Relationship Stability in Lesbian Couples with Children: a Qualitative Psychological Study

Author: Julie O'Rourke

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/1822

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 1996

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.
RELATIONSHIP STABILITY IN LESBIAN COUPLES WITH CHILDREN:
A QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

Dissertation
by
JULIE O'ROURKE

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 1996
I. Title: Relationship Stability in Lesbian Couples with Children: A Qualitative Psychological Study

II. Author: Julie O'Rourke

III. Dissertation Director: Bernard O'Brien, Ph.D.

IV. Abstract

This study investigated factors which influenced the stability of long-term relationships among twelve lesbian couples who had been together for at least fifteen years and reared children. A retrospective, semi-structured interview was used and each participant was interviewed separately. Themes related to relationship stability were identified prior to the interview and operationalized through the interview questions.

The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed by the researcher. Themes related to the topics addressed in the interview were coded using an instrument developed by the researcher entitled The Lesbian Relationship Coding Sheet. The coding was done by the researcher and one of the principal authors of the instrument on which the coding sheet was based. Coding quantified the participants' perceptions of the relationship and identify patterns of stability and change in the relationship over time. Consensual agreement on the scoring was reached in all cases, and the inter-rater reliability was .86.

Passages reflecting the codes used in the Lesbian Relationship Coding Sheet were identified and organized using HyperRESEARCH software. Twenty-two themes derived from the topics covered in the interview were grouped into five interdependent categories: developmental themes, interpersonal themes, relational themes, sociocultural themes and
familial themes. These findings were discussed in terms of creating and establishing couplehood, progression of the relationship, structure of long-term lesbian relationships and familial experience.

This study found that lesbian couples created their own unique partnerships and understandings of commitment. These relationships developed high levels of emotional intimacy and achieved egalitarianism in roles and responsibilities. Complementary patterns of relating were common among these lesbian couples. Many relationships experienced significant conflict in the middle phase of their relationship which correlated with a reduction in relatedness, intimacy, communication and satisfaction. Factors involved in becoming a family were experienced differently between nuclear and blended families. Parenting roles, responsibilities and styles were issues affecting the relationship between the lesbian couple.

Date of Defense: March 29, 1996
Acknowledgements

This project is the final requirement on a long road that began in Montessori School and ended in the successful defense of my doctoral dissertation. This has not been a solo journey and I am extremely grateful to the many people who have encouraged and supported me along. To begin and end, my parents, Laura and Tom O’Rourke, have made this all possible. They are role models in every sense of the word and allowed me to find my own way which I suspect, at times, was very difficult. Their encouragement and support never faltered even when I did. My sister, Molly, a fellow student throughout much of my academic career, offered inspiration and her own experiences as a means of support. She taught me the sense of accomplishment that comes from higher learning and how to get unstuck when I was very stuck. It is one of my great joys that I have such a wonderful relationship with my sister. My aunties, Joyce Eckes, Joan Elliott and Jane EckesEtzel, have given me many gifts over the years including the self confidence to explore new worlds and reach greater heights. Their positive energy and white light have sustained and protected me during my graduate school career.

I am grateful to all my friends who took an active interest in my graduate pursuits, made sincere inquiries into “how it was going” and offered their pride in my accomplishments. I have also had the fortune to develop friendships with three outstanding students of psychology, Elaine Campbell, Brenda Coyle and Laura Kantar. In our different ways, we have all been through the mill together and my ability to get to this point is in a large part a result of our friendships.

I am grateful to my dissertation committee - Bernie O’Brien, Dick Mackey and Brinton Lykes. I appreciate the opportunity to work with Bernie and Dick in their
study of relationship stability. Bernie has been a guiding light and stabilizing force throughout my doctoral studies and dissertation process.

My partner and soon to be husband, William Hudkins, has witnessed and borne the good and the bad of my graduate school pursuits. He has remained throughout, a calming and stable anchor. He has offered his quiet support and pride in my achievements and has truly been there for better or worse.

I am indebted to the inspiration, humor and encouragement of my friend, Mary Casey, who, I am sure, has not missed out on any of this journey. This accomplishment is dedicated to her.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................. i
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. v
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................ vii
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................ viii
Chapter 1: Introduction .......................................................................................................... 1
  Background of the Study ...................................................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem .................................................................................................... 8
  Strengths and Limitations of the Study .............................................................................. 10
  Significance of the Study ................................................................................................... 12
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature ..................................................................................... 14
  Relationship Stability ......................................................................................................... 14
  Relationship Quality .......................................................................................................... 16
  Lesbian Families ................................................................................................................ 26
  Relationship Development ................................................................................................. 28
Chapter 3: Methodology ......................................................................................................... 32
  Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design ..................................................................... 32
  Research Design and Procedures ...................................................................................... 33
  Statement of Subjectivity ................................................................................................... 49
Chapter 4: Results .................................................................................................................. 53
  Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 53
  Developmental Themes ...................................................................................................... 54
  Interpersonal Themes ......................................................................................................... 65
  Relational Themes .............................................................................................................. 94
List of Tables

1. Age, Years Together, and Religious Affiliation..........................35
2. Educational Level, Employment Status, and Individual Income...37
3. Blended Family Structure.........................................................40
4. Nuclear Family Structure.........................................................41
List of Figures

1. Frequency of Reported Conflict Among Participants over the Three Relationship Phases..........................66

2. Frequency of Reported Positive Relatedness Among Participants over the Three Relationship Phases..........................74

3. Frequency of Reported Positive Emotional Intimacy Among Participants over the Three Relationship Phases..........................81

4. Frequency of Reported Positive Communication Among Participants over the Three Relationship Phases..........................87

5. Frequency of Reported Positive Satisfaction Among Participants over the Three Relationship Phases..........................100
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The benefits of intimate, loving relationships have been documented for lesbians, gays and heterosexuals (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Glenn & Weaver, 1981; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lauer & Lauer, 1986). The importance of intimate relationships is illustrated by the significant amount of research examining the nature of these relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Clunis & Green, 1988; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Johnson, 1991; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Peplau & Amaro, 1982; Reuman-Hemond, 1994; Spanier, Lewis & Cole, 1975). These studies have given rise to models of relationship development that include correlates of relationship stability and quality (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Intimate relationships are a common topic in the recent homosexual literature (Peplau, 1982). Many of these studies have focused on various aspects of shorter-term lesbian relationships or longer-term gay relationships. Although these studies have contributed to an understanding of intimate homosexual relationships, few have specifically investigated the nature and development of lesbian relationships which have endured for ten years or longer (Dorn, 1991; Johnson, 1991; Reuman-Hemond, 1994). Thus, these committed partnerships remain hidden with little knowledge or understanding of the factors involved in the longevity of lesbian relationships. Scientific
inquiry into the structure and development of lesbian families as well as
the influence of children on the primary lesbian relationship has been
absent from the literature (Clunis & Green, 1988; Slater, 1995). This
incomplete understanding of lesbian relationship experiences and
lesbian family life cycle gave rise to the need for this exploratory,
qualitative investigations of long term lesbian couples who have reared
children.

Examination of these relationships requires a sensitivity to the
unique challenges and issues facing lesbians. A brief historical overview
of the attitudes toward lesbians and homosexuality will illustrate these
issues and describe the sociocultural context in which these
relationships are formed and developed.

Religious, Legal and Psychological Attitudes

There is a long history of discrimination and prejudice against
homosexuals; homosexuality was once considered a sin and/or a
mental illness (Bullough, 1974; Caprio, 1954; Hendin, 1975). Bullough
(1974) argued that Western religion, especially Christianity, was largely
responsible for the intolerant attitudes towards and discrimination against
gays and lesbians. Biblical material has been interpreted and used
selectively to justify the beliefs of one group (usually the power-holding
group) and condemn or persecute those individuals toward which this
group holds a prejudice (Boswell, 1980; Rudolph, 1989). Historically,
legal codes have been influenced by religious beliefs and have thus
discriminated against homosexuals (Atkinson & Hackett, 1988).
Because women have been historically cast as lower class and awarded minimal regard, the early religious and legal mandates were generally restricted to the sin and crime of male same-sex behavior (Bullough, 1974). However, these discriminatory patterns were eventually generalized to lesbians and are present in current religious, legal and social codes. The civil rights and legal status of lesbians and gays in the United States of America varies widely in both states and cities as well as in public and private institutions.

Historically, the psychoanalytic school of psychology has reflected the belief that homosexuality is "inherently pathological" (Caprio, 1954; Hendin, 1975). Analysts who theorized about the development of homosexuality regarded its manifestation as something gone wrong in the relationship between child and mother (Freud, 1933; Kernberg, 1995). Until 1975, homosexuality was considered a mental illness according to the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Conger, 1975).

Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin (1948) were instrumental in changing beliefs and attitudes about lesbians and gays. Their study and the study by Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard (1953) surveyed a large number of Americans and concluded that homosexual behavior was more prevalent than originally believed. As a result, Kinsey et al. (1953) suggested that sexual orientation should be considered along a continuum rather than in the discrete categories of homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality. This fluidity relates to Freud's (1956) early theory that women are innately bisexual: he stated that a woman's
first sexual bond is with a woman (her mother) and the intensity of this experience underlies any future sexual attachments to men.

Despite the challenges to the assumptions that homosexuality is unnatural (Ford & Beach, 1951) and/or pathological (Hooker, 1958), early psychological studies of gays and lesbians were grounded in heterosexist bias. These studies used heterosexual behavior as the norm for judging homosexual behavior. A survey of the psychological research during an eight year time period from the late 1960s to the early 1970s provides an illustration of this heterosexist bias. The majority of the 139 studies published on homosexuality during this period addressed the etiology, assessment and diagnosis of homosexuality, as well as the psychological adjustment among homosexuals (Morin, 1977). In response to pressure from psychologists and the lesbian/gay community, scientific inquiry has slowly shifted from assumptions of psychopathology toward issues more relevant to homosexual experience (Morin, 1977; Peplau, 1983). These include the growing interest in examining intimate gay and lesbian relationships.

**Social and Academic Movements**

Discrimination and persecution have marked the interaction between the heterosexual majority and the homosexual minority. This was exemplified during the 1950s McCarthy era when gays and lesbians in the State Department were considered security risks and aggressively investigated and fired from their jobs. During this same era, President Eisenhower issued a declaration against gays serving in the government
and military. There were frequent police raids on gay bars and physical aggression ("gay-bashing") was a common occurrence (Faderman, 1991). This history of discrimination and hostile societal attitudes has become internalized by many lesbians and gays (a process and condition called "internalized homophobia") which in turn affects their self-images and most intimate connections (Mencher, 1990).

During the 1950s and 60s, civil and human rights movements saw disenfranchised groups struggling for self-determination and equal rights. In 1955, a group of lesbians formed an organization, The Daughters of Bilitis, and took up the task of educating the public about homophobia. In the mid-sixties, many lesbians were attracted to the second wave of the women's movement which emphasized equal employment opportunities. However, lesbians faced initial rejection by the largest woman's organization, the National Organization of Women (NOW), which was reluctant to define gay rights as a "women's issue" (Faderman, 1991). Lesbians, who were once referred to by NOW leaders as the "lavender menace," were accepted into this organization after its 1971 resolution acknowledged the inherent feminism in lesbianism (Fassinger, 1991).

The Stonewall Riots of 1969, where gays and lesbians fought back in response to a police raid of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, marked the birth of the gay rights movement. This movement brought men and women out of the closet to fight for their civil rights in a manner similar to the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. The Gay Rights Movement has expanded since this time
and now includes a liberal civil rights branch, a militant gay liberation group and gay rights organizations formed within professions and religious communities.

The 1960s also marked the beginning of a change in how academic and professional organizations considered homosexuality. In 1969, the American Sociological Association passed a resolution banning discrimination based on sexual preference (Morin, 1977). This resolution was adopted by the National Association for Mental Health in 1970. In 1972, the National Association of Social Workers voted against including homosexuality as a mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973 (Morin, 1973). The American Psychological Association followed suit in 1975 and urged "all mental health professionals to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations" (Conger, 1975, p. 633). Thus, the American Psychological Association distanced itself from the belief that homosexual orientation is a deviant condition and instead moved toward treating lesbians and gays as members of a minority group with their own unique issues and development (Fassinger, 1991; Morin, 1977).

**Homophobia and Heterosexism**

Homophobia refers to the negative attitudes toward and stigmatization of homosexuals and homosexuality (Fassinger, 1991). According to Clunis and Green (1988), these attitudes include dislike, fear, hatred and denial which leads to the oppression of homosexuals.
Related to the concept of homophobia is heterosexism. Heterosexism is an ideology based on heterosexist bias which upholds the norms of the heterosexual culture and relegates homosexual or gay experiences to an inferior or insignificant status (Fassinger, 1991). Heterosexism may imply a tolerance rather than a real appreciation of gay life styles and experiences so that gay equality will occur only when the majority culture affirms their lifestyles as viable alternatives (Atkinson & Hackett, 1988; Pharr, 1988). Rich (1980) referred to the “bias of compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 332) to describe the ease with which the norms of heterosexuality have been used to interpret, judge and understand individuals in our society.

More recently, the AIDS epidemic has brought additional attention to the lesbian and gay civil rights movement. The traumatic illness and the compassion shown within the gay and lesbian community has brought this historically hidden group into the public view (Morin, 1991). This growing visibility has forced many people to reassess their beliefs about and attitudes toward homosexuals.

Lesbians and gays have been approximated to comprise 10-15% of the total population of the United States, the rough equivalent of 22 million people (Rudolph, 1989). Despite this large number, this group remains "a hidden minority" due to the negative societal attitudes and stigma attached to homosexuality (Fassinger, 1991; Morin, 1977, 1991). This invisibility has resulted in the exclusion of gays and lesbians from psychological inquiry, thus there is a lack of accurate knowledge about their lives.
Rothblum (1988) contends that mental health professionals are only cautiously accepting of lesbian life styles. In fact, research shows that while psychologists have more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians than the general public (DeCrescenzo, 1984), they often hold heterosexist assumptions (Cabaj, 1988), have stereotyped attitudes (DeCrescenzo, 1984) and lack accurate information about gay and lesbian life-styles and issues (Stein, 1988). Peplau (1982), however, was encouraged by trends in the literature which focused on lesbian and gay life-styles and suggested that researchers promote a more comprehensive understanding of lesbian life-styles.

Statement of the Problem

This study examined variables and identified themes that contributed to relationship stability among long term lesbian couples who have reared children in the context of a lesbian family unit. This study compliments the research of Reuman-Hemond (1994) who examined relationship stability among long term lesbian couples who did not rear children. As an extension of Reuman-Hemond's study, the influence of having children and the couple's commitment to rearing children together adds another dimension to understanding long term relationship stability among lesbian couples.

The sample consisted of 12 Caucasian couples who have been together in a long term lesbian relationship and reared children. A long term lesbian relationship was defined as two self-identified lesbians who have been together in what they identified to be a committed partnership
for 15 years or more. Commitment was defined as the relationship with their partner being their primary love relationship. A lesbian family unit was defined as a lesbian couple who has jointly reared one or more children. Using the qualitative research methodology developed by O'Brien and Mackey (1990a), each of the 24 partners involved in the 12 long term relationships was interviewed separately using a semi-structured interview. The transcribed interviews were coded using the Lesbian Relationship Coding Sheet and a frequency analysis was conducted to reveal trends in the data and examine within group differences. HyperRESEARCH software was used to conduct a content analysis of the transcribed data. The goal of the study was to gain an understanding of how lesbian couples who have reared children adapt over the course of their relationship.

Relationship stability and quality was critical in understanding how lesbian couples live and relate. Stability referred to whether or not the relationship was intact (Lewis & Spanier, 1979) while quality referred to the subjective experience of the relationship (Spanier, 1976). Using a semi-structured interview, data was collected on factors relevant to relationship stability including communication, decision-making, roles, intimacy and parenting.

In addition to focusing on the dynamics of long term lesbian relationships, the influence of cultural and socioeconomic forces was considered. More specifically, factors influencing these relationships include homophobia, religion and spirituality, income and economic conditions, race and ethnicity, social supports and feminism.
This study used a retrospective view to assess the developmental progression of lesbian relationships. This was accomplished by asking participants to identify transitions in their relationships which were then used to divide the relationships into three distinct phases. Participants were then asked about how the above-mentioned stability factors were characterized in each phase. This information was relevant both to the developmental progression of long term lesbian relationships and the lesbian family life cycle.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Some researchers suggest a heterosexist bias in traditional quantitative methods of research (Morin, 1977; Sang, 1989). Morin (1977) contends that without careful consideration, research can reflect the biased values of the researcher and the homophobic social climate in which the research takes place. Qualitative methodology, such as that used in this study, does not begin with hypotheses but allows for a flexible and open approach to examining specific topics. Qualitative methodology allowed for an in-depth exploration of this topic. The semi-structured interview encouraged participants to articulate significant aspects of their relationship while also giving the researcher the opportunity to focus on and clarify these features. As a result, dynamic, developmental and culturally specific data were collected in an area where there has been little empirical investigation.

Qualitative methodology has several limitations. In its intent to capture data reflective of the participant’s true experience, it is a time
consuming procedure. The comprehensive scope of this study required extensive time conducting, transcribing, reading and analyzing 24 interviews each of which were approximately two hours in length.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method allowed for a flexible and in-depth collection of data. At the same time, the researcher was inherently subjective and vulnerable to using her own values, impressions and theory thereby influencing the study's findings (Scharf, 1986). To mitigate this problem, the researcher explored her own biases, values and assumptions throughout the investigation.

The qualitative methodology used in this study gathered self-report data that was retrospective in nature. Participants therefore provide reconstructed perceptions about historical events. Although not unique to qualitative methodology, participants may also provide distorted images of themselves based on a desire to appear more socially acceptable.

The sampling method provided another limitation. The small size and homogeneity of the participants' demographic characteristics limit the generalizability of this sample to the larger lesbian population. Qualitative research is intended to generate hypotheses rather than to generalize results (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, this study contributed to the theoretical understanding of relationship stability and quality in lesbian relationships.
Significance of the Study

In their reviews of the literature, Morin (1977) and Sang (1989) emphasized the lack of information about gay and lesbian relationships. Previous research was based on an underlying assumption of pathology (Morin, 1977; Sang, 1989); only recently has the literature addressed issues relevant to lesbian life styles (Peplau, 1982).

The increasing interest in and acceptance of lesbian life-styles mandates a better understanding of the dynamics and development of lesbian relationships. This study generated this information and, with its focus on long term relationships, allowed for a better understanding of the nature, issues, and challenges involved in the formation and maintenance of committed lesbian relationships.

Information about lesbian relationships, their development, quality and stability would be helpful for mental health professionals and individuals who seek to understand and support lesbian life-styles. This study, which identified significant themes involved in long term lesbian relationships and the lesbian family life cycle, contributes to this knowledge.

A specifically unique aspect of this study was the sampling of lesbian couples who have reared children. It is becoming more common for children to be reared in lesbian relationships but there has been little scientific investigation into lesbian families. Subsequently, these families remain misunderstood and isolated. This study provides useful information regarding couple's decision to have children, parenting roles and responsibilities, and the children's role in affecting the quality of the
couple's relationship. This will be a valuable resource for lesbian couples who rear children and to individuals who are supporting these families.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Relational stability and quality have been found to be correlated (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kurdek, 1992, 1988; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995; Peplau, Padesky, Hamilton, 1983). These measures of relationship adjustment will be considered in this review.

Relationship Stability

Relationship stability refers to whether or not the relationship is intact (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Researchers have used the same theoretical models of relationship stability originally developed for heterosexual couples to examine lesbian couples (Kurdek, 1991a; Kurdek 1992; Peplau & Amaro, 1982). Although the factors contributing to stability in each of these relationships have been found to be similar, the female/female composition of lesbian relationships and sociocultural attitudes toward homosexuality affect the significance of some of these variables. Two models are considered below.

Rusbult (1983) offered an interdependence model of relationship stability which included perceived costs and rewards, satisfaction, alternatives and level of investment in the relationship. In a longitudinal study of heterosexual subjects, this model predicted both relationship stability and relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, 1983). Using the interdependence model in a longitudinal study of 31 lesbian couples
who had lived together for an average of five years, Kurdek (1992) found that the factors in this model discriminated between relationships that dissolved and relationships that remained intact. Couples that separated reported high dissatisfaction with the relationship, placed a high value on personal autonomy (a cost or sacrifice to being in a relationship and a self-oriented alternative to the relationship), and invested little time, money or emotional commitment in the relationship (Kurdek, 1992).

Levinger's (1979) investment model of marital stability predicted that relationship stability is a result of a dynamic interplay between "bonds" and "bars". Bonds are similar to the appraisal of rewards discussed in Rusbult's (1983) model. In one study of long term lesbian relationships, lesbian couples who had lived together for approximately nine years reported high level of rewards from the relationship (Kurdek, 1991a). Kurdek (1988) found that lesbians had a strong interpersonal focus in their relationships suggesting that these women are more likely to gain rewards and suffer disappointments in their intimate relationships.

Bars refer to the barriers or constraints against ending a relationship. Lesbians do not incur the same institutional barriers to terminating a relationship as do heterosexuals (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a). Lesbian couples often do not have to contend with the obligations of children, religious sanctions regarding their relationship, financial considerations or legal codes. Also, lesbian relationships are not generally recognized by society and couples often choose not to disclose their relationship. Consequently, they may receive less familial and social pressure or encouragement to keep the relationship intact.
Peplau and Amaro (1982) noted that homosexual couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to dissolve unsatisfying relationships. Dissolution occurred when alternatives to the relationship were more desirable than perceived current or future attractions (Peplau & Amaro, 1982).

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality is defined as a subjective evaluation of the person's satisfaction in that relationship (Spanier, 1976). Dimensions along which relationship quality has been assessed include individual, interpersonal, demographic and social variables (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Within these dimensions, researchers have identified themes which characterize lesbian partnerships and contribute to satisfaction with relationships. While these themes are discussed below, it should be acknowledged that thus far there has not been a thorough investigation of the variables contributing to relationship quality.

Individual or Personal Variables

Each individual brings to a relationship his/her values which result from early socialization processes (Mencher 1990). As a result of early socialization processes, researchers have found that men are taught to value individuality, independence and autonomy (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1977; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). These male-based values provided the foundation for many models of human development (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Kernberg, 1976, 1980). Researchers have
highlighted the male bias inherent in these models and contended that women are socialized to define themselves in relation to others, equate morality with responsibility and care, are aware of the needs of others, and constrain competitive and aggressive drives (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1977; Gilligan, 1982). Chodorow (1978) theorized that mothers relate to their daughters differently than they do to their sons, treating the former as extensions of themselves. Subsequently, women internalize this mother representation and develop a relational ego or core self that revolves around relationships.

Women learn to value interpersonal connections and have relational patterns, needs and behaviors which reflect their experiences (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Surrey (1991) stated that women seek relationships and strive to build mutually enhancing relationships as a goal of their development. Additionally, Miller (1976, 1984) proposed that women not only value connection but also grow and develop within the context of authentic, intimate relationships. For women, “the primary experience of the self is relational; the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships” (Surrey, 1991, p. 52).

Lesbian relationships allow women to engage in relational patterns which are not compromised by the different and often competing relationship patterns of men (Mencher, 1990). The literature provides evidence for differing patterns of intimacy among lesbian versus heterosexual couples (McKenzie, 1992; Mencher, 1990; Peplau & Amaro, 1982). However, research measures of development have pathologized lesbian relationships and refer to their connection and
intimacy patterns as dysfunctional "fusion" (Mencher, 1990).

Fusion or psychological merger in adults has been considered a pathological condition in which the boundary between self and other is obscured (Mahler, 1975). Burch (1986) described fusion as a state of "psychic unity" where individual boundaries dissolve resulting in the couple's experiencing a sense of oneness. Additionally, Karpel (1976) proposed that in this state, the boundaries between self and other are unclear and create a lack of separation.

The concept of fusion has been reexamined in recent analyses of intimate lesbian relationships (Burch, 1986; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1988; Smalley, 1987). The dynamics of two women in a relationship are unique: women may have a greater capacity than men for intimacy and empathy, are less fearful of boundary loss and are less likely to limit emotional closeness (Burch, 1986; Pearlman, 1989). Fusion in a lesbian relationship has been defined as an intense connectedness, bonding and mutual interdependence (Elise, 1986). Women's values of intimacy and relatedness make fusion a natural consequence of two women in a relationship (Mencher, 1990).

Rather than being perceived as a deviant liability in a relationship, fusion is emerging as an important correlate in the quality and stability of lesbian relationships. The features characteristic of fusion are the same as those found in relationship satisfaction among lesbian couples: equity, companionship, overlap of love and friendship, valuing of communication, and emotional support (McClandish, 1982; Moses, 1978; Vetere, 1982). In fact, Mencher (1984) studied lesbians who were in six
to eight year relationships and found that fusion was a significant factor in these satisfying and enduring relationships. Fusion has also been considered an adaptive strategy for lesbian couples to protect themselves from a predominately homophobic culture which attempts to deny, invalidate or pathologize lesbian relationships (Krestan & Bepko, 1980; McKenzie, 1992; Mencher, 1990; Pearlman, 1988).

Interpersonal Variables

Equality and equity

Equality and equity are similar concepts that have been used, at times interchangeably, in the literature to discuss lesbian relationships. To clarify this confusion, equality refers to egalitarianism and a balance of power while equity deals with issues of fairness or the practice of equality.

Lesbians place a higher value on equality in their intimate relationships than do heterosexual women (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Lynch & Reilly, 1985/86; Peplau & Gordon, 1983; Schneider, 1986). Although not all lesbians identify themselves as feminists, this value may be a result of lesbians who do subscribe to feminist ideology which emphasizes the issues of power and equality in relationships (Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Peplau et al., 1982). Not only does egalitarianism characterize lesbian relationships (Caldwell & Peplau 1984; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978), it has been correlated highly with satisfaction in the relationship (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau et al., 1982). A study of 127 lesbians, over half of whom reported current
involvement in a romantic relationship lasting an average of 13 months, found that satisfaction was significantly higher for women in relationships where there was equal power in and commitment to the relationship (Peplau et al., 1978). This finding supports Blau's (1964) social exchange theory which implied that satisfaction in a relationship was related to equal investment and involvement by the partners. However, the egalitarian ideology of equal balance of power, which included shared decision making, was the single best predictor of satisfaction in a lesbian relationship (Peplau et al., 1982). While the sampling of only one partner in a relationship limited the results of the Peplau et al. (1982) study, themes of egalitarianism (Lynch & Reilly, 1986) and equality of power (Kurdek 1988) were found in studies examining cohabitating couples.

Roles

Partner roles are associated with the theme of equality in lesbian relationships. Role flexibility has been a consistent characteristic of lesbian relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Lynch & Reilly, 1986). One study of 70 lesbian couples who had been living together for an average of 4.7 years reported minimal assignment or taking on of specific roles (Lynch & Reilly, 1986). The stereotyped “butch” and “femme” roles which have been presumed to affect decision-making, power, division of labor and sexual behavior in lesbian relationships were not identified by lesbian couples as reflective of their relationships (Lynch & Reilly, 1986), a finding supported by others
Instead, the majority of lesbian couples described role shifting and flexibility within their relationships.

These findings on equality and role flexibility in lesbian partnerships contrast with heterosexual marriages which are often characterized by inequity and role division along gender lines (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995; Schneider, 1986). An obvious difference in these relationships is the gender composition. Studies have examined the similarities and differences between lesbian and heterosexual women across various relationship values and expectations. However, the specific effects of gender in the interpersonal dynamics, stability and quality of same-sex relationships has not been adequately addressed in the literature.

Intimacy

Intimacy has been defined as an interpersonal process that includes strong affection, self-disclosure, sexual closeness and sharing of living space (Reiss & Shaver, 1988). Involvement in intimate relationships positively correlated with mental and physical health and provides such necessities as understanding, validation, care and connection (Reiss & Shaver, 1988). In a study comparing lesbian and heterosexual women, both groups ranked sharing of affection and companionship as important goals for a relationship (Peplau & Amaro, 1982).

