families such as their unique daily living considerations, their fit with sociocultural surroundings, and the stresses they face because of their *difference* from traditional family structures. The leisure experiences of lesbians have been completely absent in the literature. Lesbians' roles in society have only begun to be researched (Rothblum & Cole, 1989). As leisure researchers have suggested, (e.g. Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Henderson, 1990, 1995; Shaw, 1995; Scranton, 1995; Wearing, 1995; Wimbush & Talbot, 1988), an analysis of all women's roles in society must occur if all women's leisure is to be understood.

Methodology

Guiding Framework

Feminism has been defined as a philosophical perspective and practice that embodies equity, empowerment, and social change for women and men and seeks to eliminate the invisibility and distortion of women's experiences. The belief is that all people should be treated as human beings independent of categorical judgments based on such aspects as sex and gender roles, race, class, and sexual orientation (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996). As feminist researchers, we purposely chose a feminist framework and acknowledge the importance of this perspective throughout the entire study. We believe feminism was a useful guiding framework for this research because this perspective provided alternative viewpoints for family and family roles as well as data for substantiating those views. Feminist perspectives also provided broader interpretations for the findings, helped provide different ways to study questions about leisure and gender, and aided in correcting biases and invisibilities that exist related to women's lives (Bella, 1989; Deem, 1986; Eichler, 1980; Harding, 1986; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1992; Reinharz, 1992).

This interpretive research project used a symbolic interactionist approach to gather qualitative interview data from lesbian couples with dependent children. Symbolic interactionism was chosen as a means for understanding the meanings and events that comprise the context of day-to-day living (Denzin, 1989, 1992; Henderson, 1991). The three basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism are that human beings act toward things based on the meanings these things have for them; meanings arise out of social interaction; and meanings are modified through an interpretive process that involves self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another (Blumer, 1969). Essentially, symbolic interactionists believe that human beings create the worlds of experience they live in. Individuals interpret the actions and events that take place in their lives based on past experiences

and current meanings derived from social interaction. Symbolic interaction relies on the assumption that the individual is the final authority in subjective experience (Denzin, 1992).

Data Collection

Researchers guided by symbolic interactionism attempt to make the worlds of their participants' lived experiences directly accessible to the reader by capturing the voices, words, and actions of those studied. A common means to understand the ways that individuals attach meaning to their everyday lived experiences is through interpretive methods. Data collection in this study involved the use of in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with each of the lesbian mothers who participated in the project. This type of interview promoted free interaction between the researchers and each participant with opportunities for clarification and discussion. As suggested by Reinharz (1992), open-ended interviews explore people's views of reality and allows researchers to generate theory. In this case, in-depth interviews allowed women to speak in their own voices about their experiences as lesbian mothers in an alternative family structure.

The interviews were conducted during the winter of 1994. A purposive sampling technique was used since understanding, rather than generalization, was the ultimate goal of this research. Women who belonged to a local lesbian mothers' support group were contacted for their support and ultimately their involvement in this study. Several of the women in the support group knew two of us personally which may have lead to their trust and willingness to be interviewed. The women invited to participate had to meet the study criteria of being in a partner relationship and having one or more dependent children for whom they had primary parenting responsibilities. We contacted 13 couples by telephone to participate in the study; however, four of these couples chose not to participate because of time constraints, uneasiness with disclosure about their lifestyle, or inability to meet the study criteria. During the telephone conversations time and location for the separate and joint interviews were established.

Two separate interview guides were used during the interview process. Questions for the individual interviews probed the women's leisure experiences and their meanings; the leisure constraints encountered; the types of role negotiations undertaken for household responsibilities, childcare, and leisure; and perceptions of support from other people to be viewed as a family. Joint interview questions served as a means for confirming the information from the individual interviews. Questions asked during the joint interviews focused on issues of responsibility for household and childcare duties as well as the ways that leisure were incorporated into family life.

Initially, each woman in the study was interviewed separately. After the individual interviews were completed for the couple, they were then interviewed together. This process resulted in a total of 27 interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours and took place primarily in the

homes of the women. We decided to have the women choose their interview sites as a way to provide for their comfort and safety. These environments also provided a starting point for us to establish rapport with each of the participants. For example, we were often welcomed into their homes, met their sons and daughters, and saw glimpses of their home atmospheres.

