

## ***Is There a Primary Mom? Parental Perceptions of Attachment Bond Hierarchies Within Lesbian Adoptive Families***

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**ABSTRACT:** Basic tenets of attachment theory were evaluated in a qualitative study of 15 lesbian couples with internationally adopted children, focusing on parental perceptions of a primary mother-child attachment within the families. Interviews with 30 mothers examined variables affecting the hierarchy of parenting bonds, including division of labor, time with the child, and parental legal status. All children developed attachments to both mothers, but 12 of the 15 had primary bonds to one mother despite shared parenting and division of labor between the partners. Quality of maternal caretaking was a salient contributing factor; no significant relationship existed between primary parenting and parental legal status.

**KEY WORDS:** Attachment; International Adoption; Lesbian Families.

During the past decade, lesbian couples have joined the wave of Western parents adopting children from other countries (Markowitz, 2000). Though their motivations for adoption may resonate with those of heterosexual couples, lesbian parents create families that challenge theories about child development and family life. They offer the child two mothers as caregivers and attachment figures, calling into question theories about the existence of a primary parent bond. This study provides a different population for examining basic tenets of attachment theory, a theory that provides a frame for understanding the meaning of the adoption process for both the child and the mother (Brinich, 1990; Shapiro, Shapiro, & Paret, 2001). Through a predominantly qualitative study of 15 lesbian couples and their internationally adopted children, the investigator explored the presence of a primary mother-

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child attachment within the families. The research examined the variables affecting the dual mother-child bonds and shed light on the attachment process in lesbian family relationships.

### **Historical Context**

As social and sexual mores shifted over the past 30 years, the adoption landscape was altered by an increase in the number of sexual minority families (Brodzinsky, 1995). Often partnered, lesbians seized the opportunities available to “single” women to adopt through the foster care system, privately, or through intercountry adoption (ICA), and though it is not known how many adopted children have lesbian parents, ICA has become a common pathway for lesbian adults seeking parenthood (Bennett, 2001; Shapiro et al., 2001). Similar to heterosexual women, some lesbians choose adoption because they are unable to become biological mothers, but others reportedly prefer adoption to pregnancy due to the biological symmetry that is created in the family (Benkov, 1995). Although foreign countries do not openly allow adoption by gay and lesbian adults, ICA remains a popular option due to perceived antigay bias in the domestic adoption system. When lesbian partnered women adopt in countries that allow single women that option, their partners sometimes legally adopt the child in the U.S. through the “second parent adoption” process (Connolly, 1996).

As the number of ICA's has increased in recent years,<sup>1</sup> there has been a general concern among adoptive parents regarding the adjustment of the children. There have been reports of attachment difficulties for children who previously lived in orphanages, and the medical and behavioral sequelae of these adopted children have been reviewed in the pediatric journals (Jenista, 2000). In addition, behavioral research studies have validated that preadoptive experiences play a significant role in the well-being and development of internationally adopted children (Chisholm, Carter, Ames, & Morison, 1995; Howes, 1999). As a result of this increased awareness, the establishment of a parent-child attachment bond is one of the first concerns for parents of adopted children. Lesbian adoptive parents have the added concern

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<sup>1</sup>The number of foreign-born children adopted in the U.S. increased from 9,679 in 1995 to 15,774 in 1998 (Simon & Altstein, 2000). Adopted primarily from Latin American, Eastern European, and Asian countries, these children make up the majority of the 14% of “transracial” or “transcultural” adoptions that occur in the U.S. (Vonk, Simms, & Nackerud, 1999). In 1998 approximately 4,263 children were adopted from China and 4,491 were from Russia.

about the influence of their nontraditional family structure on the attachment process.

### **Literature Review**

An outgrowth of the observations and ideas of Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and Ainsworth (1967), attachment theory provides a framework for understanding the losses and the attachment that follows between the child and adoptive parents (Brinich, 1990). This theory posits that a child develops biologically-based bonds of attachment in order to diminish isolation and fear, and Ainsworth's (1967) studies recognized a time-sensitive period between 6 and 12 months of age when an infant's attachment behaviors are organized and directed toward a particular primary caregiver. She proposed that a child experiences the attachment figure, differentiated from even a familiar person, as a "secure base" from which the world can then be explored (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The reciprocal "attachment bond" is persistent and not interchangeable with the bond to another person and is distinguished by the child's attachment behavior, such as smiling and vocalizing, crying, approaching and following, and signaling a desire for interaction. The quality of the attachment is determined by the child's experience of a "secure" or "insecure" bond to the attachment figure (Cassidy, 1999).