High levels of emotional intimacy, expressiveness and closeness have characterized most lesbian relationships (Caldwell & Peplau,
1984; Peplau & Gordon, 1982) and have been correlated with satisfaction (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau et al., 1978). Hyde and Rosenberg (1980) suggested that women have been socialized to place a value on interpersonal connection, so that two women in an intimate relationship have an increased level of emotional closeness, love and security. In a study involving intimacy among 275 lesbian couples, who had been together for at least two years and an average of 5.4 years, emotional intimacy accounted for half the variance in relationship satisfaction (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990).

In a study of 300 heterosexual and homosexual couples, 90 of whom were lesbian, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that lesbian couples engaged in the least amount of sexual activity and preferred physical intimacy such as hugging and cuddling to sexual intimacy. However, half the couples who reported infrequent sexual contact were dissatisfied with their sexuality. Several explanations have been offered to explain this pattern of intimacy among lesbians: women are socialized to be the recipient not the initiator of sex (Clunis & Green, 1988; Nichols, 1987); lesbians may be reacting to their own internalized homophobia (Nichols, 1987) and women equate love and sex so that disruptions in the relationship affect sexual intimacy (Clunis & Green, 1988; Nichols, 1987; Peplau & Amaro, 1982).

The issue of monogamy and nonmonogamy is important to lesbian couples. Lesbian couples were found to have similar rates of nonmonogamy as heterosexual couples with nearly 28 percent reporting at least one affair outside their relationship (Jay & Young, 1977).
However, this study found lesbians were more likely to be open with their partners about their affairs.

In her study of lesbian couples together ten or more years, Johnson (1991) addressed the issue of monogamy and nonmonogamy. The majority of the 106 couples in her study had made verbal agreements to practice monogamy although this was not necessarily the preference for each woman. Clunis and Green (1988) stated that most lesbians prefer to be monogamous in their committed relationship. Johnson (1991) concluded that the decision to commit to a relationship is often grounded in the couple being monogamous.

Demographic Variables

Women in lesbian relationships share similar background characteristics: age, level of education, working status and income (Kurdek, 1988; Peplau et al., 1982). Less similarity has been found in religious backgrounds (Peplau et al., 1982). The literature that addresses race in lesbian relationships focuses on the unique issues facing inter-racial couples including the challenge of understanding the different cultural contexts from which each person arises (Clunis & Green, 1988; Garcia, Kennedy, Pearlman, & Perez, 1987; Johnson, 1991).

The literature is unclear about how similar demographic backgrounds affect relationship satisfaction. Specifically, it has been difficult to discriminate between the concrete demographic variables such as age, social class and education and the values associated with
specific cultural groups. Kurdek (1988) found that among 47 cohabitating lesbian couples, there was significant similarity in demographic characteristics including age, education and income as well as significant similarity in psychological variable including trust, autonomy and decision making. Satisfaction with the relationship was correlated with the psychological variables rather than with the demographic variables. Kurdek (1988) emphasized the importance of similar demographic and psychological variables in facilitating communication, understanding and empathy as well as creating a relationship based on shared interests and values.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) predicted that the social status of each person in a relationship will affect the equality of the relationship. Researchers have found that balance of power is crucial to relationship satisfaction among lesbian couples and that a dissimilarity in demographic and psychological variables may affect this balance (Kurdek, 1988; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Peplau et al., 1982). Caldwell and Peplau (1984) found specific income and educational differences were correlated with an imbalance of power in lesbian relationships.

Social Variables

Variables within the social dimension that affect relationships include family, friends and the larger sociocultural attitudes. Studies have indicated that many lesbians are not “out” to their parents (Chafetz, Sampson, Beck, & West, 1974; Jay & Young, 1977). The lesbian woman’s perception or anticipation of her parent’s disapproval may affect
her sense of self and her relationship with her partner (Murphy, 1989). Murphy's (1989) study of 20 lesbians revealed one woman who believed the affects of hiding her lesbianism from her parents "spilled over" into her relationship with her partner having a negative impact on their communication and intimacy.

Parental attitudes or responses toward their daughter's partner may be overridden by their attitudes and responses to lesbianism (Murphy, 1989). Regardless of their responses, parents' knowledge of their daughter's lesbianism can support the latter's sense of integrity and integrated sense of self while also helping her relationship with her partner (Murphy, 1989). Many lesbians reported that parental disapproval brought the couples closer together out of an "us against the world" posture while parental acceptance helped to validate the couple's relationship and further encouraged the couple's own acceptance of their life-style (Murphy, 1989).

Despite a frequent lack of support from the families of lesbian couples, it is consistently reported that these women find support through friends in the lesbian community (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987b; Laird, 1993; Murphy, 1989). These friendships provide opportunities for intimate emotional sharing, advice, love, support, social contact, affirmation, a sense of belonging, emergency aid and healthcare (Laird, 1993; Murphy, 1989). Lesbians who received high degrees of emotional support from friends were less likely to be psychologically distressed than those who received low degrees of emotional support (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987b). Therefore, social supports outside of the family of origin play an integral
role in lesbian’s lives.

Lesbian Families

The effects of children on a couple’s relationship have been studied extensively among the heterosexual population (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Mackey & O’Brien, 1995; Spanier, Lewis & Cole, 1975). In contrast, little is known about this dynamic in lesbian families. Several cross-sectional studies of heterosexual family life found that the couple’s relationship satisfaction declines during the child rearing years and increases after the children leave home (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975). Thus, there is a curvilinear pattern of marital satisfaction across the family life cycle (Mackey & O’Brien, 1995; Spanier et al., 1975).

Lesbians who are rearing children face many unique issues that have not been explored. These issues include: how children are brought into the relationship, the different parenting roles as well as maintaining the family’s functioning and integrity in a homophobic society. These issues affect the family unit as a whole as well as the lesbian couple’s relationship. There are several ways children are brought into a lesbian relationship. These include adoption, artificial insemination and as a product of a previous heterosexual relationship. Unlike traditional heterosexual couples, there is no standard or traditional time for beginning parenthood in lesbian relationships. The influence of children on the quality and stability of a lesbian couple’s relationship is likely to be
different and more complex when compared with heterosexual couples (Slater, 1995).

Child rearing factors implicated in the changes of marital quality among heterosexual couples include less intimacy (Harriman, 1983), less social support (Myers-Walls, 1984) and changing roles (Waldron & Routh, 1981). Like heterosexual couples, after the arrival of a child, lesbian couples experienced a loss of freedom and were dissatisfied with the amount of time, level of intimacy and emotional sharing with their partner (Stiglitz, 1990). Unlike heterosexual couples, lesbian couples have not received the increased social support from their family after having a child (Stiglitz, 1990). Lesbian couples also reported that after having a child, they felt they did not fit in with their old friends and often struggled to develop new social supports (Stiglitz, 1990).

A child demands new roles for the parents, creating new needs, experiences and feelings for each partner (McClandish, 1987). The roles of individuals in heterosexual couples often change after the birth of a child and tend to be in line with classic sex role stereotypes (Slater & Mencher, 1991). Here the roles of mother and father are assigned according to sex and women are usually the primary caretakers and nurturers of the children while the father provides for and protects the family. With lesbian families, the primary roles of mother and father are not applicable so that the responsibilities traditionally assigned to these roles must be negotiated by the lesbian parents. Role flexibility, which is characteristic of lesbian couples, can both complicate and liberate the lesbian family.
For lesbian families, family functioning and movement through the family life cycle relies on the continual negotiation of private versus public identities (Slater & Mencher, 1991). The need to maintain some aspect of privacy to guard against discrimination can create a rigid boundary between the family and the outside world. This type of protective response may also be evident in the over involvement or loosening of boundaries between the individuals in the family (Slater & Mencher, 1991). This response has been referred to in pathological terms as fusion or enmeshment although Slater and Mencher (1991) argued that this response becomes problematic only when employed at extreme levels. They suggested that families strive toward fusion flexibility where fusing patterns are increased during challenging periods and decreased during secure or stable periods.

Relationship Development

Relationship quality and stability change throughout the life span (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). An understanding of these concepts requires an assessment of the relationship at several points in time as well as an understanding of the developmental nature of these relationships. Some studies comparing heterosexual with homosexual couples found similar variables predictive of relationship satisfaction and quality (Kurdek, 1991a, 1991b; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986b) as well as a similar developmental progression (Kurdek 1991a, 1991b). Their similarities suggest the existence of universal processes in any type of intimate relationship. However, models that accurately reflect lesbian relationship
development can not be extrapolated using heterosexual populations.

Studying intimate human relationships is a complex undertaking and requires investigation of the developmental processes of the relationship and an understanding of the context in which these processes occur (Kelley & Conley, 1983). The dynamics operating in lesbian relationships and the context from which these relationships emerge suggest that their development and progression may be different from that of heterosexual relationships.

Clunis and Green (1993) proposed a stage model of lesbian relationship development. Their six stages included prerelationship, romance, conflict, acceptance, commitment and collaboration. Each stage has its own particular characteristics, tasks and challenges. Although these authors recognized that couples cycle and recycle through stages differently, they believed that this model was useful in anticipating and normalizing some of the issues couples may face. Their model only made occasional reference to lesbian families with children.

Slater (1995) also offered a stage model of lesbian relationship development. Slater proposed mitigating factors that affect the particular events, challenges and accomplishments of each stage. These factors included lesbian identity development, minority identity development, and sociocultural influences. The five stages were based on the linear time progression of the relationship and included: formation of the couple, ongoing couplehood, the middle years, generativity and lesbian couples over sixty-five. Lesbian families with children were addressed only anecdotally.
Kurdek's (1988) research on lesbian couples found that the quality of the relationship varied as a function of the length of time in the relationship. Couples who had been together six years or longer reported increased trust and satisfaction with social supports and with the relationship (Kurdek, 1988). Kurdek (1992) added that an increase in relationship satisfaction over time was related to an increase in perceived rewards from and emotional investment in the relationship as well as a decrease in perceived costs. Kurdek (1992) also postulated that growth in satisfaction may be related to the development of satisfaction with one's partner as well as a willingness to be close to and nurturant with that partner. These findings illustrate the necessity for a better understanding of lesbian life-styles including relationship quality, development and stability.

Summary

Relationship stability and quality have been found to be highly correlated (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kurdek, 1992, 1988; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995; Peplau, Padesky, Hamilton, 1983). Theoretical models designed to examine relationship stability among heterosexual couples have been used to examine this variable among lesbian couples (Kurdek, 1991a; Kurdek, 1992; Peplau & Amaro, 1982). The myriad factors that have been related to relationship quality have not been adequately explored among long-term lesbian couples. Factors related to values and early socialization (Mencher, 1990), equality (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Lynch & Reilly
1985/86; Peplau & Gordon, 1983; Schneider, 1986), roles (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Lynch & Reilly, 1985/86), intimacy (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau & Gordon, 1982), demographic variables (Kurdek, 1988; Peplau et al., 1982), and social factors (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987b; Laird, 1993; Murphy, 1989) have been examined in relation to relationship satisfaction among lesbian couples.

Lesbian families have received little attention in the literature (Slater, 1995; Slater & Mencher, 1991; Stiglitz, 1990). Lesbian couples face a number of unique issues when rearing children including how children are brought into the relationship, negotiating parenting roles and protecting the family from a homophobic society. The affects of these issues on the quality and stability of lesbian relationships remains to be examined. The paucity of literature about relationship stability and quality among lesbian couples as well as the lack of research into lesbian families suggests the need for further investigation into the development of long term lesbian relationships among couples who have reared children.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design

Only within the past 15 years have studies focused on lesbians. There has been a shift in the intent of these studies as they have moved from a classification of lesbianism first as deviant, to the concept of lesbianism as a viable life style and more recently toward an interest in issues relevant to lesbian experiences (Sang, 1989). The earlier studies lacked an awareness of the biases on which the research was built and reflected the social values and prevailing attitudes of the dominant, heterosexist culture (McHugh, Koeske, & Friese, 1986; Morin, 1977). Investigators have described the quantitative techniques and self-report measures which were used predominantly in early lesbian research as biased in their subjectivity and values (McHugh, Koeske, & Friese, 1986; Morin, 1977). Hence, these research methods are limited in exploring phenomena across cultures.

The growing demand for research related to lesbian life-styles requires a methodological approach that will minimize heterosexist bias while investigating lesbian phenomena. Because it imposes almost no preconceived notions, qualitative methodology is designed to elicit the totality and structure of a phenomenon as it exists in its natural context. Building theories about relationship stability among lesbian couples is impossible without first investigating this dynamic in its natural context. Strauss and Corbin (1990) have described the qualitative approach as "a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about..."
phenomenon" (p. 24). This methodology is suitable for investigating relatively unexplored topics such as long term lesbian relationships. Peplau (1983) and Sang (1991) have contended that qualitative methodology meets the demand for much needed descriptive data and accurate theories about lesbian life styles.

This study used qualitative methodology to generate data reflecting lesbian experiences in their natural contexts. Specifically, this study investigated long term lesbian relationships lasting 15 years or longer among couples who had children. From the data, themes related to relationship stability emerged from participants' experiences in their relationships.

Research Design and Procedures

Participants

The sample consisted of 24 participants representing 12 lesbian couples who had been living together for at least 15 years as a family unit, rearing at least one child. There were six couples representing blended families and six couples representing nuclear families. Blended families referred to family units where the children were a product of a previous heterosexual marriage and were present at the beginning of the lesbian relationship. Nuclear families referred to family units where couples were in an already established relationship and made a conscious choice to have children either through adoption or artificial insemination. Pseudonyms were used for all participants; blended families were assigned names with letters from the first half of the alphabet (A-F) and nuclear families were assigned
names with letters from the second half of the alphabet (M-S).

Table One presents the name of each participant, her age, the number of years the couple had been together and each woman's religious affiliation. All names are pseudonym to protect the privacy of the participants. The participants ranged in age from 38 to 68 years old with the mean age being 47.6 years. Most couples were close in age with the greatest difference being nine years for one couple, eight years for two couples and seven years for one couple. The remaining eight couples had a maximum age difference of four years.

The number of years the couples had been together ranged from 15 to 29 years with a mean of 19.7 years. The mean number of years together for the blended families was greater than that for the nuclear families: for blended families it was 21.1 years and for nuclear families it was 17.1 years.

Religious affiliation varied greatly. Six women identified Judaism as their religious affiliation. Four participants identified themselves as Episcopalians, four as Protestants and two as Catholics, one as a Quaker, one as a Unitarian, one as a Congregationalist and one woman identified herself as claiming several religions. Four participants left this question blank.

Table Two presents educational level, current employment status and individual income. Women in this study varied greatly in their levels of education. One had a high school degree, two had some college, three had a bachelor's degree, ten had master's degrees and eight had doctoral or professional degrees. Seventy-one percent of the women were employed full-time. The remaining 29% were employed part-time and one woman was
Table One

Age, Years Together, and Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years Together</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>mixed affiliations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Protestant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Quaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ester</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Protestant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felise</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octavia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Congregational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table One (continued)

Age, Years Together, and Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years Together</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

X=47.6 \[\text{Range}=38-68\]  \[X=19.7\] \[\text{Range}=15-29\]

* all names are pseudonym

Key:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>YEARS TOGETHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 = 30-39 years old</td>
<td>1 = 15-19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = 40-49 years old</td>
<td>2 = 20-24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = 50-59 years old</td>
<td>3 = 25-29 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 = 60-69 years old</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table Two

Educational Level, Employment Status, and Individual Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple*</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Individual Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$37-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$12-25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>&lt;C</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$25-37,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire**</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$12-25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constance</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$37-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>self-employed</td>
<td>$25-37,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>&lt;C</td>
<td>self-employed</td>
<td>$25-37,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>retired</td>
<td>&lt;$12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ester</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$37-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felise</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>$12-25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$37-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>$12-25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octavia</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>$37-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>&lt;$12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>$25-37,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table Two (continued)

Educational Level, Employment Status, and Individual Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple*</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Individual Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>GP</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* all names are pseudonym
** also attending school full-time

Key:

EDUCATION

HS = High School Graduate
<C = Some College or Post High School
C = College Graduate
GP = Graduate/Professional Degree
Eighty-three percent of the participants who were employed part-time represented nuclear families (n=5). Only one woman from a blended family worked part-time and she had recently retired from her full-time job.

Individual incomes varied greatly within this study. Nine women reported earning greater than $50,000 a year, five reported earning between $37,000 and $40,000, four between $25,000 and $37,000, four between $12,000 and $25,000 and two less than $12,000.

On a sexual orientation continuum ranging from homosexual to heterosexual, fifteen women (62.5%) stated they were exclusively lesbian. Six women (25%) stated they were predominantly or primarily lesbian with three of these participants adding they could be bisexual. Three women (12.5%) stated they were bisexual in a lesbian relationship.

Nine women, including eight women from blended families, had been married to men. The one woman from a nuclear family who had been heterosexually married was separated from her husband when she began her relationship with her partner and was divorced soon after. Of the eight women representing blended families who had been heterosexually married, four were still married at the beginning of their lesbian relationships, three were separated from their husbands and one woman was already divorced. After beginning their lesbian relationships with their partners, the married women averaged almost seven years before separating from and/or divorcing their husbands. This time period ranged from five to nine years.

The structure of the blended and nuclear families are presented in Tables Three and Four respectively. The average number of children for all families was two, with the number of children in each family ranging
Table Three

Blended Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple*</th>
<th># of Children</th>
<th>Age of Child/ren When Couple Began Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice**</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constance**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2, 3, 4, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily**</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3, 4, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ester</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felise**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* all names are pseudonym
** brought child/ren to the relationship

Key:
AGES OF CHILDREN
1 = 1-4 years old
2 = 5-8 years old
3 = 9-12 years old
4 = 13-16 years old
Table Four

Nuclear Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple*</th>
<th># of Children</th>
<th>Present Ages of Child/ren</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octavia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* all names are pseudonym

Key:

AGES OF CHILDREN
- 1 = less than one year old
- 2 = 1-3 years old
- 3 = 4-6 years old
- 4 = 7-9 years old
- 5 = 10-12 years old
from one to four. The age range of children from blended families at the
beginning of the lesbian relationship was from one to 16 years. In five of the
blended families, one of the partners brought the children to the lesbian
relationship. Each woman in the sixth blended family brought a child to the
lesbian relationship.

The age range of children from nuclear families was from ten months
to 12 years. From the nuclear families, two couples adopted children and
four couples bore children using artificial insemination. In one case, both
women in the couple bore a child.

The average response to a question concerning how long each
respondent has considered herself to be a lesbian was 21.6 years. Twelve
of the responses to this question equaled the number of years that women
had been in the current relationships. Ten women provided responses that
were greater than the number of years they had been in their current
relationship and two women gave responses that were less. Of the ten
women who identified themselves as lesbian longer than they had been in
their current lesbian relationship, nine represented nuclear families. On the
average, couples had lived together for almost 18 years. Only four couples
had lived together for less years than they had been together as a couple. In
two cases, the partners lived in different states and in the other two cases,
the women were still married and living with their husbands.

The participants in this study differentiated the beginning of their
relationships and the beginning of their commitment to one another. Of the
24 participants, the most frequent response to the event or experience that
marked the beginning of the relationship was the first time the couple made
love (n=11). Other responses included their first conversation, verbally expressing their love for one another, holding hands, moving in together and agreeing on monogamy. The most frequent response to the event or experience that marked the beginning of the participants' commitment to her partner was moving in together (n=12). Other responses included verbal agreement, making love, their first days together, agreeing to monogamy, continuing the relationship long distance and verbally expressing their feelings.

This sample can be described as lesbian couples who have been together for at least 15 years, reared or are rearing children in their lesbian relationships, lived in New England, were "uncloseted" and willing to participate in this study.

Recruiting Participants

Participants had to meet the following criterion: lesbian couples who had been together for 15 or more years, had reared or were currently rearing children and both partners were willing to participate. Given the difficulties of sampling a "hidden" population, this study used a snowball sampling technique to recruit lesbian couples. The methods of recruitment involved contacting specific people and advertising through various media. These initial efforts included contacting friends and associates of the researcher. Simultaneously, contacts were made to gay and lesbian community centers, recreational and social groups. Phone calls and letters explaining the study and requesting participants were used. Media sources included advertising in gay/lesbian/bisexual newspapers and magazines as well as posting flyers
in "gay friendly" locations. Initial contacts resulted in additional contacts thereby creating a network of individuals including the participants themselves who identified additional participants. Of the 12 couples who participated in this study, seven were identified through the researcher's personal contacts, three from the participants themselves and two in response to advertisements.

When participants were identified, they were sent a letter (see Appendix A) explaining how they had been identified as possible participants, what the study was about and what would be expected if they were to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. It took approximately two months to recruit 12 couples. All of the couples who were contacted and met the criterion for the study agreed to participate.

The Interview Process

This study used a semi-structured interview designed to elicit qualitative, phenomenological data which reflected lesbian experiences in long term relationships in which children were raised. Questions in the interview were framed in a manner to allow for flexibility and openness so participants could use their own meanings and process in providing information about their experience in the relationship. The semi-structured format enabled the interviewer to further pursue and explore areas of inquiry in an effort to understand the unique perspective of each participant.

The Marital Stability Interview developed by O'Brien and Mackey (1990) served as the original structure for the interview schedule. The Marital Stability Interview was designed as part of a large scale study of
marital stability (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995). Factors related to marital stability were researched and operationalized through the interview questions which were then pretested, refined and later used in interviewing 120 spouses from 60 marriages. The Marital Stability Interview was divided into four major sections: the marital relationship, social influences including economic and cultural factors, parents' marriages, and participants' experiences of their marriage. This last section was subdivided into three developmental stages (pre-children, child-rearing years, post-children) to gather data about adaptation to marriage over the course of the relationship.

For this study, the Marital Stability Interview was modified to reduce heterosexist language and bias. It was also expanded to include issues that were relevant to lesbian life styles. The interview schedule was reviewed and modified after consultation with a lesbian who was in a long term relationship and raising a child. The final product of these revisions was a semi-structured interview entitled Lesbian Relationship Stability Interview (see Appendix B).

Areas addressed in the interview included individual personality factors related to the relationship, transitional points, characteristics of the interpersonal relationship, issues related to children and family and cultural influences. Additional questions examined: communication, decision-making, equality, roles, conflict, and intimacy as they pertained to the relationship. Questions also focused on the familial aspect of these relationships including desire and decision to have children, parenting and the family culture. Cultural or social influences on the relationship were elicited through questions about economic factors, religion, social supports,
ethnic background, homophobia and feminism. The interview was structured to assess for changes in the relationship over time. Participants were asked to identify junctures where the relationship changed or shifted in some way. The nature and timing of these junctures were operationalized as transition points in the research. When more than two transition points were identified by the participants, they were asked to identify the two most important transitions. The two transition points were incorporated into the interview and used by the interviewer as points of reference for the participants to divide the relationship into three phases. To assess for change over time, participants were asked about the above-mentioned factors, characteristics and influences in each of the three phases of their relationships. Each partner was interviewed separately which allowed participants to reflect on their experience without being potentially compromised by the presence of their partners.

The 24 interviews were conducted over a four month period from April through July of 1995. The partners in six of the couples were interviewed separately but on the same day. The women in the other six couples were interviewed on different days. In these cases, a specific request was made to the partner who was interviewed first not to share information related to the interview so as not to bias her partner's interview experience.

Each interview took between one and a half and three hours with an average interview time of approximately two hours. All interviews took place in the homes of the participants and were conducted away from the potential interference of family members. Before the interview began, each participant was given and signed an informed consent form which discussed the
purpose of the study, the interview process including the audio-taping procedure, confidentiality and anonymity as well as an explanation of how the data would be used (see Appendix C). Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions and clarify any concerns before the interview commenced. At the end of the interview, each participant was asked to complete a background information sheet and was instructed that this would be used for demographic information in order to accurately describe the sample (see Appendix D).

After becoming aquatinted with the nature and purpose of the study, participants expressed a welcome attitude toward the researcher's efforts to explore this topic. During informal conversations after the interview, participants commented on their participation in this research as a means to educate society and serve as role models for other lesbians. After reviewing the informed consent form which offered participants a copy of the study's results, each participant indicated a desire to receive such a report.

**Data Analysis**

Each audio-taped interview was transcribed to facilitate coding and analysis. The 24 interviews were analyzed separately to determine the individual participant's perception of stability in long term lesbian relationships. The qualitative methodology, specifically the semi-structured interview, used in this study allowed participants to voice their perceptions' of their relationship. This approach to conducting and analyzing the data was done to examine differences among lesbians involved in long term relationships. The individual perceptions of each partner in a couple were
used in examples as appropriate and some comparisons were made between participants from nuclear families and participants from blended families.

Themes related to relationship stability which were derived prior to the interviews and operationalized through the interview questions, were translated into codes to facilitate analysis of the data. These codes were organized into the Lesbian Relationship Coding Sheet (see Appendix E). The Lesbian Relationship Coding Sheet was modified in its language and structure from the original Marital Coding Sheet developed by O'Brien and Mackey (1990). Codes were used to quantify the presence, quality and structure of relationship themes as well as to identify patterns of stability and change in the relationship over time. Frequency calculations using SPSS-X software described the coded data. The Coding Sheet contained 32 topic areas divided into more than 115 sub-topics as themes were assessed in the relationship over three time periods.

The transcribed interviews were read and coded separately by two coders: the primary researcher and one of the authors of the original coding sheet. The two coders reached a mutual understanding of the three phases in each relationship by discussing the transitions identified by the participants. The researchers created a timeline diagram for each participant which included the year the relationship began, dates of significant events and transition periods as well as the length of each phase. These diagrams assisted the researchers in accurately coding the nuances and changes in the relationships over the three phases. The two researchers compared their codes and when discrepancies occurred, referred back to the original
transcript to reach an agreement on the appropriate code. The inter-rater reliability 86%.

The transcribed data was coded line by line for key themes that correlated with topic areas addressed in the Lesbian Coding Sheet. HyperRESEARCH software (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis & Kinder, 1991) was used to identify and organize specific interview passages and assisted in the content analysis of the 24 interviews. The coded passages were used to further illustrate and develop the themes reflected in the interview and the quantitative codes. Related themes were grouped into categories and are presented in Chapter Four.

Statement of Subjectivity

Qualitative research requires interpersonal interaction thus allowing for the probability of mutual influence between the subject and investigator. Kvale (1983) contends that "the reciprocal influence of interviewer and interviewee on both the cognitive as well as an emotional level is...not primarily a source of error but a strong point of the qualitative research interview" (p. 78). Thus, the inevitability of this mutual influence may be used as an asset in qualitative research provided there is an awareness of its existence. Ignorance of the dynamics of this process can result in subjective and biased analyses. In an attempt to maintain an objective awareness of the interview's interactive process, this researcher maintained written process notes throughout this study and continually engaged in a process of self-reflection to evaluate the potential influence of her own values, attitudes and assumptions as the study progressed. The remainder of this subjective
statement will examine potential sources of the researcher’s bias in an effort to mitigate their affect on this study.

The researcher is a 30 year old, single, white female of Irish and German descent. She is the oldest of two daughters born to parents who have been happily married for 32 years. The researcher was reared in a predominantly middle class area of New Jersey in close proximity to New York City. This area contained a population reasonably diverse in culture, religion, socioeconomic status and political affiliation.

The researcher’s family of origin is marked by tolerance and diversity. Although Catholicism was an important factor in the lives of her parents, it was insignificant in the lives of their children. The formation of political and social opinions was encouraged and differences ranging from conservative Republican to liberal Democratic ideology were valued and respected. The researcher’s family encouraged interpersonal development and pursuit of interests with little regard for traditional gender roles. Education was strongly supported by the researcher’s family and all members have been educated beyond the undergraduate level.

The researcher considers herself predominantly heterosexual. She identifies herself as a feminist and gay-affirmative. The researcher is pursuing expertise as a cross-cultural counselor and is committed to understanding development within its cultural context while continually examining her own motives and behaviors as a cultural being.