Each researcher transcribed her audio-taped interviews. Copies of the transcripts were shared and read by all of us. We decided to analyze the transcripts through constant comparison procedures that allowed for the identification of themes and the emergence of grounded theory (Henderson, 1992; Reinharz, 1992). We independently read the transcripts and developed our own list of potential themes. At this point we discussed our theme ideas and generated an initial coding system. We each re-read and coded all of the transcripts and made additional notes where we found ideas that did not fit the themes. We discussed these incongruities and adjusted our theme structures to be inclusive of all ideas expressed by our participants. This process of constant comparison resulted in the three of us, as a group, doing a final confirmatory reading of the transcripts based upon the identified themes.

Sample Profile

Nine couples met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The average age of the women was 39.8 (range 33-44 years old) and they had been in their present relationship for an average of 10.5 years (range 2-20 years). All of the women were European-American except for one woman who self-identified as "Hispanic." Only two of the women worked less than full-time, and the women classified themselves as primarily middle class families. The education levels were high: three had technical/associate degrees, five had undergraduate degrees, seven had master's degrees, and one had a Ph.D. Most couples had one child (8 boys, 3 girls in total) whose average age was 4.5 years old (range 2-11 years). Seven of the children were conceived through artificial insemination procedures, three had known biological fathers (two from previous heterosexual relationships, one from a gay male interested in parenting), and one child was adopted.

Findings

When analyzing the transcribed interviews, the data were examined from two perspectives: negotiations around household and childcare responsibilities and implications for leisure. The first issue regarding negotiation of household chores and responsibility for childcare is addressed in the following section.

Negotiations of Household and Childcare Responsibilities

When the women who participated in this study were asked to describe how they and their partner allocated responsibilities around household du-

ties and childcare, several themes emerged. The four emergent themes relevant to household and childcare negotiations were based on: interests, time, ability to buy help, and structured agreements for task completion.

Negotiations based on personal interests. Most of the women discussed meeting household and childcare responsibilities based on their personal interests. Often the women discussed handling these tasks in an informal manner without much negotiation. For example, one women explained, "So, it's more of what we like to do; that's the strategy." Other women articulated this same sense of distribution of responsibilities based on likes and dislikes:

> We didn't have a plan or a set thing that we do, it just gets done . . . the parts that neither one of us enjoy we feel like we just have to do anyways, so we just kind of get it done. . . there's not a lot of strategy to it. I think we just kind of developed a sense of what we both can do and like to do, and we just kind of work from that.

> I mean there are things that Pam doesn't like to do and I'll, it doesn't bother me. . . She hates to do laundry and put it away. I don't mind to do laundry and put it away. I hate the dishwasher, so she'll take care of the dishwasher, you know?

Quotes from these women described how the task division of household responsibilities was accomplished based on personal interests. These women emphasized joint decision-making of task allocation was important to their overall sense of living in an egalitarian partnership. These findings are consistent with results of past research done with a focus toward lesbian couples. Lynch and Reilly (1986) found that many lesbian couples did not clearly assign task responsibility to one partner or the other. Rather, the women in these relationships performed household tasks based on their particular likes and dislikes, sometimes on a rotating basis. Task assignment, especially mutually disliked tasks, did not appear to follow a clear division along "traditional" lines.

Negotiations by who had time. A second theme related to a time issue where the couple had an understanding that whoever had the time at that moment would accept responsibility for completing the task. One woman commented, "I think it's our schedules that's the key. And that we both like to get involved with things." Another woman suggested, "Obviously that varies sometimes depending on each other's schedules. . . at night, that's a little tougher as to who's less tired. Or who's at home to do it." Two other women said:

> There's no real role playing and there's no feeling that this is women's work and this is men's work or whatever. If the wood needs chopping, the wood needs chopping. You just have to do that. It doesn't matter which one does it. It just has to be done. If the dishes have to be done, it's the same deal. It's whoever's got the time.

> We pretty much have a nice system where one takes him [their son] and the other picks him up. And, you know obviously, that varies sometimes depending on each other's schedules, but most of the time, that's how we work things out, and it works out good.

For the lesbian mothers who negotiated based on time, the main point seemed to be that responsibilities did not follow any traditional role pattern. Performance of household tasks according to the time available reflected a sensitivity to each partners' schedule and personal needs. Again, this method of task negotiation based on time has been described by other researchers (Lynch & Reilly, 1986). Negotiation strategies based on time and personal interests seemed to characterize the egalitarian ideal the lesbian mothers practiced in their relationships.

