

THE LESBIAN FAMILY LIFE CYCLE: A Contextual Approach

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A recent broadening of family life cycle theory to include the various family norms deriving from ethnic differences, single parenting, divorce, and remarriage has not extended to the lesbian family experience. The need to articulate a lesbian family life cycle is underscored here with particular attention to the specific challenges and coping mechanisms of this particular family experience.

May 12th has begun and I'm up early to be ready for the two noteworthy events due today. I drive to the office to meet with the 45-year-old tenured professor who has prepared for a year for tonight's disclosure to her parents. I find her uncharacteristically jumpy, anxious, and in need of our connection today. Her eyes meet mine with an intensity and a frequency she seldom allows herself. I ask if she feels ready for tonight and we begin to discuss how she'll take care of herself, how she'll manage her fear, and how she'll get herself to break into the small talk and begin. Her focus drifts to her desire to take care of her parents, and we begin to sound like paramedics planning triage at the scene of a disaster. I remind her she doesn't need to take care of all three of them. We talk further. I remind her they will all survive. I remind her, too, of what a gift her honesty is to her parents and we acknowledge they may not agree. I have her reiterate how she came to this decision, and she talks about living a lie, about it being impossible to share anything meaningful with her parents without this disclosure. She tells me of her joy with her lover and quickly says maybe she'll go easy on the word "joy."

Later that day, I dress for my lover's niece's wedding. She, too, has planned for over a year for this day. We arrive at the house to find bridesmaids already dressed, wine opened early, and a jumpy, anxious bride. Her working-class parents have poured their life savings into their only daughter's wedding, and they can be heard telling guests it's all worth it to make Nicole's special day perfect. From the horse-drawn carriage to the \$600 wedding cake, they've

used this ritual to convey their love and their welcome to the new life stage she begins today. At the reception, we stand and applaud the entrance of the new Mr. and Mrs. Robert Jennings, and the bride unself-consciously proclaims her joy.

A week later, Nicole visits us to show us pictures of her day. She lets slip the amount of money she received and asks if we can use any of the appliances she got duplicates of. She tells us she is relieved that the wedding is over and life can get back to normal.

I next see my client on May 16th. She tells me she hadn't been able to do it; the visit came and went. Amidst great self-blame, she had sent a coming-out letter to her parents the day before this appointment. We struggle to retrieve her self-esteem, and talk of what a huge moment passed in silence at that lonely mailbox. My attendance at Nicole's wedding leaves me unable to tolerate the utter void into which my client broke her silence, and I cannot keep myself from intervening. At my urging, she agrees to gather her friends to celebrate the passage she has finally negotiated. Three long weeks of complete silence from her parents follow her letter. Her agony and fear are palpable. So much for her life getting back to normal.

Whenever we encounter a long series of words with no punctuation, our eyes automatically strive to create phrases, complete sentences, and make paragraphs of the words. We add exclamation points, question marks, and periods for further dis-

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inctions, and thereby create beginnings, middles, and ends. Undemarcated words strung together create stress for the reader, who must work to inject meaning, purpose, and tone.

Family life, like writing, takes on vitality, stability, and character when punctuation is provided. Rituals bring delineation of beginnings, middles, and ends. They signal key successes in a family, they flag moments of important passages, and they imbue the time between a family's formation and its dissolution with exactly the punctuation provided in writing.

Heterosexual culture recognizes the power of validation to sustain family life and has devised a lifetime of rituals for this purpose. Engagements and weddings entail exchanging of rings, change in last names, and alterations in legal and financial status. The society celebrates the announcement of a baby's birth, baptisms, Bar Mitzvahs, and Bat Mitzvahs. Anniversaries of a couple's wedding are denoted, and funerals identify next-of-kin. From beginning to end, life is broken up into a series of rituals, some of which are repeated periodically, and some of which mark a family's successful passage through life stages experienced only once. The culture also provides its members with images of what to expect. The family *knows* which moments signify passages and watches other families reach, mark, and move beyond specific moments in the family life cycle. Television, movies, magazines, greeting cards, literature, theater, and children's games all reflect heterosexual family images and offer heterosexual families examples of themselves that create a powerful base of support and stability for each of its member families.