The researcher has a number of significant relationships with people who are lesbian or gay. She values this alternative life-style and has gained a sensitivity to the issues involved in being lesbian and gay. The researcher
is politically liberal and a socially active proponent of civil rights and human equality. However, she recognizes that the influences of heterosexism are pervasive and subtle.

Given the dynamics of two women in a relationship, the researcher expected to find evidence supporting feminist literature and developmental theory regarding women's interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the researcher anticipated that female gender role socialization operated within the relationship and would significantly influence emotional intimacy and expressiveness, communication, mutuality, joint nurturance of the relationships, and equity of roles and responsibilities.

Because homophobia is pervasive and subtle, the researcher expected lesbian couples who have been together for 15 years or more to have developed strategies to cope with homophobia. Homophobia as a specific example of sociocultural influence was addressed in the interview to assess its impact on the relationship and in the couples' coping strategies. It was expected that the participants, as individuals and as couples, would demonstrate characteristics of resilience and strength in the face of adversity. Additionally, it was expected that the majority of participants would not be closeted as participation in this study required disclosure of personal thoughts and feelings regarding their lesbian relationship to a relative stranger.

Because the researcher's sexual orientation was heterosexual, she expected that qualifying subjects would be hesitant in agreeing to participate and cautious in responding to some of the interview questions. In an effort to create a respectful and trusting atmosphere, the researcher qualified herself
as heterosexual, gay-affirmative and specializing in cross-cultural counseling. The researcher encouraged open discussion of any concerns held by the participants.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Introduction

The transcribed interviews were coded from themes related to relationship stability among lesbian couples. Twenty-two key themes were identified and are presented in this chapter. The themes were organized into five interdependent categories: developmental themes, interpersonal themes, relational themes, sociocultural influences and familial themes. A frequency analysis of the codes quantified the themes so they could be compared among the group of participants and across the three phases of the relationships. These frequencies are reported in this chapter and represented in Figures One through Five. The themes were further developed by identifying, cataloguing and organizing specific interview passages which reflected the codes. Excerpts of these passages are used in this chapter to illustrate the themes presented.

Pseudonyms, consistent with the tables in the previous chapter, were used to credit the quotations. Each couple was assigned their own letter so that all members of that family group were given names that began with the same letter. Blended families refer to families where the children were present at the start of the lesbian relationship and were a product of one or both of the participants' previous heterosexual marriage. Blended families were assigned letters from the first half of the alphabet (A-F). Nuclear families refer to families where the couple brought a child into the already established relationship through artificial
insemination or adoption. Nuclear families were assigned letters from the second half of the alphabet (M-S).

There is no universal name or title to assign to each of the parents in these families. However, for the purpose of this study it was necessary to distinguish between the biological or legally adoptive parent and the parent who did not give birth or was not the originally legal parent. Parents who were the biological or the originally legally adoptive parent will hence forth be referred to as the biological parent while her partner will be referred to as the co-parent.

Developmental Themes

The developmental category consisted of two dynamic themes that examined the progression of the relationship over time: transitions and commitment. An exploration of these themes provides an overview of the evolution, change and adaptation of these long term relationships.

Transitions

Because lesbian relationships develop in ways that are not clearly understood, the participants in this study were specifically asked to identify transitional periods in their relationships. Transitions were identified as periods where the relationship shifted or in some way emerged as qualitatively different from what it had been. This information provided a framework of three phases through which to look at the progression of the relationships.
In all twelve couples, participants identified identical or roughly equivalent transition points. However, there was some variability in the length of the phases between couples. The blended couples had been together on the average four years more than the nuclear families and their three phases were slightly longer in duration. For all participants, phases were likely to be between four and ten years. The early years of the relationship comprised the first phase of the relationship which lasted between the first five to ten years. During this time, the relationship shifted and the couple moved into the second phase of their relationship which lasted between three and twelve years. Once again a shift in the relationship was identified and the couple moved into the third phase of their relationship which lasted between two and ten years.

There was a difference in the type and timing of transitions among the participants and between the nuclear and blended families. For example, despite the commonality of having children, children were present at different intervals in the relationship and were of different ages when they became part of the family. Three types of transitions were identified: 1) events that changed the environmental context of the relationship such as buying a home and/or moving, 2) changes in the interpersonal contexts of the relationship such as separation or divorce from a husband or issues involving children entering the relationship and leaving home, 3) times of either specific or general conflict such as issues related to monogamy, careers and roles. In many cases, these types of transitions occurred simultaneously (e.g., divorce was a change
in the interpersonal context which lead to a change in the environmental context such as the lesbian couple moving in together).

The natural development and adaptation that takes place in a long term relationship is illustrated in the following quote:

Roberta: It seems like in all of these phases that as it begins there has been a real quality of the relationship fitting and the patterns - both of us complementing each other real well and the patterns of relating were working. And then the sort of gradual build up that 'oh, this isn't working anymore'. There is a piece of growth that one had done that the other hasn't compensated for until something kind of explodes. It's the earthquake model of relationships. Tectonic plates building up until finally there is a shift.

Changes Related to the Environmental Context

Seventy-five percent of the participants identified moving to a new place of residence as one of the major transitions in their relationship (n=18). The following quotes illustrate the shifts in the relationships and mark the beginning of a different phase.

Claire: Moving to California was a big move; we were away from family. I guess the first phase was the great relief of being together alone without judgmental stuff from family, the husbands were finally gone and we were free to forge a life of our own. It was blissful and everything seemed possible.

Nina: It's a little hard to because we still feel a little bit in flux here. We have only been here less than a year. And we are sort of in the process of defining ourselves as a family here. Where we used to live mostly we hung out with other lesbian families and it was very comfortable in that respect. It was fine for the kids and it was completely relaxing for us. Here it has been interesting because we arrive here as a lesbian family and this is a very straight neighborhood and it's a lovely neighborhood, I think we have been welcome. But we feel... lonely, I think that's the way to describe it.
Of this 75% who identified moving as a transition, four participants, all representing blended families, indicated that moving in together was a major transition point. These transitions occurred at the same time the married partner divorced or separated from her husband. For these participants, the transitions were a positive change in the relationship.

Beatrice: She was divorced and we [began] living together. [There was] really a growth in terms of becoming a "we" and also in terms of our relationship becoming more mutual where we did more mutual nurturing.

Dana: She had finally had it with her husband and just couldn't live with him anymore. This had been the third time she went to a lawyer but this time she was sure because she could come and live with me. So she got divorced...and that is when she moved in...I just think it took a lot of stress off of our relationship because now we were together. It calmed it down a bit. It probably wasn't as exciting as it had been because it was now so easy. No, it was still exciting, it was just different. The stress was gone.

Moving in together or the couple moving to a residence brought about a change in the relationship. These quotes illustrate that the change involved eliminating negative interference from others and/or moving into a deeper more committed relationship.

Changes Related to the Interpersonal context

There were four couples where either one or both of the participants were married and living with their husbands when they began their lesbian relationships. Of these eight participants, six of them considered the divorce or separation to be a major transition in their relationship with their partner. The effects of this event on the relationship were obvious in allowing these couples to pursue their lesbian relationships.
Abby: Well, certainly the point at which [Alice's husband] left was a real major transition point and I guess out of that evolved the period that we went through therapy and really sort of realized that we are individuals and could commit as individuals to being in a relationship.

Beatrice: Clearly, when Betty and her husband separated and divorced. That was a big transition in our relationship because for the first few years, it wasn't clear what was going to happen to us. We were in love but then what. And part of that was both of us coming to terms to the changing understanding that meant in our spiritual understanding. But then she had to sort that out in terms of what that meant about a commitment to a husband. Obviously, when they were separated and divorce was a big transition in the relationship because now we were a couple. And as she didn't lose custody of the children that was a transition.

All 12 participants from the six nuclear families spoke about bringing children into the relationship as a major transition point. Three of the 12 identified the period of discussion and decision to have children as the transition point whereas the other nine participants stated that the birth or adoption of the child/ren was a transition point.

Molly: And then sort of moving into could we have children together because that was important for both of us. And then, I guess after the phase of talking about having children together was if we did, who was going to get pregnant first...Because the commitment and agreement to have children was already there, it was a matter of working it out...To me that sort of marks the beginning of the children stuff. How we were going to do it. Who was going to get pregnant first and then when we were going to do it. There was a phase that was very intense focused on how we were going to have children and having the babies and having young children.

Samantha: Well, I can start backwards. I think that one clear transition was the decision to have a child. There are something's we have done very differently since we made that decision.

Three participants, all representing blended families, marked the grown children leaving the home as a major transition point.
Abby: There was a definite transition point when ... the kids were both in college for the first year that Aretha was away and Arthur was away as well. That was a real transition because we sort of had to say we don't have to worry as much about them, I mean we are not going to forget them but in the day to day way we live, we have different choices that we can make. We could go out and do things by ourselves and not worry about them being okay, feeding them dinner or arranging for them to make their own dinner or something like that or getting them home from school.

When husbands and children left, participants were able to focus more exclusively on themselves and their relationship with their partner. On the other hand, the addition of children to the family unit gave the partners a task to work on together.

Changes Related to Conflict

Thirteen participants identified transitional points that were marked by crisis and conflict. Of these participants, eight did not provide a concrete event or issue as a specific marker but instead talked about periods of conflict.

Olivia: There was a period of about years two through five that were pretty tranquil although I think that was when we were having these issues about being the same and being different. And then there was a hard period that was probably the next two years so what would that be six and seven which I guess people talk about as being a hard time.

Samantha: There was another time that was major which was during my residency when we weren't doing well. That is a painful one to talk about but...

Ester: And then the middle years when we had a terrible time.

In retrospect, participants had a clear awareness of the conflict and its effects on the relationship. The remaining five participants
identified specific crisis events including serious illness, intense conflict around roles in the relationship and issues related to nonmonogamy.

Commitment

Transitions provided markers through which the development of the external trappings of the relationship may be seen. The participants were also asked about their commitment to their partner and the relationship. It was through these descriptions that a sense of the change and development in the internal environment of the relationship can be perceived.

The commitments did not have formal beginnings nor did they have recognizable events that coincided with the progression of their commitment. Several couples found creative and unusual ways to publicly mark their commitment to one another. These markers often took place years after the couple had recognized their commitment to one another. These events took various forms including a graduation party, anniversary party and a renewal of baptismal vows.

There was no universal language or model that described long term committed lesbian relationships. In their descriptions, there was a sense of fluidity to the relationship and a developing commitment to being together. The commitment deepened in response to the years and events that unfolded in their lives.

Dana: It was just a natural progression I think. She is very impatient and she wanted to be together. Her kids at that time, the youngest was eight and she said we would have to wait ten years to be together because I want my kids to be out of school and then maybe we can be together. But ten years was like, you know, I'll never wait ten years. And I was committed to saying 'ten years, it
will go by, we can do it'. So basically, we did kind of commit that in ten years we would be together. We just basically went along like that.

Alice: It was evolutionary and I guess I'd just have to say that 20 years blurs some things together and I'm not really sure. I remember initially really enjoying being with Abby, going places and doing things with her and then that relationship involved into a sexual relationship and I remember wondering at the time, where is this going, what is going to happen. Feeling very much in love with her. I don't know where commitments specifically came in except I think for me just being willing to acknowledge that I love her and acted on that comes from some sort of a commitment right from the start. I think particularly at that time it wouldn't have occurred to me to just kind of really experiment without some kind of underlying commitment there.

Nina: And I think it was fluid. I mean I think there were periods when I felt more a commitment and times when she felt more of a commitment than I did. But getting an apartment after Nancy graduated was our commitment. We were not going to fall by the wayside like other people we had known in school. Then with each crisis, we remarked our commitment.

To define their commitment, these couples created their own meanings to fit their particular experiences. These commitments were complex but may be grouped into three categories: growth-enhancing, break-up prevention and future oriented.

Growth-enhancing

For several participants, the commitment was specifically not made as promise to stay together forever although that was the expectation. Instead, the commitment was based on a growth-enhancing idea of staying together as long as the relationship was healthy.

Alice: It was something that we talked about, again, over a period of time. My commitment to her is complete but I no longer talk about forever and no I am not willing to make vows and get up in front of people and say that I will love you until death do us part.
My expectation and the way I live my life is that will happen but having once broken those vows, I am just not willing to make them again. Life throws us curves and I think it's real clear in the way we live our lives that we will stick with each other, thick or thin. But it's really a different kind of thing than being in a marriage.

Beatrice: We kind of negotiated an ongoing commitment. But Betty had made marriage vows and I had made vows in the convent both of which we felt in the best of faith we had to break. So both of us felt that to make life vows, maybe you can't vow for life. Maybe you just intend and keep reviewing. And that is something we both struggled with a lot - feeling guilty and really working through to a different understanding to what it is to make a commitment.

Betty: What I learned is that I could never again promise to love someone until I die. Or promise to stay with someone until they die, I can't make that kind of a promise. I have experienced the fact that life happens in the midst of your promises and there they go. So what I said what I would rather be about was being committed to one another for as long as we were growing, for as long as we were enabling one another to be all that we could be and was good for the both of us. For me, that was the commitment that we were going to be together. And I still feel strongly about that.

In a similar growth-enhancing manner, Emily's description of her commitment to Ester transcends the often oversimplified commitment of "I'll love you forever" and becomes not just a commitment to the person but to their potential.

Emily: Part of the reason we were going to be monogamous was that we felt like we had things to do in the world and we both feel that way very strongly and while we both believe that theoretically or perhaps may even be a good idea to maintain several relationships at the same time, we also felt like in order to do that you have to spend a lot of time making sure that everyone feelings aren't hurt and that everything is all right... And we made the decision that we wanted to do more in our lives than doing that and therefore we wouldn't do that. And so that was a big part of when I say we made a commitment. We made a commitment to do something with our lives and to support each other as a couple in doing something with our lives so it wasn't just a "I love you" although it was that too but it was also "and I love the kind of work
Participants recognized the liability in making a commitment for a future no one can predict. These quotes illustrate how participants were committed to creating and maintaining a healthy relationship where partners supported and encouraged each others’ growth.

Break-up Prevention

Other participants built and understood a different kind of commitment based on a break-up prevention idea. Again, these types of commitments were not specifically focused on staying together forever although that was implicit. Instead, they were understood as a commitment to working on the relationship when it was troubled in order to prevent a break-up.

Octavia: That there is a sense that you are in it for the long haul. That there are going to be difficult situations that you are just going to have to get through that you may not like. That there are also going to be really good situations that might not last but that you expect kind of both. That you are really there no matter what. That it can't get so bad that you walk out. You can walk out for an hour but that you are there and are really committed to working on the issues. Certainly that we were going to be living together and sharing our lives very closely.

Roberta: We knew we were serious about one another. We knew we wanted to make a long term relationship. And I think part of why we have had a long term relationship is because that is important to both of us. Both of us figure whatever it is, we are going to be with somebody and we have gotten through 15 years with this one person so why not keep on moving... But we also had this thing that we kept going for years. We had sort of a statute of limitations on ourselves that okay, now we have been together for a whole year now and we have been through some rough times but if it gets horrible, you have to commit to one month of working it out. And if after a month, and you have been working hard at
working it out, and you are still not happy then you are free to go. And then it was like okay we have been together for 5 years so 6 months. You have to work 6 months. And we kept that going for a while until we realized how funny that was. That it was kind of silly. But it was a nice safety valve for both of us I think. It wasn't like you were trapped in this relationship. And then there was this other person was going to let you know that she wasn't just going to leave tomorrow. She is going to let you know and she is committed herself to explaining her point of view or talk about the unhappinesses and give you a chance to work through.

These participants conveyed an idea of how important the relationship was in their lives and their willingness to work at keeping it intact.

**Future Oriented**

Other commitments were based on the future and goals for the couple to achieve together. These types of future-oriented commitments are represented in the following quotations:

Maria: [Our commitment is to] staying together and raising a family.

Sarah: At this point, we have decided that we plan to grow old together and retire together and hike the Appalachian trail together. And hike the entire north and south islands of New Zealand. We have lots of fantasies. And we are totally committed to doing that and we are going to do it. We are going to do these things. Certainly for me, and I think for Samantha too, it is inconceivable that we won't be together for a long time even if we start fighting or something, we will just get through it.

Future oriented commitments were based on a desire to accomplish a goal (e.g. raising a family, traveling) in conjunction with their partner.
Interpersonal Themes

The category of interpersonal relationships contained four themes. These themes revolved around the interactions between two people and defined the interpersonal category. They included conflict, relatedness which encompassed intimacy, communication and egalitarianism in the relationship. Each theme was examined in relation to the three phases identified by the participants.

Conflict

Issues of conflict were present throughout the relationship. Figure One illustrates the level of conflict in the relationships over time. Frequencies taken from the coding sheets revealed that in the first phase, nine participants reported major conflicts in their relationships. The highest reported level of conflict was in the second phase of the relationship where 12 participants reported major conflict. This number was halved by the third phase (n=6). Participants identified a variety of conflict laden issues: monogamy, communication, time and living styles.

Monogamy

The most prevalent conflict was around monogamy as each participant talked about this issue. Some couples resolved this issue almost immediately by agreeing to be monogamous.

Pamela: We were both basically very monogamous kind of people. That was Penny's biggest struggle. Her last partner wasn't monogamous and she was. And that was my trouble with my husband. So we never, well, I never had any affairs. I wasn't interested in exploring other options although she was the first woman I was ever with.
Figure 1: Frequency of reported conflict among participants over the three relationship phases.
Dana: I think I am kind of a one person person. Even though there is not a written commitment to her, it's once I wanted to be with her, I wouldn't do anything to ruin that relationship. Like I said, even if I was attracted to somebody and that only happened like twice, I would have never have thought of going with that person because she is my soul partner.

Francis: We are absolutely monogamous and have been from day one. That is part of our commitment. Neither of us could have tolerated it any other way. Just who we are, it would have been horrible. So we have always been totally monogamous. I think it destroys trust and I think it destroys intimacy. That doesn't work for women. It seems to work for men, for some men. But it doesn't work for women.

Some couples had partners with other opinions on issues of monogamy where one partner agreed to monogamy at the request or insistence of the other.

Maria: Like I said, I had not been monogamous to the relationship and Monica knew this and I don't think she was thrilled about it but she never said anything. But when we got an apartment together, she said she didn't want me to see anyone else and I agreed.

Nancy: Because of my personality and I believe my early religious training, I am a firm believer in sexual monogamy. I could not be in an adult relationship that did not conform to that expectation. Nina never felt that way, never felt that sex was an indicator of how you felt about a person. We have very different views of that, they are irreconcilable. So I think the biggest adjustment was Nina agreeing to conform to my view that monogamy was an absolute prerequisite to any kind of relationship with me. That was probably...not an easy one or probably one she still doesn't want to do. It is just my bottom line.

Fourteen participants, more than half the sample, experienced conflict in their relationship as they worked through the issue of monogamy. Three blended families and four nuclear families discussed conflicts related to this issue including sexual affairs and attractions outside the relationship.
While the issue of nonmonogamy was present at the beginning of each of these relationships, it took on a different form in the blended versus the nuclear families. In the blended families, this issue was occurring with the children present and the couple working to integrate the co-parent. In nuclear families, the couples grappled with nonmonogamy and resolved it before the children were brought into the relationship.

For the three blended families who experienced conflict, the conflict occurred around nonmonogamy in the same phase where the couple was also experiencing the difficulty of blending or integrating their family unit. In two cases, it was the co-parent who was attracted to someone else. In the third case, where each woman was a biological parent, both had affairs outside the relationship. One of these participants described how the sociocultural context surrounding their relationship sanctioned nonmonogamy or at least influenced the couple's thinking on this issue.

Claire: But monogamy was something to be despised as part of the establishment that made everything wrong with the world. The Vietnam War was still going on and we were radicals...And my stance at that time was that monogamy was bad and I didn't want any part of it...I remember telling Constance again and again that I did not want to have a monogamous relationship and it would make her very sad.

The participants in these three blended families described how the issue of monogamy was played out in their relationship. The following descriptions give some evidence of why there were outside attractions and how these attractions affected the relationship.

Abby: I was involved with someone just before [Alice] and [her husband] separated. I was at the point where I was acting out by
saying I am not getting enough by getting it from somebody else. That stopped even before [Alice's husband] left.

Claire: The first 10 years were very rocky as a result of having relationships with other people...We eroded each other's trust I think in having other relationships. I think the past five years, I have finally begun to trust again... I started feeling safer in the past five years and am feeling safer and safer every day.

Constance: I had some relationships with other people, with some other women. These were always horrible. I always thought they were a dandy idea and they wouldn't change my feelings toward Claire and of course it would always hurt her badly and then I would feel awful... But I think about it now, I thought I could have other experiences without it hurting our relationship. I was pretty immature on my part to think this was possible...[After an affair where I moved in with the woman and later returned to Claire, she] just sort of hated me. She was very angry at me and stayed angry at me for years. Not all the time but a lot of the time. She would work it into the conversation at the most irrelevant times, she was awful but I put up with it because I thought this is what I had coming. I had set all of this in motion so it was my fault. I just stopped defending myself after awhile... there was just really no explaining it all and there was a lot of bitterness left and there still is.

The reasons given or implied for attractions outside the relationship included not getting enough attention from partners in the relationship and a desire to continue to explore other intimate relationships. The above quotes illustrate the stress, pain and lack of trust created by outside attractions.

Four nuclear families identified issues of monogamy as areas of conflict in the first and second phases of the relationship. In each case, the issue occurred and was resolved before children were brought into the relationship. Participants from three different couples commented on the conflict involved in confronting this issue and moving the relationship to a place of monogamy.
Nina: I think the thing that was hardest for us at the beginning was monogamy. I don't think we would ever have put anything in those terms but the one source of discomfort was that at various points at the beginning we knew we had to come to some sort of understanding about it.

Octavia: And I know the issue then was nonmonogamy. It was something that came up with Olivia sort of seeing somebody else. It was an issue that came up and was very, very painful for everybody. And therapy was very, very painful. We went in and we sort of had patched things enough so that we could be dealing with everyday life and when we walked out it was all kind of open again. So it was very hard.

The last couple to comment below identified the affair as a symptom of a preexisting problem of poor communication in the relationship.

Samantha: During the second phase, we sort of had to face a lot of difficult feelings in which we weren't very graceful talking about and didn't talk about anymore than we needed to. But we did start talking more about what was going on. Both of us sort of pulled a third person into the middle of our relationship. Sarah's sense was that we were drifting apart and she wasn't exciting enough and I wasn't happy...And she was somebody who I was pretty sexually attracted to before this whole story came up. And I would never have thought of acting on it and Sarah invited her in because sex had gone out of our relationship...she was doing that out of the desperate grasp of doing something for me because she cared for me and the rational side didn't make any sense but that's an example of the extent to which we were not able to talk about what was going on.

The above quotes reflect the difficulty these couples had addressing the causes of nonmonogamy and the pain in resolving this issue.
Communication and Time

All participants discussed poor communication and/or issues around time and money as causes for conflict in the relationship at different points.

Samantha: We each had space and didn't have any troubles sharing bureau drawers or household chores but now we had a household together. And things like she expected that if you weren't going to be home at a certain time that you would call. And I was like 'oh, I never knew that was the rule'. And some of those things we ended up negotiating at that point which was harder to do because it felt like we are supposed to already know that. And she would have these expectations of this is what should happen so she wasn't conscious of feeling like she needed to tell me because we had been together for six years so if she knew that, then of course I should know that. It was awhile before it occurred to me that was the expectation. So we ended up during that three years of residency having a bit of a crisis at one point of not talking about things and getting ourselves in trouble. And we went to counseling for awhile and I actually moved out for a couple of months.

Pamela: Money and time were our big sources of disagreement. And a lot of our fights would be around time - we weren't spending enough time together. I would sort of a lot of times say 'you're right, I'm not doing my share here'. And would sort of be repentant and try to get back to do more my share. But I have always felt this pull towards doing other things. I wasn't content to be at home in a relationship. That wasn't enough for me. And I would contend that I wanted some sort a balance but I could see that my balance was off. Probably because I have a hard time saying 'no'. But after awhile I would be pulling my hair out - 'oh, I've got so much to do'. I have really changed around that partly because I have worked on that but also because of the kids - you can't do that or you will get really burnout. You have to be home more. That was always a tendency of mine to get involved in too many other things. And even though I acknowledged this, it was very hard for me to stop doing it.

From these examples it was evident that relationships required communication to resolve different expectations for how partners should behave in a relationship. A lack of communication can lead to a major
crisis as in the first example where the couple separated for a period of time. Although the second quote illustrated a couple that was able to communicate over a difference in the relationship, it brought to light another issue. The participants in this study were active achievers in their professions and their community. Having a spectrum of interests outside the relationship may lead to conflicts about time spent in the relationship.

Living Style

There was one couple who identified major conflict as occurring throughout their 21 year relationship. While there were specific areas of conflict identified at different times in the relationship, the backdrop of the ongoing conflict was different styles of housekeeping.

Claire: We have had huge differences around communication and neatness. She will always think that I think she is a compulsive cleaner and she will always think that I am a terrible slob.

Constance: Yes, our ongoing, forever, ever conflict is style of neatness. I am very neat, Claire is very sloppy. That is a continual problem that ebbs and flows. I usually get my way because I care more. Ultimately, I get my way but in the meantime I have to say 'there is stuff all over the house, will you please pick it up?'. And then I have to remind her three of four hours later.

Despite this ongoing conflict about cleanliness, the couple seemed to at least accept their different styles as they had managed to stay together for 21 years.

Relatedness

Relatedness referred to how partners got along and the level of connection they had. The relatedness varied over the three phases and
was at its lowest level during the second phase where there was the most conflict. Relatedness was highest in the first and third phases; 19 of the participants indicated feeling related to their partners while the remaining five participants described mixed levels of relatedness. In the second phase, 15 participants felt related to their partners, seven felt mixed levels of relatedness and two reported no relatedness. The variation in relatedness over the three periods of the relationship is illustrated in Figure Two.

According to the participants, relatedness develops over time and its quality and nature changes as two people build a history together. This dynamic process is illustrated in the following quote:

Beth: We have always gotten along well, we love each other but I think we like each other, enjoy each other, we love to be together. Home is the place where you come to at the end of the day and reconnect. I think we respect each other. And I think that was true in the first seven years and I think that has just grown. And the fact that it has grown is because of the amount of time we have had to spend wrestling with the challenges and struggling to build a life and to do that with integrity. I think that accounts for the growth and relatedness of respect and caring and loving. I can't say there have been changes, just continual growth.

In the first phase, participants described their relatedness to their partners in terms of the excitement of getting to know someone and of establishing a new relationship.

Maria: Well, that time was very intense, very sexually intense. We were getting to know one another and together all of the time. You know you just can't get enough of that person at the beginning. I was just generally intense, not a lot of conflict, we were very happy and learning about each other. You know how you tell and retell stories and each time it's told brings you to a different level of getting to know each other.

Nancy: So in the early period it was new and exciting and working out all of those early relationship stuff, the monogamy stuff, the
Figure 2: Frequency of reported positive relatedness among participants over the three relationship phases
difference in personality stuff, the difference in expectations stuff. At the same time, there was the political element of being in the lesbian feminist movement which was also a support and a distraction from the relationship in some ways. And that was all exhilarating and the quality of the relationship was good. We had good lively discussions, we always had fun together.

The second phase marked a shift in the feelings of relatedness between the two partners. In some instances, the level of relatedness improved, in other cases a distance emerged and in at least one instance, both of these processes occurred.

Pamela: I think the first two years there, there was more sort of pushing and pulling in getting close because of my unsureness of my sexual identity and was this the person that I wanted to be with. So that sort of characterized that period. And then the sort of second period of time...I think we were somewhat you know, settled into more of a...I think that pushing pulling kind of thing me pushing her away kind of moderated. We were pretty connected and pretty close. We did a lot together and we had a pretty close network of friends. I think people on the outside would see us as a pretty couply couple. We spent a lot of time together.