Infants develop multiple attachments within the first year, and the nature of the interaction with the infant is more important than the person's legal or biological tie to the child. In heterosexual families, the father is likely to become an attachment figure along with the mother, and there is evidence that the quality of the infant's attachment to the father is related to the caretaking behavior of the father (Belsky, Rosenberger, & Crnic, 1995). Despite indications of multiple attachments, the potential number of attachment figures is limited, and an "attachment hierarchy" is thought to exist (Cassidy, 1999). Colin (1996) proposes four likely variables that influence the differing attachment relationships within the family: 1) the amount of time the infant spends with each attachment figure; 2) the quality of care each provides; 3) the person's emotional investment in the child; and 4) the social cues the child receives about who is important.

Few studies have focused on the attachments of adopted children (Howes, 1999), but two studies from the 1970s confirm that adopted children have difficulty forming trusting relationships when they are

adopted after 6–8 months, i.e., after the time when first attachment relationships are established (Tizard & Rees, 1975; Yarrow, Goodwin, Manheimer, & Milowe, 1973). A decade later, Singer et al. (1985) found that adopted children placed within the first 6 months of life were able to develop secure attachments with their adoptive parents in the same proportion as biological mothers and infants. More recent studies of children adopted from Romania found that children who spent at least 8 months in an orphanage were at risk for the development of attachment difficulties (Chisholm et al., 1995).

Thus far, little published research has focused on children adopted by lesbian parents, and research about lesbian couples that become co-parents in the context of their partnership is quite small (Benkov, 1995; Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Patterson, 1992; Sullivan, 1996). Of relevance to this discussion is a study by McCandlish (1987) focusing on relationships within donor inseminated lesbian families. Her research indicates that the biological connection between the mother and baby is significant in determining the initial parenting roles of the two mothers. However, when biological ties are not present, it is not known if or how a child develops a primary attachment bond where there are two lesbian mothers.

Focused on this question, this research studied the development of parenting bonds between lesbian co-parents and their internationally adopted children (Bennett, 2001). The principal research question under review examined the nature of the reciprocal bond each co-mother experienced with her child. The presence of an attachment hierarchy was explored, with an examination of factors thought to contribute to hierarchies in lesbian adoptive families. In addition to the variables suggested by Colin (1996), the study explored the influence of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, hours of employment, parental legal status, and division of labor.

## **Methods**

Although the full study provided a comprehensive account of family life in these lesbian adoptive families (Bennett, 2001), this article is selectively focused on the development of parenting bonds in the first 18 months post-adoption. The research followed a qualitative design because there has been no published research focusing on mother-child relationships within the lesbian adoptive family, and because

this approach made it possible for the subjective experiences of the participants to be heard in-depth (Padgett, 1998; Reid, 1994).

It was not possible to assess the quality of the parent-child bond in terms of the level of attachment security. Exploration of the personality traits and parenting skills of each mother, based on the self-report of both parents, provided the assessment of quality of care. Examination of the amount of time each mother reported being away from her child through work or other activities provided the evaluation of time as a factor influencing the parent bonds. Legal status was investigated because it was hypothesized that the child might internalize cues of emotional investment associated with the unequal legal status that existed at the time of the international adoption.

### *Participants*

Drawing from four metropolitan areas, the sample consisted of 15 lesbian couples that each had one internationally adopted child. The children were between 1.5 and 6 years of age and had lived with their families a minimum of one year post-adoption. These parameters assured that there was time for an attachment bond to occur (Cassidy, 1999). Each couple had lived together a minimum of one year prior to the decision to adopt. No parameters were placed on the race, ethnicity, or age of the adult participants or the child's ethnicity, gender, or age at time of adoption. Tables 1 and 2 provide a description of the participants and their children, and it is noteworthy that 14 of the 15 adoptions were transracial, 5 countries were represented, and 14 of the 15 children were female.