Unfortunately, heterosexual culture is also heterosexist. That is, it operates deliberately to present heterosexual family life not as one of a number of choices, but as the only family life there is. Lesbian families—and gay male families, as well—are specifically excluded both from consideration in

forming views of "normal family functioning" and from the rituals used to emphasize successful family life. Lesbians are legally barred from marriage, so that engagements, weddings and their anniversaries, joint last names, and joint legal status are withheld. Instead of experiencing a social assumption that they will have children, as heterosexuals do, lesbians are forcefully stigmatized for becoming parents; thus, most rituals and normative expectations around the rearing of children are off-limits as well. Birth announcements, children's birthday rituals, the first day of school, the moves through elementary and high school to graduation and leaving home are all punctuations of the life cycle from which lesbians are primarily excluded.

Thus, lesbian family life is completely empty of images of normal progression. The only rituals left for such families are purely individual ones, marking such events as birthdays, new jobs, and retirement, that fail to acknowledge the existence of the family unit. How do lesbian families punctuate the long series of moments between the first and final words of life? What happens to such families as they try to flourish in this atmosphere of disregard and deliberate exclusion?

This article examines the significant realities of the lesbian family experience over the course of the life cycle. While lesbian family life may parallel the heterosexual experience in various ways, neither the substantial differences nor the points of intersection have yet been articulated in mainstream family therapy literature. The particular stresses and coping mechanisms of the lesbian family life cycle are identified here. The emergence of lesbian rituals to punctuate family life is examined, as is the negotiation of an additional system, the lesbian community.

SYSTEMS THEORY APPROACH

Traditional family theory offers little context for responding to these questions. Family therapists have long recognized that it is

vitaly important for families to gain a sense of the normative progression of family life with its predictable points of stress (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Often, couples or families come to therapy with much dread or panic about the conflict or difficulty they are experiencing over a particular issue. Their sighs of relief are almost audible when the therapist identifies the conflict as part of a normative transition in family life. By simply locating their situation on a developmental track, the intervention helps such families to experience a sense of normality and to identify the dysfunctional patterns that have temporarily derailed them.

The clinician's work has been aided by the many family theorists who have attempted to codify a normative family life cycle. Of these, Carter and McGoldrick (1980) offered the definitive representation. They theorized that all families follow a basic progression through predictable stages of family life. Rather than viewing family behavior as idiosyncratic, they suggested typical and normative patterns that are virtually generic. In these patterns, families proceed through the stages of the family life cycle, from mate selection as young adults through the formation of the new young family and the bearing or adoption and rearing of children, to the exit of the grown children who will, in selecting mates for themselves, start the cycle again in the next generation. Carter and McGoldrick suggested that there are specific tasks and potential stresses and conflicts indigenous to each family life cycle stage. Normally, developmental momentum is supported by social recognition of the existence of the family and social validation of family growth and change. Carter and McGoldrick reasoned that symptoms and dysfunctions reflect the family's difficulty with normative life cycle transitions and are most likely to surface when the life cycle is interrupted for some reason. The task of therapy is to restore the family's developmental momentum, to get it back on track, so that the

normal propellants of social support and intrinsic movement toward growth and change can operate.

A vital component in the family's successful negotiation of its life cycle is the use of ritual. Rituals serve to delineate life cycle transitions, to create a family context for sharing individual reactions to events that affect all family members, and to locate the family in the shared social scheme of family life. Ritual, and the knowledge of which rite lies next on the horizon, generates the momentum that moves a family through life. It assists in the very establishment of family identity by creating a sense of "this is what our family does/this is who our family is" (Imber-Black, 1989).

The public component of family ritual is particularly critical. Through ritual, both public and private, the culture sends a message of connection and validation, of "we recognize ourselves in you," to the individual family. Such validation can bestow a sense of legitimacy in the world. Even at times when the family feels unformed or fragmented, the power of ritual is so strong that it can, for better or worse, substitute external validation for internal cohesion (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). This is perhaps why the wedding has evolved as such a vital rite for the newly forming family.