Sarah: Probably the [second phase] we were both working really hard. I don't think we were really related then except during the periods of time when we were traveling and buying houses together. We were doing stuff together but we both had a lot of separate meetings and separate activities.

The third or most recent period also brought changes to the level of relatedness in the relationship. For some of the participants who experienced a difficult time during the middle phase, the third phase was marked by becoming more related.

Emily: But [the second phase] was a very, very difficult time for us. And set the stage, I think, for a lot even when Elaine went off to college. Since then, I would say the last couple of years have been good. We had a lot of cleaning out to do. A lot of cleaning out... In that last three years since we have gotten out of my being pissed at Ester, now we are just very much delighted with each other and our lives and our good fortune to be in good health in this space of time in our lives. And we say it frequently. So I feel
like we are fairly demonstrative and a lot verbally demonstrative. And we say it to each other - how lucky we are to be in this space at this time.

Ester: But between that and the therapist in the last year or so we have been pretty solidly put back together. We have a more mature sense of negotiating so we don't have to pretend that everything is fine when it is not. And we don't have to be upset that we have nothing in common. And we seem to be clearly quite pleased with each other. Which is a nice place to be finally again.

Claire: [Lately,] it's really solid, really dependable. We are both very dependable to each other and to the community and to our families. I never thought all of this would happen. We are really late bloomers, slow to develop. I just didn't know how to be an adult and didn't want to be one.

The quotes in this section illustrated the developing quality and changing nature of relatedness over time. The first phase was marked by the thrill and intensity of falling in love. The second phase was often tumultuous and saw a drop or standstill in the relatedness as partners pursued other endeavors including self-exploration and careers. During the third phase, obstacles impeding the relatedness were identified and removed.

Intimacy

Participants in this study spoke about three different kinds of intimacy: sexual, emotional and physical. Sexual intimacy referred to the sexual relations between the couple. Emotional intimacy referred to personal closeness with verbal sharing of thoughts and feelings between partners. Physical intimacy referred to touching that was not necessarily sexual, including hugging and holding hands.
All three dimensions of intimacies were reported at high levels in the first phase of the relationship. Twenty participants described positive sexual intimacy in this first phase, 20 participants described positive emotional intimacy and 19 participants described positive physical intimacy. These frequencies are typical of the 'honeymoon phase' of intimate relationships.

Like many characteristics of the relationship, these numbers changed in the second stage. Only nine participants indicated positive sexual intimacy, 13 indicated positive emotional intimacy and 13 indicated positive physical intimacy.

With the exception of sexual intimacy, which continued to drop, these intimacies recovered to close to their original levels during the third stage. Six participants reported positive sexual intimacy in this last stage while 19 participants reported positive emotional intimacy and 18 participants reported positive physical intimacy.

Throughout the entire relationship, emotional intimacy was more positive than either sexual or physical intimacy and the participants placed a greater emphasis on emotional intimacy as indicated by their view of its importance. Over the different phases, participants considered emotional intimacy followed closely by physical intimacy to be more important than sexual intimacy. Unlike physical or sexual intimacy, all 24 participants rated emotional intimacy as either very important or important in each phase.

Sexual intimacy. Sexual intimacy was often at a very high level at the beginning of the relationship or in what several participants called the
'honeymoon period' (n=20). One woman who was 27 years old and married at the time she met her partner described this time:

Dana: I think we turned into two school kids who just wanted to be together and we would go parking in crazy places and do all kinds of crazy things like that where we could have got caught so bad. Stupid but we were in love and just couldn't get enough of each other. Basically, it was like a young couple falling in love.

Nine participants related satisfying sexual intimacy in the second phase and six participants described this in the third phase. Many of the participants who spoke about the gradual decline in their sexual intimacy over the years discussed it with a level of acceptance and viewed it as part of the aging process. Others spoke about the decline with a grudging acceptance that held a note of regret.

Constance: Sex has changed over the years. It was very intense in the beginning and sort of stayed frequent up until those horrible years in the '80's and since then it has not been that great. It's not that we are not intimate or affectionate it's just sex has been sort of infrequent by my standards. Way too infrequent by my standards, I used to worry about it and argue about it and want to talk about it and now we just don't even bother, you know, because it is just what it is. It's not that I have accepted it because I really don't think it is good enough. You can't create a lot of stress about the same old thing all the time. If the interest isn't there, the interest isn't there on her part and there is not much you can do about it. You really can't force people to do that, you really have to feel it.

Declining interest in sexual intimacy was attributed to several factors including inequality in the relationship, different levels of sexual drive, and menopause.

Felise: And I hate this kind of thing but I think that the sexual part of our relationship depended or worked better when we were unequal than when we were equal...Always sex in our society has been organized around dominance and submission. And always organized around hierarchical ways. And always females have played a sort of 'take me, I'm yours kind of a role'. And I think that we enacted that in our sexual relationship. And I think I found that
very exciting. I think that our sexual relationship suffered gradually over the years as our work lives became more totally entwined and as I idealized her less in a way. I think that I am the withdrawer here.

Claire: But I think constitutionally, Constance is just more sexual that I am. I was just wowed and acted in a way that I haven't always been before whereas it is probably in her norm to be more sexual than I am. That is problematic. I just don't want to be intimate all of the time as much as she would. Around sexual issues, my libido is much lower than hers...I guess I think like 'why do you want to have sex? We have done that already. We did that last month'. There are no surprises in it, once I get into it, I am glad I am there but it takes me a long time. I never really initiate it very often. And that is a great disappointment to her and I try to.

Dana: And I went through the change about three years ago. And sexually, I don't have it anymore. And I was very sexually and emotionally... She is more sexual than I am now and it is basically because of my change. ...I think she is probably a little bit unhappy about the sex part not being as often as she would like it but she accepts the way I feel too which is good.

Some participants mentioned that despite the decrease in sexual intimacy, the quality of these encounters has increased.

Pamela: Now I think we are pretty compatible about that. Maybe after that first period of time when I kind of recognized in myself this need to be in control because I felt threatened. That wasn't very equal so it was very hard. I would say, again, it has sort of gotten better over the years - the sexual intimacy part.

Samantha: In terms of sexual stuff, I think we are the stereotype of a long term relationship - in terms of frequency, it has markedly decreased. But in terms of intensity and quality of it, it is incredibly much higher than it ever was before. And there was a very long period of healing from that crazy time with [the affair] where I don't think I was able to let myself be sexual.

In the third phase, six couples, representing both nuclear and blended families, indicated that sexual intimacy was a very frequent and important part of their lives.

Emily: We have an active sex life 15 years later and I don't know how much you know from whoever you talk to but that is very
unusual. I tell you that lesbians years down into their relationship very infrequently have an active sex life.

Maria: I think sexual intimacy is the cornerstone of any kind of relationship. I feel sorry for the lesbians who have that lesbian bed-death. I don't know how they can have anything without that kind of intimacy. For me, if you don't have a sex life, I don't see how a relationship can continue.

When asked about the importance of sexual intimacy in their relationships, most participants were casual in negating its importance.

Felise: Certainly it is not what has held the relationship together at any point. It has been valuable but it has never been essential. So maybe so much of those six years at the beginning when we weren't together for long periods of time that were very close and intimate but we didn't see each other but every six weeks.

Sarah: It's almost secondary - certainly the sexual intimacy. It's better when it's there but when it's not there, it wouldn't wipe out the relationship because it is based on a lot of shared values and a lot of shared projects and shared experiences and we like each other and we like doing stuff together. I think the emotional intimacy is an important component of that but as I said the sexual intimacy - it's nice when it's there but it is not a make it or break it part of the relationship.

Participants considered sexual intimacy to be important and valuable but not essential to maintaining the relationship.

Emotional intimacy. Twenty participants described satisfactory emotional intimacy in the first phase of the relationship, 13 in the second phase and 19 in the third phase. Figure Three illustrates the ebb and flow of emotional intimacy over the years. Many participants described how emotional intimacy has grown and developed over the years.

Betty: Emotional intimacy I think was present in the very beginning and that has just grown as far as I am concerned. We are both very much our own person, we aren't dependent on one another to tell us who we each are. We have a lot that we share and we have a lot that we do on our own. But our basic intimacy, I think, has just grown. I don't know, I get this picture of these two old
Figure 3: Frequency of reported positive emotional intimacy among participants over the three relationship phases.
geezers sitting on their front porch rocking away with their gray hair. I have this picture of a kind of a harmony or a kind of closeness, that they don't need words sometimes. And I think that is a lot about how I feel about Beatrice.

Nancy: [Our] emotional intimacy was characterized by growth. I think Nina made a commitment to me before I made a commitment to her because of our different views on monogamy and I think I did hold back a lot of my emotional commitment to her during that period. But I still loved her deeply as a friend and would still say she was my best friend during that [affair]. So it was only a small component that was held back but I would say the beginning was characterized by growth and the middle period I think really deepened our emotional intimacy once there was a commitment to each other for the long term. I think that a lot of the anxiety and nervousness and also the public presentation because it wasn't a phase anymore, it was something we were going to be doing for the rest of our lives - being out there in public as a lesbian couple. I think that was all a real deepening of that.

Despite the fact that participants were not always satisfied with the emotional intimacy in their relationship, there were no instances of a total void of emotional intimacy. The ebb and flow of emotional intimacy was a dynamic process responding to interrelationship issues as well as factors outside the relationship including children and affairs.

Alice: And I think we have sort of had times of emotional intimacy that are greater than times when there have been less. It is something we are really working and struggling on. Not necessarily even between us but if there is something happening in our children's lives, or our friend's lives or our work lives, we are trying to help each other with that and work with our feelings. We have been talking a lot. But most of the time, and there are certainly a few times when not, but most of the time I feel connected with her.

Roberta: There are some areas of our lives that we are like business dealings. Like who can pick up Rebecca when. And that is sort of at the surface level. That is stuff we talk about all the time, we know how to deal. We know how to negotiate. It is not ever an issue. Then there are other levels that are maybe more intimate or more personal and we deal somewhat on those. We have figured out how to connect and how to be supportive. And then there are
some levels that are highly personal and almost to the very core of who we are as people where we haven't communicated much or haven't shared feelings in those ways. And in some cases those are the areas that we push to the outsides of our relationship and I don't think that we trust each other very much in those areas.

Beatrice: I think in terms of emotional intimacy and probably in the first seven years, was a lot of emotional intimacy. Sharing a lot and trying to work through all of these things. I think in the next seven years, perhaps like a lot of middle age couples if you will, we turned more toward learning to live with each other and raising a family and that kind of stuff. It didn't feel like there wasn't any emotional intimacy but we weren't sharing as much.

Some participants spoke about the interaction between sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy. Discussions revealed that the two types of intimacy were connected in a way that one enhanced the other.

Octavia: Well, I think we became intimate on all of those levels very quickly in the early stages of our relationship. I think it was important to be very emotionally intimate at the same time we were physically and sexually intimate. I think it sort of went hand in hand. It was just tied together, I think we were more able to be sexually intimate because we were emotionally intimate as well.

Roberta: Neither of us likes that [we are not sexually intimate now] but that's where we are. And actually that has been the catalyst for learning to deal with each other in a more emotionally intimate way. And sort of pulling the stuff out of the dark spaces and trying to deal with those cause we are figuring that is a path, one path back to sexual intimacy which both of us really want...Those two things have always been linked for us in ways that I don't get all the way and Regina, I don't think, does either. She may have like totally different views on how all this works, I am sure she does. But there is some kind of connection in my head and in my understanding of the relationship between times when we are emotionally intimate and supportive of one another and also sexually intimate. And each is a weapon against the other and is a way that we are able to carry out the private battles that we have. And so there is some ways that we manipulate those two things that I don't really get. But, yea, things have definitely been different but it is not easy to see what makes it different - why at some times we seem incredibly nonsexual and emotionally close and then highly sexual and like not even remembering the other's last name.
Although emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy did not rely on each other for existence, the presence of emotional intimacy enhanced the level of sexual intimacy.

Physical intimacy. Physical intimacy was highest in the first and third phases of the relationship (first phase n=19, third phase n=18). Many participants spoke very simply about the presence of physical intimacy from the beginning of their relationships and how it has remained consistent.

Betty: We get skin hunger if we are away from each other too long. When we come back together, we have to hug and get skin contact. We like to put our arms around each other or just be close. And that was there at the beginning and that is the same. It is still very much part of our relationship.

Pamela: We have always done a lot of cuddling. I think we both like that a lot. I have liked that a lot about Penny that she liked that kind of closeness. I think I didn't have a lot of that in my family or in my relationship with men. So that is something I really prize a lot. We both like that a lot. That part is always pretty comfortable.

Physical intimacy was considered important throughout their relationships.

Alice: Certainly, the physical, nonsexual stuff is very important. It is important to our relationship. It is important to our persons. We are both very tactile.

Beatrice: Absolutely, that has been a very, very important part. Every night we snuggle when we are in bed. It is really important for both of us. And we kiss and hug and hold hands. I think in the beginning, I was much more so and she was much less. But that's really changed over the years.

Satisfying physical intimacy was reported by 13 participants in the second phase. Interruptions in the level of physical intimacy were related to forces outside the relationship including children and affairs.
Regina: I think [physical intimacy] has been one of the things that has been a strength in the relationship but I would say has also suffered in the last four years since Rebecca was born. I think that we are now just starting to come out of that. But I think that for a long time, it has been a strength in our relationship.

Samantha: Physical nonsexual intimacy has always been a lot and important and felt good except that time [the affair]. It's now more often comfortable in public. And that has always been Sarah's issue where she is less comfortable holding hands or hugging or whatever.

For some participants, physical intimacy was not a part of their relationships. For them, homophobia and the need to keep their lesbian relationships hidden had a lot to do with that.

Emily: And I would say on the hugging kind of level that we do less of it because as a gay couple there is just not too much of that goes on outside of your house. You don't do that walking down the street with great abandon. Even in this street and town that is very liberally oriented.

Felise: And I just had these prickles. And wanting to keep that part of our lives private. So we have never, ever been comfortable with public displays of affection except rarely now where we are in a lesbian community now where we can tease and be open. But it is so unfamiliar for us that it is even hard for me to move into that mode because we have had 30 years now of learning how.

The negative social stigma attached to two women displaying physical affection influenced the level of physical affection participants displayed in their relationship despite their urge to be more physical affectionate with their partners.
Communication

Communication was an important component of the relationships. In the first phase of their relationships, 15 participants described good communication with their partners, eight had mixed communication and one participant described poor communication. In the second phase, which was the most conflict ridden, the number of participants maintaining good communication dropped to 13 while nine participants described mixed communication and two reported poor communication. In the third phase, these numbers recovered: 20 participants described good communication and only four reported mixed or poor communication. Figure Four illustrates the changes in communication over the three phases of the relationship.

Eight participants reported that communication has been good from the beginning and throughout their relationships.

Dana: Always total communication, very open and honest. Yea, exactly how we felt. If we had a problem, we would just talk about it...So we have always been open with each other especially after we finally said to each other how we felt about each other. Up until that point, everything was inside...Our communication is just so open, that if we feel a certain way or have a problem or I get upset about something, we just talk about it. We just straighten it out. And it usually works. We are just open and honest with each other. I don't think we are unhappy about anything. I'm not.

As the participants spoke about communication in their relationships, it became apparent that the style and quality of the most couples' communication developed over the years.

Molly: I think that we have always been able to communicate well in terms of expressing ourselves to each other and understanding each other. I would say the change is less in how we communicated and more in how we fought because I don't think
Figure 4: Frequency of reported positive communication among participants over the three relationship phases.
that it changed. I think the way we have communicated hasn't really changed but I think what has changed is how we have addressed certain issues in our relationship.

Pamela: Rather than deal with the real feelings that were going on, I would just sort of push her away. I used to storm out, that was something I would do, leave...In the middle phase I would tend to say 'well, don't you understand this is the way it is, this is the way it should be'. And she would be in tears about it, feeling terrible and I would just be being rational about it all... So we would be in pretty different positions but we were listening to one another. So maybe not in that particular moment but later we would say 'I listened to what you have to say and you are right about that'. So I think we could be really rigid at the time and sometimes say mean and hurtful things to each other. I think that is one thing that we have learned is that you can't say horrible things to each other because it is really injuring. I can remember a few times when I said something terrible and I will always remember it and since I can remember those few times, I can keep myself from saying them. Relationships just can't stand up to all of that.

Samantha: In terms of initially, it was more conversational. We shared a lot of information and told each other things we did and talked about politics, about hiking, about places, about stuff that was going on, about our work. But not very much about feelings. During the second phase, we sort of had to face a lot of difficult feelings in which we weren't very graceful talking about and didn't talk about any more than we needed to. But we did start talking more about what was going on...So when we started to face that emotional stuff, we had no history or experience in that and weren't very good at talking about those things even in the best of times.

Differences in styles of communication seemed to be a very common occurrence with these couples. The challenge for them was to recognize these differences and find a way to bridge that gap.

Betty: Beatrice is an extrovert and I am an introvert. Beatrice tells me more than I ever want to know about anything, that is her way. We will be driving down the highway and she will be doing the running commentary. That's not my style, I register all of those same things but I don't feel compelled to share them. So having said that, one of the growing edges of our communication was my interiorness of my communication and her needing me to verbalize. That has been one of the places where I think that we
have worked the hardest... And I have really been intentional about speaking up for what we need from each other in terms of good communication, asking for what we need. I have to ask Beatrice not to give me all the details on something. She has to at times to ask me to verbalize what I am thinking.

Claire: I think culturally she is Italian and will say 'ouch' before it hurts. She is very able to demonstrate what she needs and what she wants. She is not communicative about herself, she is not very open about herself, I don't think, compared to me. I didn't have a clue that people should express themselves, I really thought you just had this stiff upper lip and just suffered in silence. Especially if what you are feeling is something you don't like to be feeling. You never say "I am jealous." You have hurt my feelings. That just never came out of me easy, it comes out more easily now because I had to take responsibility for how I was feeling. Over the years, I have heard her say that whatever I feel is valid. I am not a great communicator, I still am not a great communicator. I still go into my shell and not want to relate and deal with things by going away from it. Like I don't like what you're saying so I am going to go away from it... And I think I have come a long way.

Nancy: We have personality differences in communication where I tend to be in keeping with my refusal to do therapy and my ability to cut off people I don't like, to be more terse about communication and to have higher expectations for understanding on a nonverbal level. Nina is much better in laying out in words what an issue is, what the possible resolutions are, let's work through this. When I can bring myself to conform to that style, we move along very nicely. When I think it is a waste of time or am just not ready, it just waits until I can do that. So Nina is very patient with me in terms of communication which I think is needed...She does take the responsibility for maintaining communication, I must say.

In many instances, one woman in the couple was not a communicator. As the following excerpts illustrate, these partners had to struggle to be more open and communicative as well as ask for what they needed:

Beatrice: Interestingly enough, one of the things that emerged in sharpest relief when I was dealing with the memories of the incest was that for all my blabbing, a lot of how I deal with more intimate things like feelings, I wasn't sharing that. And that has been the wall where I have really protected myself which I learned at a very
young age that it wasn't safe to share feelings. So one of the things that happened when I was going through those memories was that I was shutting her out a lot. I was doing it under the rubric of "I don't want to burden you" and she was saying "I need to be included in this. I am really feeling shut off." And since then, I think we have come into a deeper place of communicating. I don't have the same degree of reticence that I had at that time about sharing my feelings. I still have to remind myself "hey, let her know what I am grappling with." By the same token, ask her if something is wrong. I think that our communication is better than it has ever been.

Penny: Well, I think it is much better now. I think in the beginning, I had a tendency to sort of clam up and not say when things were bothering me. And Pamela used to have to drag it out of me. And I think it was because I didn't know how to deal with it. I had spent a lot of my younger years not being able to say things that were bothering me. So I think over the years it has changed and now I am more likely to say this is happening or that is happening and then we can discuss it. Sometimes we have a hard time discussing it but sometimes it feels better to discuss it.

These couples took great measures to learn effective communication skills in the relationship. Therapy, mutual projects, weekend getaways and contracts were all strategies that enhanced communication.

Samantha: We have always worked well on projects together. And I suspect that is the way in which we do a lot of our process about our relationship because we don't talk about those things as if that is the subject. But as we are working on a project together and the negotiation about the project and how we do those pieces seems to act itself out in terms of helping us out with our relationship. We are much better and much more comfortable talking about the logistics of planning a conference or putting together a nonprofit institute or working on a research project together. And while we are doing that, sort of the decision making about things in the relationship works much better.

Emily: I think we have a lot of communication tools because of this sort of feminist training sort of stuff. I mean for example, we don't gunny-sack. That is not an okay thing to do. There are a lot of ground rules. We don't yell at each other, you know. We had a lot of trouble about Ester's canoeing schedule about 3 or 4 years ago.
We made a contract...And we came up with a 3 or 4 page agreement about how often she would canoe, how I would react when she came home and so on and so forth. And we have used that through 2 or 3 canoeing seasons where Ester has gone 3 weekends out of 4 and is at committee meetings during the week. So we virtually see nothing of each other for three months at a time. It is a very stressful period every year for us. And this allows us to get through that with a minimum of turmoil.

The quotes in this section illustrated the importance of communication in the maintenance of these long term relationship. Over the course of the relationship, participants developed an awareness about their style of communication and how to better enhance the communication with their partner.

Egalitarianism

In this study, egalitarianism was evidenced by observable behaviors and decision-making processes. In the first phase, 19 participants spoke of the relationship as fair and equal. Three stated there was very little equality and fairness while two participants described something in between these extremes. Eighteen participants saw their relationships as egalitarian in the second stage while two participants viewed it as having little equality and fairness; four participants described something in between. By the third stage, 22 participants believed their relationships were egalitarian while two participants from different couples described their relationships as mixed regarding equality and fairness.

Egalitarianism was observed in chores and tasks around the house as well as in child care and compromise.
Molly: Maria really doesn't like to drive and it used to feel important to me that she would drive half the time. Then I realized that it didn't really matter and I started driving all of the time. I guess things like that, just dividing up what tasks we each do in the house. That isn't to say we don't struggle over them but we could more divide things into broader categories and say this makes sense, how we are going to do it.

Olivia: Fairness and equity is a big component in how I look at the world and I think how Octavia looks at the world, too. We get bogged down in fairness and equality. For example, each of us used to do all the same chores. Chores are a good example. It was like 'I did the dishes yesterday, you do the dishes now' and at some point we realized that there were chores that each of us didn't mind doing as much as the other person. And we could get beyond equality to actually being a little bit happier about doing things...It started out as like we each have to do everything, make it 50/50. And really this is 50/50 by way of common agreement. And it's just easier. It works.

Examples given by participants revealed that decision making was an important component of egalitarianism. Based on these examples, decision making was coded as mutual, variable or separate. Twenty-one participants described mutual or variable decision making in the first and second phases of their relationships while 23 participants described mutual or variable decision making in the third phase. Examples of these styles and how they affected the relationship are given in the following quotes:

Molly: I would say pretty much we make decisions jointly. We often tend to agree which I guess is another thing in what I meant about shared values. We don't tend to disagree especially about important things. There are some areas where one of us may feel more strongly than the other. Like Maria almost always decides our vacation plans. She seems to feel more strongly about it. That is an example. There are some things I care about that Maria couldn't care less about. If I need help with a decision, she is more than willing to help.

Sarah: A lot of our decisions have always been arrived at together in terms of major decisions about moving and what we were going
to do. About buying a house and if we were going to live together or not. Those have always been shared decisions. It wasn't like 'I want to do this'. Usually we come to terms with the decision making. And usually when push comes to shove, Samantha probably usually decides what she wants to do and talks to me until I start to agree with her.

Francis: We always talk over any decision...Sometimes that doesn't mean that we are careful about making sure that everyone's wishes get met. I can go charging ahead and Felise can too, but we really very much try to include each other in the decision making...Usually I say 'what do you want to do?' on little things almost always.

These quotes demonstrated how decision making is shared and negotiated. However with smaller decisions, participants either continued their mutual decision making or mutually agreed that one partner would make the decision.

A small percentage of this group of participants described separate decision making in the relationship. Three participants described this style of decision making in both the first and second phases of their relationships while only one woman continued to describe it in the third phase.

Roberta: It's hard. It's hard and I think that is part of the stuff that has been shoved off into the corners all these years. A lot of them, she just makes the decision and I just say okay, it is easier to go ahead than it is to try to get in the way of this powerful, decision making engine that she is. That is the current image. So in a lot of ways, I have just sort of allowed her decisions to rule, to stand because it is hard for me to figure out what I want or for me to be very direct about what I want, I guess. There have been big pieces of our lives where we say 'okay, you are in charge for the day'. And you are the queen and I am the helper. And then the next project, I will be the queen and you be the helper. And we just say okay. Or my topic, you know. Should we stock pile food, which is my tendency, or should you just buy what you need. We also switch off grocery shopping so in the years that I am doing the grocery shopping, we stock pile food and I am in charge. And in the years that she is doing the grocery shopping, she stops every
night on the way home and picks up whatever it is for dinner. So there is no decision really except the first one that says this is yours. We have managed to avoid a lot of conflict that way.

One participant recognized the drawbacks of separate decision making and described the couple's recent attempts to make it a more mutual process.

Regina: You know, I think we had a tendency, and I don't think it is a strength, but to divide things up. This is your stuff and this is my stuff. And the down side of that is that it feels real parallel, it doesn't feel real integrated. So I think we have divided things. Like I will be charge of this and you be in charge of that. And so decisions get made something like that. Sometimes we just defer to the other. Decision making. So we do a lot of parallel stuff. You do this and I will do that. For some decisions, we will defer to one another. If they are decisions that we need to make jointly, we are getting better at sort of talking through - this is what I think, what do you think, what do I feel, what do you feel.

Separate decision making appeared to have the liability of keeping a distance between the couple. This was the case with Roberta and Regina, who were not happy with this style of decision making but used it to avoid conflicts.

Relational Themes

The category of relational themes is comprised of three themes which describe the relationship in its broadest sense: interpersonal fit, satisfaction and stability. These themes were examined throughout the three phases.

Interpersonal Fit

In discussing their relationships, the participants described how they related to one another in terms of the "fit" of their relationship. The
relationships were then characterized as either complementary or symmetrical. Complementary referred to a relationship pattern where two different, often contrasting personalities came together to enhance or complete one another. Symmetry was used to suggest a relationship pattern where the two personalities were similar and often mirrored one another. Participants in this study described elements of both complementarity and symmetry in their relationships.

Complementarity

The majority of relationships were primarily complementary throughout the three phases. In the first phase, 22 participants (11 couples) described complementary relationships. There were 20 participants (10 couples) who described complementary relationships in the second phase and 19 participants in the third phase. There was a modest suggestion that as the relationship matured, participants may became more alike in their functioning and less complementary.

An assessment of the couple's interpersonal fit came from examples about interpersonal behaviors, roles, communication patterns and personality styles. The following are examples of complementary patterns of interpersonal relating.

Abby: Alice is more of a caregiver. I am a big doer. I am sort of an action person and she sometimes is the one who says 'slow down and take life easy'. Certainly in relationship to the kids, she's always been the one who provides a little more emotional support for them and I'm the one who cooks them nice things to eat. So like I have a tendency to give care a lot by doing things, although listen and talk too.

Betty: So we were in two different places partly because of our past experience of life and partly because of the way we are
designed. I find it very difficult at times to be subjective and she finds it very difficult at times to be objective. So we balance each other. That has enabled our communication over the years. I think basically we gave each other permission to pull at each other, to pull out of each other the places that we needed to go but couldn't do that by ourselves.

Penny: Well, it was true then and it's true to some extent now that I am the accelerator and Pamela is the brake. And that has always been true although we have moved closer to a place in the center were we both become sort of the clutch. But at the beginning it was definitely true. I always wanted to move forward with whatever it was whether it was a relationship or whatever we were going to do together - 'let's do it!'. Around money, around everything.