### *Procedure*

Due to the limited and hidden nature of the minority population, non-random sampling techniques were used. Participants were located through word of mouth, adoption support groups, and advertisements in a gay newspaper. Participants were interviewed in 30 individual sessions over a 6-month period during the year 2000. The audiotaped interviews were 1.5 to 2 hours in length. Twenty-three were conducted in the participants' homes or offices, and seven were conducted by telephone because distance precluded in-person appointments. The investigator followed a semi-structured interview guide that was developed through pilot interviews reviewed by an expert in qualitative research. The open-ended questions elicited information about paren-

**TABLE 1**  
**Description of Adult Participants**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Parental Ethnicity		
European American	29	96.7
Latin American	1	3.3
Parental Age at Time of Adoption		
30–34 years	3	10.0
35–39 years	8	26.7
40–44 years	12	40.0
45–49 years	5	16.7
50–55 years	2	6.7
Parental Legal Status		
Legal first parent	15	50.0
Legal second parent <sup>1</sup>	4	13.0
Nonlegal second parent	11	36.7
Parental Education Status		
Some college	5	16.7
College graduate	10	33.3
Masters or law degree	13	43.3
Doctoral degree	2	6.7
Parental Occupation		
Professional	18	60.0
Technical or skilled	9	30.0
Retail or sales	1	3.3
Homemaker	2	6.7
Income of Family		
\$25,000–50,000	2	6.7
\$50,000–75,000	6	20.0
\$75,000–100,000	22	73.3

<sup>1</sup>Second parent adoptions

**TABLE 2**  
**Description of Adopted Children**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Child's Ethnicity</b>		
Asian American <sup>1</sup>	12	80.0
European American <sup>2</sup>	2	13.3
Latin American	1	6.7
<b>Child's Age at Time of Adoption</b>		
0–2 months	1	6.7
3–4 months	2	13.3
5–6 months	4	26.7
7–8 months	2	13.3
9–10 months	3	20.0
11–12 months	1	6.7
Over 12 months	2	13.3
<b>Child's Preadoptive Placement</b>		
Orphanage	9	60.0
Foster care	1	6.7
Combination orphanage-foster care	4	26.7
Placed at birth	1	6.7

<sup>1</sup>Three countries represented

<sup>2</sup>One child adopted by transracial couple

tal motivation and preparation for parenthood; the child's initial transition into the family; parental perceptions regarding the presence of an attachment hierarchy, including behavioral indicators of attachment; factors influencing the mother-child bonds; and the perceived impact of adoptive lesbian parenting on relationships with extended family, friends, and between the partners. A questionnaire collected the demographic data.<sup>2</sup>

Fully transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed by the author of this study following a grounded theory methodology of constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), with identification of

<sup>2</sup>The interview guide and the demographic questionnaire can be obtained from the author.

themes that emerged from between-partner and within-group analysis. A researcher (Mallon, 2000) who specializes in gay and lesbian adoptive families reviewed the coding to increase reliability. The use of computer software, QSR NUD.IST (1997), facilitated the qualitative data analysis. This process included the open coding and content analysis of each line of the transcribed documents, followed by comparing, conceptualizing, and then categorizing the text. After all themes had been identified, connections were made between different categories and subcategories. The search capacities of the computer software enabled analysis of associations among the codes and variables. In keeping with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory method of analysis, a "story line" and core categories emerged from the coding, and the categories were delimited and systematically checked and validated.

### **Summary of Findings**

Although the data were subjective, the mothers within each dyad were remarkably congruent in their separate assessments of each other and the attachment relationships within the family. Participants reported that all 15 children at the time of adoption, developed bonds of attachment to both adoptive mothers and showed preference for the parents over other caregivers. Moreover, 12 of the couples agreed that their child demonstrated a preferential bond to one of the mothers during the first 18 months post-adoption, despite the finding that the couples shared parenting and reported an egalitarian division of labor. The remaining three couples agreed that their child did not show a preference between the parents. Although over half of the children had medical problems or developmental delays at the time of the adoption, only one family reported that their child developed attachment difficulties or serious emotional problems that may have been related to her preadoptive life.

In the families where there was a clear agreement that the child chose one parent for a primary bond, the behavioral indicators of primary attachment were typical of those reported by previous researchers. The parents were able to recall a period of time when the child primarily preferred one parent for comfort when frightened, hurt, stressed, or sad, and asked for that parent in the middle of the night. As one mother said succinctly, "When she was distressed, it would be me she wanted." A number of mothers admitted they felt some hurt or jealousy when they realized they were not the preferred parent.



One said that she felt competition “because it was upsetting if we were some place and my daughter had a choice to go with me or my partner, and she would generally take my partner.” Another mother who was not the primary parent stated, “I can’t control if she feels, for whatever reasons, more close to my partner or me. It’s her choice, it’s the way she’s forming her love relationships.” One woman who was initially ambivalent about becoming a parent felt pangs when she saw the intense bond developing between her partner and their baby. However, she believed it was essential for her daughter—or any child—to have a primary bond with one person. She stated:

I think as lesbians, we’re all afraid of what issues or baggage we’re giving our children by being different. One of the things that I was afraid of was that if she’s going back and forth between two mommies, is she going to form the depth of a bond with one person to do the work she needs to do? And I think it’s been positive for her that it’s clear to her that my partner is her mother.