Negotiations to hire help. A third theme addressed the ability of the couple to buy help for household and childcare duties. Several of the couples felt the benefits gained from more time for themselves outweighed the costs of hiring someone to help with household and childcare responsibilities. The following comments illustrate this consideration:

> You know, (we talk about) what are some of the things that we can pay someone to do. . . I'd rather just farm that out, you know? We bring in someone to clean the house once every two weeks, and I do that because it saves us time to be together. . . we have the resources for someone to come and do that, why not do it?

> Well, I think there is a good balance, part of that is we have sidestepped or eliminated part of the issue by having someone come in and doing the regular cleaning every other week. It costs us money, but it's worth the time we save.

> We buy them [household and caregiving services]. We don't negotiate those things, we purchase them. We hire baby-sitters and the housekeeper.

This strategy to buy help can be interpreted in two ways. First, the ability and willingness of these women to purchase the services of someone to help with domestic work was the result of a conscious choice to have more opportunities for leisure. For these mothers, leisure in their lives as individuals, as members of a partner relationship, and as mothers in a family with small children was more important than the need to clean their own bathrooms. Second, these mothers did not feel guilty in their decision to spend money in order to accomplish all household and childcare responsibilities. This strategy was not perceived by the women as an extravagance but rather a way to trade money for time together. This interpretation might suggest that some lesbian mothers resist the ideology of motherhood and traditional female gender roles with their decision to alleviate some forms of self-performed domestic labor.

Negotiations through structured agreements. The last sub-theme to emerge was the need for planned negotiations around household and childcare responsibilities. Most couples worked out schedules that seemed to be fair and balanced to them. Negotiations seemed particularly important in areas where neither partner was especially interested in the task.

> We've done it out of choice and we've been very intentional about it. . .you know we've talked about it. . . We try to work so both of us are happy having to do the things, or at least we don't resent one another, you know. . . it's a good arrangement. I think we're real balanced. I think we talk about it. We

have to work at it—I mean it doesn't come naturally—we really have to work
at it in terms of saying "This needs to be done."

I don't want her to do everything, and I don't want to do everything. I want us
to talk about how we can get things done, what are the things that are important
to get done, when things need to get done, what things don't need to get done.

One week one of us washes clothes and the other cooks, and when you do the
cooking, you do the shopping. So, but the thing that could cause problems
domestically, I think we've worked out ways to get it real clear as to who's
responsibility is what. So, that's pretty good.

Throughout this theme, communication between the women was criti-
cal. Household and childcare responsibilities were shared and their alloca-
tion was mutually determined by the mothers. This constant, mutual deter-
mination through structured agreements might arise from the absence of a
sharp, pre-established division of labor among lesbians in couple relation-
ships. This absence, along with the women's gender role socialization, may
account for or create the capacity for a sense of acute attunement to the
needs and wishes of others (Pearlman, 1989). Because no normative process
exists for lesbian mothers to assume family and household roles, these
women consciously re-evaluate or negotiate their roles to function effectively
as a family.

Considering the omnipresent heterosexual culture, we assumed we
might find differences in the way these lesbian mothers negotiated house-
hold and childcare responsibilities in contrast to heterosexual families. How-
ever, the purpose of this study was not to compare negotiation strategies
between family types. In order to provide a context for the lesbian mothers'
experiences, we asked if they thought their household and childcare respon-
sibilities were handled differently from heterosexual couples. All but three
of the women said that their negotiation strategies differed from heterosex-
ual strategies. The lesbian mothers who felt a difference existed between
strategies attributed it to the fact that no assumed gender-based roles were
inherent in their own relationship since both members of the couple were
women. The following exchange represents two women's thoughts on per-
ceived differences in family roles in lesbian and heterosexual families:

I think in heterosexual relationships, it's understood. . .that the woman is going
to clean the house, you know, and cook the meals and take care of the kids. . .
I think in a heterosexual relationship the roles are so defined. . . (partner) The
assumptions are different I think.

One mother described the lack of arbitrary family roles based on gender
differences in her relationship in this way:

I do think that Diane and I do, even among my most feminist heterosexual
friends, have more equal responsibilities. And maybe that's because we're both
socialized as women. We both are socialized to do the same types of things.
And so there's not as much clear overt types of differences between the kinds
of things we do.

Several of the women attributed the differences to something other than
sexual orientation: "I don't know that it has anything to do with heterosex-

uality or not. I don't really tend to think that it does. I think that it tends to think of how you and your partner decide to work together."