Complementarity in the relationship was seen in these examples as partners making up for each others' short-comings and balancing each others' strengths and weakness. There was a sense that with these relationships, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

Symmetry

Symmetry was also evident in the partners' cultural backgrounds. Twenty-one participants contended that the similarity in their racial, socioeconomic, educational backgrounds made their relationships easier.

Nancy: Our styles of communication are fundamentally the same, we are from similar economic and social backgrounds, we have similar types of education, we have a similar world view including what a family life should be like. So we don't have the tension of people who bring really different past experiences to their relationship.

Octavia: I think that our origins are fairly similar class-wise and ethnically. And that has been, for us, a really good thing. We both grew up in very working class families and we both have whatever set of values that from...Both of us have a working class style and it would be very difficult for me if that were not true. If Olivia was
upper middle class or middle class and I had to deal with issues about style like that, it would be a very different relationship.

Ester: Well, we have always felt that we have come from similar backgrounds - middle class, Protestant, white. So our values are generally the same. We haven't had much of a mismatch.

The symmetry in the couples' backgrounds extended to a symmetry in world views and values. This similarity seemed to bring about an easiness or at least lack of tension in the relationship.

Just like complementary patterns, symmetrical patterns seemed to enrich and enhance the relationship. And while only a small minority of the participants had primarily symmetrical interpersonal patterns, many participants gave examples of this behavior in parts of their relationships. Examples of symmetrical patterns of relating reflected the intimate connection between two participants while highlighting their similarities. Several of these participants named this type of connection, "fusion".

Claire: I have an incredible sympathy and empathy for her. In her fears or whatever. I would hate to hurt her. I don't know if that's because we are the same sex or not. It has always been the hardest thing in my relationship with her to know where I stop and she begins, not to fall into that trap of thinking we are one. It is hard for me to separate and individuate. I just feel that my lot is thrown in with her in a way that I never felt with my husband.

Diane: We are very compatible. We even think alike. I think things and I will say something and she will say 'I was just thinking that'. It's uncanny sometimes how we think alike. We like to go on trips by ourselves. We can have so much fun. After 25 years, you would think we must be bored with each other but we are not. We can go out and talk and talk and talk. We just enjoy scenery, we both enjoy birds, we both enjoy nature. We enjoy life, either of us are bigoted people. We are very sensitive people. We are just a lot alike. Neither of us knowing that when we first met. And I think compatibility is a very, very strong point in keeping a couple together.
Felise: We have worked together for so long now that we can tell what each other is thinking. And that is fusion but I don't define fusion as a negative or pathological thing....So we enjoy the sameness and always have... We write together and we do very well at that. So there are a whole lot of things that we don't have to talk about and negotiate. We just do it and it works. And I love that.

The fusion between partners was evident in these descriptions of thinking alike and thinking as one. Fusion was also implied in participant's descriptions of the inordinate amount of time they spend together.

Nina: I think one thing that has been characteristic of us is that we have always spent every second together. At some points, I worried about that because so few people do. So we figured that was what you were supposed to do because so few people stay together either. I no longer feel worried about it, there have been so many break-ups that whatever we are doing is correct. When we were in school, like maybe once every two weeks one of us would go out with work friends or another friend. But we never did things separately if we could possibly help it. People would tease us about being fused and all that but it just was the most enjoyable way to spend our time.

Dana: We just do everything together, we work together, we live together. Once in a while she will go to the store by herself but basically we are together 24 hours a day.

Symmetrical patterns of relating were a unique aspect of these participant's relationships. However, fusion was also an obstacle for several as they spoke about the process of learning they were separate individuals within their relationships.

Claire: It was different in the beginning. I thought she was just like me, of course. I would just tell her story as if it were my story thinking she was as open as I am and she is not...I would say one of the lessons we have learned is really how individual we are, that we really are separate and individual people. That's where that kind of respect has come from is really knowing that.
Octavia: I can't remember if we were dealing with issues, there is this whole thing of lesbian fusion, I think there were issues of identity. I think that during the first few years we really did want to do the same things together and we were really very much going in the same path. And I think that at some point, we realized that 'okay, now I want to do this and I don't know if she wants to do it'... What is my identity outside of the couple? What is my identity inside of the couple? And how do I live with both? That was on the philosophical basis.

Olivia: And what became apparent was that people saw us as being very much the same. And that was very hard for us to understand how we were different. And it became more and more important to understand that as time went on. But I would say that was more like three or four years into the relationship that became more of an issue.

Symmetrical patterns of relating were seen in the partners' empathy toward each other and similar ways of thinking and being. This pattern seemed to blur the interpersonal boundary between partners. In some cases, participants felt confused and needed to differentiate themselves from their partners.

Satisfaction

Throughout the relationships, the level of satisfaction started high (n=20) and then dipped during the second phase (n=16). Eighty-three percent (n=20) of the participants were currently satisfied in their relationship while the remaining 17% (n=4) had a mixed sense of satisfaction. The variation in satisfaction over the phases of the relationship are illustrated in Figure Five. Each participant's satisfaction with their relationship was evident in the interview data and revealed in their responses to what their partner means to them.
Figure 5: Frequency of reported positive satisfaction among participants over the three relationship phases.
Constance: I love her with my heart and soul, I really do. I really care about her, I really love spending time with her. She is my favorite person in the world to be with and unfortunately, there is never enough time for me. I would spend all my time with her if I could and enjoy it but I don't get to do that.

Penny: She is kind of like the core of my life, the core of my being in the world...It used to be that I would go somewhere without her and it felt like very much I had a big, empty space inside my being that I couldn't really fill up with anything else. I think it is different now because I have learned how to take with me some of that essence that I think is there in our day to day life. So if I go somewhere, she does too.

Francis: She is the most important thing in my life. I don't really enjoy things without her. Not really. I suppose we are fused as they say. I just think to me a relationship, that committed relationship, is that central thing in life and everything else goes around it.

Participants expressed their satisfaction with their relationship by describing their love for and importance of their partner.

Stability

Many of the elements related to maintaining the stability in these relationships were elicited through direct questioning about specific characteristics of the relationship. The participants were also given the opportunity to voice what they perceived to be the factors that contributed to the stability of their relationships over time.

The most frequently articulated responses were being committed to the relationship, working at the relationship, having a sense of humor and enjoying humor. Compatibility in terms of common interests and complementary relationship patterns were also perceived as contributing to relationship stability as were shared values and backgrounds. Participation in couple's therapy, communication, respect, trust, friends
and specific characteristics unique to the relationship were other factors that were important to the stability of these long term relationships.

There were a few illustrations of how the relationship has remained stable over the course of time and in the face of many challenges.

Abby: I've loved her for a long time. It's just that deep love that just seems to keep growing and that's really the big thing. How accepting she is of me and I of her. Just that way of expressing how much we love each other and how much I love her.

Betty: There is a sense in which we met, this thing happened and then there was this period of years where everything in my life and my family's life and in her life is being kind of pulled through this new happening...We have moved together as individual people with the rest of the family construct until we juggle around and came up with a new construct. But the way we have been with each other has been very much the same from the beginning until now. It has all been part of the same package.

These examples demonstrated how stability in a relationship is related to a continually evolving love of one another and the continued expression of that love in the face of the changes and challenges brought by being together over many years.

Sociocultural Influences

A number of factors external to the relationship affected the relationship. The impact of these factors ranged from none to positive to negative. There were six themes that comprised this category: finances, social supports, religion and spirituality, feminism and homophobia.
Finances

In the first phase, 10 participants described how money and finances had a positive influence on their relationships. Three participants described financial matters as negatively influencing their relationships and eleven participants said it had no impact. These numbers remained fairly constant throughout the three phases. Ten couples pooled their money and two couples kept separate accounts. Those who indicated finances had a positive or no impact described freedom of conflict around money issues. Reasons for this impact included partner's similar values attached to money as well as their ability to share easily and to have earned enough money to live comfortably.

Francis: Well, it is very interesting because we have never had one minute of trouble about money...We have never had any trouble about money except we spend too much. We are both spenders. We are also both earners, fortunately. But now I am not an earner so much anymore so we have to stop being such spenders. We have never had a conflict about money in 30 years which is very interesting. We don't really care about money. If you have it, you spend it but it is not a big thing.

Octavia: Financially, we were pretty much in the same boat. At one time I was working and she was in school and another time she was working and I was in school. So that kind of support was really clear. At some point fairly quickly, like a year after we moved in together, we pooled our financial resources. That was a relief, that was so easy to do. We had done what roommates kind of do - 'you pay for this and I will pay for that'. Keeping tabs on it. And the minute we said 'we are in a committed relationship, let's take this financial step' and whatever we made we pooled together and we made financial decisions together. It was just so relaxing after that.

Dana: So I made more money than she did but she contributed what she could to the household. We just sat down and figured how much money we needed to pay the bills and stuff like that. I
contributed probably more. And since we have moved here, we share everything. I probably have more money left over but she basically takes care of all the finances and things and I had a very stressful job so she just took care of the finances. I would just give her whatever money she said to give her and never questioned it.

The negative impact of finances was a result of not having a lot of money and partners having different ideas about what to do with money. In these cases, one partner was a saver and the other was a spender.

Pamela: We moved out here in '81 or '82 and we went through really a hard time economically. We didn't have good jobs and sort of came out here on a wing and a prayer. We had very little money for the first year we were here. Then we moved into a little house which we rented and then we started talking about buying it...So we started having a really hard time and that was like in our 7th year of our relationship and we went into counseling. And it was around the question of whether we were going to buy this house. We were having a lot of arguments over money.

Penny: It would tend to be that I thought Pamela spent too much money and she thought I was a tightwad...There was kind of middle period of time when we both had pretty good jobs and there wasn't much to worry about and that was nice. But we are now into a phase again where it might not be so smooth. But we seem now to be at a place where we sort of see ourselves dealing with it together and not blaming the other.

Couples who indicated they had enough money to live comfortably seemed able to avoid any conflict that might have otherwise risen from who earned the money and how it was spent. In this way, finances became a non-issue for these well-off couples while couples who did not have a lot of money were more likely to have conflicts about finances.

Social Supports

Participants also considered how their social supports have influenced their relationships. There were three groups of social
supports that were mentioned: relationships with friends, the gay community and extended family. The participants in this study derived a great deal of social support for their relationships from their friends and the gay community. Relationships with extended family were tenuous as families often had difficulty accepting the lesbian relationship.

Friends

In the first and second phases, eighteen participants believed that friends provided a positive and supportive influence on their relationship. By the third phase, all participants expressed the importance of friends in supporting their relationship.

Nancy: We have good friends that I think would support us in anything. We have parallel families, white lesbians who are raising adopted kids of color about the same age. Three or four families in that group that we see regularly provide support for each other. We vacationed with one of those families recently and that was really nice for the kids.

Pamela: It's interesting. Some friends have sort of faded away as a result of us having children. People just function in this other world where you are free to go out and go dancing or so to a concert and we are not free to do that. And some people have really made the effort to come and see us or do things with the kids. Like there are these very close friends of ours who come every week to baby-sit. They are really like aunts and go on vacation with us. It is a real issue. Then other friends, mostly heterosexual friends, who have children we have kind of gotten closer to. It's like here are the kids together and we can hang out and talk on the sidelines. But we have lost touch with some of our lesbian friends because of us having children. And that was really hard especially in the first year when everything was so miserable plus where are our friends?

Felise: We have also maintained connections from every part of our lives. Francis still has friends that pre-date our knowing each other who she keeps in touch with and who are very important to her. So lifetime friendships really. I have fewer of those. I sort of
mark my two lives between the end of my marriage when I sort of walked away from the heterosexual world in a way. Although I had a couple of heterosexual friends from pre-Francis days. But then since Francis and I have been together, we have really had friends from every stage in our lives that we still stay in touch with. So I would say that we really do have an important and fairly extensive group of friends. Some we see a lot more than others. Some we see twice a year. Others we see more often and they come up to the cabin. I just constantly feel that I want more time to spend with friends. It is a time issue. So I feel very solid about our friendship network.

For these participants, friendships were important and closely tended. Friends shared similar experiences and offered support, assistance and a sense of identity.

Gay Community

Subjects also spoke about the important, positive influence of lesbian and gay communities. Affiliation and ties to the gay community were considered a positive influence on the relationship by twelve participants in the first phase and eighteen participants in the second and third phase. Interaction with the gay community took on different forms including the importance of friendships with other lesbians, involvement in gay/lesbian organizations and affiliation with gay/lesbian-friendly events.

Nina: We go to Michigan to the Music Festival every year and the kids have always gone. In doing that and hanging out with other lesbian families, we are trying to remind ourselves and them that there is another side to this whole picture. The Music Festival has been central to our lives. if there is a spiritual moment in our lives, it is there. And for the kids too. Nulsala starts talking about it every year in January and it's not until August. She starts planning for it and wondering who she will see there. It is a big deal for us. And I think without it we would be very anxious, very adrift.
Octavia: Especially since we have had kids, we have had a very close knit group of lesbian mothers and have kind of jelled at a point where all of our kids were born within a year of each other. It is five families, actually four of these families were in this family cooperative where each of the kids went to overnights. We trade overnights each month with each of the kids. It is incredible and the kids have grown up together. So socially, they are more like cousins than friends. They have literally known each other since they were babies. I think the support of those people has been integral to us succeeding in this world as a lesbian family - knowing that our kids know other kids of lesbians.

Regina: I think community is really important and I don't think that we have enough of that. And I think we both think that. We couldn't do without the friends that we have. I think particularly as gay people. I don't want to sound like an oppressed minority but we need a sense of community to feel comfortable, I think. I mean we are both pretty out but there is just so much hatred and homophobia in the world that it is important for us, for me to feel that I sort of have friends that I really trust. I think that is true with gay people.

Friendships with other lesbians and affiliations with gay organizations provided a grounding for the lesbian families as well as a connection to a larger community. The gay community also offered a source of validation for their lifestyle and a place to feel secure.

Extended Family

Extended families were less reliable in terms of support for lesbian relationships. In averaging the influence of both of the partner's families over the three phases, only 36% of the participants listed their extended families as a positive influence while 40% described the negative influence of their extended families. The remaining 24% believed that extended family did not influence their relationship with their partner. There was a trend toward extended families becoming less of a negative and non-influence and more of a positive influence over the years. For
some couples, it was an important segment of their social fabric and for others it was an obstacle.

Sarah: We have an extended family on both Samantha's side and my side and it's large and supportive and we are all accepted in that family. I guess it still amazes me especially on my side. When Susan was born, all my aunts and uncles sent baby presents. All my cousins did. And everybody wanted to see the child. And we have just absolutely been accepted into my family. We have been accepted into Samantha's family forever. But even my mother's friends sent us presents. That was a big surprise for me, that I wasn't at all expecting. So that is very much a part of our family. And it's important to both of us that we keep close track of our family and they are part of our support system too.

Molly: That was initially more negative but I think has evolved over the years to a more positive thing. Her parents did not know about our relationship until they knew about Maria's pregnancy with Michael. So they had to take the good with the bad...There was a lot more acceptance over time especially after Monica was born. Maria's mother died when Monica was quite young maybe a toddler but by the end Maria's father used to say I was his favorite son-in-law. Not meaning quite that but meaning of all his children's partners, he really liked me.

Nancy: For them, she has always been a member of my family and they were great with her and great about me and fully accepting of my relationship with her and of Nina as a person until they became adults. And then it changed. It was one of those interesting things...That was all fine during college but when we moved into an apartment after college, that all changed. My parents no longer spoke to me, my brothers no longer spoke to me. Basically they were saying to me virtually "now it's time to grow up and marry a stockbroker." That has been the stance basically since 1980. We are just beginning to have some rapprochement with my family, it has been very difficult for years.

Octavia: Family, I don't think we have really depended on family support because we didn't think we could. My parents have just moved up here and we are co-supported. They do a lot of babysitting for us and I want them around my children kind of thing. They are not supportive of our family though in an emotional way.

If extended families were accepting and supportive, they were considered a positive influence. However, many of the extended families
were unreliable in terms of offering unconditional acceptance and support. For some participants, this brought a sense of regret to their relationship with their partners while other participants did not allow their relationship to be influenced by their extended families.

**Religion and Spirituality**

Sixty-seven percent (n=16) of the participants reported that religion or spirituality did not influence their relationships in the first phase while 46% (n=11) held this belief in the third phase. In these cases, the participants indicated they were not particularly religious or kept separate personal opinions on religion. Religion or spirituality was considered a positive influence by 29% (n=7) of the participants in the first phase. This number grew to 50% (n=12) in the third phase. These participants pointed to similar religious backgrounds and religious commitments as factors which brought them closer together.

Olivia: So I think that [being Jewish] was important to us but not in the religious sense in a while. I think it became more important not so much around kids but even earlier than that but even more so when kids came in. That’s when we joined a temple. When Oliver was three, we joined a temple. But we were involved in the gay and lesbian Jewish organization for awhile even before we had kids. So it was important. It is something I would say is fairly important in our lives right now.

Beatrice: Yes, it has been a very powerful and important part of our relationship. That was how we met. That was and is our most profound connection. The evolution has been interesting over the years. At first, very prohibitive and negative on some level. And then, as we came to terms with our sexuality more and more, we also began to have our consciousness raised in terms of feminism more. And that led into a lot of conflict with the Church...I think we have evolved a relationship both in terms of our spirituality which we see somewhat differently from our relationship with organized
religion whereby in the early years we were both extremely active in the local church.

Pamela: And actually being part of a church community has been really important to us. And some of it is just the community aspect of it. And some of it is the insight and the guidance that is that spiritually based...We are different in how we relate to it. For Penny the community part is more important where the spiritual part is more important to me. But both is important to each of us.

One couple reported religion as a negative impact due to a difference in the importance of religion in their lives.

Sarah: I am not an overly spiritual person. It hasn't been an important part of my life by and large. I was born and raised Jewish. And kind of the Jewish cultural part is important to me. But the spiritual part is not a key part to my being. That is quite a different story for Samantha though. She converted to being Jewish when she was three months pregnant with Susan. So she is a Jew by choice and very into it.... So that is actually one of those things where we do have conflicts these days over time. Whether to do this or to go to services because Samantha likes to go to services with some regularity but we work it out. She goes to services and gets the morning off to go to work on Saturdays. So in terms of our relationship, it hasn't been a piece that brings us together. It's another thing that we bicker over. It is really one of the differences between Samantha and me. I was a born Jew and it is part of my culture and Samantha is really into it.

For those participants who identified religion as positively influencing their relationships, this was seen in how religion organized and grounded the family and the couple around a common faith. The one negative affect of religion on a relationship was an issue of time; the time one of the partners spent at religious services competed with time her partner wanted to spend with her.
Feminism

The participants considered feminism and the women's movement to positively influence their relationships. Approximately 90% (first phase n=21, second and third phase n=22) of the participants mentioned feminism as a positive influence on their relationship while the remaining 10% believed it did not influence their relationship. The following quotes illustrate how feminism opened the door to living an alternative life style.

Nancy: It's interesting because I think of our relationship as very insular and not affected by or part of another movement but obviously we are able to live as we are because of the feminist movement and because of Stonewall and because of a lot of the work other people did. And they don't give them enough credit. If I had been born 50 years earlier, I would have been a nun. I know we owe a lot to the feminist political movement and the feminist cultural movement.

Octavia: But for us, I think that the way we define our relationship is as a feminist one. I suppose we could easily define a nonfeminist lesbian relationship either as one where there is roles that are more bound to male or female. Of just and unequal relationship which I think is a nonfeminist relationship. I think a lot of the equality and negotiation and respect and trust are all very feminist. So I think that is clearly there.

Regina: And has it played a big role in my relationship? I think to the extent that all of us have been made aware that equal partnership is made a goal. I think that is what feminism has put out. I think it put it out there for straight couples but certainly the gay world said "that is our goal too". Equality, emotional equality, mutual respect, I think it put it out there. And I think to that extent, it affected everybody's relationship to some extent and certainly ours.

Participants' reported that feminism and the women's movement allowed them to consider themselves lesbian. Other participants responded that it provided an alternative to the traditional male-dominated model of relationships.
Homophobia

During phase one of their relationships, slightly more than half of the participants (n=13) described the negative influence of homophobia. In the third or most current phase, participants described the influence of homophobia as having a range of effects on the relationships including negative (n=5), positive (n=6), no (n=6) and mixed positive/negative influences (n=7).

Participants described the myriad of effects that homophobia had on their relationships. These included feelings of being marginalized in a patriarchal society, restricted behavior such as being physically intimate in public, issues related to self-image including internalized homophobia and a lack of recognition by social institutions (e.g., hospitals and insurance companies).

Octavia: I think specifically being lesbians, being women, [homophobia] has affected us in small ways and big ways. Like how the world deals with us as a couple or as even two people going out on a date. It is very different. It's part of the homophobia but it's not having a man around thing. I can't really put my finger on it except to say that there is something very threatening to society about us making a very good go at life without having a man. And I think it is beyond what we do in bed, it is beyond being lesbians, it is the lack of being a man. I think that has really affected us. We are just not treated with respect in a lot of situations.

Diane: Like we belong to a golf course and on Friday nights there is a fish fry and there is a whole bunch of us and we drink and putt and we have a good time together. And they are all married people. I would love to go over to Dana and put my arm around her back like how anybody could to their husband or wife. But I can't do that. That's taken away from me. That spontaneous feeling of my love for her can never be shown. I have to be on my guard. And that part I don't like at all and I don't think it should be like that but it is.
Regina: I think [homophobia] is huge and pervasive. And I think that we only understand a fraction of it because you can't let yourself understand it really. I think if you let yourself understand it, you would get really depressed... the truth is we can't hold hands without a little bit of fear that someone is going to be nasty. And I think that takes a toll. If you can't show affection sort of publicly, I think you can't help but internalize that... To the extent that we internalize any of that hatred, that is just real that if you take it in and make it yours and believe it about yourself, which is almost impossible not to do, you damage yourself and you damage the relationship.

Participants described their negative experiences with homophobia but varied in their perception of how it affected their relationship. For some participants, homophobia placed a burden on their relationship, others felt it brought them closer to their partners and others felt they were able to keep it from affecting their relationship at all. Over time, couples developed responsive coping strategies which alleviated some of the pressure of homophobia. Strategies differed among couples but clustered into one of several broad categories of responses: reliance on each other and developing a protected network, challenging homophobia and making deliberate choices to mitigate its presence.

Abby: I think one of the things in some ways is [homophobia] has drawn us closer together because we do have to build our support community and we provide a lot of support and find it in ourselves.

Beatrice: As we have become more and more out and been willing to be more and more out, we have been more insistent that wherever we go and invest our time and energy that they need to be accepting of us. And we have found that and we have found a lot of people who say "wow, you have been together for how long?" and have really been inspired by the quality of our relationship.

Felise: [Coming out] has been enormously helpful for our relationships with straight people Professionally, I feel far more
secure than I did when I wasn't out. It is interesting because when you are out then people can discriminate you and oppress you but they have to take some responsibility for doing it. When you are not out, they can whisper and carry on. It is a different level.

Claire: I think we have been very careful to surround ourselves, insulated ourselves from homophobia by the friends, the jobs, the schools, the neighborhoods. The people we have been lucky enough to spend our time with have sort of insulated us from that. I think homophobia is the root of all evil, one of the evils in the world like racism. And it is so vicious but we have managed to insulate ourselves.

Developing strategies to deal with homophobia gave participants a sense of being able to control how it affected their relationship.

Family Themes

Seven themes comprised the familial category in each of these couples' long term relationship: the initial desire for children, early family events, progression toward being a family, parenting roles, parenting styles, the effects of children on the relationship and challenges to the lesbian family. Although these themes were common to both blended and nuclear families, each of the two types of families had different familial experiences.

Desire for Children

Two female parents represent a nontraditional family where children are not easily had. The participants were asked about their initial desire for children. In blended families, four of the non-biological parents indicated a desire to have children and in fact found their partner's children an additional attraction to the relationship. In one blended family, each woman was a biological parent and presumably was not
hesitant about children in the relationship. One of the non-biological parents was hesitant about her partner's children and remained so for a number of years before she began to embrace the idea of children.

Initially, in all nuclear families at least one of the partners wanted to have children. For two couples, both of the partners desired children. With the other four couples, one of the partners expressed a desire to have children while her partner was initially ambivalent or adamant about not wanting children. In three of these cases, before children were brought into the relationship, the reluctant partner underwent a process whereby she also became favorable to the idea of having children.

**Blended Families**

The following are illustrations of the co-parent's desire for children and attraction to her partner's children:

Dana: I think basically when we first met each other, I wanted children very badly in my marriage. I even went to a doctor to make sure there wasn't anything wrong with me. My husband wouldn't go to be tested. So at that point in my life, I wanted children. So that shows even more that when I hooked up with [Diane] that her children were my children. I needed that and I got it through her children.

Emily: And when Ester was deciding if she wanted to be in a relationship with me, the fact that I had children was a big weight on the positive attraction side. She really wanted a family. And she made a point of doing things with my kids.

Francis: I was very attracted to Frank, I'll tell you that. He was adorable, he was a baby. I was very much longing for children...So certainly, that was a big plus. It was not a negative, it was a positive, very much a positive.

Co-parents often wanted children prior to even meeting their partners so that the children were a draw to the relationship.
The one co-parent who remained hesitant about the children even after she had been with her partner for years began to appreciate the children after working through her own unhappy childhood.

Beatrice: I had never wanted children and I understood better once I got the memories of my abuse that childhood was not a happy time for me...Kids weren't wanted, kids weren't loved and I didn't feel wanted or loved. I didn't have a good attitude toward children, I never wanted children. And here I fall in love with a woman who has three kids, it's just a package deal...I think I was very resentful of the kids. It took me a lot of years to come to terms with having them in my life...Over the years, I can see the kids and the family as a gift.

Nuclear Families

Two women in different nuclear families, who were initially ambivalent about having children, described their process of finally wanting children. These participants' initial hesitation about having children was related to their early childhood experiences.

Octavia: Olivia was the first on board about it. At some point, she started talking about having kids and how she would love to have kids. And I was pretty incredulous. I was pretty afraid of kids in a way. I was like I wouldn't know the first thing to do with a kid not having grown up with kids around me. I was the youngest in my family so it didn't resonate with me at first. We talked about it at first. We took care of one of our friends little kids for a week and it began to become more real to me. And then of course, there was another part that felt very natural that we would have a family. There was this wanting to have kids and that we are going to make a family which is somehow very powerful. And when I started to think about it, it seemed like it was really something I wanted to do.

Regina: Roberta has always wanted to have a kid. For ten years I said no. I just didn't feel that I could do that. I was worried about I guess the moral issues. There would be a dozen people who would throw that in Rebecca's face...And I know that is something, by the decisions I am making that would cause pain to Rebecca. And it took me sort of a long time to say that was okay and to deal with the issues of having a kid in a gay family. And to deal with my
sort of capability of giving to an endlessly needing person as kids are...Roberta didn't think her life would be fulfilled unless she had kids. And I didn't want to be the one to say that your life is not going to be fulfilled. That is a lot. So we decided. I think that she was waiting for me to decide that I could do that.

Four couples dealt with some ambivalence about wanting children. Three of these couples worked out their uncertainties about having children before they began a family. The fourth ambivalent couple had a more difficult process. In this case, Penny acquiesced to Pamela's desire to have children after they were able to recognize the deep commitment they had to one another. Pamela realized that her relationship with Penny was more important than having children which enabled Penny to agree to have children.

Pamela: And we did start talking, not in the very beginning but fairly early on about children. I didn't have any questions in my mind and she clearly did not want to have children. So that was kind of a bone of contention. So there was a part of me that was holding on to that idea that in a sense held me back from thinking of a life-long commitment with her. And then at some point within a year or so after that, I made the decision in my mind that I was committed to Penny above the idea of having children. It was clear that I wanted to be with her. That was just something that happened emotionally for me. And I told her about that and that opened her up to having children.

