

## Sociology of Sexuality

### Lesbian Mothers

This project will discuss the topic of gay and lesbian parents. The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate that developments and progress throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have allowed for a significant increase in same sex couples choosing to raise children. However despite this increase there still remains a significant amount of controversy surrounding the issue. This paper will detail many cultural shifts that have occurred which have allowed for homosexuality to become more socially acceptable. However, it will also be shown that despite this acceptance, there still remains a negative culture towards homosexuality and indeed lesbian and gay parenting. In past research the main focus has frequently veered towards male homosexuality and neglected lesbian behaviour. Consequently this project will concentrate primarily on lesbianism and lesbian mothers. In doing so it is essential to discuss the historical and cultural factors which have affected the construction of female homosexuality in society.

Only in recent years has the study of lesbianism come to the fore in academic research. Historically studies have inevitably tended to focus on the cultural construction of male homosexuality. Consequently many of the theories were adapted from this research and adjusted for examining female homosexual behaviour. Thus are frequently viewed as inadequate and unreliable as they were founded by assuming that the existing male homosexual models were somehow suitable for analysing lesbianism. (Suggs, 1993; Ettore, 1980) It is an inappropriate assumption that female homosexuality can be viewed as a 'mirror-image' of male homosexuality. Distinct gender divisions exist across all cultures regardless of individual sexual orientation; therefore it is essential to make theoretical distinctions between the sexes when researching. (Suggs, 1993) Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and particularly in the latter stages of it essentialist theory has been the dominant cultural set of beliefs with regard to gender and sexuality. Essentialists perceive sexuality as having a biological and natural basis. They argue that sexuality is an innate part of individuals that is pre-determined before birth or in the infant stages of development. They maintain that there are two inherent sexual behaviours: homosexuality and heterosexuality. (Tasker, 1999) According to the essentialist model then lesbians are born and not socially constructed. Studies carried out in this area reveal that across cultures various attempts have been made to socialise females with lesbian tendencies into heterosexuality. This social alteration of behaviours in lesbians has only partially succeeded and is only accomplished during particular stages in lesbian development. Thus suggesting that such behaviours and tendencies are biologically determined rather than socially constructed. (Whitman et al, 1998)

However, sexual behaviour can unquestionably be socially influenced in some ways. Much research in the area of social construction derives from the influential work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1978). He argued that societies construct "sexual regimes". That is certain sexual attitudes and ways of thinking in societies are formed through time and space and reflect historical concepts. Ideological discourses produced through the effects of power influence and socially construct knowledge and ways of thinking in modern society. Foucault (1978) also discusses the concept of a 'reverse discourse', which can operate within societies. This occurs when socially and politically marginalized groups such as lesbians (who do not

conform to conventional sexual norms) contest their exclusion by proclaiming their '*naturality*'. In doing so they in turn invoke a response which further adds to the already existing legitimate discourse. In effect then the minority group by trying to improve their position can frequently intensify the situation pushing them further into the margins of society. (Ramazanoglu, 1993)

Other social constructionists opposed to the biological essentialist model have argued that homosexual behaviours are not consistent and vary across time and cultures. (Seidman, 1996) Weeks (1986) maintains that sexuality does not have a biological basis but instead is created by social and cultural interactions. Sexual behaviours, experiences and orientation are socially and culturally produced and not biologically determined. Weeks (1986) argues that political thought and power shape sexual orientation in society. Historically heterosexuals have had the power in societies and consequently labelled heterosexuality as being '*normal*' and homosexuality as being '*deviant*' or the '*other*'. Thus Weeks (1986) is suggesting that the majority of individuals in society conform to heterosexuality as opposed to going against the socially accepted norms imposed by those in positions of power. Rich (1980) also explicitly argues this to be the case she categorically states that heterosexuality is fundamentally a political institution. She goes on to say that those in power impose what she terms '*compulsory heterosexuality*' on the less powerful individuals in society. She states that for women heterosexuality is imposed on them through the use of propaganda and force and is not necessarily through choice or preference.

There has been a significant increase in the amount of lesbian women choosing to raise children. National research estimates in the United States have revealed that the number of children residing with lesbian and gay parents ranges from six million to 14 million (ACLU, 1999). Moreover other large-scale surveys carried out in the lesbian and gay community have estimated that approximately one in every five children are being raised by lesbians. However, the accuracy of such findings is difficult to judge as many lesbians are unwilling to disclose their identity (Tasker, 1999). Feminist movements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century particularly in the 1960s and 70s challenged the patriarchal values and ethos of society and assisted in giving lesbian women such opportunities. Increasing numbers of women entering into full time education coupled with the rise in employment opportunities has meant more women are able to lead financially independent lives. They are no longer as reliant on men for income and as a result the lifestyle of the contemporary women in modern day society is significantly different from that of her predecessors. The modern female does not necessarily conform to societies traditional norms of marriage, motherhood or indeed heterosexuality (Dunne, 1997). Previously lesbians were not included in the procreative equation. Scientific developments in recent years have led to the availability of new alternative forms of reproduction. This has enabled lesbian women to produce children out-with the previous boundaries of a heterosexual relationship. Consequently more lesbian women are choosing to have children using the method of Artificial Donor Insemination (A.I.D.). However this reproductive practice remains to be a highly controversial topic in the medical, political and social realm. (Speziale and Gopalakrishna, 2004)

Gay and lesbian parents challenge the concept of gender essentialism as well as pushing the boundaries of sexuality, the family and the normative constructs of socially accepted institutions. Just recently in the United States a document reached

the Senate floor proposing a constitutional amendment calling for the redefinition of the meaning of marriage. Sponsors of the amendment proposed that marriage should be defined only as that of the union between a male and a female. Such an amendment reaching the Senate shocked many of the Senators as normally a two thirds majority vote is required by the House of Representatives and the Senate before amendments can be brought to the floor. However, those who backed the amendment claimed that the judicial resolution in Massachusetts permitting same-sex marriage had incited their eagerness in getting the vote to the Senate. Sponsors of the vote argued that they feared the judicial amendment in Massachusetts “*could spread throughout the nation and undermine traditional marriage*” (Naples, 2004 p679). In 1996 President Bill Clinton passed the Defence of Marriage Act. However, right wing politicians argue that this is not adequate for preventing the possibility of same-sex marriage and thus does not protect the traditional institution of marriage. Furthermore at the beginning of 2004 President George W. Bush called for a constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage. He argues that such marriages would affect “*the welfare of children and the stability of society*” (Naples, 2004 p.679). After the subsequent refusal of the amendment Bush vowed that he would continue to fight against same-sex marriage (Naples, 2004). Although many lesbian and gay groups argue that same-sex marriage should become a legitimate union, there are also many who are opposed to idea. In line with Foucault’s “*reverse discourse*” they argue that achieving this ‘normalizing’ objective would undoubtedly result in “*assimilation into a heterosexist regime, undermine radical queer organisations and further marginalize those who did not fit into a monogamous dyad*” (Naples, 2004, p. 680). Moreover, legal alterations do not necessarily equate to a transformation in the social and cultural world. The acceptance of lesbian and gay parenting will inevitable entail long-term efforts, in continuing to challenge the enduring domination of ‘heteronormativity’ and the cultural advantages of heterosexuality in society. However, there still remains a growing consciousness amongst homosexuals that same-sex marriage campaigns may be driving them further into the social periphery (Naples, 2004).

Such negative attitudes in the political world towards the issue of homosexuality have not prevented the rising numbers of lesbian women choosing to have children. In western culture the significant increase of lesbian and gay parenting has led many commentators to suggest that Britain and the United States are observing the embryonic stages of a “*gayby*” boom (Dunne, 2000). Nevertheless, the political culture does effect lesbian parents in so far as it denies the non-biological mother any legal relations to her child. Non-biological parents who wish to be legally acknowledged as a mother must formally adopt the child. However the process for lesbian and gay parents to adopt is extremely difficult and is met with much legal negativity. Formal adoption laws in the United States state that both parents must be legally married. Therefore in order for lesbian non-biological mothers to adopt they must persuade the court to manipulate the existing adoption laws to incorporate lesbian co-parents. (Dalton and Bielby, 2000) The Scottish Executive has just recently approved an act, which will bring Scottish adoption laws into line with England. At present Scottish adoption laws do allow same-sex and unmarried couples to apply for adoption. Although in legal terms if adoption is granted it is only one of the couple that formally adopts the child. However, the recent Act passed by the Scottish Executive will alter the adoption laws to include same-sex and unmarried couples. (Adoption UK, 2004).