Behavioral indicators of attachment were present among the children in the remaining three families except these children did not show signs of preference for one mother. These three couples reported that their daughters bonded to them as a primary unit, or “equally,” rather than establishing a primary parent early in development. One of these couples was unusual for the intentionally shared family structure they provided their child. Obtaining custody of their daughter two days after her birth, they both lived with her as foster parents until the adoption was legal and they could return to the U.S. Both mothers did “adoptive breastfeeding” and shared the childcare responsibilities, working part-time so their daughter would usually be home with one or both of them. The other two couples reported a family organization in which the parents worked and traveled, and the child had additional childcare givers. The mothers in these two families stated that their children shifted attachment preferences to the parent who was present at the moment, or the one who was most recently attentive, yet the child differentiated the two mothers from external relationships.

#### *Factors Contributing to Attachment Hierarchy*

An analysis of the narratives suggested that quality of care was the salient factor in the establishment of an attachment hierarchy, although all the contributing factors interacted with each other and carried a distinctive weight in each family. Further examination sug-

gested that parental legal status and time spent with the child were not decisive variables in the development of a primary attachment bond. Division of labor also was not a determining factor, because the narratives suggested that the parents shared the childcare activities despite the presence of an attachment hierarchy. The negotiation of childcare activities was more influential in the dynamics within the couple's relationship rather than in the dynamics between the mother and child. Likewise, the family's diversity did not appear to influence the attachment hierarchy, but the racial and ethnic differences within the family and the sexual minority status of the parents did complicate the challenges of family life.

To further elaborate, the 12 families that reported a primary parent bond were examined according to the legal status of the parent. The primary parent was the first legal parent in only 7 of the 12 couples, suggesting that legal parent status was unrelated to primary parent status. The couples were then examined according to the number of hours they were employed outside the home. In 7 families the primary parent worked fewer hours than her partner and spent more time with the child, but in 5 families the primary parent actually worked more hours outside the home than the nonprimary parent. These quantitative findings converged with the qualitative analysis and suggested that time and legal parent status were not the defining factors contributing to the attachment hierarchy.

Further analysis of the 12 families examined parental personality traits and parenting skills to evaluate common characteristics among the primary parents. In 7 of the families, the participants agreed that the primary parents had personality traits that resonated with Western cultural definitions of being "mother." These parents were also the same 7 mothers who spent more time with the child. They were described as "more nurturing," "more patient," and "more maternal" toward the child. They often had a "more imaginative" or "creative" interaction with the child, and were sometimes "over-protective" and more attuned to the child's fears and feelings. The partners of these women were described as "outgoing," "more direct," "more competitive," "abrupt," "a risk-taker," "less cautious" and "more playful." Some of these parents were the ones to "rough and tumble" with the child, play "sports," be "more active," and take the child to activities and classes outside the home. Several of these families reported that they saw the benefits of their personality differences, and they thought their differences had some bearing on their parenting and the attachment bonds.

In the remaining 5 families, the words used to describe the personalities of the participants were less patterned. However, the nonprimary parents in this group generally reported more initial ambivalence or anxiety about parenting, sometimes due to deficits in the relationships they experienced with their own parents. One woman was a full-time, stay-at-home mother, but not considered the “preferred” parent. She reported that her partner, who worked full-time, benefited from a loving, psychologically healthy family-of-origin. She said: “I think her way of parenting is just more life-giving. I think of the two styles, hers, that comes naturally, is the nicer, better style.” These findings suggested that the 12 primary parents were most similar in terms of their personality traits and parenting styles, which evolved from their own family relationships and the manner in which they were parented.

## Discussion

Several limitations exist in this study and should be noted as a prelude for the discussion. First, the degree to which findings generalize to the population of U.S. lesbian adoptive families is unclear due to the sampling techniques and small sample size. Although the adult participants were a socio-economically privileged group of women, their incomes were in keeping with other families in their urban locations,<sup>3</sup> and high income may be typical of couples that adopt internationally given the costs involved in that process. Also, parental self-report is subjective, so the perceptions of these parents may be skewed or defensive, even when the two partners were congruent in their perceptions. Bias is also likely regarding parental perceptions of the children, who were not observed naturalistically or tested with instruments commonly used in empirical attachment research. Despite these limitations, there was a richness and depth to the narrative data that is only possible in a qualitative study, and the repetition and redundancy of the data allowed some clear themes to emerge from this group of lesbian adoptive families.

The children in this study lived in orphanages or foster care homes prior to their adoptions, but their preadoptive experiences evidently

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<sup>3</sup>The Washington, D.C., mean household income for the year 2000 was \$102,824; Montgomery County, MD, mean household income for 2000 was \$119,081.

did not preclude their capacity to establish primary bonds or to transfer previously established bonds to new caregivers. Despite the non-traditional nature of their adoptive family structure, these children developed bonds with both mothers, and despite the committed investment of both mothers in the caretaking, a hierarchy of attachment was reported in 12 of the families. It is possible that in the remaining three families, there truly was not a primary bond to one particular mother. As Cassidy (1999) has said, "the child matches an attachment hierarchy to the hierarchy of the caregiving in his or her environment" (p. 15). However, it is also possible that there was a primary bond for these three children but that the mothers were unable to recognize it or reluctant to acknowledge it.

The one variable that seemed consistently important to the establishment of a primary bond was the quality of the caregiving, influenced by the preferred mother's personality and the parenting she received as a child. This stimulates questions about the relationship between quality of caregiving and interpretations of the role of "nurturer." Among these women, personal parental views about what it means to be a woman and perform as "mother" seemed influential in the family dynamics and may have contributed to the establishment of an attachment hierarchy. In addition to parental personality traits, it is likely that the quality of each parent's adult attachment patterns served to shape the quality of the child's bonds, but this variable was not assessed in the current study (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Van IJzendoorn, 1995).

The unanswered questions that emerge from the study suggest the need for further research in at least three areas. First, the findings suggest the presence of an attachment hierarchy, but they do not describe the particular attachment patterns of either the child or the parents. Further attachment research could clarify the nature of the reciprocal bonds in lesbian adoptive families in terms of the quality and patterns of attachment security. Second, questions continue about the influence of gender, including parental interpretations of nurturing, on the development of attachment hierarchies. These questions could be explored through studies comparing lesbian adoptive families with gay male and heterosexual adoptive families. Finally, questions remain about the future development of these children and the impact of their "complex" adoptions, i.e., transracial adoption of an institutionalized child into a lesbian family (Shapiro et al., 2001). As a result, children adopted by lesbian parents need to be included in the longitudinal and developmental follow-up studies of internationally adopted children.

A final mention must be made about the policy and practice implications of this study. Although the mothers did not perceive parental legal status to be a factor shaping the attachment patterns for their children, the integrity of the lesbian family is endangered by current adoption policies that limit the legal status of both parents. When lesbians must adopt as single women or when second parent adoptions are not supported,<sup>4</sup> the family is set up for power imbalances and the child is at risk if the couple separates (Connolly, 1996; Davies, 1995; Hartman, 1996). As this study suggests, children are bonded to both parents, and a legal system that does not recognize the legal rights of both parents is failing to act in the child's best interests (Robson, 1994; Shapiro, 1996). The child may be in danger of losing a primary parent to the custody of a nonprimary legal parent, should the family dissolve. Policy analysts and the judiciary should examine the prejudice inherent in a system that supports an unequal legal arrangement for adoptive parents based on sexual orientation (Mallon, 2000).

It is important for adoption professionals and practitioners who work with lesbian families to be aware that the attachment relationships in these families parallel those reported in the literature about child development. Despite the nontraditional nature of the family structure, there are many ways that lesbian adoptive families are similar to other mothers and children. Nonetheless, there are special challenges that emerge from the multiple layers of diversity in this population because they face the challenges of being adoptive families, transracial or transethnic families, and sexual minority families (Bennett, 2001). In other words, it is important not to exaggerate or minimize the differences between lesbian and heterosexual families (Hartmann & Laird, 1998). Professionals working with lesbian families are advised to explore the heterosexist or homophobic views that may shape their practices and avoid generalizations about the negative impact of difference on the child in sexual minority families. This study suggests that the children and parents in these families are not so different in terms of the development of their attachment bonds.

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<sup>4</sup>At the time of this writing, the practice of second parent adoption was allowed in 21 states; 3 states (Florida, Mississippi, and Utah) had passed legislation forbidding adoption by gays and lesbians.

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