Having established, in both theory and clinical practice, the vital importance of the family life cycle, with its defined stages, predictable stresses, and socially sanctioned rituals, family therapists have recently called attention to issues of diversity. Great strides have been made in tailoring family therapy theory and practice to the real world of clients, trying to avoid the identification of a single norm for the family. The analysis of ethnic differences in family relationships represents a major effort to acknowledge the ways in which norms, expectations, and patterns of dysfunction vary not just from family to family, but along ethnic lines (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Similarly, the field's focus on single-parent and divorced fami-

lies has begun to expand the notion of what constitutes a family, grounding us in more realistic visions of contemporary families (Brown, 1989; Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Peck & Manocherian, 1989).

The movement in family therapy toward addressing diversity has been strikingly depicted in the revised second edition of Carter and McGoldrick's *The Family Life Cycle* (1980), now renamed *The Changing Family Life Cycle* (1989). In this edition, the first one reappears only as a single section, its limitations acknowledged in its title, "The Traditional Middle-Class Family Life Cycle." Among the several additions meant to reflect more inclusive and accurate versions of contemporary family life, are sections on life cycle norms for divorced families, for low income families, for alcoholic families, and for dual-career families. Certainly, the move from the excessively generic to the accurately specific will help clinicians to prevent nonwhite or non-middle-class families from expecting to behave like the middle-class white families depicted in popular culture (and at one time in family therapy) as the only normal families.

Unfortunately, gay and lesbian families have been the "poor relations" in family therapy's attention to diversity, receiving little consideration as to their establishment or to the differences and similarities among their life cycle patterns and those of heterosexual families. We learn from Carter and McGoldrick's revised edition only that the family of origin often treats a lesbian member as an "unlaunched adolescent," and that the lesbian family itself suffers from the absence of normative rituals to mark the family life cycle. Walters, Carter, Papp, and Silverstein (1989) have entreated us to examine multiple contexts, including those of family and gender, in work with families, and have brought the experience of women in family life into focus in the family therapy field. However, they have ignored the context of sexual identity, and have declined to examine lesbian families as a specific group.

Those family therapists who have examined differences between lesbians and heterosexuals, have tended to target patterns of dysfunction and conflict (Kessler & Bekko, 1980; North, 1985). No one has yet articulated a comprehensive life cycle scheme for lesbians.

Thus, while lesbian families, like heterosexual ones, experience a need to know what is ahead over the family life cycle, neither popular culture nor family therapy provides a chart, nor do traditional rituals exist to light the way. Carter and McGoldrick's scheme is not applicable to lesbian life for several key reasons. First, their life cycle depends on a multigenerational context in which the family begins with the launching of the young adult, and moves on through stages of coupling and raising children, and cycles back to the next generation's launching of the young adult. For the young lesbian, her adult life is often such a departure from the family life of her childhood that her training is rendered inapplicable to her adult experience. For example, the existence of the heterosexual family is so taken for granted that its establishment is unquestionably supported by the community, popular culture, and social institutions. Typically, the lesbian woman has not been trained by her heterosexual parents to fight for family status, since the legitimacy of the parents' family unit was assumed, not hard-won. The family of origin rarely views it as their task to train the young lesbian adult in the ways of establishing a family life.

In the second place, Carter and McGoldrick's model assumes and relies on a consistent context of social supports to aid families in their movement through the life cycle and to offer examples of rituals to mark their passages. Clearly, most lesbian families lack these supports. For heterosexual families, the withholding of social validation is viewed as an aberration; for lesbian families, it is the norm.

Thirdly, this scheme of the family life cycle is child-centered. Carter and McGold-

rick assume the bearing, or adoption, and the rearing of children as a cornerstone of family life. Although there have always been some lesbians with children, and increasing numbers of lesbians are considering having children, lesbian life is not traditionally child-centered. Neither heterosexual nor lesbian culture readily assumes or offers institutional support for the raising of children by lesbians. Nevertheless, lesbian couples—and childless heterosexual couples for that matter—establish and maintain a family unit which passes through discrete stages with their attendant stresses, transitions, and accomplishments.

RECURRENT STRESSORS

There are ways in which the life cycle of some lesbian families may mirror the traditional, middle class, heterosexual family life cycle. This is probably because many lesbians grew up in the heterosexual family culture and few other role models are available to them. Whatever descriptions are found to identify actual life cycle stages, the work of these stages proceeds against the backdrop of particular, recurrent stressors faced by virtually all lesbian families. While family therapists might typically view a family's repeated confrontation of the same stress and the repeated employment of the same coping mechanisms as evidence of dysfunction, for lesbian families the repetitive nature of these stressors and coping mechanisms are normative realities of family life in a continually hostile climate.