Penny: So then came the whole thing about kids. And we had discussions about this for a long time and I did not want to have any children because I grew up with parents who were alcoholics and they were pretty nonfunctional almost every weekend. And I have a younger brother and he is five years younger so from the time I was ten, I basically took over a lot of care for him. So I had it for that kind of role. I had done it, I didn't want anymore. But Pamela was very intent on it and she actually said that she had considered that we might have to split up if I didn't want to do this. And she told me this when she no longer felt that way but I think it made me realize how serious it was for her. How much she wanted it. And I think that is why I agreed. I thought I love Pamela more than anything in the world and if that's what she wants then I can do it.
Early Family Events

Both blended and nuclear families faced challenging situations in the process of becoming a family. For five blended families, the challenge involved the heterosexual marriage and divorce for one of the partners. For nuclear families, there was the process of deciding how to have children and then implementing that decision.

Blended Families

In five of the six blended families, the biological mother was still married and in three cases, still living with her husband when she fell in love with her partner. In these three cases where the heterosexual marriage was occurring concurrently with the lesbian relationship, there was stress and conflict.

Abby: I think I didn't know that I was feeling it early on and I am not sure that I probably didn't notice so it was really a pull between [Alice's husband] and I. I wanted more attention and she was giving [her husband] too much attention. At that point, I think I was looking for her to provide everything and through years of therapy, we now recognize that we don't provide everything that each other needs. We are really best friends and we like doing things together but we also do things that are different.

Alice: I certainly was tired of being in the middle which was the way I thought of myself. I thought that I was going to just sort of zoom into outer space all by myself. Abby became interested in another woman and I thought surely that she would leave and that I would still be in my marriage and I was upset about that. But as I began to work with the feelings that were coming up, it was clear to me that regardless of what vows I had made, the real deep bonded relationship was with Abby and that was the one that was more important.

One woman deliberately limited her relationship with her lover choosing to remain with her husband until her children were grown.
Diane: My kids were young enough so my responsibility, first of all, was them and then me. I knew I had to get them grown up before I could say now it's my turn...I lived with my family for nine years before I moved in with her and got a divorce. My children were young and they had to go through high school. Like I said, they came first. And she understood that.

Two couples talked about the negative effect of divorce on the children and on their relationships with them.

Alice: Aretha had a lot of trouble at the time of the divorce. She was mad as hell. She was angry at Abby but she was mostly angry with me. And she will still introduce us as 'this is my mother and this is her friend'. Arthur, when we would go to meet his friends would say 'this is my mom and this is her lover'.

Abby: When [Alice's husband] left, there was some real acting out. Aretha was very distant from both of us for a little while and from myself a lot longer. She and I are much more mutually respecting now. We are not emotionally real, real close but I think she appreciates some of the kinds of supportive things that I have done. Arthur and I had been closer. We were sort of buddies for awhile. We like a lot of the same thing.

Betty: I think in terms of the kids, I am not sure but I suspect that it was more difficult for them to deal with the divorce of their parents than it was to deal with Beatrice and my relationship. I mean divorce is always painful especially in this one where they were not aware of problems. It's not like they saw their parents fighting. So when we sat down and talked to them about our ending the marriage, it came right out of the blue. So there is a sense that in the beginning of our making a home together, I wouldn't say I was exactly feeling guilty but I was aware that this was enormous change for them. I probably did my share of overcompensating.

In three cases, participants talked about the continued presence of the biological father. In two situations, the couple made active efforts to keep the biological father involved. In one case, this was problematic. A third couple, Claire and Constance, had difficulty with their husbands.
Felise: But [Frank] also had a very involved father... Problematically involved father. We did a lot to try to support his staying in touch. Sometimes we would pay for his train ticket. We did a lot of things to make sure that Frank had a father in his life. As the same time, his father overly intruded in our lives. And we would just be at our wits end.

Betty: Beatrice also felt very strongly that the kids do have a father. [He] and I made a lot of decisions, you know big decisions that had to be made. As far as I can recall, Beatrice supported that. And the fact that the kids continued to see [him] as a continuing parent even if he was an inactive parent.

Claire: Having ex-husbands who are real jerks at the same time has not been fun. Never feeling like they cared about the best interests of the children as much as their own selfishness...And there has always been this blackmail kind of thing going on so if you don't like the fact that you are only getting $25 a week child support then we'll go to court and I will have the kids and you won't because you are a dyke.

For blended families, early family events created challenges to the couples establishing their relationship. These events revolved around issues related to one of the partners still being heterosexually married which produced tension in the lesbian relationship and affected the relationship between the couple and the children.

Nuclear Families

Unique to nuclear families was the process of deciding how to have children. This involved decisions around adoption or giving birth and often took a long time and involved a great deal of communication between the two partners. With a few minor exceptions, all of the participants from nuclear families described the process of decision making as long and arduous, but without conflict. The process was
different for each couple. One participant described working together to reach a shared goal.

Sarah: Lesbian relationship and sort of begetting a child, it is more difficult but there are more choices. And fundamentally we agreed. We learned what the issues were about lesbians becoming parents in workshops. Sometimes Samantha went to them and I went to work and she would come back and tell what the issues were. But basically we understood what our various choices were - adoption versus one of us bearing the child. There was never a question of who was going to bear the child - it was always Samantha. And then the choice of known donor or unknown donor. We agreed. We talked about them. We understood what the options were and we agreed with what was right for us. That was not a conflict situation. And we went to the [clinic] and read the catalogue about what sperm was available and we both reached through it and picked out our favorite. And we both agreed on who our favorite was...And so that all worked out. We are really happy with our decision. All of us.

There were two couples who expressed minor conflict in their process of having children. For one couple, it was a difficult and painful decision as to who was going to get pregnant first. The second couple expressed conflict about deciding the last name for their child.

Olivia: The only issue I think was hard was the last name. We ended up hyphenating the names but I think she didn't want to do that and I did. I was concerned about my name getting lost because the child was going to be hers biologically...She started to think about the baby and not about her and she thought this is really the [Olivia's last name-Octavia's last name] baby...So that is the only child thing that I can remember being a conflict. The rest of them were laborious in terms of having to make decisions but they were not conflict ridden.

Molly: We were both sure we wanted to have children...Then there was the issue of who was going to get pregnant first which was really, really hard. Maria started out saying she was going to get pregnant first. And before we could make a decision together, she had to back off that and realize that she wasn't necessarily going to get pregnant first. For me, it was kind of prioritizing what I really wanted because we assumed correctly that Maria was going to get pregnant quickly and it would take me a long time. I decided I just
wanted to have a baby and I wanted to get it done. That was the main thing, that was how we decided.

For the most part, nuclear families had an easy time reaching the decision to have children although there were some stumbling blocks about how to have and name them.

**Progression to Becoming a Family**

For blended families, becoming a family was more of an issue of integration - different individuals, particularly the co-parent, slowly came together and began functioning as one unit. For nuclear families, becoming a family was a transitional situation that required change and adjustment.

**Blended Families**

Through their dialogue, participants from blended families described the natural and slow blending of the family components into one family unit.

Betty: I think it is also important to remember that I was the one with the established home and family into which Beatrice came...I am sure she had more problems from time to time coming into an established situation where things might have been different than she was used to. I am not sure we thoroughly negotiated that stuff right from square one. One of the things that has been important to us being together is slowly but surely reclaiming the space. This is the house in which we all lived at first. We each had some feelings about that. Each of us need to exorcise the ghosts of this place. She needed to claim this space as hers which was difficult because it has [my ex-husband] and my looks to it. But over the years we have redecorated and made this space ours instead of just mine.

Dana: I think it just kind of happened. It wasn't anything I said like 'oh, gee, now I have these kids to think about'...And I would go to
her house for lunch almost every day. And after I got divorced, I used to go to her house for supper almost every night. So I was there at the dinner table all the time...At that time, Diane was not happily married and she was always hollering and screaming and her husband was a loud person too. And then you have four children who want to say something and want attention. So you have everyone hollering and I would just sit there and watch it. But I kept going back because I wanted to be with her. And eventually, I probably got just as noisy and loud as they did.

Diane: She wanted children so when she fell in love with me I felt like I was taking that away from her. That I could never give her children except mine...and little by little, not even realizing it, she was becoming part of my children's life.

For blended families, the progression toward becoming a family happened slowly over time. In some cases, deliberate efforts were made toward this goal but for the most part, it was a process that happened gradually without overt effort.

Nuclear Families

Becoming a family meant lifestyle changes for all nuclear families. In all six couples, at least one of the parents changed their job or the hours that they worked to accommodate the child. Three couples specifically changed residences because of the children.

Nancy: And now with [the youngest child] we would have two kids in day care and we couldn't afford it. It wouldn't make financial sense. This is one of the tensions in our relationship. Whenever one of us is at home, one of us is at work for the most part. One of the decisions why we moved out here is that it would free us up financially to have only one adult working so that we wouldn't have to be passing ships in the night. So we could have family dinners.

Sarah: I changed my job so I would have a flexible schedule and would have the ability to stay home if she were sick or pick her up at day care. It is my job that has the flexible hours. At least one parent needs to have that. And I changed my job. I quit my job as
a consultant to another company and started my own company. And part of that was to establish a consulting practice on my own so when Samantha had the baby, I would be able to do that.

Pamela: And I could see that we had to move because she was going crazy. I knew kids were hard for her anyway and to put her in a tiny house where they were right on top of her all the time was disastrous.

Parents made major life style changes in terms of jobs and relocations to accommodate to the family. The transition to becoming a family affected not only the couple's life style but also required a period of adjustment. This transition was experienced as a bumpy, conflictual road by many of these nuclear families. Several of the participants spoke about this difficult time and the adjustments they made since the children arrived.

Pamela: They come between us and that is really mind boggling. The first year of having them, we are now in our third year, was heavy. That was a real transition. We went through, again, questioning whether we could stay together because it was so difficult it didn't seem like there was any choice. In order to have either of us happy again, you know. Patricia had said yes, she could have children but she was also probably starting menopause so it was really hard. But that's what happened when you have children late in life. But that was really tough so that was another watershed. We would have these horrendous fights and then we would figure out that we do want to stay together so we would have to figure out how we were going to get through this. We got a couple's therapist for us to sort of talk about our parenting issues and that helped. Then also the children have a therapist and we see her once a month and that helps, too.

Penny: And then when we first got the kids, it was terribly difficult...So I think that was the hardest time. I think the closest I ever came to sort of throwing in the towel was that year. But I didn't. I didn't because I knew I couldn't live without Pamela, I didn't want to. It's not that I couldn't, it's that I didn't want to...But still things were very bad. I felt very invaded. I felt that these children had come in and taken over my life. I felt like I had lost Pamela. It was really a very bad thing...For me, I think it has been the hardest times for me when I felt like I was not part of the family
any more. Because the kids, for whatever reason and Prudence more than Patricia have really forged a bond with Pamela...There have been times when I have felt that Pamela has her kids now and that's all that matters and I'm out of here. And those are very brief moments that don't happen often but they do happen. And they don't happen as much as they used to. I think it is a period of adjustment. That's why they happen less than they used to. Adjusting to being in that situation where it is just no longer me and Pamela. So it's been tough. But it feels different than it did during the first year. There have been times when the kids have just been hanging out and doing their own thing and we are puttering around the kitchen. It just seems normal.

Roberta: I think the period where we were most conflictual and had the most difficulty between ourselves has been the last one when Rebecca's here. And it seems to both of us that whatever inadequacies the relationship had - like we hadn't worked out a way to deal with 'X' or how to share power or how to make decisions - that the added pressure of a demanding third person just put those into this incredibly sharp relief. So this is the period that has been the most rocky I think.

The presence of children and the demands made on being a parent changed the couple's relationship in ways that made some partners considered breaking-up. Once they had resolved to stay together, participants recognized the need to identify what was causing the conflict and work to change it.

Parenting Roles

Participants from both blended and nuclear families spoke about parenting roles. For blended families, this was a slow process as the co-parent was integrated into the family. Overall, nuclear families had an easier time defining and enacting parenting roles.
Blended Families

Blended families had the challenge of establishing and defining a role for the co-parent. Along with roles came responsibilities and these concepts were discussed throughout the interviews. Many of the participants spoke about the slow and steady progression of the co-parent to becoming a real parent to the children. In all cases, mutual parenting was the end result. The following quotes illustrate the perceptions of roles and responsibilities by both parents. In each couple, the co-parent is quoted first and the biological parent is quoted second.

Abby: There was a lot of figuring out of what is my relationship to the children. I am an adult in this household and there were times that I had the responsibility for the kids because I am the only one around and I used to help drive them to and from school...When Arthur was interviewing for college and Alice and I went with him to his interview, I don't remember if it was the end of the interview or the beginning of the interview, anyway, he introduced us and he says, 'these are my parents' and he now introduces us as his two mothers or something like that. I guess I feel like a real parent although not quite a mother, you know, not that real mother thing.

Alice: Back at the very beginning, where there were three adults and two children, I think Abby kind of worked in gradually in terms of doing things with the children and for the children...She always wanted to participate. She never said 'they are your kids, do what you want'...She invests a lot of emotional energy. I think that there are points where she is willing to be there emotionally for them but I think the children turn to me more emotionally than they do to Abby. I think that is partly because Abby is the real doer and I am more of the listener.

Dana: I think I was more of a friend to the two older girls but as far as Deborah was concerned, I felt like she was my little girl, too. We really bonded together. She was only eight when I first met Diane and with her being so young, we just included her because I wanted to be with her children.

Diane: Deborah loves Dana, she really feels like Dana is a mother to her. She really does. At her second wedding, she had
us both as her mother of the bride. She introduced us and everything.

Francis: And it was only recently that I could call him my son. About a year ago. He always called me his Ceco. I was his Ceco. Which is like a parent, not a mother or a father but another adult parent. I always thought it was kind of clever for him to figure out.

Felise: Francis was fully a parent financially, emotionally, caretaking wise. We shared an awful lot. She was always extraordinarily giving to him and was never, as far as I know, never begrudged that. I would say she kept a level of reserve and caution about not wanting or seeing herself as fully a parent - as being able to claim parenthood.

Early in the relationship, co-parents were often at a loss to define their role with regard to the children. With the support of the biological parent, the co-parent became involved in the care and nurturing of the children. It was often the children who later, through words or actions, clarified the co-parents role as a parent.

Nuclear Families

The participants in nuclear families spoke with ease and fluency about the roles and responsibilities they established with their children. In all families, each parent had a different role that made their function in relation to the children different. These roles were often complementary although responsibilities were, for the most part, equally divided making for a mutuality in parenting.

Roberta: I help Rebecca a lot with a sense of her own strength. Rebecca will fall apart, she will be frustrated with something. Regina will go help her. My tendency will be to say "you have to figure out the way to make that work for you." So there is a piece on either side that is real helpful.

Molly: I would say in the beginning other than sort of dividing up the morning and evening parts of the routine, we were both pretty
much equal. Different ones of us may be different in different areas. Like year to year, clothes shopping is Maria who does that. Year to year, it changes who has the time to take the kids to the doctors. It depends on our schedules...I would say we have both been fully involved in all of the decision making and emotional supports. Even, not matter what our schedules are, on a daily basis with the children we are equally involved with them.

Nina: Initially, I think Nancy feels the total responsibility or could well have the total responsibility and I feel like I have half the responsibility. And I think neither is the case. But when somebody wakes up at night, Nancy is out of bed in a second without pausing to think whose turn it is or any of that. We will sit and have an argument about that like "I was supposed to get up."...Nancy does social things and I do health care. It's also easier for me to take care of school to drop the kids off than it is for Nancy because she worries Natina is going to feel sad. So we sort of divide it up according to our preferences.

The exceptions to the concept of mutual parenting in these nuclear families are a result of some of the children favoring one parent over the other, and from one couple who was striving toward more mutual parenting.

Pamela: And then the situation that we have currently there are some real issues around me being more connected with the kids than she is. So there have been times when she has felt left out of the family and that has been really tough. I sort of wanted to have a more motherly relationship with them and we had a different idea about what parenting was. For me, it was more involved and doing things with them. And also Patricia, it was very obvious she sort of chose me. And she calls me mom, they both call me mom and they don't very often call Penny mom.

Octavia: They are very different and it's incredible to see that. With Oliver, if he was really hurt either physically or emotionally, he could go to either one us pretty equally, He didn't really prefer one or the other. But Oscar has been very, very attached to me all along so that is a difference that we have had to cope with all along. It's different, not in terms of loving us differently but when he is hurt and I am in the room, especially when he was a baby, now when he is hurt sometimes he will go to Olivia and that's fine.
That has been something that we have had to accept that when there is that situation, I am more in that role than Olivia will be.

Several of these couples made it clear that while they had different roles and functions, they were committed to having the child/ren and the outside world seeing them as unified and equal parents.

Nina: I think there is a tendency to prefer Nancy at bedtime...So we have been pretty careful to make sure they switch off with us every night for bedtime. We are committed to letting them know we are a united front. We have different approaches to things and different styles but we make decisions together and I think they have all gone through phases of preferring one to the other from time to time. We roll with some of these things well, I think. If everybody is into me instead of Nancy, we will both try to redirect it after a little bit and also to explain to the kids that is important. I think we've avoided a lot of difficulties because of that.

Octavia: Well, equality is a very strong component of all of our decisions like I said before. We want to really make sure that the kids would see both of us as their equal parents. Both of our kids have hyphenated last names. It's a mouthful and it's long and awkward but that is one way that we thought would be equal.

Regina: People see us as parents, both as her parents...Roberta and I went [to the day care center] and came out as a couple like "we need you to understand this" because we don't want Rebecca to be in a situation that is uncomfortable for her. We want people to perceive us as equal parents and as I think we feel that we are.

The roles of the two parents complimented one another in terms of what they provided for their children emotionally and custodially. When there was a lack of equality in the parenting due to the actions of the children or the couple, steps were made to correct this.

Parenting Styles

A common topic raised by participants in both blended and nuclear families was the issue of negotiating parenting styles. Parenting
styles referred to the participant's attitudes about how children should be reared as well as the actual interactions parents had with their children. This was a particular challenge for some of the blended families where there were different styles that created conflict in the relationship. For nuclear families conflict also existed although there were different parenting styles related to the different roles played in relation to the children.

Blended Families

In several of the families, the two partners initially had different parenting styles that sometimes created conflict. In processing this conflict, participants became more aware of their own style of parenting as well as their partners'.

Alice: She had her own ideas about how she was raised and therefore how children should be raised. Some of them were in common to my ideas and [ex-husband's] ideas and some of them weren't. Certainly, that was an issue and something we struggled and struggled with.

Constance: We have very different ways of being parents but Claire sort of deferred to me to be the parent because I was a stronger parent, she was much more laissez-faire in the extreme. To the point, really, when it wasn't even parenting. Even though we could have had a whole lot of arguments about that, she deferred to me because I was more into it, more into being a parent. So that sort of saved us which is good because we have totally different ways of dealing with kids.

Felise: It was so interesting in that how she was holding this part of herself off. Like she didn't discipline him. And that was another rough edge spot we had. Frank had this [father] who was Good Time Charlie. And then there was Francis who was endlessly patient, kind, loving, all those things. And I was the heavy. And the one who came in if he was rude to her. I was the one who disciplined him. I was responsible for that part of life. The one
time we went for treatment, we went into family treatment for about six months when he was nine or ten. I resigned from some of that part of it and she took over. And that was enormously relieving, it was wonderful. I became the moderate one and she stepped in to do some of the heavy stuff.

Blended families faced the situation of a co-parent who entered the family after the biological parent has already established a parenting style with the children. The couple then had to struggle with and resolve incompatible differences in parenting.

Nuclear Families

With the exception of one family, all of the partners in the nuclear families had parenting styles that complemented one another and did not cause friction. The one family that had conflict is still in the process of negotiating their parenting styles.

Pamela: But it is still a struggle, I think there are a lot of issues. And a lot of it goes back to your childhood and what you expect it to be like to be a parent. She and I have pretty different expectations about that. Wow, that was a big one. But how would you know that until you actually have these kids. I expect to tend them a lot more than she does because she kind of grew herself up.

Penny: I am not interested in arguing about child rearing styles. My style is different and sometimes she criticizes me for it and sometimes I don't like it but a lot of the times I know she is right. I am much more strict. And I think it has to do a lot with my own feelings of being deprived and neglected as a child. So, you know, I think I don't give as much as she does. And she is right. And all I can do is try and make an effort. And I leave a lot of the decisions about the kids to her. When she wants to make a decision with me, I clearly will do it but otherwise I am happy for her to do it.
The differences in these partners' parenting styles related back to
the childhood experiences of one partner who was in the process of
learning to be a nurturing parent.

Effect of Children on the Relationship

Participants discussed the children's effect on their relationships;
these effects varied systematically between the blended and the nuclear
families. Children both enhanced and restricted relationships.

Blended Families

Participants in blended families discussed how children have
positively and negatively effected their relationship with their partner.
From a negative perspective, the presence of children inhibited intimate
expression between the partners.

Dana: After she moved in, there were a lot of difficult times then
too because we were in separate bedrooms and wanted to sleep
together but Deborah living there...That was probably the most
difficult time because after Deborah moved out we did sleep
together.

Children were also a major responsibility that often curtailed the
freedom and time participants had to pursue their own interests.

Francis: There were a lot of adjustments around that which was
fine but it was just reality in terms of going out and not wanting to
get sitters because he was all alone and she was working and I
was working and we didn't want to get sitters. And the one
Saturday we went Christmas shopping and we said we were
going out he threw himself on the floor and sobbed. And we said
that's it. We just stopped going out, we just didn't go out. We
didn't go out for years. We were working. [Frank's father] would
have him often enough that we would have the opportunity to do
things. We had a sitter during the day and it was too much at night.

On the positive side, children also stabilized the relationship by giving couples a reason to come together and stay together.

Claire: We had children and I think they stabilized our relationship to a degree...I think just having them as a responsibility, on one level, just kept the relationship together. On the other had, I think it was difficult too. There were times that we stayed together for the sake of the kids and for the sake that we owned a house together. And it would have been easier without kids just to go our own way.

Nuclear Families

The participants from nuclear families, for the most part, had children who were younger and more dependent than those in the blended families. Some of the adverse effects of having children was that the couple had less time for their own intimacy.

Maria: With the kids when they were young, we had less time together so we would catch each other on the fly. We didn't have much of a sex life but for me there was a lot already going on with my body with pregnancy and breast feeding so I really wasn't wanting anymore stimulation.

Nina: I think Nancy and I see each other less than we would like to at the moment but it feels temporary. We have been through this (having an infant) already twice before so it will come around again. None of these kids sleep at night so you get tired. It's interesting because we have less time together, less pure moments together but more understanding of each other as parents too it's very enjoyable when we do have time together. We know how to make just every minute count.

Octavia: I think it has certainly stressed [our relationship]. It has stressed it time wise and it terms of the amazing stresses that children do put on you to constantly be dealing with either sickness or whatever. But it is also, when we are out on a date, and we do try to go out, we talk about the kids a lot. We enjoy them. They are central to us. It's kind of hard for me to remember
the relationship before kids. So at the same time, it has really filled out our relationship.

Like blended families, the children in nuclear families also enhanced the couples' relationships although here children brought the couple closer together.

Molly: It has probably moved us closer...Both sort of emotionally and actually there is something really special about being parents. It's so intense to be able to do that together makes you closer. It is something that is important to us in terms of wanting to make a home and nurturing a family.

Sarah: Oh, it was been very positive. Just really positive. We do many more things together. It's just been really nice. Parts of it have been a little difficult. We don't go out as much as we used to although we are starting to get better about that. We have just been really into being a family cocoon. But we have just enjoyed it enormously. And of course, we have a wonderful child.

Challenges to the Lesbian Family

Lesbian families face challenges in establishing themselves as family units in a heterosexist society. Couples must work hard to maintain the integrity of the family unit. The parents try to protect their children from the sting of homophobia while teaching them how to negotiate and make their way in a homophobic society. Some of the common challenges these families face included coming out to their children, lack of recognition, defining and educating society and protecting their children.

Coming Out to Children

The issue of children's reactions to the lesbian relationship was common among blended families often including the possibility of a
custody battle if the nature of the couple's relationship was revealed to the children.

Claire: Cathy [three years old when the relationship began] had a lot of problems about her mothers being lesbians...I think that Cathy was consciously trying to separate us in any way she could think of. I think her goal was to get mommy and daddy back together and to get Constance out of the picture. I think that we had an awful lot of arguments about that...Maybe in the long run Cathy did bring us together. But she tried like hell to sabotage the whole thing.

Beatrice: At some point each of them asked a question and she talked to them and we held our breath. For each of them, it was like "oh, okay." So for years, we couldn't be openly affectionate even at home in front of them.

Francis: She would have wanted to tell him sooner than I did. I felt that he knew and when he was ready to talk about it he would. And he was having some problems in school. This is when he was big, some learning problems. And Felise thought it was the secret. And I think that she was right. We really kept the secret because of the threat of lawsuit and custody. So we had to keep the secret. But I think that I felt more comfortable with the secret anyway.

Couples often waited to tell the children about their relationship sometimes until the children made their own inquiries. Some children expressed difficulty with the nature and/or secrecy of the couples lesbian relationship including acting out or internalizing the problem.

Lack of Recognition

The nonbiological or nonlegal parents in both blended and nuclear families spoke about being discounted and invalidated in their roles as parents.

Beatrice: I felt like a step-parent but who didn't even have the social position of being a step-parent but emotionally, I was one. What has been hard over the years is not having a status. I am not
a person who seeks status, I am not status hungry but I have come to appreciate the place of status. Now more recently, Betty and I have come to a place where in some settings we will introduce each other as our partners. So now I have come to have status. But with the kids, on some level, I still don't. It's like "this is my mother and this is Beatrice."

Maria: When Michael was born, I think it was hard for Molly because she wasn't the parent and had to fight for her right to be a parent and to be recognized. But after a while, I think it became easier because she built a solid relationship with Michael and just relied on the strength of that relationship now that nothing or nobody could change that.

Nina: Up until certainly the last year or two there has been a little bit of a problem that has nothing to do with our relationship but the fact that we aren't seen equally in the world. For example, I went once to pick up Natina's birth certificate from the Town Hall and they wouldn't give it to me. They said "doesn't she have a sister-in-law who can come?" So things like that tend to make me feel more phobic about the world but more involved with the family within. But it is less so now with three children because with three people treat you very differently when you have three kids rather than when you have two. It's too many for people to cope with.

Co-parents in nuclear and blended families struggled in defining their relationships with the children because they do not have a legal parental status or a traditional parental role. Co-parents had to look toward their partners and rely on their relationship with their children as validation for their role as parents.

Defining Family and Educating Society

In speaking about their children, several participants discussed the challenge of identifying as a family unit. Participants struggled to identify themselves as a family and were constantly challenged to define themselves as such to the outside world.
Regina: I guess what I think is that we are really learning to identify in that way as a unit. It is easy for me to identify Rebecca as my - I mean I call her my god-daughter but as my child. Emotionally, I feel as my daughter but to identify us as a family? Maybe because the world doesn't.

Octavia: We are also a family that is different from a lot of other families in terms of family structure, obviously. So we are always faced with the challenges of redefining our family every time we go to a place where the norm is mom and dad and a kid or two...If there are institutions with forms and stuff, we cross out father and put in mother so there is mother and mother and we figure they will figure it out. We sort of act as advance agents to our kids. We certainly pick out institutions like schools and day care centers that we feel that will be comfortable with us as a family. We are often the first out lesbians with kids in the various places we have been in. We know there have been other lesbians there but...We are doing educating.

Emotionally, parents felt like a family unit even though they continually had to educate the outside world about the structure of their family.

Protecting the Children

Parents spoke about their concern for their children being hurt by what other people might say about their relationship. One participant hid her lesbian relationship to protect her children from the comments of others. Another parent even questioned the decision to have children because of the ridicule her child might suffer because of her involvement in a lesbian relationship.

Diane: Like I said, I tried to include [the children] in everything [we] did as much as I could. And of course, other kids made comments to my kids about "your mother is with a woman all the time." And they had people tell them, that's how cruel people can be. My main thing in life was not to show anybody any reason to show that Dana and I were "gay" or "queer" or to hurt them. They told me afterwards that people used to come up to them and say "there
is something funny about Dana and your mother being together all the time." It was adults, not even kids.