Summary. Several commonalties existed among the four emergent themes related to negotiations of household and childcare responsibilities. Family roles and assigned responsibilities for these lesbian mothers were not pre-determined. Therefore, the women had the flexibility to create their own roles based on at least one adaptable and comfortable negotiation strategy. Household and childcare responsibilities were divided in ways that promoted equity, even if true equality was not achieved. Co-mothers realized that an equitable division of labor enhanced the family's overall well-being. A balanced approach to role negotiation seemed tantamount to the personalized strategies these women had developed for a successful family life.

Implications of Negotiations for Leisure

As previously mentioned, the data were also examined from a second perspective: implications for leisure. This second issue regarding the role of leisure as influenced by the negotiation process is addressed in the following section.

As the interviews were conducted and analyzed, couples' concerns for negotiation of household and childcare responsibilities had direct implications for their leisure. The foundations of constant communication and mutual equity regarding strategies for household and childcare responsibility allocation enabled the women to experience leisure in their everyday lives. All of the women talked about the importance of leisure and delineated their leisure into three separate, but not mutually exclusive, contexts: leisure for self, leisure for the couple, and leisure for the family.

Leisure for self. Leisure for self was the need to have time and space to do whatever a mother chose as a way to relax. For example, one mother commented, "Leisure to me is relaxing, not having much to do in terms of not having responsibility to attend to." Another woman defined leisure as, "Something that pleases me, that provides me with a break from things that I have to do. Something I choose to do. . . I look forward to them, I see them as breaks." Personal leisure also helped maintain the women's happiness. The women recognized that taking some time for themselves often resulted in a more positive outlook for themselves and the other members of their families. As one woman stated, "If I don't get a certain amount of quiet and solitude, I just become real crabby." In other comments, different women explained:

> Probably turning off is a big deal to me. I mean I have religious experiences taking a good book into the bathroom and taking an hour and a half bath. I mean that's not incredibly exciting to anybody else but when you're going, going, going, that's a big deal for me. . . I mean I have to have moments. So, I mean moments of silence, moments of quiet, are leisure to me.

> I'm aware of the consequences if I haven't had my leisure in a day or two days that I really miss it. I think I've always had a pretty strong sense about the importance of play.

When I'm feeling real overburdened or overloaded to psychologically just say, "This is important to provide for me, to keep on keeping going whatever I have to do." I want to do something for myself. I have to give myself permission, because I feel guilty by doing it. . . I usually go ahead and give myself permission, because the past has told me that I have never regretted I have done that.

I've gotten to points where I feel really, really stressed out that, you notice that if you don't have any leisure time, you're not a real pleasant person to be around, you really need a certain amount of that quiet time to yourself or however you define leisure for yourself.

These personal meanings of leisure and the apparent importance to the lesbian mothers are certainly similar to leisure meanings voiced by women in previous studies (Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991; Henderson et al., 1996). The recognition that leisure for self was an important component in positive family interactions was of particular interest. Few studies have reported findings where the women explicitly tied the meaning of their personal leisure to better family interactions (Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992). While the meaning was personal and brought benefits to the individual woman, the resulting secondary benefits were not overlooked or undervalued.

Leisure for the couple. The importance of time for self was augmented by another theme centered on the importance of leisure for the couple. Two sub-themes seemed to emerge from the women's comments: the importance of time to spend together as a couple, and the value of and respect for their partner's desire for leisure.

All of the couples indicated the desire for time to be with each other. This time together often took much planning and concerted effort for both women. For example, one couple gave each other tickets to a theater series as a way of "forcing" themselves to prioritize the time for each other. The women often described sitting down with calendars and doing weekly and/ or monthly planning to save opportunities to have "dates" with each other. As one woman said, "I mean there's a certain amount of leisure time where I like just hanging out with her, too, and we have to keep negotiating that." In another example, "We usually look at the beginning of the week, and we'll say, you know, do we want to go out to dinner, and if so, we need a sitter." One couple talked about the importance for adult time:

We had gotten into a situation where we were so focused on the kids that our circle of friends, which used to be quite large, had gotten down to an increasingly fewer number of people. . . we sort of started re-evaluating and looking at some of those things recently and wanting to spend more time as a couple and also seeing more friends and being more outgoing.

Another couple, however, acknowledged the difficulty of finding this time together because of their small children:

Both Jane and I would say that we lose out individually right now, and we lose out as a couple right now, but we think that is just one of the realities of having

young children. We can't meet their needs and meet all of our needs, too. Something's got to give, and our priority is that the bulk of their needs get met before ours do.

The other sub-theme seemed to focus on the value that each of the women placed on the leisure needs of their partners. This concern was expressed with respect for the individual desires of their partners and seemed to acknowledge the benefits to the couple of time for individual leisure:

I think we both value each other's need. We have been together about twenty-two years in April. And over the years one of the things we learned is, we can't be all things to each other and so cultivating outside interests and friendships has been really important to the health of our relationship. And so we try to have evenings out during the week without the other and without Tim [son] and when we can kind of do whatever we want to. . . and I think we both respect that it has value to the relationship to be able to have time away from each other.

She respects my leisure. If I want to do something else, it just never appears to be a problem when it happens. I find she encourages me to, things that I'm interested in, she'll encourage me into it. And so I feel like she respects my leisure.

I think that we, considering the amount of stress and how fast we go, that we do a pretty good job of helping the other person get the rest or leisure that they need. And time to themselves or their exercise or whatever. It's considered an important thing.

Oh, I think she actually gives me a whole lot of leeway on my leisure. She's very respectful. . . and there's just always that space there.

The need for shared leisure experiences for the couples was an interesting perspective to emerge from the interviews. Almost without exception, participants expressed this aspect in their individual interviews as well as in the joint interviews. The couples seemed to place a great deal of importance on these shared experiences as a way to reinforce their own relationship as well as maintain relationships with other people. As discussed in several studies of women's leisure (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1993), the need for affiliation and connection is a fairly common meaning for women. However, the lesbian mothers specifically mentioned time alone and exclusive time with their partners as important aspects of leisure. This distinction was an interesting departure from past findings where leisure was defined as time together with family or friends. The valuing of couple time during leisure supports a finding by Wood (1994a) that suggested lesbians accorded primacy to relationships where individuals were considered within the context of the relationship, and interdependency of partners was assumed. Within lesbian relationships, top priority is given to the relationship and the processes that maintain the connection with partners (Wood, 1994a).

The respect for a partner's need for her own leisure was surprising. Past research related to women's leisure has often indicated the need for the individual woman to have time for self. Seldom has a study indicated any

support from a partner or family member (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1994). In traditional society, women's desire for emotional intimacy may have been at the sacrifice of personal autonomy. Lesbians have used autonomy to make intimacy safe (Weston, 1992; Wood, 1994a). This thought is supported by Gilligan's argument (1982) that women are concerned about honoring the needs of others and exhibiting a caring attitude toward themselves as well as others. Perhaps this finding emerged because these lesbian mothers transmitted aspects of their lives that approximated more closely a "pure form of gender culture" (Wood, 1994a, p. 260). The women's orientation was more visible than in heterosexual relationships where female/male orientations are mitigated by the presence of, and accommodations to, an alternate orientation. The tie between the negotiation strategies and the need for leisure was apparent regardless of the source of this respect, encouragement, valuing of the partner's leisure, or the resulting sense of entitlement for their own leisure.

Leisure for the family. The role of leisure in family interaction was extremely critical to these lesbian mothers. Leisure experiences shared with the children often served as a way to bond with the child and contributed to the feelings of being a family. As stated by one mother:

> As a family, I think leisure is just pretty much a whole part of our lives. . .we spend a lot of time that we consider having just fun leisure time. . . I think that our motivation of spending more time together and creating work schedules that we have, is so that we can enjoy each other as a family.

Other mothers expressed similar family values:

> Leisure is like family time that's important. We read every night together before Abbie [daughter] goes to sleep. You know, we all three do that, even if there are other things that need to be done. We all just stop and do that. We like to put on music and dance. We all just dance around, or we chase. We play.

> I like to have at least some time that we are all together. Like playing a game together or taking a walk or whatever.

> I think it's real important to keep us sort of connected and listening to each other, and I think it helps their (the boys) continuity of a family, of four of us together. Playing together, negotiating together, just any time you have siblings, there's always a certain amount of negotiation. I think it helps family cohesiveness where we do things together. The four of us, I guess it gives us some sense of being a family.

The desire to have leisure experiences shared as a family was important and consistent with past leisure research (Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Horna, 1989; Samuel, 1995; Shaw, 1994, Shaw, 1995). However, leisure was valued as a way to reinforce and validate lesbian couples' distinct perceptions of themselves as a family. In a society that rarely legitimates alternative kinship structures, leisure can serve as a means of bonding within the family unit as well as a challenge to the status quo of heterosexuality and family. Through leisure, one could suggest that lesbian mothers and their families are asserting the importance of their relationships

that often lack social status or even vocabulary to describe them. Perhaps leisure can be seen as a point where lesbian family structures are not so much assimilated into the heterosexual culture. Rather, leisure serves as an exit point from heterosexuality with a recognition of lesbians' similarities and differences that arise in any alternative kinship structures (Weston, 1992).

Conclusions

Readers must be reminded that this study was descriptive and designed to make visible the lives of lesbian mothers. The study followed a culturally variant sociological approach to lesbian parenting. Findings imply that in many ways lesbians are like other women and parents, yet, in other important ways, they are different (Baber & Allen, 1992). Several conclusions can be suggested.

First, negotiations, whether structured or more informally decided, seemed to reflect a shared view among these women that no prescribed roles were assumed as a part of the relationship. They entered into their relationships with the expectation for equal responsibilities and balance within the major structures of family. This notion has been discussed from feminist perspectives for empowering families that encourage the restructuring of intimate relationships to emphasize equality between partners (Baber & Allen, 1992; Lein, 1984; Weston, 1992; Wood, 1994b).

Second, the negotiation process was enhanced by the relationship that included good communication patterns that reflected an ability to share their thoughts and have them respected. This conclusion fits communication research that suggests lesbians create the most expressive and nurturant communication climates since both partners value talk as a means of expressing feelings and creating closeness (Wood, 1994a, 1994b). This communicative pattern could also result from the lack of hierarchically ordered relationships based on gendered divisions of labor found in heterosexual relationships (Weston, 1992). Without assumed roles based on gender differences, these women have the power to establish their own roles within their families. This power to self-define their behaviors within the roles of *both* mother and partner was found to be realized through a process of constant communication.

The third conclusion centered on the need for autonomy *and* connection, often through leisure. As described by Wood (1994b), the desired degrees of autonomy and connection can be less problematic in lesbian relationships in which both partners tend to have congruent desires for connection and autonomy. As evidenced by the interview data, negotiation efforts were often transacted as a way to respect and enhance the quality of life of the individuals as well as the family unit. Therefore, the sense of autonomy gained through leisure for self was seen as complimentary to connection rather than a threat to the relationship.

The final conclusion was that leisure was a critical context for the lives of these lesbian mothers. They designed negotiation strategies and made

conscious decisions around household and childcare responsibilities that maximized their ability to experience leisure within the parameters of their family's temporal and economic conditions. Within leisure, these women provided themselves an opportunity to develop their own sense of family and also challenged the *status quo* by being socially visible as a family.

Summary

An analysis of women's roles and relationships within alternative kinship structures such as lesbian families initiates the process of critique, correction, and transformation of the way that lesbian mothers might be viewed within leisure contexts. For example, we uncovered the role negotiations used within lesbian families to address household and childcare responsibilities and the importance of leisure for the individual partners, the couple, and the family. These findings supported the suggestion made by Lynch and Reilly (1986) that lesbians feel free to consider radically different and personally satisfying relationship patterns and roles. The findings also problematized the power associated with socialized gender roles and institutionalized patriarchal structures surrounding family and kinship. An examination of alternative strategies used in chosen families illustrated the possibilities for resisting traditional roles, thereby empowering women and men to create egalitarian and satisfying family structures.

Further research is needed to fully understand implications regarding lesbian mothers' unique perceptions about family and the roles enacted within that social structure. As one lesbian mother emphasized:

> I mean in terms of the quality of the life that we lead, generally, I'm very content. I think there's good connectedness with us. We know how to communicate, you know. I think we try to be sensitive about one another's needs individually as well as a relationship as a couple. So, I mean we work at it very hard, but I think it's a good life. I think we've worked hard to try and create our own sense of family. Traditions, our own family rituals, and all of that of what we want recreation to be, leisure to be. Or just time that we replenish ourselves. That makes a big difference, because we can't just follow a heterosexual model. I mean, how do we live our lives following a heterosexual model? It's very hard.

For people who choose to resist traditional gendered roles and relationship expectations, the path may not be easy. However, as demonstrated by these lesbian mothers, leisure can be a context in which a family can come together to provide their own sense of legitimacy and stability that challenges traditional family expectations.

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