The most profound of such stressors are not stage-specific and are not alleviated by the successful completion of a particular developmental milestone. Fundamentally, lesbian families must continually face the question of their viability. The society at large views members of a lesbian family as unconnected individuals. Younger women living together are dismissed as "friends," "roommates," or "girls" who are living in a holding pattern, presumably waiting to find a male partner. Joint ownership of a house by a female couple is attributed to

financial necessity or protection against male violence. The dyad is presumed to be temporary, platonic, and largely incidental. Even when this companionship extends over a lifetime, the partners are viewed as unmarried women who never had a family. Since the integrity of their bond is not recognized, the bond is seen as without stages, overriding themes, or temporal progression. There is no act, commitment, or length of time spent together that moves such a couple into a sanctioned social status. The couple must fight both active and passive disregard throughout life.

My mother invited me home for the weekend," my client reported angrily. "Me—that's who she invited. It's like I never came out to her at all. It's like Andrea doesn't even exist. Well, I told her we're a package deal and where I go, Andrea goes, too."

The obituary read, "Joan Reynolds is survived by two sisters, Helen Jenkins and Rhona Stewart, her brother John Reynolds, and one nephew." My eyes searched in vain for mention of her partner of 36 years.

Lesbian couples may internalize this withholding of relational status and thus find it more difficult to develop confidence in their relationships than do their heterosexual counterparts. The length of time a couple has been together often becomes imbued with great meaning, signaling the extent to which their lesbian bond is legitimized. For example, lesbian couples often delay commitment or union ceremonies until a significant anniversary is achieved, thus measuring relational legitimacy only by the standard of relational tenure. The duration of the relationship is thus employed as a substitute for the conventional forms of societal recognition afforded heterosexual couples.

Verification of the lesbian family's existence may become a task relegated almost solely to the couple themselves. The bond between the partners must be strong enough to compensate for both the denial and the danger that the family faces from the society at large. This is a burden seldom placed on heterosexual families, inherently validated as they are by every norm and ritual assigned to them.

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But the validation lesbians must generate cannot, by definition, be supplied by the couple alone. The couple requires verification and validation of its family status. But how can validation—an inextricably social concept—be awarded to couples who cannot risk social exposure? Public assertion of family identity can entail loss of job, home, family of origin, physical safety, and custody of children. This risk must be balanced against the impact on the family of agreeing to be an invisible, seemingly non-existent entity. This is a struggle not limited to any one life cycle stage, but an ongoing, central stress that is a major distinction between heterosexual and lesbian families.

The task of continual refueling of viability as a family unit is complicated further by the extent of internalized homophobia experienced by lesbian family members. All lesbians and gay men struggle with internalized homophobia, stemming from the remnants of their heterosexual upbringing and from continuing homophobic assaults on the self. The establishment of a sense of family and ongoing verification of family status by family members is severely hampered by internalized homophobia.

Jane, a 32-year old therapist and gay rights advocate, sat mournfully through Sabbath services with her lover. This was their first time in a synagogue since finding each other and commitment as a couple. While she felt at home in the synagogue, Jane abruptly questioned how they could dare to follow through with their plans to have children, wondering how she would ever have the audacity to introduce herself and her lover as the parents of a bar mitzvah boy. For the first time, she found herself wondering if lesbians should have children.

Confrontations with internalized homophobia may plague the lesbian family throughout the life cycle, particularly at such moments of ritual and passage as registering a child in school for the first time, celebrating rituals of passage with children, writing wills, buying a home together, making medical or financial decisions for one's partner, and choosing a nursing home.

The continual negotiation of private versus public identities is also a persistent fam-

ily theme to be faced both individually and collectively by all family members. The extent to which life within the home and life outside it are integrated or fragmented will significantly affect family functioning and movement throughout the life cycle.

Olivia, 28, and Mary, 30, had lived together as a couple for five years, for much of which both were in graduate school. During this time, they enjoyed the validation and support of a well-developed urban lesbian community, especially as they negotiated conflict with each of their families of origin about their relationship. When Mary graduated and received a prestigious appointment in a rural area just a few hours away, the two women suddenly found it necessary to confine their relationship within the four walls of their home. Mary, in particular, became the guardian of their public identity as "just friends." Olivia became more and more reluctant to have any sexual contact, even with privacy assured. The couple attributed their conflict to the stress of the move, without understanding the particularities of this transition as a lesbian couple.