Regina: Roberta has always wanted to have a kid. For 10 years I said no. I just didn't feel that I could do that. I was worried about I guess the moral issues. There would be a dozen people who would throw that in Rebecca's face. And they will be like adolescents...Adolescents are the cruelest animals and I know that. And I know that is something, by the decisions I am making, that would cause pain to Rebecca. And it took me sort of a long time to say that was okay and to deal with the issues of having a kid in a gay family.

Parents were concerned about the experience their children might have because of their involvement in a lesbian relationship. They made conscientious choices about raising children in a lesbian relationship and took strides to protect their children from ridicule.

Summary

This chapter reviewed 22 themes related to relationship stability, quality and development among lesbian couples who reared children. The themes were organized into five interdependent categories: developmental themes, interpersonal themes, relational themes, sociocultural influences and familial themes. Developmental themes examined how the relationship progressed and adapted over time. Interpersonal themes looked at the interaction between partners. Relational themes inspected "fit" between partners as well as satisfaction and stability in the relationship. Sociocultural influences examined how a variety of sociocultural factors impacted the relationship. Familial themes looked at the experiences of becoming and maintaining a family with children. The themes in this chapter highlighted common
experiences and developmental trends in long term lesbian relationship.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introduction

Qualitative analysis of the data derived from interviews with 12 lesbian couples revealed themes important to relational stability. Twenty-two common themes were identified and grouped into five categories. These categories and the related themes were presented in Chapter Four.

Despite having common characteristics, there was significant diversity among the participants. Diversity existed in the ages of the participants, their backgrounds including the sociocultural context in which they were raised, the number of years the couple had been together, the current sociocultural environment in which they currently lived, their ages when they began parenting, their children's ages and whether they were blended or nuclear families. Blended families referred to family units where the children were a product of a previous heterosexual relationship while nuclear families referred to family units where the couple choose to have children through adoption or artificial insemination. The diversity of experience lends itself to the richness and complexity of the data. Simultaneously, it contributes to the varied perspectives needed to understand and appreciate lesbian experiences (Slater, 1995).

The themes and categories identified in relationship stability were presented individually in Chapter Four. However, there is an interaction
among these factors so that examining one theme without considering its interaction with other themes would provide a narrow or simplistic view of the relationship. For example, examining the cause and effect of conflict in a relationship would bring to light themes related to communication, intimacy and satisfaction. So while themes were presented individually in Chapter Four, to accurately understand relationship stability among lesbian couples, it is necessary to look at the relationship as a whole.

The four sections presented in this chapter represent a reorganization and consolidation of the individual themes in Chapter Four. The following discussion will integrate related themes in an effort to illuminate the participants' experiences in stable lesbian relationships. The four sections presented in this chapter are: creating and establishing couplehood, patterns of curvilinearity, structure of long term lesbian relationships and familial experiences.

Discussion of Findings

Creating and Establishing Couplehood

Regardless of their age and acceptance of their lesbian identities, each couple created their own unique partnerships without prescribed roles and patterns of relating. Society provides virtually no models for lesbian couples to look to in establishing and guiding their relationships (Clunis & Green, 1988; Peplau & Amaro, 1982; Slater & Mencher, 1991). Because society does not affirm their relationships, these couples were challenged to create their own traditions, rituals, ceremonies and support systems to validate their existence. Whereas older couples were more
likely to encounter societal and religious proscriptions against celebrating their relationship, younger couples are challenging this exclusion and gaining affirmation through private celebrations and religious ceremonies (Clunis & Green, 1993; Slater, 1995).

The partners also created their own structure of commitment. For them, commitment did not occur as a solitary event but was a dynamic and ongoing process and was reevaluated and changed as the relationship evolved. Its fluidity was a common process among all couples and was most apparent in response to changes in the relational and familial context. For example, all couples experienced either a period of resolution following a major crisis in the relationship or, specifically for nuclear families, the addition of children to the family. In each of these cases, the commitment shifted to a deeper and more intimate level. However, it should be noted that the selection criteria for this sample excluded couples who terminated their relationship because of conflict.

Couples were able to create a structure of commitment to fit their individual and relationship needs. Commitments were not based on a "forever" time frame (e.g. for eternity, until death, for life) although participants indicated they could not imagine being without their partner. Three broad categories of commitment were reflected in these partnerships: 1) "growth-enhancing" commitments reflected promises of staying together to support and encourage one another as long as each partner felt satisfied with the relationship, 2) "break-up prevention" commitments were based on the couple's agreement to work on the
relationship when there were problems - these relationships either assumed a type of the growth-enhancing ideology in its structure or were concerned about the consequences of a break-up such as division of property, 3) "future-oriented" commitments where couples identified goals (e.g., raising a family or traveling the world) they were committed to achieving.

These three commitment structures relate to the two tenets of commitment Johnson (1991) identified as important to stability in long term lesbian relationships: a belief that the relationship will stay together and an understanding that the relationship will overcome difficult times. Commitment allows for conditions of interdependence between the partners where each individual's needs are met and the relationship is enhanced (Clunis & Green, 1993; Johnson, 1991). Collaboration including shared goals and projects signals commitment in lesbian relationships - observable commitment rituals are not always present (Clunis & Green, 1993). In this study, collaboration was evident in rearing children, going into business and buying property together.

Homophobia influenced and created a constant challenge to the creation and establishment of these relationships. Early on, internalized homophobia seemed to cause some of the participants to hesitate in their commitment to their partners, an unconscious process that may affect partners' images of each other and belief in the sanctity of their relationship (Slater, 1995). Imposed by the dominant culture, homophobia keeps these families socially isolated and invisible. As found in previous research, homophobia was also internalized, causing
self-castigation and compromised self-esteem (Clunis & Green, 1993; Slater, 1995). Participants did not make the distinction between heterosexism and homophobia as they spoke about the continual stress of these influences on their personal development, the establishment of their relationships and the formation and maintenance of their families.

The influence of homophobia had a range of affects on the participants over time. At the beginning of the relationship, homophobia either negatively influenced the relationship or had no influence at all. For some participants, homophobia imposed a daunting challenge to their new relationships. For others, the thrill and excitement of a new relationship surmounted its negative influence. After the relationship was established, homophobia was considered to have a negative, positive, mixed or no influence on the relationship. This variability suggests the many ways couples choose to deal with homophobia as well as how homophobia has a varying impact on the relationship as it develops and matures over the years.

These couples may have achieved longevity in their relationships because of their ability to overcome the overwhelming and unrelenting negative influence of homophobia. For some partners, the struggle against homophobia brought them closer together. How homophobia affected their relationship appeared to be related to the couple's responses to it. As their perceptions about homophobia changed, so did their responses. For instance, a blended family, fearful of losing their children because they were lesbians, hid their lesbianism from the outside world. However, after the children were grown, the couple
chose to take an active stance and to challenge homophobic attitudes. In this situation, homophobia was initially threatening, causing the partners to be fearful and uncertain. However, as their situation changed, their perception of homophobia shifted as did their responses.

Societal homophobia can never be fully transcended and couples continually confront its negative influence. Couples must constantly assess how "out" to be, with whom and when. This recurring decision-making can cause conflict and strain in the relationship (Clunis & Green, 1993). The constant confrontations with homophobia may make it difficult for lesbians to develop confidence in their relationship (Slater & Mencher, 1991).

To survive the continual pressure of homophobia, couples maintained the integrity and stability of their relationships by employing creative coping strategies. Lesbian strategies for coping in a homophobic society have been reviewed in the literature and include fusion in the primary relationship, creating supportive social networks and establishing reaffirming rituals such as holidays and vacations (Laird, 1993; Slater, 1995; Slater & Mencher, 1991). Variations of these strategies were found in the four kinds of coping strategies identified in this study:

1) Some couples chose to challenge homophobia by what one woman described as being "very out" and not restricting or hiding their lesbian identities from society. This was a relentless task but one to which many women were dedicated. It required repetitive explanation and education in every element of their lives including work, family and
vacations. Couples who used this type of strategy refused to allow their relationships to be compromised by having to "hide" themselves. There was an emotional element that came from continually challenging a force as pervasive as homophobia. These couples processed and supported each other's feelings of frustration, anger and sadness.

2) Couples made deliberate choices about their lives in an effort to mitigate the affects of homophobia. An example of this was the area or geographic region in which couples chose to live and rear children. When able, couples chose gay and lesbian friendly communities which allowed them freedom from oppression in their daily lives. Decisions regarding career, work environment, daycare, schools and doctors were made with the thought of minimizing homophobic attitudes.

3) Couples relied on their interpersonal interactions to protect them from homophobia. Often they relied on each other and interacted as minimally as possible with a society that could discriminate or judge them harshly. This protective and adaptive strategy has contributed to what has been pathologized as "lesbian fusion" (Mencher, 1990).

4) Couples also used interpersonal interactions in the form of social networks that served as a buffer against homophobia. The families of origin were often unavailable or openly hostile because of their own homophobic attitudes, leaving these couples to create their own social supports. Laird (1993) and Slater (1995) discussed the importance of creating new families in a literal affront to the adage "you can't pick your family." In devising their support system, couples used personal choice rather than genetic material to determine their family.
Friends were the main social support for these lesbian couples and were vital in maintaining the stability of these relationships. These friendships were not limited to lesbians but also included heterosexual friends and families. Involvement in the gay and lesbian community including professional, religious and recreational organizations was also an important component in validating and supporting these relationships. More specifically, the lesbian community has been a source of role models providing a sense of what is normal for different life stages, while offering support and suggestions in negotiating developmental challenges (Slater & Mencher, 1991).

Patterns of Curvilinearity

Curvilinearity refers to the connection between family cycle and relationship adjustment. With heterosexual couples, curvilinearity has been evidenced by high marital quality in the beginning of the relationship followed by a decrease in the middle phase of the relationship when the children are young and then an increase in quality after the children leave home (Hicks & Platt; 1970, Mackey & O'Brien, 1995). Patterns of curvilinearity in lesbian relationships emerged with a number of the interpersonal themes including conflict, intimacy, communication and satisfaction. Furthermore, there was a reciprocal relationship between the inverted curvilinear pattern of reported conflict in the relationship and the curvilinear patterns of intimacy, communication and satisfaction. That is, as the level of conflict rose in the relationship, satisfaction with the relationship as well as the quality of
intimacy and communication dropped. Similarly, as the conflict subsided, the quality of the other interpersonal characteristics returned to or exceeded the original or pre-conflict level. This fluctuation in interpersonal themes is similar to Dym's (1994) three phases of a relationship: expansion, confrontation and resolution. While these phases may be applied to the larger curvilinear pattern of interpersonal characteristics, they also seemed to cycle continuously as the couples' relationships evolved.

Conflict

Conflict appeared to be a predictable if not necessary element of these long term relationships. Clunis and Green (1993) outlined a series of developmental stages that include conflict as its middle stage and Slater (1995) viewed conflict as a necessary characteristic in long term relationships. Conflict may serve as an impetus and transition for couples to move from a simplistic view and understanding of each other to an appreciation of the depth and complexity of one another (Slater, 1995).

In the first phase of the relationship, there was little reported conflict. This was characterized as the "honeymoon phase" where couples were enthralled and captivated by the newness and excitement of their relationships. During this time, joy and thrill were expressed about getting to know one another. This is similar to the early phases in Clunis and Green's (1993) model where couples moved closer together during the pre-relationship and romance stages.
In the first period, partners formed bonds characterized by strong interdependent connections. In their observations of gays, McWhirter and Mattison (1984) suggested that new couples spend a period of time blending before conflict either emerges or is allowed to emerge. Pearlman (1989) stated that this early closeness creates a "couple glue" that makes it possible for the relationship to continue through disappointments, disillusionments and disagreements. This blending time allowed the couples to build a strong foundation to negotiate the conflicts that are likely to arise in the second phase.

The intimate and intense bonding process described by participants in the first phase of the relationships gave way to an increased level of conflict in the second phase. Conflicts were reported at their highest level in this phase. They were described either as a generally difficult time period or as a specific event which reflected problems within the relationship. Participants had idealized views or expectations about their partners and eventually became disillusioned and angry that their expectations and needs were not being met. Slater (1995) similarly suggests that this de-idealization leads to disappointment and conflict in their relationship.

The initial bonding and later conflict experienced by lesbian couples can be related to Chodorow's (1978) description of female development as based on the mother-daughter relationship. The early mother-daughter bond is characterized by a level of intimacy and intensity similar to the well documented bonding or fusion that occurs between two women in lesbian relationships (Slater, 1995; Slater &
Mencher, 1991; Pearlman, 1989; Reuman-Hemond, 1994). Mothers relate to their daughters as extensions of themselves and create a socialization process where females learn to develop in and value connection with others. As the child matures, gestures indicating individuality or separateness can cause a negative reaction from the mother such as withdrawal or distancing. Similarly, as the lesbian relationships matured, the initial state of what Pearlman (1989) calls "merger connectedness" was challenged when inevitable differences emerged between the partners. Conflict resulted when couples attempted to accommodate to and accept differences. Pearlman (1989) postulates that resolution of differences can result in a recommitment based more on individuality and separateness. Just as daughters struggle to define themselves as different from mother, women in these lesbian relationships found themselves challenged to establish and forge their identities separate from their partners. Conflict in the relationship may be an impetus for or a by-product of this process.

Monogamy was a source of conflict for more than half the couples and was spontaneously discussed by all participants. In lesbian relationships, this issue was considered by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) who found that women equated sex and love. They suggested that a sexual encounter outside the primary lesbian relationship has more potential to become a love affair rather than a casual sexual encounter because women do not separate sexual behavior and feelings of love. Similarly, a study of lesbian courtship scripts found that romance and friendship scripts were often difficult to differentiate (Zand, 1991).
Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that nonmonogamous couples were less committed to relationships suggesting that monogamy is an important component in the commitment that underlies long term relationships.

Engaging in outside relationships was often a reflection of or reaction to a conflict that was occurring in the relationship. In addition, women engaged in affairs when they sensed their partners becoming distant. In the latter case, women considering or actually engaging in nonmonogamy seemed to be testing the commitment in their primary relationships. Here, nonmonogamy occurred as a result of a fear of commitment or a dissatisfaction with the level of commitment in the primary relationship. Slater (1995) contended that as the relationships develop and the women become older and more settled, commitment may be equated with stagnation. Subsequently, one or both of the partners may involve themselves in an affair in reaction to restrictive commitment and fear of stagnation.

The third phase of these long term relationships was marked by a reconciliation of difference and a reduction in conflicts to a level below that observed in the first phase. The process of reconciliation brought a sense of calm and peacefulness to the relationships even in the face of continued disagreements and differences. Through the reconciliation, couples learned to accept each others' shortcoming and tolerate differences in the relationship that perhaps they once fought over. This acceptance, along with the recognition of what change was possible was also marked by a period of expansion in the relationship. That is, the
partners developed a better understanding of one another, renewed their commitments to the relationships and enhanced their levels of communication.

These characteristics reflect Erikson's (1968) stage of generativity as participants created new ways to find esteem in themselves and in their relationships. The tasks of generativity were reflected in the participants' decisions to: raise children; support each other in pursuing intellectual, spiritual and professional growth; tell their stories and demand communities recognize their lesbianism. The third phase of these relationships was similar to the later stages of Clunis and Green's model (1993) which included acceptance, commitment and collaboration.

Intimacy

Emotional, sexual and physical intimacy also lessened in the second phase. Emotional intimacy was the most important type of intimacy so that the diminished emotional connection during this conflictual phase may have contributed to a decrease in the satisfaction with the relationship. Similarly, previous research has found that of the different kinds of intimacy, emotional intimacy correlates most strongly with relationship satisfaction (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990).

Although emotional and physical intimacy recovered to their original levels, in the third phase sexual intimacy continued to decline. Biological changes including menopause and pregnancy as well as the
affects of having young children contributed to this decline. The level of sexual activity was in keeping with Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) findings that in comparison to heterosexual and gay couples, lesbians have the least amount of sexual activity at every point in their relationships. The frequency of sexual contact in lesbian relationships has been related to early socialization practices encouraging women to repress their sexual desires and not initiate sex. Internalized homophobic attitudes about sex between two women has also been implicated as a factor in the frequency of lesbians' sexual contacts.

The descriptions of participants' sexual intimacy suggests that it may contribute to satisfaction with the relationship but it is not critical to the stability of the relationship. Despite this, lesbians are less likely to link the frequency of sexual contact with sexual satisfaction (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). The reported quality of the participants' sexual encounters increased while the frequency decreased, suggesting that desire rather than frequency is important in long term lesbian relationships. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) also found that lesbians had high levels of nongenital physical contact and considered physical intimacy to be an end in itself and as satisfying as genital sex.

Communication

The quality of the couples' communication was reported at its lowest level in the second phase. However, it dropped the least of any of the interpersonal characteristics suggesting that even in times of conflict, lesbian couples continued to communicate. Women have learned to attune themselves to the cues of others and to react with empathy and
nurturance in their relationships (Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1976). These relational capacities enhance the level of communication between two women in an intimate relationship. Each is more likely to be attuned and attentive to the needs of the other.

Couples in this study demonstrated a developmental progression in the style and quality of their communication over the years. Slater's (1995) theory of the lesbian family lifestyle suggests that lesbian couples were able to establish positive patterns of communication through repeated cycles of conflict and resolution. The nature of women's relational capacities allows for more proficient self-disclosure and empathic responses which results in a deepened level of intimacy. Lesbian couples' participation in therapy has been well documented in previous research (Clunis & Green, 1993; Johnson, 1991; Reuman-Hemond, 1994) and was identified as a helpful communication tool by the participants in this study. Additionally, joint projects, weekend getaways and patience contributed to the high levels of communication found in the third phase of these relationships.

Satisfaction

Overall, participants indicated their satisfaction with their relationships. However, as with other interpersonal themes, there was a pattern of curvilinearity: satisfaction dipped in the second phase of the relationship. Previous research suggests that the long term stability of these relationships was associated with relationship quality and satisfaction (Kelly & Conley, 1987; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Because lesbians are more likely to dissolve unsatisfying relationships, some level
of satisfaction was present even in times of conflict (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a; Peplau & Amaro, 1982).

The participants' abilities to negotiate the problems in their relationships supports Kurdek's (1988) findings that a willingness to deal with conflict is highly correlated with relationship quality. Additionally, relationship quality has been correlated with open communication, happiness in the relationship and enjoyment of each other's company (Johnson, 1991; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Communication did not suffer the drastic fluctuation during the conflict-ridden second phase and continued to improve over the course of the relationship. Participants demonstrated their satisfaction with the relationship in their expression of happiness and love for their partners and in their responses to what their partners mean to them. The affective experience of love is an important component in the success and satisfaction in intimate relationships (Broderick & O'Leary, 1986).

Structure of Lesbian Relationships

The structure of lesbian relationships was built on themes of egalitarianism and fusion. These themes among lesbian couples in the present study appeared to serve as a central structure or central tenants on which the relationship was built. As structural elements, these themes lent strength and support to the relationships as they developed over the years.

Egalitarianism
Egalitarianism was identified as an important goal toward which participants continued to strive. Couples established their relationships based on egalitarian principles of equality and fairness which remained underlying tenets in their relationship over the years. In short term relationships, equality has been found to be a desirable if not completely attainable (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Reilly & Lynch, 1990). The achievement of egalitarianism was found to be linked to the longevity of the relationship.

Egalitarianism was a complex concept that was observable in decision making and daily behaviors. This finding supports previous research which found that of heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples, lesbians had the highest scores for shared decision making (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a). Mutual or egalitarian decision making was observed in two forms: couples who made all decisions together as a team and couples who equally divided tasks requiring decisions. For example, one partner oversaw the healthcare of the children while the other would tend to the children's educational involvements.

Egalitarianism was also observed in the couples' everyday behaviors and allowed for role flexibility which is frequent in lesbian relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Reuman-Hemond, 1994). Tasks and chores around the house were shared or divided equally, often according to interest. For most nuclear families and some blended families, child care was also equally divided with both parent's being equally involved in rearing the children.
The participants' identification with egalitarianism in their relationships reflected Gilligan's (1982) work on women's moral development. Gilligan viewed women's motivation as operating from an ethic of care, allowing for consideration of individual needs and abilities. This principle was reflected in the couples' responses to different needs or preferences experienced in the relationship. For example, one of the women would acquiesce when she recognized that her partner felt more strongly or more passionately about her preference.

The ideology of egalitarianism was closely related to an identification with feminism and feminist principles. Of the 24 participants, 22 considered themselves feminists or indicated how feminism positively influenced their relationships. Liberal feminism challenges the patriarchal model of dominance and power which has oppressed women in their relationships and in the larger society. Feminism offers an alternative model based on principles of equality. In keeping with this model, partners shared power while developing as individuals and as a couple. For these participants, power was not tied to money; women who earned less or did not work, had an equal say in the relationship. Power and role equality, as endorsed by feminist values, correlates with relationship satisfaction among lesbian couples (Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Peplau et al., 1982).

Faderman (1991) contended that exposure to feminism and the women's movement allows lesbians to consider an alternative to the inequality of the traditional heterosexual relationship model. The principle of equality espoused by feminism permitted the participants not
to sacrifice their own pursuits in the service of supporting their partners. Instead, through mutual support and esteeming, each partner was encouraged and able to pursue intellectual endeavors, consider alternative careers and develop memberships in community organizations.

Fusion

Fusion, defined as an intense sense of connection and emotional closeness, also served as a central tenant in many of these relationships. It was a desirable relational feature and a source of satisfaction in the relationship. Fusion has been described as a unique element in lesbian relationships (Burch, 1982; Krestan & Bepko, 1980) and in this study, it was also an adaptive coping mechanism that protected the couple from the larger homophobic society (Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Mencher 1990). Like previous descriptions, fusion was characterized by intense emotional intimacy, high levels of self-disclosure and significant amount of time spent together (Slater & Mencher, 1991).

Similar to Reuman-Hemond's (1994) findings, fusion was present at the beginning of these relationships. Participants described their intense emotional connections and the vast amount of time they spent together. This observation was supported by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) who found that lesbian couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to spend a lot of time together. The intense emotional connection characteristic of fusion was also found in the later years of these relationships.
Fusion was also found in the symmetry of many of these relationships. Although complementary patterns of relating characterized all but one of these relationships, the symmetrical elements contributed to the closeness characterized by fusion. Symmetry was evident in the couples' shared morals, values and attitudes (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987a; Reuman-Hemond, 1994). Relationships were enhanced by partners' common dedication to themes of trust, loyalty, open communication, respect and commitment.

In addition, there was a symmetry in the demographic characteristics of these couples. Many couples were homogeneous in race, religion, education and socioeconomic backgrounds. This symmetry in values and backgrounds may be one of the pre-cursors to fusion. They do not have to overcome fundamental differences thus making it easier to merge. This merging may be an adaptive mechanism for the survival of the relationship in an inhospitable and homophobic society.

While symmetrical patterns of relating contributed to fusion in these relationships, the complementarity evident in the interpersonal "fit" enhanced the relationships by adding richness and vitality (Burch, 1993). Complementary fit was evident in the partners' styles of communication, decision-making and personality. Similar to previous research, the majority of participants (n=22) described a complementary pattern of relating with their partners (Burch, 1993; Dorn, 1990; Reuman-Hemond, 1994). This fit was evident in participants' descriptions of communication where one partner was extroverted and the other
introverted, decision-making where one partner was the spender and the other the saver, and in personality where one person was the accelerator and the other the brake.

Burch (1990) suggested that interpersonal differences are a source of attraction for lesbian partners and are a foundation upon which relationships are built. These differences were found at any given time in the roles and responsibilities of partners. For example, partners were able to trade off being the nurturing care-taker or the economic provider, enabling the relationship to remain balanced. The complementarity seen in this adaptive capacity demonstrated the role flexibility previously described among lesbian couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Lynch & Reilly, 1986; Tanner, 1978). Complementarity has been found among long term lesbian couples suggesting this relational pattern may be an important element in the longevity of lesbian relationships (Dorn, 1990; Reuman-Hemond, 1994).

Familial Experience

The examination of family issues underscored the diversity within this sample which included whether or not one or both of the partners had been heterosexually married, the age of the partners when they began to parent, the length of time the relationship had been together before the couple began to parent, the number of children, the ages of the children when the partners began to parent, and in what manner the children were brought into the relationship.
Despite these differences, all couples shared the experience of rearing children together. The couples experienced children as both a divisive and connecting influence on their relationship (Johnson, 1990; Slater, 1995). The stability the children brought to the relationship was similar to Johnson's (1991) finding that children keep the couple from focusing exclusively on themselves and may contribute to the longevity of the relationship. The seven familial themes discussed in Chapter Four are integrated in the following discussion about becoming a family, the structure of lesbian families and interactions between the family and the larger society.

Becoming a Family

By the time children became part of the relationship, a large majority of participants stated they wanted children. Most of the partners of the biological parent were attracted to the children, so that children became an asset to being in the relationship. Nuclear families varied in their initial desire for children. Some couples developed a desire to have children together. In other couples, one of the partners waited to act on her desire to have children until her partner also embraced the idea. The waiting process took up to two years during which time the reluctant partner defined and faced the issues that prevented her from wanting children. Two participants identified the issues that made them oppose the idea of children: one was intimidated and uncomfortable about not knowing anything about children and another was fearful that a child reared in a lesbian family would be subject to ridicule and hostility.
Some couples had children despite the co-parent's continued ambivalence about having children and parenting. It appeared that without both partners wanting children, the integration and progression of the family was difficult and conflict ridden. Co-parents sought help through therapy and recognized how their abusive and traumatic childhoods contributed to their feelings about children. The recognition of these issues helped the co-parents to become more involved with the children. Some of the women who embraced the idea of having children also grew up in dysfunctional families and had unhappy childhoods. Therefore, the relationship between a participant's own childhood and her desire for children were not directly correlated.

Women who were still heterosexually married at the beginning of their lesbian relationship were likely to feel trapped between their partners and their husbands. Unmarried participants were likely to feel jealousy and resentment toward the husbands and children who competed for their partner's time and energy. As the changes in the family structure occurred, family members adapted and negotiated time for the couple, the children and the family.

Children who were old enough to understand the events around them had mixed reactions as their parents divorced and their mother started (or in one case continued) living with her partner. Some children had adjustment problems which caused an added strain on the lesbian relationship. For some couples, the fathers' continued involvement with the child/ren, including custody threats and deliberately undermining the couple's parenting, was also a source of stress and conflict.
Couples stayed together despite the stress and potential for conflict that occurred early in these blended families. These women were older and more experienced in relationships. As a result, they may have brought a sense of stability and maturity to the relationship that was helpful in handling the strain and negotiating the conflict.

Of the six blended families, eight women had not considered themselves lesbian at the beginning of their relationships. Each of these women talked about their experiences of falling quickly and deeply in love with their partners. Several women commented that for the first time in their lives, they felt complete, and experienced love in a way they never had. These powerful feelings, so early in the relationship, seemed to sustain these couples through the early challenges of blending their families.

For nuclear families, the events that occurred early in the process of becoming a family were generally without stress and conflict and moved the participants into a new kind of collaborative partnership. Deciding on how to have children presented these couples with an enormous amount of options to consider. These decisions took time, patience and open communication. For these couples, having children was a reflection of their partnership and their commitment to one another. Couples who emerged from the period of conflict common to the middle years of the relationship described the decision to have children as a result of their re-commitment to each other. Expanding their established "family core" to include children was a natural step for these couples.
The difference in becoming a family between the blended and nuclear families may be a result of a cohort effect. The blended families were establishing themselves during a time when there were few resources or social supports available. The nuclear families have established themselves in a different social climate where, still lacking in supports and resources, having children in a lesbian family is increasingly more common.

