

## Lesbian and Bisexual Mothers and Nonmothers: Demographics and the Coming-Out Process

Jessica F. Morris  
Northampton, Massachusetts

Kimberly F. Balsam and Esther D. Rothblum  
University of Vermont

In a large, national sample of 2,431 lesbians and bisexual women, those who had children before coming out, those who had children after coming out, and those who did not have children were compared on demographic factors and milestones in the coming-out process. Differences were found in race/ethnicity, age, prior marriage, income, religion, use of mental health counseling, and reported hate crimes. Results are also presented for lesbians and bisexual women of each ethnic/racial and age group. Controlling for age and income, lesbians and bisexual women who had children before coming out had reached developmental milestones in the coming-out process about 7-12 years later than women who had children after coming out and about 6-8 years later than nonmothers.

During most of the 20th century, women who were sexually attracted to women had a lot to lose, but this was particularly so if they were mothers. Historically, lesbian mothers had children either from a prior marriage or sexual relationship with a man, or through coparenting children with a woman who had children with a former male partner (see Patterson, 1992, for a review). When lesbian mothers were in the news, it was over custody rights in divorce cases (see Falk, 1989, for a review of this literature). Because the courts focused mostly on the mental instability of lesbians and their lack of fitness to be mothers, the early psychological research on lesbian mothers focused on the empirical examination of mental health and parenting (see Allen & Burrell, 1996, for a review). This included research on the mental health of lesbian mothers, the psychological and social functioning of children reared by lesbian mothers, the parenting ability of lesbian mothers, and the social stigma for children reared by lesbians (Allen & Burrell, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1996; Laird, 1997; Parks, 1998). There was also a focus on the gender role development and sexual orientation of children reared by lesbians, to counteract the fear by the general public that these children would engage in gender-inappropriate behavior and grow up to be gay or lesbian themselves (see Falk, 1989, for a review). These early studies had small sample sizes (20-40 subjects) of

lesbian mothers and their children, often with a control group of heterosexual mothers and children, and were largely composed of White, middle-class families.

The past 20 years have witnessed a lesbian "baby boom," with lesbians and bisexual women increasingly choosing to have children after establishing a lesbian or bisexual identity. This includes having children through adoption, by donor insemination, or with a known male friend or acquaintance who was not the woman's romantic partner or spouse (e.g., Patterson, 1995a, 1995b, 1998).

More recent research on lesbian mothers has often focused on lesbians who had children after coming out as lesbians (Parks, 1998; Patterson, 1995b). Although the samples have still been small and the lesbians mostly White and middle class, the focus has been less on showing the mothers and children to be "normal" and more on issues such as coparenting roles, impact on work and career, coming out to children, and relations with the children's school. For example, Patterson (1995a, 1996, 1998), who focused on 66 lesbian mothers and their children, investigated parents' division of labor, relationship satisfaction, children's contact with grandparents and other adults, and children's self-concept and behavior problems. She also investigated differences between the biological mother and the nonbiological mother on variables such as relative amount of time spent in child rearing and outside employment. Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, and Joseph (1995) compared 15 families of lesbians who had planned to have children with 15 heterosexual families matched on children's gender, age, and birth order as well as parents' race, educational level, and income. They found no differences in the children's behavioral or intellectual functioning and no differences in the parents' self-reported dyadic adjustment. Lesbian parents were found to have greater awareness of some specific parenting skills; however, on further analysis, this difference appeared to be related to gender of parent rather than sexual orientation.

Tasker and Golombok (1997) conducted by far the longest study following children raised by lesbian mothers into

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Jessica F. Morris, independent practice, Northampton, Massachusetts, Kimberly F. Balsam and Esther D. Rothblum, Department of Psychology, University of Vermont.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Esther D. Rothblum, Department of Psychology, University of Vermont, John Dewey Hall, Burlington, Vermont 05405-0314. E-mail: [esther.rothblum@uvm.edu](mailto:esther.rothblum@uvm.edu)

adulthood. Thirty-nine children from lesbian families and 39 from single, heterosexual mothers in the United Kingdom were first interviewed as young children in the mid-1970s and then reinterviewed in 1990 when the children were in their 20s. The interviews focused on demographic information, the mother-child relationship, children's gender roles, children's peer relationships, and the mothers' psychological adjustment. Gartrell and her colleagues (1996, 1999, 2000) have conducted the largest and also the longest of the longitudinal studies of lesbian mothers who had children through donor insemination. The 84 lesbians were first involved in the study when they became pregnant through donor insemination. Over time, the lesbian coparents have been interviewed concerning level of outness about their sexual orientation, participation in lesbian community events, health concerns, relationship strengths, parenting concerns, time management, social supports, concerns and coping with stigma, and experiences with discrimination.