Despite such political advancements lesbian mothers still challenge the traditionally accepted norms of parenthood. A lesbian-mother could be said to have two conflicting identities. Her identity as a lesbian excludes her from mainstream society and can be categorised as a '*marginalized identity*'. Yet her identity as a mother is one that is a respected, central, enduring part of society that can be classed as a '*mainstream identity*'. Lesbian-mothers therefore must learn strategies to cope with these conflicting '*marginal*' '*mainstream*' identities in society (Hequembourg and Farrell, 1999). In addition to this lesbian parents also challenge the norms of the traditionally accepted family arrangements. Researchers have noted that it is extremely difficult to disperse the traditional concept of the family unit. The family is viewed as the most natural and biological social institution. It has existed as an enduring, timeless, central structure of society. Yet it still remains to be one of the most changeable, controversial, disputed and investigated topics amongst, academics, politicians and indeed the family member (Dalton and Bielby, 2000). As aforementioned legal constraints also impose further restrictions on lesbian couples wanting to have children. In the United States two lesbians are not recognised legally as a family, this lack of legal acknowledgement of lesbians as parents is a result of the origins of family law. Similarly in Scotland many courts do not recognise lesbian couples as a family unit. Adoption trials in Scotland are determined on a case-by-case basis therefore the ultimate decision lies with the Sheriff (OPFS, 2004). Moreover lesbian women who are non-biological mothers encounter far more legal disadvantages as a result of their gender in comparison to non-biological fathers. This is evident when heterosexual couples divorce and a custody hearing is necessary to determine which parent will gain custodial rights. Judges will make the automatic assumption that the male is the real biological father. However, gaining parental status for non-biological lesbian mothers is by contrast extremely difficult. (Dalton and Beilby, 2000)

Despite the apparent growth in the numbers of lesbian women raising children their existence in society still remains very much disputed and neglected within dominant heterosexual culture. Moreover lesbian families face a constant battle to prove their viability as a functional, legitimate family form in society (Hequembourg, 2004) Many who question the viability of the lesbian family highlight the social stigmatisation and prejudices that the child may encounter as a result of their family background. Homophobic bullying is frequently used as a key argument against lesbian and gay families claiming that they are unfit to be parents. Moreover, a major objection raised in lesbian-parents custody cases "*is that the children will be teased about their mother's sexual orientation and ostracised by their peers* " (Clarke et al, 2004 p.532) Homophobic bullying of young gay and lesbians has for a long time been recognised as a serious problem in schools. However, less is known about the effects on children with lesbian and gay parents. Recently in a custody case in Scotland a sheriff refused to give custodial rights to a lesbian mother but instead granted them to the sperm donor. The sheriff claimed that the child might encounter victimisation as a result of being raised by a lesbian couple. (Clarke et al, 2004) The academic views on homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents are decidedly mixed. Studies carried out by Sears (1994) claimed that the children do suffer as a result of their family background and the most common fear particularly in adolescents is that their peers will assume they are gay because of their parent's sexual orientation. Other research in this area has revealed that "*fears about children of lesbian and gay men being...ostracised by peers...are unfounded* " (Clarke et al, 2004; p.7). Another more

extreme objection to lesbian and gay parenting is that it may influence the child's own sexual orientation. However from an essentialist perspective this outcome is extremely unlikely. Furthermore, in line with this view heterosexual couples do not always produce a heterosexual child.

Recent studies carried out in Belgium on lesbian parents have demonstrated that their children would appear to be as well adjusted as those raised by heterosexual parents. Researchers discovered no variations between children raised by lesbian parents and children raised by heterosexual parents. Both groups interacted in a similar way with their parents and there were no significant differences in their psychological well-being. In addition it was found that the majority of the children had not suffered from any form of homophobic bullying. Despite the fact that many of them had revealed their family set-up to their peers. (BBC, 2004) Moreover, a number of research studies carried out in Britain have discovered similar results. The findings in these studies show no significant developmental differences between children brought up in lesbian-led families and children from heterosexual families. However, many more longitudinal studies still remain in their infantile stages (Dunne, 2000). Undoubtedly as lesbian and gay parenting is a relatively new phenomenon far more research is needed before any clear-cut conclusions can be made.

It is likely that historically lesbian and gay parents have always existed albeit that the parents may have chosen not to reveal their true sexual identity to their children or indeed their partners. A famous example of this is the marriage of a British aristocratic couple Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson. The couple maintained a long-term marital status and raised children together. Despite the fact that both parents were engaging in homosexual relationships outside of the marriage (Tasker, 1999).

In conclusion, the upsurge in lesbian parenting would appear to suggest that it is a result of changing cultural patterns in society. Therefore indicating that lesbian parenting is a phenomenon, which is the product of social construction. However, homosexuality in general according to essentialists has always existed. Although it is far more socially accepted than it was in previous years. Moreover social alterations through time have now allowed for the broadening of the definition of the family institution. Despite the many social advancements the issue of lesbian-led families still remains an extremely controversial one.

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