Structure of the Lesbian Family

The structure of lesbian families referred to the roles and responsibilities of the parents in relation to each other and to their children. Clunis and Green (1993) described the absence of legal status and common language to describe the connection between members in lesbian families. These families had no models to follow in creating a structure for their family. The families in this study created a structure that fit their experience and met the needs of each of its members. There was some similarity in structure between blended and nuclear families. However, the blended families went through an evolution of structures while nuclear families made minor adjustments. In both family types, a power imbalance was an inevitable challenge as the co-parent was not recognized by society (Slater, 1995).

Parenting roles have historically been divided along gender lines. Lesbian couples have been challenged to rid themselves of these proscriptions and to create their own parenting systems. For example, one couple described their struggle over what names their child would
use to refer to them as parents. As was the case for this family, couples often wait for the child/ren (particularly the older child/ren) to choose the names (Slater, 1995). Parents waited for young children to produce some utterance that distinguished each parent.

Integrating the co-parent into the family was experienced differently among the blended families. Confusion about the role of the co-parent was less likely when the couple was open about their lesbianism (Clunis & Green, 1993). The ease of integration appeared closely related to the age of the children at the beginning of the couples' relationships with younger children having an easier time adapting to the changes in the family. It may have been easier for young children because there was less of an adjustment to make. The parents' roles and responsibilities in the blended families with young children appeared more easily established as the co-parent quickly began to attend to their needs. Young children were likely to be less aware of societal attitudes about homosexuality and more accepting of the co-parent's role (Slater, 1995). These couples were not without some difficulty, however. Often there were conflicting differences in parenting styles. The recognition and articulation of these differences, sometimes with the help of therapy, allowed for the necessary adjustments to be made.

In blended families, older children often reacted to the loss of their fathers and to the confusion over who this new person (i.e., the co-parent) was in relation to their mothers and themselves. This reaction created some difficulty in blending the various individuals, particularly the
co-parent, into the family unit. Clunis and Green (1993) warn that because the co-parent will not be recognized by society, the couple must remedy this by actions inside and outside the family. This process required time and was helped by the biological parent inclusion of the co-parent in matters pertaining to the children. In addition, using phrases such as "our children" encouraged the children and the outside world to see the couple as equal parents.

With older children, the roles and responsibilities of the co-parent in these blended families were never assumed. Initially, there was a good deal of ambiguity. A clearer definition of the co-parent's roles and responsibilities developed slowly over the years. The role also seemed to be shaped by the needs and desires of three interacting forces: the co-parent, the biological parent and the child/ren. The co-parent's own level of comfort and ideas about being a parent evolved over time as she became more of an established parent in the family. Likewise, her partner's support and reaction to her being a parent also influenced the co-parent's position in the family. There were often different ideas and styles of parenting which created conflict and again required recognition and reconciliation. Finally, the reactions and needs of the children as well as their relationships with the co-parent contributed to the role the latter would have in their lives. This melding of reactions, needs and desires greatly influenced the position the co-parent had in the family.

The roles and responsibilities of each parent in the nuclear families was often discussed before the children arrived. This preparation time allowed the transition into these roles to be smoother
than it was for the blended families. For nuclear families, the roles of the parents were different according to function. For example, if one of the women gave birth and was breast-feeding, she initially took a central role in the child care. Similarly, if one of the women had a flexible job or worked at home, she had more day-to-day responsibilities for child care. In addition, the different personality styles, ideas about parenting and needs of the children defined the different roles of each parent. The different parenting styles complemented each other. This complementarity is a further example of the previously discussed complementary patterns of relating which is frequently observed among long term lesbian couples (Dorn 1990; Reuman-Hemond, 1994).

Despite differences in parenting roles, the nuclear families were committed to equity in sharing the responsibilities for child care. Since lesbian families and in particular, the co-parents, have been discounted by society, couples must work hard for acknowledgment (Clunis & Green, 1993; Slater, 1995). To compensate, couples worked to be recognized as equal and legitimate parents. For all but one of these nuclear families, mutuality and equal parenting was a goal to be achieved and maintained. It was very important for these women to be seen as equal parents by both their children and the outside institutions that interacted with the family (e.g., daycare, school, doctors). For the child/ren, parents modeled egalitarian relationships and redirected the child/ren who favored one parent over the other. For the outside institutions, parents used explanation and education to enforce their parenting partnerships.
Interaction between Lesbian Families and the Larger Society

Having children requires lesbian families to interact with society while at the same time giving them more reason to hide their identity from homophobic reactions (Slater, 1995). Slater (1995) contends that there is an ongoing disequilibrium between the family's push to be visible in society and its need to protect itself from homophobic responses. The prevalence of homophobia as well as the affects of heterosexism make for difficult and often risky interactions between lesbian families and the larger society.

In this study, parents in blended families faced the fear of their child's reactions if they acknowledged their lesbian relationships. As compared to nuclear families, Johnson (1991) found that couples in blended families were less open with their children about their lesbianism. Ironically, the child often knew the truth but were not given the language or permission to name the nature of their parent's relationship. Subsequently, these children remained confused, acting out in school or withdrawing from their family.

Lesbian parents also had the additional burden of protecting their children from the sting of homophobia. This required a need to continually define their family in each new interaction with the larger society. Parents acted as advance agents and educators to determine the most "lesbian friendly" environments so their children would not to be ostracized or singled out. Lesbian parents had to work hard to reinforce the sense of family. This included evolving family traditions, creating special family events and telling family stories (Laird, 1993; Slater, 1995).
Parents who were "out" about their lesbianism were able to model independence and pride giving their children a reinforced sense of family identity (Slater, 1995).

Blended families and nuclear families who choose to adopt children faced the fear of losing custody of their children. The media is scattered with real life cases of ex-spouses, grandparents, non-relatives and agencies taking children away from loving gay and lesbian parents. Perceptions of family are influenced by the heterosexism inherent in law and religion (Atkinson & Hackett, 1988). Subsequently, the lesbian family is not acknowledged and there is no validation or recognition for the real and integral role the co-parent plays in the lives of the children. Slater and Mencher (1991) contend that the principal stressor for all lesbian families is the lack of validation and recognition which serves to perpetuate the doubt and fear of internalized homophobia.

In response to the lack of acknowledgment by the larger society, Slater and Mencher (1991) emphasized the importance of maintaining connections within the lesbian community. However, while the lesbian community is generally in support of lesbian couples having children, the community itself is not child-oriented (Clunis & Green, 1993). Because they had children, several of the couples in this study commented on feeling abandoned and/or rejected by the lesbian community. These couples had to either make adjustments or lose their connection with lesbian friends who did not have children. At the same time, these couples sought other lesbian families who were supportive and validating.
Because lesbian families are not multigenerational with a history of rules and rites for how to be a family in mainstream society, these families must create their own family histories. Laird (1993) emphasized the importance of lesbian families developing rituals that support the family and mark its progression through time. Participants in this study talked about important ritual events in the family. For example, the marriage of a son or daughter marked an important and historical moment as both women walked their child down the aisle. Another family made a journey to the Michigan Women's Music Festival every year. Commitment ceremonies, holiday traditions and religious observances were also rituals that reflected and validated the family's history.

Implications for Counseling Couples

Lesbian experience has suffered from the "Great Silence" imposed by the negative, homophobic attitudes of society and perpetuated by the doubt and fear internalized by lesbians who must live in a culture that ignores or is hostile toward their existence (Rich, 1980). The field of psychology has historically participated in perpetuating this silence and only recently has begun to investigate lesbianism as a viable life style. There has been little research examining developmental issues in the lives of lesbians, particularly the experience of lesbians in long term relationships and lesbian headed families. This research project was designed to explore long term relationship stability among lesbian couples who have reared children. The results of this study have
implications for professionals who interact with and support lesbians in their partnerships and families.

The individual, interpersonal and sociocultural variables identified in this study are useful for professionals who seek to understand factors involved in the success of long term lesbian relationship where children have been reared. The identification and interaction of specific themes found in this study provides a relational and familial structure enabling professionals to integrate the myriad internal and external influences affecting these relationships. The descriptive examples offered in this study will assist in recognizing these themes as they are reported by lesbian couples. The results of this study will enable professionals to identify the strengths and difficulties within lesbian relationships.

Over the developmental progression of the relationship, conflict and change in important relational factors such as communication, intimacy and satisfaction are common occurrences and can be anticipated and acknowledged by professionals. There was a pattern to the intensity of conflict in the relationship over time and a number of common conflict themes experienced by these couples. Likewise, couples used similar resources including social supports, therapy and a commitment to communication to work through the change and conflict. Given the lack of role models and support for keeping these relationships in tact, it is important for professionals to see these events as a normal part of the relationship experience.

While more lesbian couples are choosing to rear children, there is little understanding of the process involved in making this decision or the
experience of becoming a lesbian family. An exploration of these issues among nuclear and blended families revealed some of the difficulties, challenges and rewards experienced by lesbian couples rearing children. Professionals who work with lesbian families will be able to use these findings to support healthy family functioning.

Professionals must understand the cultural context in which their client's experience takes place. For example, what may look like dysfunctional fusion may be a profound level of intimacy and connection that gives the couple satisfaction. Likewise, what may be perceived as suspicion or paranoia might be an adaptive response to living in a homophobic society. Although the relational features of lesbian relationships must be considered, professionals need to also consider the cultural environment in which they occur.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study is one of the first investigations of long term relationships among lesbians who have reared children. The results of this study suggest there are a variety of interacting factors that contribute to the stability of these relationships. Further qualitative and quantitative research is needed to more specifically understand the themes involved in relationship stability and quality of lesbian relationships and families.

There were several homogenous demographic characteristics that defined this sample. All participants were White, lived in New England and were, for the most part, well educated. Future research could consider the influence of race and ethnicity in non-Caucasian and inter-
racial lesbian couples. Studying couples who represent a variety of cultural backgrounds would contribute to the many perspectives needed to understand and appreciate the lesbian experience (Slater, 1995).

As more lesbians couples choose to rear children, a new type of family is emerging. The research and theory that includes lesbian families has often done so by comparing them to heterosexual families (Laird, 1993). In contrast, the current study examined lesbian families in terms of how the children affected the partners' relationships. To more fully understand these families, there needs to be additional research into their experience and structure including the experience of the children in these families.

This research used a qualitative approach to studying a relatively unexplored area of investigation. Factors related to lesbian relationship stability were identified in broad categories composed of basic themes. Once there is a better understanding of the basic elements involved in long term lesbian relationships, quantitative techniques can be used to elaborate upon the findings from these investigations. A longitudinal design would eliminate the difficulties of failed memory and inaccurate perceptions in retrospective analyses. Finally, the collaboration of lesbian and heterosexual researchers might bring a broader perspective to this type of a research project.

Concluding Remarks

This qualitative study examined lesbian couples who had been together for at least 15 years and had reared children. An analysis of the
data revealed specific themes and developmental patterns common to these long term relationships. Twenty-two themes were coded and organized into five interdependent categories. The development and progression of these relationships was marked by transitional events and often corresponded with changes in the commitment to the relationship.

Relationship stability was related to an interaction between interpersonal, relational and familial themes as well as sociocultural influences. The level of conflict in the relationship was inversely related to levels of relatedness, intimacy and communication. The middle years of the relationship were the most conflicted and least satisfying. Issues related to monogamy were present in most relationships and contributed substantially to reported levels of conflict. The interaction between conflict and monogamy, especially in the middle years seemed to reflect a questioning by the participants about their desire to remain in the relationship. Satisfaction in the relationship was related to commitment, egalitarianism, communication and intense emotional intimacy.

Couples and their children were challenged in their progression toward becoming a family. Blended families faced the challenge of integrating the co-parent into the family unit. Nuclear families dealt with transitional issues in adjusting to children. Parenting roles, responsibilities and styles were additional challenges as these aspects of parenting have traditionally paralleled gender lines. All families were affected by homophobia but developed various strategies to cope with this pressure. Overall, children were experienced as both stressors and stabilizers for the relationship.
Lesbian families are challenging and redefining the concept of intimate relationships and the structure of family units. The participants in this study demonstrated how creating a successful relationship involves time, motivation, flexibility and a willingness to learn. The couples in this study are models for future generations of lesbians are seeking stability in their intimate relationships.
References


Dear (participants name),

I appreciate your interest in my research on long-term relationships and thank you for considering potentially participating in this worthy study. As I stated, I wanted to provide you with some written information that may reiterate and expand on what I explained over the phone.

Let me first explain the nature and purpose of this research. My study is part of a larger research project conducted by members of the Counseling Psychology Department at Boston College. This project is examining factors which contribute to long-term relationship satisfaction and stability among different cultural groups (e.g. African-American, Latino, Jewish). So far this research has focused only on heterosexual couples failing to consider how these concepts operate in lesbian or gay relationships. Unfortunately, this is all too common in current research and literature. Rather than generalizing the findings from heterosexual research to understand lesbian experience, I hope that my study will allow lesbian couples to draw on their own experience and use their own words to describe their relationships with their partners. I believe this information will be useful to the lesbian community and mental health professionals who work with lesbians as well as to educators who are building awareness and appreciation of difference.

The research is qualitative and utilizes a two to two and a half hour semi-structured interview in which participants respond to open-ended questions concerning personality and interpersonal factors within the relationship, social support networks, family and the impact of sociocultural factors on the relationship. It is necessary that both partners in the couple participate. Each interview will be audio-taped. Anonymity and confidentiality are considered paramount and guaranteed. Your identity will not be revealed in any reports generated by this study.

Couples need to have been together at least 15 years and have raised or are currently raising at least one child. You will be asked to sign an informed consent form acknowledging you understand the nature of the research and agree to participate. As a volunteer, you have the...
right to stop the interview at any time, skip a question or discontinue your involvement altogether. Interviews will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you.

Because this research can be personal in nature, I believe it is necessary to provide some information about myself. I identify myself as predominately heterosexual. I have a particular interest in cross-cultural issues (defining “culture” in its broadest sense) and am pursuing expertise as a cross-cultural counselor. My interest in this specific topic also stems from my close relationship with family members and close friends who are lesbian and gay. I have a long-standing interest in women’s issues and consider myself gay-affirmative.

I will phone you next week to determine your interest in participating in my study. I would be more than willing to answer any further questions or concerns you may have, my home telephone number is (area code and home number).

Sincerely,

Julie O’Rourke
Appendix B: Lesbian Relationship Stability Interview

Interview Schedule

I. The Relationship
A. Initial Attraction, life circumstances, family reactions

1. As you look back to the time when you met (partner), what first attracted you to her?
   a. What interests did you share?
   b. Was there a point in time when you knew you were committed to each other?
      1. When was it in your relationship? (if it was a short time, how were you sure?)
      2. How did you know?
      3. What kind of a commitment did you understand it to be?

2. What was going on in your life around the time you committed to each other? (educationally, vocationally, family, etc.)

3. What kinds of functions or responsibilities did you see yourself having at the beginning of the relationships? What about (partner)?

4. Did you have expectations about needing to work at the relationship? If so, why? What were they?

5. What, if any, adjustments did you have to make in the initial stages of your committed relationship? How did you feel about these changes? What adjustments did (partner) have to make?

6. I'd like to focus on your family of origin with regard to their understanding and response to your relationship with (partner).
   a. At the beginning of your relationship, how did your family understand and respond to your relationship with (partner)? How has this changed?
   b. How has your family felt and reacted toward (partner)?
   c. Is there a variation in these reactions among different family members?

7. How has (partner)'s family reacted to you and your relationship with (partner)?
B. I would like you to think back to the beginning of your relationship and consider the ways you and your partner have changed or remained the same over time. In order to assess these changes over time, I would like to get a historical view of your relationship. What do you identify as the transition points in your relationship? (Assess the nature of these points as well as the time in the relationship that they took place. Using these transition points, break the relationship up into phases to be used for the following questions).

1. Would you describe what your relationship together was like from your point of view (in terms of quality, roles, responsibilities, etc.)? (As appropriate, ask about different phases)
   a. In general, how have you gotten along? What has been good, not so good and/or bad about the relationship?
   b. How would you describe the quality and style of communication between you?
   c. How would you describe the intimacy in your relationship over time? (emotional, physical, sexual)
      1. How important have each of these areas been to your relationship?
   d. What has been important to getting along?

2. I'd like to focus on how you as an individual and as a couple make decisions and solve problems. (As appropriate, ask about different phases)
   a. Will you describe how you, as an individual, make decisions?
   b. As a couple, how do you and (partner) make decisions? (i.e. children, friends, recreation, etc.)
   c. What kind of conflict have you had in your relationship over time?
      1. How do you deal with conflict or differences? What is your perception of how (partner) deals with conflict or differences?
      2. When you have had differences in your relationship, how would you describe the fairness or equity in which they were resolved?
   d. Have there been situations where one of you has had more influence than the other?
   e. Can you give me some examples of how you and (partner) faced and dealt with a difficulty or problem?
3. I'd like to focus on your children.
   a. Will you describe your family?
      (in blended families, to nonbiological parent)
      1. How do the children refer to you?
      2. What was it like for you to become part of this family?
      3. What were some of the particular issues or challenges?
      4. How have you and (partner) handled or worked out the
         responsibilities of taking care of the children?
      5. How has parenting affected your relationship with
         (partner)?
   (in blended families, to biological parent)
   1. What was it like for (partner) to become part of your
      family?
   2. What were some of the particular issues or challenges?
   3. How have you and (partner) handled or worked out the
      roles and responsibilities of raising children?
   4. How has parenting affected your relationship with
      (partner)?
   (in nuclear families)
   1. Can you tell me about your process involved in your and
      (partner)'s decision to have children?
   2. How have your and (partner) handled or worked out the
      roles and responsibilities of child-rearing?
   3. How has parenting affected your relationship with
      (partner)?

   (**How have these changed over the years and what were the ages of
   the children when these changes occurred)

4. I'd like to turn to your relationship in general (as appropriate, ask
   about different phases).
   a. How much understanding do you feel (partner) has had of
      you? How much understanding do you think you have of
      (partner)? Have either of these changed over the years?
   b. How sensitive has (partner) been toward you? And you toward
      her? Have either of these changed over the years?
   c. How much respect do you feel (partner) has had for you? And
      you for her? Have either of these changed over the years?
   d. How much trust have you felt towards (partner)? And her
      towards you? Have either of these changed over the years?

II. Sociocultural Influences
* How have the following played a part in your life together and how
  have they affected your relationship over the different phases?

A. Religion or spirituality
B. Social supports including extended families (both) and friends
C. Economic factors including income.
D. Cultural factors including class, ethnicity and sexual orientation
   1. The norms of this culture which favor heterosexism, how has this affected your relationship with (partner)?
   2. How has the prejudice and discrimination of homophobia affected your relationship with (partner)?
   3. How have you coped with it as an individual and as a couple?

E. Other values, beliefs, or moral standards
   1. How has feminism or the feminist movement affected you and your relationship with (partner)?

III. Influence of Other Relationships on Your Committed Relationship

A. Was there a model relationship you looked towards in constructing your idea of a committed relationship?
   if yes...
   1. What was it? What aspects of this model influenced your relationship?
   if no...
   2. How did you go about building your relationship?

B. I'd like to focus on your parent's relationship.
   1. What positive and negative influences did your parent's relationship have on your relationship?
   2. What are some of the similarities between your parent's relationship and your relationship with (partner)? What are some of the differences?
   3. What were/are your parents attitudes toward the dissolution of a committed relationships? Who would this pertain to your relationship with (partner)?

IV. Participants Views of the Relationship Over Time and Wrap-up
* In this final section, I would like to ask about how you see your relationship changing and remaining the same since you and (partner) first met. I am interested in how you both have been able to deal with the challenges of remaining together and building a relationship.

A. As you look back, what were the personal qualities of you and (partner) that kept you together? What were some of the factors in the relationship that kept you together?

B. Do you think your relationship has changed or has the relationship remained pretty much the same from the beginning? How so?

C. What words best describe what (partner) means to you now? In the past?
D. Are there any other things that you wish to add that were critical issues/factors that kept you in the relationship? Significant events, periods of assessment and/or renewal?

E. Is there anything else that you think would be important for me to understand about you, (partner), or your relationship?
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

I understand that the interview sessions with Julie O'Rourke are part of the research for her doctoral dissertation under the direction of Dr. Bernard O'Brien of Boston College. The purpose of the research project is to better understand how some lesbians, together at least 15 years, negotiate their relationships. The purpose of the interview(s) is to share my personal ideas, feelings and life experiences concerning my long-term relationship.

I understand that the interview will be tape recorded. I realize that I may choose not to respond to any particular questions, that I may stop the interview at any time, and that I may request to listen to the tape. The information obtained from this tape will become part of the research material for this study. My identity will be kept strictly confidential and will not be revealed in any reports generated by this study.

I recognize that these interviews are not designed or intended to be psychotherapy or treatment of any sort. I realize that I may ask about various aspects of the study, and that further information on the project will be provided at my request. A copy of the results of this study will be provided to me upon my request.

I have read this information and consent form and agree to be part of this research study.

Signature __________________________ Date ____________

I, Julie O'Rourke, agree to respect the aforementioned conditions of this research study.

Signature __________________________ Date ____________
Appendix D: Background Information Form

Background Information

This information is being used to describe participants of this study as a group. Please complete the following questions with the knowledge that your responses are completely anonymous.

1. Your age (years and months): ____________________________

2. Your partner's age (years and months): ____________________________

3. Your race and ethnic group: ____________________________

4. Your religion: ____________________________

5. Your geographical origins (state or foreign country): ____________________________

6. Your present educational level (HS, BA/BS, MA/MS, Ph.D., M.D.): ____________________________

7. Current employment status:
   - full-time employment
   - part-time employment
   - not employed
   - full-time student
   - part-time student
   - other (explain) ____________________________

8. If employed, what is your title and field: ____________________________

9. If a student, what is your field: ____________________________

10. What is your average yearly income?
    - less than $12,500
    - $12,500 - $24,499
    - $25,000 - $37,499
    - $37,000 - $50,000
    - over $50,000 ____________________________

11. Approximately what percentage of your household income do you provide? ______

12. On a sexual orientation continuum ranging from homosexual to heterosexual, please describe yourself.
    ________________________________________________________________
    ________________________________________________________________
    ________________________________________________________________

13. For how long have you consciously considered yourself to be a lesbian? ______

14. Have you ever been heterosexually married? ____ Yes ____ No

15. How long have you been in your current relationship?
    ____ Years ____ Months

16. How long have you and your partner lived together? ____ Years ____ Months
17. What event or experience do you consider the beginning of this relationship? Please provide a date or year that this occurred.

18. What do you mark (e.g. event, conversation or understanding) as the beginning of your commitment to each others as a couple? If possible, please provide a date or year that this occurred.

19. For each child that has been raised by you and your partner, please describe the circumstances around your becoming a parent (i.e. by a previous marriage; bore or adopted a child/children when single, in current lesbian relationship, in former lesbian relationship; etc.)

What is/are the ages of the child(ren)?

How many years has/have the child(ren) been reared in your current relationship?

20. Do you want to have another child in the future?

Definitely Not 1 2 3 4 5 Most Definitely

21. What is the likelihood of this happening?

Definitely Not 1 2 3 4 Most Definitely 5
### Appendix E: Lesbian Relationship Coding Sheet

#### Scoring Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>code #</th>
<th>name</th>
<th>partner's name</th>
<th>interview date</th>
<th>age</th>
<th># of years together</th>
<th>education</th>
<th>occupation</th>
<th>income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Subject's initial attraction to partner  
   (0) negative  (1) ambivalent  (2) positive

2. Subject's family support for partner choice  
   (0) disapproval  (1) no response  (2) approval  
   (3) mixed  (4) not acknowledged

3. Subject's circumstance at beginning of relationship  
   (0) no conflict  (1) conflictual

4. Role expectations for self at beginning of relationship  
   (3) no expectations  (4) role sharing  
   (5) role differentiation

5. Expectation of need for effort to sustain relationship  
   (0) no expectations  (1) no  (2) yes

6. Subject's perception of sexual relationship  
   (0) negative  (1) mixed  (2) positive  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase

7. Subject's perception of the importance of the sexual relationship  
   (0) not important  (1) important  
   (2) very important  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase

8. Subject's perception of the presence of intimacy in the relationship  
   (0) no  (1) mixed  (2) yes  
   (A) psychosocial intimacy  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase  
   (B) nonsexual, physical intimacy  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase

9. Subject's personal style of decision making  
   (0) logical  (1) impulsive  (2) intuitive  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase

10. Decision making style of the couple  
    (0) separate  (1) variable  (2) mutual  
    (A) first phase  
    (B) second phase  
    (C) third phase
11. Style of handling interpersonal differences in the relationship  
   (0) deny  (1) avoid  (2) confront  
   (A) subject's style  
      (A) first phase  
      (B) second phase  
      (C) third phase  
   (B) perception of partner's style  
      (A) first phase  
      (B) second phase  
      (C) third phase  

12. Subject's reported level of conflict in the relationship  
   (0) minimal  (1) major  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase  

13. Subject's perception of the responsibilities for child rearing  
   (0) individual  (1) mutual  

14. Subject's perception of relationship variables: partner to subject  
   (0) no  (1) mixed  (2) yes  
   a. sensitivity  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  
   b. understanding  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  
   c. respect  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  
   d. trust  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  

15. Subject's perception of relationship variables: subject to partner  
   (0) no  (1) mixed  (2) yes  
   a. sensitivity  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  
   b. understanding  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  
   c. respect  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  
   d. trust  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  

16. Subject's perception of fairness/equity in the relationship  
   (0) no  (1) mixed  (2) yes  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase  

17. Subject's perception of communication within the relationship  
   (0) no  (1) mixed  (2) yes  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase  

18. Subject's overall sense of relatedness  
   (0) negative  (1) mixed  (2) positive  
   (A) first phase  
   (B) second phase  
   (C) third phase  

19. Subject's perception of other influences on the relationship  
   (0) negative  (1) none  (2) positive  
   (3) mixed  
   a. finances  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase  
   b. religion/spirituality  
      (1) first phase  (2) second phase  (3) third phase
c. subject's extended family
   (1) first phase (2) second phase (3) third phase

d. partner's extended family
   (1) first phase (2) second phase (3) third phase

e. ethnicity/race
   (1) first phase (2) second phase (3) third phase

f. other values (list in comments)
   (1) first phase (2) second phase (3) third phase

20. Subject's perception of similarity of own relationship with parent's marriage
   (0) discontinuity
   (1) mixed
   (2) continuity
   (A) first phase
   (B) second phase
   (C) third phase

21. Subject's perception of own relationship behavior
   (0) instrumental
   (1) mixed
   (2) expressive
   (A) first phase
   (B) second phase
   (C) third phase

22. Subject's parents' attitudes toward divorce
   (1) disapprove (2) accepting

23. Subject's perception of interpersonal fit with partner
   (0) no
   (1) mixed
   (2) complementary
   (3) symmetry
   (A) first phase
   (B) second phase
   (C) third phase

24. Subject's overall sense of the relationship as satisfying
   (0) no
   (1) mixed
   (2) yes
   (A) first phase
   (B) second phase
   (C) third phase

25. Subject's initial attraction to committed lesbian relationship
   (0) negative
   (1) ambivalent
   (2) positive

26. Subject's family support for lesbian relationship
   (0) disapproval
   (1) no response
   (2) approval
   (3) mixed
   (4) not acknowledged
   (A) initial response
   (B) later response

27. Subject's perception of other influences on the relationship
   (0) negative
   (1) none
   (2) positive
   (3) mixed

   a. gay/lesbian community
      (1) first phase
      (2) second phase
      (3) third phase

   b. friends
      (1) first phase
      (2) second phase
      (3) third phase

   c. homophobia/heterosexism
      (1) first phase
      (2) second phase
      (3) third phase

   d. class
      (1) first phase
      (2) second phase
      (3) third phase

   e. feminism/feminist principles
      (1) first phase
      (2) second phase
      (3) third phase

28. Subject's parents' attitudes towards dissolution of relationship
   (1) disapprove
   (2) accepting
29. Composition of subject's lesbian family

30. Subject's perception of the importance of emotional intimacy

31. Subject's perception of the importance of the physical intimacy

32. Subject's initial desire for children

COMMENTS: