

Female Homosexuality and the Custody of Children¹

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The issue of a mother's lesbianism is occasionally raised in custody litigation as evidence of her unfitness to rear the children of her marriage. Some of the reasons for the court's negative view of lesbian motherhood are raised and a review of the literature available on the development of gender role identity in children raised in lesbian households is presented. While the research available at the present time is deficient in many respects, there is no evidence to suggest that a homosexual mother is more likely to influence adversely her child's sexual orientation or development than a solo heterosexual mother.

Should the custody of children be granted to women living in a lesbian relationship? In recent years this is a question which the courts have considered in a number of contested custody hearings both in the United States (Lewin, 1981) and New Zealand (for example, *C v C*, 1981). In determining the outcome in cases where the lesbian mother's fitness to raise children has been disputed, in some instances expert opinion on the matter of the possible psychological damage to the children has been sought. The purpose of this paper is to report a survey of the research available on the effects of being brought up by a homosexual mother. Because of the increased rate of divorce in recent years, the number of female-headed families has expanded and a conservative estimate from Kinsey's figures (Gebhard & Johnson, 1979) would suggest that about 2-3% of those families would be headed by a homosexual mother. In the United States, a recent estimate (Hoeffler, 1981) is that 1.5 million lesbian mothers reside with their children. It seems reasonable to argue therefore that a large number of children are being reared by lesbians and that as more homosexual women publicly acknowledge their sexual orientation, the courts are increasingly likely to hear arguments about

whether the fact of being a lesbian determines a mother's ability to care for her children.

The arguments most likely to be raised in court against the granting of custody to lesbian mothers are as follows:

1. That the child may be predisposed towards homosexuality by the mother's attitudes or behaviour. An extension of this proposition is the suggestion that homosexuality is an overt clinical sign of underlying psychopathology which will tend to manifest itself in some way to the detriment of the child. The implication of this is that the child is more likely to develop disturbed patterns of behaviour because of the maternal influence.

2. That stigma is likely to attach to the children of lesbians and that the children will therefore be exposed to ridicule from their peers or will be isolated in the community in which they live. The possibility of such effects is largely a matter of opinion. The importance of this factor will depend on the size of the community, the age of children, and the degree of public knowledge about the mother's homosexuality.

3. That the mother's homosexual liaisons and activities will dominate and overshadow the discharge of her role as a mother. Lewin (1981) after reviewing a number of American judgements which relate to this argument concludes that:

Lesbians are thus popularly viewed as insatiable sexual creatures, all aspects of whose lives are motivated by the relentless pursuit of clandestine pleasures. Fears that

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such a person might harm or corrupt children have emerged in various local efforts to deny employment to homosexual teachers and health practitioners, as well as in custody litigation and denial of foster and adoptive parenthood to gay men and women (p. 7).

The argument is a refinement of that presented in 1. above and implies that homosexuals, because of their underlying pathology, in some way conduct their sexual life in such a depraved and time-consuming manner that their children will be neglected or perverted by the example provided.

Do female homosexuals manifest more overt signs of disturbance than do heterosexual single women? Certainly it is implicit in much psychoanalytic thinking that homosexuality is indicative of unresolved psychic conflict (e.g., Fenichel, 1945). The empirical evidence which does exist on the psychological adjustment of lesbian women suggests that there are pervasive psychological similarities between homosexual and heterosexual women (a detailed review of this literature is provided by Mannion, 1976). Adelman (1977) for example found that only on the *Sc* scale of the MMPI did a group of professionally employed lesbian women differ from a matched group of heterosexual women. Following an item analysis, Adelman reported that the *Sc* scale elevation reflected a sense of social isolation and that there were no between group differences on items pertaining to more frank signs of psychosis. Siegelman's (1972, 1979) investigations using the Neuroticism Scale Questionnaire on both British and United States lesbian samples did not result in any evidence being found of a greater degree of disturbance amongst the lesbian subjects compared with a matched group of exclusively heterosexual single or married women. Similar results have been found using the 16PF (Hopkins, 1969) and projective techniques (Lewin, 1981). While the studies cited above did not use representative or random sampling of female homosexuals, there is a general consensus apparent that the incidence of psychoneurotic symptom patterns is not more typical of lesbian women than it is of married or single heterosexual women (Green, 1980; Mannion, 1976).