Systems theory holds that family boundaries must be intact and flexible to promote functional family dynamics. However, the negotiation of public versus private identity may at times require brittle and rigid family boundaries for lesbian couples and families, thereby creating a persistent stress throughout the life cycle.

The negotiation of roles by the lesbian couple comprises an additional major area of both stress and creativity within lesbian families. The traditional middle-class heterosexual couple has been trained since birth for the role each partner will play and these roles are determined along gender lines. But, whereas some lesbian couples adopt a traditional role arrangement in which one woman chooses the traditionally male role and the other takes on the traditionally female role, most lesbian couples do not (Marecek, Finn, & Cardell, 1982).

They show greater role flexibility and take advantage of opportunities to choose tasks and responsibilities based on individual preferences, skills, and needs. However, without the predetermined roles of most heterosexual couples, the lesbian couple may continually face the issue of how the divi-

sion of labor, areas of responsibility, and emotional roles are to be negotiated and understood. The patriarchal society values what it terms "masculine" and "feminine" tasks differently. How can a lesbian couple extricate itself from the emotional loading of the task of defining family roles? Thus, additional flexibility both complicates and liberates family functioning, while remaining an ongoing stress throughout the life cycle.

COPING MECHANISMS

While these stressors continue to plague them, lesbian families have also woven unique and creative coping mechanisms into the fabric of their lives. Both within the couple relationship and through the creation of loose but nurturing lesbian communities, lesbian families have developed strategies that offer protection from these ongoing challenges to their family integrity.

Because families of origin and the mainstream heterosexual culture rarely offer lesbian couples the support they require, the burden falls squarely on the shoulders of the closed system of the couple dyad. Several clinicians have noted the tendency of lesbian couples to respond to homophobia and lack of recognition by adopting a "two-against-the-world" stance and by making their boundaries as a couple rigid. These authors have witnessed a varied range of characteristic lesbian relational elements—including social isolation, exclusive emphasis on partners' similarities with little tolerance of differences, the interweaving of sense of self with the couple relationship, low tolerance for conflict, and a preponderance of time and energy spent on the relationship of the couple with little attention to individual relationships outside the couple—and labeled them "fusion." These writers assert that this fusion is inherently dangerous, maladaptive, and dysfunctional for the couple (Burch, 1985; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Lowenstein, 1980).

Fusion is variously defined in the psy-

chological literature, with several features common to most definitions. It is seen as a state of "psychic unity" in which individual ego boundaries are crossed and two individuals experience a sense of oneness (Burch, 1985). In addition, it is often defined as a state in which the self is embedded within a relational context, and boundaries between self and other are unclear (Karpel, 1976).

While dangers and sacrifices of individual identity are certainly associated with fusion, and some of them are appropriate foci of therapeutic intervention, the movement contained in fusion has been too completely dismissed as pathological. The relational characteristics listed above constitute some of its more extreme manifestations, but an exploration of the less extreme behavioral or emotional dynamics that are also part of fusion may articulate its functional aspects for lesbian couples. Specifically, in lesbian couples who are forced into secretive isolation, it is often quite adaptive for the partners to move in close to each other, deliberately blurring boundaries and giving their identity as a couple great prominence in the way they structure their lives.

Such fusion is a potentially constructive and functional move for lesbians for two reasons. First, to borrow a term, it is ego-syntonic, because women of all sexual identities tend to prefer relational structures that feature mutual interdependence, the evolution of identity through connection with others, and a high degree of intimacy (Jordan, 1986; Kaplan, 1984; Mencher, 1990; Miller, 1986, 1988). It is therefore not surprising to find that couples in which both partners are women are naturally drawn to a relational structure that is characterized by greater fusion than are those of heterosexual couples or gay male couples. Several studies have found that lesbians attribute the high degree of satisfaction found in their relationships to many of the same relational features that have been interpreted as fusion, for instance, intense inti-

macy, a high degree of emotional self-disclosure, and a preponderance of leisure time spent together (McCandlish, 1982; Moses, 1987; Vetere, 1982). Such relational features are valued intrinsically, quite apart from their utility in dealing with oppression (Mencher, 1984). The typically negative slant of the literature on issues of fusion reflects a male and heterosexual bias that is largely bereft of understanding for this preference.

Secondly, lesbians have used fusion to strengthen their boundaries and to challenge the culture's claim that they are not families at all. The "you and me against the world" predicament reflected in this use of fusion is usually an accurate perception, but this defensive use of fusion, for all its dangers, has been a creative and useful strategy for many lesbian couples.

As the culture refuses to recognize the couple as a unit, normal differences between partners carry the additional threat of furthering society's view of the women as separate, thereby undermining the couple's bond. Usually, the lesbian family itself is assigned the responsibility for "irrational" fears of differentiation between the partners. Actually, these fears reflect the realistic perception that the family is at risk. As the partners sense the ways in which their differences are used against them, maintaining their intimacy can become a full-time job, with sameness coming to be seen as security and difference as danger.

We propose that fusion be viewed not as a singular and maladaptive phenomenon, but rather as a primarily constructive and desirable relational feature which becomes problematic only when it is employed at extreme levels, high or low.

Extremely high levels of fusion can indeed result in both stagnation in individual adult development and paralysis in the growth of the relationship. What constitutes a high level of fusion must, however, be determined by comparing the dynamics of a particular lesbian relationship to parameters of normative lesbian intimacy pat-

terns, not to heterosexuality-determined paradigms.

Similarly, because fusion provides lesbian couples with the increased relational integrity required for the relationship's survival, extremely low levels of fusion are also dangerous for lesbian couples. In our clinical experience, it is the couples who fail to create compensatory fusion who are at greatest risk. If outside pressures on the couple to act as separate individuals are supplemented by fear of this degree of connectedness by one of the partners, the couple will fail to generate sufficient cohesion and will separate. Compensatory fusion is not needed at equal levels throughout the course of the relationship, but it is necessary periodically. The extent of the need is based on a number of factors, including access to outside validation. The goal is not for the couple to establish a single, unchanging, moderate level of fusion to be maintained throughout the relationship. Lesbians must instead achieve the more complex capacity to employ differing levels of fusion flexibly at various points in the relationship. The couple must be able to move toward increased fusion during the inevitable periods of incoming challenge. It must also be able, during periods of relational security, to decrease fusion levels and focus on the growth of each partner's distinct self.

Homophobia, while always a persistent undercurrent in lesbian family functioning, also arises unevenly and sometimes suddenly. The couple must perceive these fluctuations and respond with a fluidity in fusion levels that is not required of unoppressed populations.

Many lesbian couples continue to create meaningful lives as partners, despite the obstacles. They have apparently found resources within themselves and each other that sustain them even under their very difficult circumstances. Nevertheless, it remains true that a major stress for lesbian couples is isolation from other lesbian couples. The invisibility required for survival

in the larger society precludes learning what is normative, since comparing stories, sharing strengths, exchanging gathered wisdom, and simply enjoying each other is fraught with great risks.

The wheel, therefore, gets invented, invented again, and then reinvented as the solutions found by a couple in Seattle fail to find their way to a couple struggling in West Virginia or another pair in upper New York State. Because of their isolation, couples are forced to depend on idiosyncratic solutions to problems that are, in fact, universal.

From the growing segment of the lesbian population that is openly identifying itself, a sense of community is developing; it includes social networks, lesbian cultural events, and an increasing number and variety of academics and professionals who have "come out" publicly. While a high-profile lesbian presence only exists in a minority of geographic areas, this presence allows for a breaking down of barriers and access to role modeling that can greatly ease the burdens of individual lesbian families. In this environment the family can risk a partial public identity, limited to the lesbian community, without exposure to heterosexual scrutiny. The lesbian community may thus offer the lesbian family its only source of positive public and social identity.

Specifically, the community provides the opportunity for its members to discover what is normal and typical for lesbians, individually and in families. It enables couples to identify the aims of each life stage and recognize the evidence of successful negotiation of developmental challenges. Overriding themes, stresses and satisfactions that are common in lesbian life can be named and shared. In this way, accomplishments can be acknowledged and used to build couples' images of themselves as strong, capable, and successful. Exposure within the lesbian community can help couples to identify those difficulties that represent normative life-cycle transitions or persistent lesbian family life-cycle stressors. Without this

community, relational difficulties generate shame and appear to add credence to the homophobic mainstream view.

In addition to articulating normative expectations for the group, lesbian communities can also generate a return to rituals for its members. Many lesbian families may only find the freedom to bring ritual into their lives within the lesbian community. Besides appropriating some of the rituals from the general culture, such as the exchanging of rings and anniversary cards, lesbians have created symbolic acts not used in heterosexual culture, such as celebrations of a couple's "coming out" experiences and the (growing) ritual of lesbian commitment ceremonies. They have also found ways to imbue their private moments of coupling with great symbolism.

"We bought a bed," began my client. She went on to tell me, in elaborate detail, of every moment of the decision, of the interaction with the store clerk, and of putting the bed together, once they got it home. Their friends had all gathered to see this new purchase and their validation, coupled with my own, had provided crucial momentum as the couple negotiated this symbolic relational milestone. The bed symbolized their blended lives, as they dropped the earlier stage of buying things separately, and brought home this investment that belonged to them both.

Clearly, however, the lesbian community is not the only source of acknowledgment for a lesbian family. Some heterosexual friends and some families of origin are finding ways to offer such moments.

Sarah's family planned a tenth anniversary party for Sarah and her partner, Judy. Once inside the private party room of the restaurant, they were each presented with corsages and given seats at the head of the table. Sarah's father offered a toast congratulating them on the ten years gone by and explicitly wishing them more in the future. All at the table raised their glasses to the couple.

The grandmother called the family into the living room on an impulsive decision to take a family photo. She had not been told of Jane and Mary's relationship and when everyone had gathered, she asked Mary to take the picture. Jane's mother objected, saying that Mary was family too, and must be included in the photograph.

Even in light of such wonderful, if un-

usual, support, lesbians do not share a group identity with their original families. This sense of commonality with others is the unique opportunity offered by a lesbian community. As information and access to each other continue to increase, lesbian families will enjoy a broadening of the supportive base inside and outside the couple relationship. The resultant self-esteem and group identity will significantly enhance the quality of life within lesbian families and communities.

CONCLUSION

Family life cycle theory offers families a profoundly supportive framework within which to understand the key stages, stresses, and passages of family life. This awareness of what is normative is especially vital to families such as lesbian ones, who are continually bombarded with the message that they are not and cannot be normal, successful families. Despite some recent attention to issues of diversity, lesbian families still experience the exclusion from family life cycle theory that they experience from virtually every other aspect of society.

In this paper, we have used the term "cycle" broadly, not limiting the concept of family renewal and replication to a multigenerational context. Lesbian family life consists of a progression through a series of stages, much like those outlined for heterosexual families by life cycle theory. While they have not yet been delineated, these stages begin with the formation of the family and map out a normative path through life.

Unlike heterosexual families, however, lesbian families seldom enjoy the rootedness of a multigenerational family. The partners' families of origin are rarely lesbian. Similarly, even lesbian families with children cannot predict a replication of their life cycle in the next generation, since their children may not themselves form lesbian families. This distinguishes the position of lesbian—and gay male—families from other minority groups, who have their minority

identity in common with previous and subsequent generations of their families.

However, family life cycle theory emphasizes the social context of family life and the culture's contributions to movement through stages of family experience. The multigenerational aspect of a lesbian family life cycle would not be based on blood ties, but rather on the shared experience of being lesbian-headed families in a loosely-woven lesbian community. The use of the concept of a cycle to describe lesbian family experience reflects the hope that such a model would make the invisible family visible and thereby help the next generation of lesbian families to flourish.

Clearly, collective efforts are needed to develop an accurate, functional articulation of normative life cycle stages of lesbian family life. The stages must be set against the backdrop of the particular stressors impinging on lesbian families, and must incorporate the unique coping mechanisms of lesbian couples and lesbian communities. These adaptive responses not only represent a defensive strategy, but also reflect key values and sources of fulfillment for many lesbian families. Much that will enrich and support the lives of lesbian families can emerge from continuing this line of inquiry. Responsive, responsible clinical work with this population must not stop at tolerance or acceptance of lesbian life. Clinicians must also build and incorporate awareness of the norms and particularities of the lesbian family experience.

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