Responding to the charge that homosexuality in the mother may lead to the de-

velopment of homosexuality in her children requires some consideration of the aetiology of homosexuality. Since most homosexuals come from heterosexual families any casual relationship is likely to be complex. Theoretical explanations for the development of homosexuality make few explicit or quantifiable predictions about the effect of having a lesbian mother. In general terms, social learning theories (e.g. Bandura, 1977) stress the importance of modelling and imitation on the acquisition of appropriate gender role behaviour. Part of the modelling process will be mediated by parental example and one would expect that the gender specific attitudes and behaviour of the mother would influence the nature and degree of sex-role stereotypy in the child. Understanding the effects of this process on the child of a homosexual mother requires knowledge of the significant features of lesbians' presenting behaviour which discriminates them from heterosexual mothers, and the part played by other important models in the child's life which might modify the mother's influence. Psychoanalytic accounts of the development of homosexuality (Bieber, 1962; Fenichel, 1945; Mannion, 1976), which involve in males the essential ingredient of the mobilization of a fear of castration, are similarly less than precise with respect to predicting the likely impact of the lesbian mother on her children. Psychoanalysts (e.g., Bene, 1965; Manion, 1976) argue that the combination of an overprotective or seductive mother, with a weak father, is responsible for initiating the development of a homosexual orientation. Father absence, as might occur in the lesbian household, is not to be equated with the effect of the presence of a weak, resentful father. The over-simplified descriptions of the two major perspectives on the causation of homosexuality above are provided to introduce two general conclusions. Firstly both the social learning and psychoanalytic theories may make few, if any, strong predictions about the relationship of lesbian motherhood and the development of homosexuality in their children. Secondly, it is the case that both theories imply that the developmental history of the child is important, leaving open the possibility that the mother's lesbianism could be a crucial factor. The only

data the psychologist has recourse to in considering the possible negative effects of lesbian child-rearing practices, is contained in studies of the indicators of gender appropriate behaviour in samples of children with homosexual mothers.

Studies of the sex-role characteristics of children with lesbian mothers

It is rather instructive, before proceeding to consider the literature available, to ask oneself what intuitive hypotheses (biases) one has about the way in which lesbian mothers might influence the sex-role development of their children. Would it be more likely that lesbian mothers would accentuate the development of masculine sex-role behaviour in their female children, than would heterosexual mothers? Alternatively, are girls raised by lesbians likely to appear more feminine than an appropriate group of control children? Would it be likely that boys would show more markedly the effects of having been reared by a lesbian mother than would girls? The short answer to all these questions about the possible specific effects of lesbian mothers' child rearing practices seems to be that the gender identity and sex-role behaviour of their children is as diverse as that of the children of heterosexual mothers. This view of the literature, which is considered in more detail below, needs to be qualified by a realistic appreciation of the methodological limitations of the research currently available.

A computer search of *Psychological Abstracts* was carried out and resulted in the uncovering of a small number of relevant studies. One of the most widely cited studies was completed by Green (1978). As a result of his research into the sexual identity of 37 children raised by either homosexual or transsexual parents, Green reported a consistent picture of conventional sex-typed preferences amongst his subjects. He investigated 21 children (with an age range of five to 14 years, mean age eight) who had lived for between two and six years in a household where there were two cohabiting adult lesbians. The sexual identities of the children were assessed using some global measures including toy and game preference, peer group composition, vocational aspiration,

and the Draw-A-Person test (it has been noted that the sex of the first person drawn in this test is indicative of gender identity: males typically draw males first and females draw females first; Fleming, Roocher, & Nathans, 1979; Jolles, 1952). The author describes this paper as "preliminary" and his conclusions are questionable for a number of reasons. For example, no control group was used and the sample of homosexual mothers was possibly unrepresentative being defined as the children of mothers examined by Green in the course of child custody litigation. The absence of a control group makes it impossible to interpret the significance of the fact that 25% of the children did not perform on the Draw-A-Person test in the predicted manner and that two of the 21 children were atypical on the peer group composition variable. Without norms for toy preference and vocational aspiration, results on these variables are uninterpretable, and although exclusively heterosexual fantasies were reported for the four children of 11 years or older, it is not possible to generalize from such a small sample. In short, the results from this study cannot be regarded as contributing a great deal to our understanding of this issue.

Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981) conducted a controlled investigation of 40 children, half of whom had lesbian mothers and half whose mothers were single and heterosexual. The children, aged between 5 and 12, were assessed on the WISC, the Holtzman Inkblot Technique, and a human figure drawing test, and were given a 45-minute semistructured interview. The mothers of the two groups were well matched on a number of relevant variables and had undergone an equally reduced standard of living after being divorced. The only significant differences between the groups of mothers were the reasons given for the divorce and the greater likelihood of the lesbian mothers sharing living arrangements with a lover than were the heterosexual mothers. The authors found no differences between the groups of children on any of the indicators of gender development they employed. No tabular comparison data or details of the levels of statistical significance are reported anywhere in this paper, making it impossible

to consider the validity of the authors' conclusions. The major methodological problem is the likely atypicality of the children tested in both groups. A high percentage of the children (90%) were rated by the interviewers as moderately or severely disturbed, and the manner of recruitment whereby a free psychological evaluation was offered may have attracted women already concerned about their child's development. Whatever the reason, the sample of children was probably unrepresentative and the expression of their emotional difficulties may have obscured differences in early sex-role development between the two groups.

Perhaps the most carefully conducted study in this area is by Bonhoeffer (1981). A group of 20 children of lesbian mothers was matched with an equal group of children with single heterosexual mothers and the toy preferences of the two groups compared. In addition, the toys the mothers preferred for their children and methods for encouraging this preference were contrasted. A standardized and consistent method for eliciting toy preferences and relating them to sex-role stereotypes was used. The most important finding was the absence of any differences on the toy preference measure of sex-role behaviour, between the two groups of children. The pattern of toy preference for all the children was similar to that found in other studies of American children from two-parent (mother and father) families. Lesbian mothers were more likely to encourage a more equal distribution of sex-typed masculine and feminine toys for their children than did heterosexual mothers. This appeared to have little effect on the children's behaviour. Otherwise there was a great deal of similarity between the behaviours and preferences of the two groups of mothers. No details are given about the method of recruitment of the subjects so sample representatives cannot be assessed; nevertheless these results are more substantial than others available. For the range of behaviours sampled, despite mothers' preferences, children from lesbian households appear to develop typical sex-role stereotyped behaviour.

Finally, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Rees (1979) reported a comparison between 12 lesbian mother-child pairs and 12

heterosexual mother-child pairs. The measures used included the Parental Attitude Research Instrument and the Bem Sex Role Inventory. No differences were found between the groups on any of the scales used.

In addition to the quantitative evaluations reviewed above, two studies describing qualitative interview impressions from lesbian mothers or children of lesbians are available (Lewin, 1981; Lewis, 1980). Lewis interviewed 21 children ranging in age from 9 to 26, who had lesbian mothers, and documented the children's reports of the problems they experienced adjusting to the revelation that their mother was homosexual. While many of the important conflicts and issues which the children have to face up to are discussed, without any quantification of the results and any appropriate comparison subjects, the significance of this anecdotal interview evidence is difficult to evaluate. In the same way, Lewin's review of her interview of 43 lesbian and 37 single heterosexual mothers records the similarity of the experience of solo parenting for both the groups, but the data does not add a great deal to the understanding of the effects of lesbian mothers on the development of their children.

Conclusions

There is no evidence at the present time which supports the belief that lesbian mothers have a detrimental effect on the psychosexual development of their children. The long-term validity of this conclusion is limited by the small number of studies conducted in this area, the restricted age range of the children sampled, the often very global and equivocal measures of sex-role behaviour used, and the possible atypicality of the samples of lesbian mothers and children selected. There are numerous indications (e.g. Lewin, 1981) that the economic privations experienced by divorced solo mothers have a deleterious effect on the quality of child-rearing and tend to overshadow any impact the lesbianism may have. In determining child custody, the data available to any psychologist called as an expert witness—limited as it may be—indicates that being a lesbian does not in itself render the mother unfit to rear children. It has been suggested that an indirect consequence of lesbianism,

the stigma which children might suffer because of their mothers' unconventional life style (particularly in an isolated community), is a factor which the court should take into account when awarding custody. Stigma is a particularly nebulous concept in many circumstances and in this context there is no direct empirical evidence the psychologist can use to form an opinion. It would seem rather unfair in principle, however, to allow the spectre of a community's inaccurate perception of and prejudice against female homosexuality to determine whether or not a lesbian is permitted to retain custody of her children.

Careful longitudinal studies of the formation of gender identity in children raised in homosexual households are needed. There is a further need to develop stronger and more quantitative models of the relationship between parental behaviour and other influences on social learning and the development of sexual orientation. How important to the children of lesbians is exposure to appropriate male role models? Does the influence of experience with peers, the presence of male relatives, and stereotypes projected via the medium of television, diminish the role that the mother has in determining gender role development? Are there attitudes or specific family circumstances which make it more likely the children of homosexual mothers will develop in any way which may be interpreted as undesirable by society? There are no convincing answers to these questions. All that can be concluded at this time is that psychologists have no data to support the notion that being lesbian automatically disqualifies a woman from being fit to raise her own children.

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