In sum, there is ongoing research about lesbian mothers and children over time that focuses on a variety of topic areas, and this research has greatly increased our understanding of how lesbian mothers and their children function and how they compare with heterosexual mothers and their children. Overwhelmingly, this research has disconfirmed stereotypes about lesbian families and has established that lesbian mothers and their children appear to be as psychologically healthy as heterosexual mothers and their children.

Little research, however, has compared lesbians with children to lesbians without children. Koepke, Hare, and Moran (1992) compared 15 lesbian couples with children and 32 lesbian couples without children on relationship variables. They found that couples with children reported higher levels of relationship quality and sexual satisfaction than couples without children. No research, however, has compared lesbians with children to lesbians without children in a comprehensive way, regardless of relationship status and on multiple variables. Given the early research focus on lesbians who had children in prior heterosexual relationships and the later research focus on lesbians who had children after coming out, we were interested in comparing these two subgroups.

Large-scale studies of lesbians (e.g., Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994) have found lesbians to be highly educated, earn low incomes relative to level of education, live in large cities, and not be religious, when compared with census data of women in the U.S. population. A study of lesbians and their sisters found that lesbians have much higher levels of education, live in larger cities, are more geographically mobile, and are less religious than their heterosexual sisters (Rothblum & Factor, 2001). These demographic differences have been explained as the result of lesbians and bisexual women not being married to men and not having children at a young age, allowing them to prioritize their own education and geographic opportunities (Rothblum & Factor, 2001).

Consequently, our first hypothesis was that lesbians and bisexual women in the present study who had children before coming out would be demographically different from lesbians who came out without children (those who had

children after coming out and those who do not have children). Specifically, we predicted that women who had children before coming out would have been married to men and had children in the context of a heterosexual marriage. Conversely, women who came out without children would have higher levels of education and be more concentrated in larger cities (indicating some geographic mobility).

Comparing lesbian and bisexual mothers who had children before and after coming out, respectively, with lesbian and bisexual nonmothers also allows us to compare experiences that do not occur among heterosexuals. We were specifically interested in how these three groups differ in ages at which they reach milestones in the coming-out process, such as having their first sexual experience with another woman, identifying as lesbian or bisexual, and telling someone else that they were lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Morris and Rothblum (1999) found that lesbians and bisexual women reach these milestones in a specific sequence. Furthermore, recent research has found that increased outness among lesbian and bisexual women was related to more positive mental health (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). Because the coming-out process has no parallel among heterosexuals, there is value in using lesbians without children as a comparison group for lesbians who negotiate this process as mothers (Morris & Rothblum, 1999).

Our second hypothesis was that lesbians and bisexual women who had children before coming out would reach these milestones in the coming-out process at significantly later ages than women who came out without children (women who had children after coming out and women without children). The presence of young children in the context of a relationship with a man, we predicted, would increase the chances that women would stay in a heterosexual relationship or increase the time before they connected with lesbian or bisexual communities. We also predicted that they would be older when first disclosing their sexual orientation to others, such as family and coworkers.

The present study used a large data set that focused on milestones in the coming-out process of 2,431 women who filled out the Lesbian Wellness Survey in 1994-1995 (Morris & Rothblum, 1999; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). Of the lesbians and bisexual women in this data set, 25% were women of color. Although the women who completed the survey were not selected specifically for being mothers or nonmothers, 21% of the sample ( $n = 512$ ) had children. Thus, it was possible to compare the demographic characteristics of lesbians and bisexual women who had children with those who did not. In addition, the diversity of race and ethnicity of the sample allowed us to examine demographic factors for African American, Latina, Native American, Asian American, and European American women separately. The data set included 312 women who had children before they realized that they themselves were LGB and 187 women who had children after coming out. This provided an opportunity to investigate how these two groups of mothers differed demographically and on developmental milestones in the lesbian coming-out process from lesbians without children ( $n = 1,919$ ).

The Lesbian Wellness Survey was developed to examine interrelationships among various dimensions of the lesbian/bisexual experience (e.g., identity, sexual behavior, community participation) and factors that predict greater outness. It includes demographic information, aspects of the lesbian/bisexual experience, milestones in the coming-out process, outness, hate crimes (antigay verbal and physical abuse), use of mental health services, and variables related to parenting.

The specific variables included in the Lesbian Wellness Survey also allowed us to investigate additional factors. We predicted that women who had children before coming out would report higher use of mental health services, indicating greater distress about becoming lesbian or bisexual. Conversely, we predicted that this group would report having experienced lower rates of hate crimes (antigay verbal and physical abuse) because of their greater ability to "pass" as heterosexual, having had children in the context of a heterosexual relationship.

## Method

### Participants

The data set consisted of 2,431 women, with participants from every U.S. state. In 1994-1995, 10,000 questionnaires were distributed to feminist, gay, and lesbian bookstores and community centers; lesbian and gay political and social groups; lesbian and gay national mailing lists; and friendship networks. In addition, advertisements about the study were placed in feminist and lesbian periodicals. Although this was a nonrandom study, mothers and nonmothers were recruited from the same sources, and thus nonmothers serve as a comparison group for mothers.

### Procedure

The Lesbian Wellness Survey was described as "a survey by lesbians for any woman who has loved other women." The stated purpose was to understand "what lives are like for lesbian and bisexual women in the U.S." Questionnaires were completed without names or addresses and were mailed back in postage-paid return envelopes. Five respondents were not included in the analyses because they indicated both exclusively heterosexual identity and sexual experience only with men.

### Measures

**Demographic variables.** The Lesbian Wellness Survey included items about age, race/ethnicity, size of city or town, religion while growing up and current religion, frequency of attending religious services, employment status, occupation, education, annual income, household composition, and current and past relationship status. Most questions that referred to sexual orientation used the phrase "lesbian/gay/bisexual" (e.g., "How old were you when you first told someone that you were lesbian/gay/bisexual?") so participants wouldn't feel excluded by the language. Gay was added because there are women who prefer to use this term in referring to their sexual identity.

**Parenting variables.** The questionnaire asked respondents whether they had ever had children and, if so, the number of children. Respondents were then asked whether they had their first child "before you realized you are lesbian/bisexual/gay"; this was

the item that was used to define respondents as having had children before coming out or after coming out. One item asked, "What was your relationship situation when you had children/how did you have your children? (check all that apply)." The choices were as follows: married to or in a primary relationship with a man, sex with a man who was not a primary partner, insemination with a known donor, insemination with an anonymous donor, adoption, foster child(ren), raising child(ren) of relative, raising/coparenting child(ren) of female lover/partner, and other. Respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of child rearing for which they were responsible on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = *all*, 3 = *half*, and 5 = *none*. The questionnaire also asked, "Have any of the following happened to you because you are lesbian/bisexual/gay?" Response options included "threatened with loss of custody of a child," "actually lost custody of a child," and "harassed/threatened/discriminated against by your children's school or other parents." Another item asked, "Have your child(ren) ever been harassed/threatened/discriminated against because you are lesbian/bisexual/gay?" Other items asked about whether respondents had grandchildren, number of grandchildren, and (for respondents who did not have children) future plans to have children.

### Aspects of the Lesbian/Bisexual Experience

**Sexual orientation** was measured on a continuous line from *exclusive! lesbian/gay* to *exclusively heterosexual*, with *bisexual* at the midpoint. This item was scored from 0 to 100 by use of a template, with lower scores indicating lesbian identity. The average score on this item was 13, with 44% of respondents self-identifying as exclusively lesbian (scored as 0), 18% in the range between 1 and 10, 8% between 11 and 20, 26% between 21 and 50, and 3% between 51 and 100.

**Sexual experience** was defined as the proportion of sexual experience with women versus men. The item was phrased, "in terms of your consensual sexual behavior since you became sexually active, where would you put yourself on this line?" The item was measured on a continuous line from *only women* to *only men*, with *equal/both sexes* as the midpoint, and was scored from 0 to 100 by use of a template. Lower scores indicated a greater proportion of female versus male sexual experiences.

**Milestones in the coming-out process** included items about ages at which respondents first (a) questioned that they might be LGB, (b) thought of themselves as LGB, (c) told someone that they were LGB, (d) had a sexual experience with another woman, (e) told their mother they were LGB, (f) told their father they were LGB, and (g) told a sibling they were LGB. Respondents were also asked who the first person was whom they told they were LGB.

**Outness/disclosure** consisted of the percentage of family, LGB friends, heterosexual friends, and coworkers, respectively, whom participants had informed that they were LGB. This subscale was adapted from the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (Bradford et al., 1994) and resulted in a total outness/disclosure score. In addition, items asked whether respondents were worried, concerned, or afraid that people would find out they were LGB, whether it was important for them to be "out" to heterosexual people they knew, and how accepting their families were that they are LGB.

**Hate crimes** particular to the experiences of mothers consisted of an item that asked, "Have your child(ren) ever been harassed/threatened/discriminated against because you are lesbian/bisexual/gay?" Participants were also asked whether they had ever been physically or verbally attacked for being LGB.

**Mental health counseling** history of the participants consisted of questions that asked whether they had received mental health

counseling in the past or currently. They were also asked whether they had ever received mental health counseling to help them through the coming-out process or as they developed their sexual identity, and also whether they had ever received mental health counseling to stop being LGB or to stop sexual thoughts about women.

## Results

### *Demographic Variables*

Given the number of t tests (for continuous variables), Mann-Whitney U tests (for ranked variables), and chi-square analyses (for categorical variables) performed on demographic variables, a modified Bonferroni adjustment of  $p < .005$  was used to minimize the impact of potential familywise error rate.

Lesbian and bisexual women without children ( $n = 1,919$ ), those who had children after coming out ( $n = 187$ ), and those who had children before coming out ( $n = 313$ ) were compared on demographic variables, and the results are detailed in Table 1. There was a significant difference in motherhood status between women of color and Caucasian women. Table 1 also presents a chi-square analysis that shows the means for each racial/ethnic group separately.

There was a significant difference in age, with lesbian and bisexual mothers who had children before coming out about 5 years older than mothers who had children after coming out. In turn, this latter group was about 5 years older than nonmothers. There was a significant effect for income level, though mean income for all groups was in the \$20,000-\$30,000 range and the univariate comparisons were not significantly different. There were no significant differences between groups on educational level, occupational level, or the size of the city or town in which participants lived. Over 90% of mothers who had children before coming out had been married to a man, compared with 50% of mothers who had children after coming out and only 12.6% of nonmothers, and this difference was significant. There was no significant difference in the percentages of women in each group who were currently in a primary relationship with a woman. The chi-square values for religion while growing up, religion now, and frequency of attending religious services were significantly different between groups. Table 1 shows the means for each type of religion for each group.

The rates of ever having had mental health counseling were high (over 75%) for all groups. There was a significant difference between groups, with mothers who had children before coming out most likely to have ever sought mental health counseling. There was no difference between groups on current mental health counseling (about one third of each group was currently in counseling). The difference between groups on ever having had mental health counseling to help with coming out was significant, with nearly twice as many mothers who had children before coming out as those who had children after coming out reporting this. Very few women had ever had mental health counseling to stop being LGB.

There was a significant difference between groups in the percentages that had been verbally and physically attacked,

respectively, for being LGB. In both cases, mothers who had children before coming out had the lower percentages of reported attacks.

### *Milestones in the Coming-Out Process*

Multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) were conducted on milestones in the coming-out process, in which motherhood status was the between-subjects factor and age and income were covariates. There was a significant multivariate effect,  $F(14, 1674) = 7.76, p < .005$ . This effect was significant even though only 725 nonmothers, 59 mothers who had children after coming out, and 63 mothers who had children before coming out responded to *all* items about milestones in the coming-out process. Consequently, to increase the sample sizes, means depicted in Table 2 are those from the individual analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) for each item, with age and income as covariates.

Lesbians and bisexual women who had children before coming out reached all milestones at later ages than did nonmothers and mothers who had children after coming out. Thus, mothers who had children before coming out were significantly older when they first questioned being LGB, when they had their first sexual experience with another woman, when they first thought of themselves as LGB, and when they first told someone that they were LGB. Mothers who had children before coming out were significantly older than nonmothers when they first told their sibling, mother, and father that they were LGB.

For each group, the order in which these developmental milestones occurred was extremely similar, and the mean ages are presented in Table 2. Thus, lesbians and bisexual women who are nonmothers, those who had children after coming out, and those who had children before coming out, first questioned being LGB. The next milestones, first sexual experience with another woman and thinking of oneself as LGB, took place several years later. After that, women disclosed being LGB to someone and then disclosed this to their parents and sibling, in that order. On average, lesbians and bisexual women who had children before coming out were 7-12 years older than women who had children after coming out and were 6-8 years older than nonmothers when they experienced each milestone in the coming-out process.

### *Outness*

Variables related to "outness" were analyzed by a MANCOVA in which motherhood status was the between-subjects factor and age and income were covariates. There was a significant multivariate effect,  $F(18, 4258) = 6.797, p < .005$ . The results for the individual ANCOVAs, with age and income as covariates, are shown in Table 2.

There was a significant difference between groups on level of outness to LGB friends and to heterosexual friends. Post hoc analyses indicate that lesbians and bisexual women without children reported being out to a greater percentage of LGB friends than did women with children. Women without children also reported being out to a greater per-

*Table 1*  
*Demographic Variables and Life Experiences of Lesbian and Bisexual Mothers and Nonmothers*

Variable	Nonmothers ( <i>n</i> = 1,919)	Children after coming out ( <i>n</i> = 187)	Children before coming out ( <i>n</i> = 313)	Statistic
Mean age	34.6 <sub>a</sub>	39.7,	44.8 <sub>c</sub>	$F(2, 2423) = 179.8^*$
Mean income levels	3.1.	3.4.	3.3 <sub>a</sub>	$F(2, 2388) = -3.6^*$
Median occupational level <sup>b</sup>	4	4	4	$H(2) = 0.3$
Median educational level <sup>c</sup>	3	3	3	$H(2) = 0.3$
Race/ethnicity (%)				$\chi^2(10, n = 2,422) = 53.2^*$
Caucasian	76.8	60.8	74.7	
African American	8.5	19.9	11.5	
Latina	7.4	7.0	7.1	
Native American	3.0	8.6	5.1	
Asian American	3.1	2.2	0.3	
Other	1.2	1.6	1.3	
Race/ethnicity (%)				(2, <i>n</i> = 2,431) = 23.0*
Caucasian	76.5	60.6	74.4	
Women of color	23.5	39.4	25.6	
Size of city (%)				$\chi^2(10, n = 2,430) = 11.9$
Large city	29.1	27.3	22.8	
Medium city	27	32.1	33.7	
Small city	24.8	20.3	24.0	
Suburb	10.4	9.6	10.9	
Rural	7.4	10.2	8.3	
Other	0.5	0.5	0.3	
Religion while growing up (%)				$\chi^2(12, n = 2,429) = 29.3^*$
Catholic	30.9	27.8	26.6	
Islamic	0.2	0.0	0.3	
Jewish	7.1	4.3	5.4	
Protestant	40.4	40.6	51.6	
None	8.9	8.0	4.8	
Spiritual beliefs (no formal)	3.2	4.3	1.3	
Other	9.3	15.0	9.9	
Religion now (%)				$\chi^2(12, n = 2,431) = 37.3^*$
Catholic	4.5	5.9	4.2	
Islamic	0.2	0.0	0.3	
Jewish	0.5	3.7	1.3	
Protestant	10.6	8.6	11.2	
None	27.0	26.2	20.1	
Spiritual beliefs (no formal)	43.8	37.4	51.8	
Other	8.9	18.2	11.2	
Frequency of attending religious services (%)				$\chi^2(10, n = 2425) = 23.6^*$
Weekly	7.4	14.5	8.9	
More than once a month	4.2	4.8	7.0	
Monthly	5.0	8.6	7.3	
Yearly	10.3	10.2	11.8	
Rarely	28.9	30.1	26.5	
Never	44.1	31.7	38.3	
Currently in primary relationship with a woman (%)				$\chi^2(2, n = 2,429) = 6.9$
No	36.6	30.5	30.1	
Yes	63.4	69.5	69.9	
Ever legally married to a man (%)				$\chi^2(2, n = 2,431) = 932.3^*$
No	87.4	50.0	8.9	
Yes	12.6	50.0	91.1	
Ever had mental health counseling (%)				$\chi^2(2, n = 2,430) = 9.8^*$
No	22.2	22.5	14.4	
Yes	77.8	77.5	85.6	
In mental health counseling now (%)				$\chi^2(2, n = 1,922) = 0.9$
No	65.3	68.3	63.2	
Yes	34.7	31.7	36.8	
Ever had mental health counseling to stop being LGB (%)				$\chi^2(2, n = 1,919) = 1.5$
No	95.7	93.7	96.3	
Yes	4.3	6.3	3.7	
Ever had mental health counseling to help with coming out (%)				$\chi^2(2, n = 1,916) = 13.0^*$
No	64.7	75.2	57.5	
Yes	35.3	24.8	42.5	

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	Nonmothers (n = 1,919)	Children after coming out (n = 187)	Children before coming out (n = 313)	Statistic
Ever been verbally attacked because she is LGB (%)				X <sup>2</sup> (2, n = 2,431) = 47.6*
No	40.5	44.9	61.3	
Yes	59.5	55.1	38.7	
Ever been physically attacked because she is LGB (%)				X <sup>2</sup> (2, n = 2,431) = 11.0*
No	93.4	89.4	96.8	
Yes	6.6	10.6	3.2	

*Note.* For continuous dependent variables, means for nonmother, children after coming out, and children before coming out groups that differ significantly have different subscript letters. LGB = lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

<sup>a</sup>Annual income was assessed on a 6-point Likert scale: 1 = <\$10,000, 2 = \$10,001-\$20,000, 3 = \$20,001-\$30,000, 4 = \$30,001-\$40,000, 5 = \$40,001-\$50,000, 6 = >\$50,000.

<sup>b</sup>Occupation was assessed on a 7-point Hollingshead scale, where a higher score indicates a more prestigious occupation.

<sup>c</sup>Education level was assessed as follows: 1 = less than 8 years, 2 = 8 years, 3 = some high school, 4 = high school degree, 5 = vocational training, 6 = some college, 7 = college degree, 8 = some graduate/professional school, 9 = graduate/professional degree.

\*p < .005.

centage of heterosexual friends than did women who had children before coming out. The three groups did not differ significantly in the reported percentages of family members and coworkers who know that they are LGB.

There was a significant difference between groups on self-reported sexual orientation. Post hoc analyses indicate that nonmothers were more likely to identify toward the lesbian (versus bisexual) continuum of the sexual orientation rating scale than were mothers who had children before

coming out. However, the means (12-17 for the three groups) were still closer to the lesbian end of the continuum (0) than to the bisexual midpoint (50).

Nonmothers and mothers who had children after coming out also had a higher ratio of female to male sexual partners over the lifetime than did mothers who had children before coming out. There was a significant effect for the degree to which women reported that they were worried, concerned, or afraid that people will find out that they are LGB (al-

Table 2

Milestones in the Coming-Out Process of Lesbian and Bisexual Mothers and Nonmothers

Variable	Nonmothers (n = 1,919)	Children after coming out (n = 187)	Children before coming out (n = 313)	Univariate <i>F</i>	
				<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>
Mean age first questioned being LGB	17.0 <sub>a</sub>	14.7.	23.7 <sub>b</sub>	21.0*	2, 842
Mean age of first sexual experience with another woman	21.0.	19.1 <sub>a</sub>	28.4 <sub>b</sub>	31.4*	2, 842
Mean age first thought of self as LGB	21.5 <sub>a</sub>	18.9 <sub>a</sub>	31.0.	50.8*	2, 842
Mean age first told someone you are LGB	22.7 <sub>a</sub>	20.4.	31.5 <sub>c</sub>	53.4*	2, 842
Mean age first told father you are LGB	24.8 <sub>a</sub>	23.04.	30.7 <sub>b</sub>	31.1*	2, 842
Mean age first told mother you are LGB	24.9 <sub>a</sub>	23.6 <sub>a</sub>	31.2.	33.1*	2, 842
Mean age first told any sibling you are LGB	25.4 <sub>a</sub>	24.4 <sub>a</sub>	32.0.	36.6*	2, 842
% of family that know you are LGB	64.6	69.6	62.5	2.8	2,2126
% of LGB friends that know you are LGB	95.3	93.6	92.1	3.3	2,2136
% of straight/heterosexual friends that know you are LGB	71.5	72.9	71.5	3.1	2,2136
% of coworkers that know you are LGB	54.3	58.6	51.3	1.3	2,2136
Sexual orientation <sup>a</sup>	12.0 <sub>a</sub>	15.1	17.0 <sub>b</sub>	9.3*	2,2136
Sexual behavior <sup>b</sup>	22.1 <sub>a</sub>	23.6 <sub>a</sub>	40.1 <sub>b</sub>	42.7*	2,2136
Worried about people finding out you are LGB <sup>c</sup>	1.8	1.7	1.9	2.7	2,2136
Family acceptance of you as LGB <sup>c</sup>	3.4.	3.6 <sub>a</sub>	3.0.	9.2*	2,2136
Importance of being out to straight people <sup>d</sup>	2.5	2.5	2.4	0.2	2,2136

*Note.* Adjusted means reflect analyses of covariance that were conducted with age and income as covariates. For each dependent variable, means for nonmothers, children after coming out, and children before coming out groups that differ significantly have different subscript letters. *F* values and degrees of freedom reflect multivariate analyses of variance with age and income as covariates. LGB = lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

<sup>a</sup>Self-labeling of sexual identity: 0 = exclusively lesbian/gay, 50 = bisexual, 100 = exclusively heterosexual.

<sup>b</sup>Self-rating of consensual sexual behavior since becoming sexually active: 0 = only women, 50 = equally both sexes, 100 = only men.

<sup>c</sup>Rated on a scale of 1 = not at all to 5 = extremely.

<sup>d</sup>Agreement with statement "It is important for me to 'be out' to straight people I know": 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree.

\*p < .005 (for the univariate main effect for motherhood status).

though a majority checked off "not at all" to this item). Women who had children before coming out reported a greater degree of worry, concern, or fear than did women who had children after coming out. There was a significant effect for family acceptance of the women being LGB, but post hoc analyses were not significantly different. There was no significant difference in the self-reported importance of being out to heterosexual people they know.

### *Variables Specific to Motherhood*

Mothers who had children before and those who had children after coming out were compared on variables specific to motherhood. The results are portrayed in Table 3. Over 90% of mothers who had children before coming out had been legally married to a man, compared with 50% of those who had children after coming out. Similarly, over 90% of mothers who had children before coming out had these children in the context of marriage or partnership with a man, compared with 44% of mothers who had children after coming out. Mothers who had children before coming out were also more likely to have grandchildren.

In contrast, mothers who had children after coming out were more likely to have had these children by having sex with a man who was not a primary partner. Mothers who had children after coming out were also more likely to have had children by insemination with a known or unknown donor, through adoption, or by foster placements than were mothers who had children before coming out. Mothers who had children after coming out were more likely to be coparenting children of a female partner. There was no significant difference between groups in the percentage of child rearing for which they were responsible.

There was no significant difference in the percentage of mothers who reported ever having been threatened with loss of custody of their children for being LGB or in actually losing custody of their children for being LGB. There were no differences between groups in reported experiences of harassment, threats, or discrimination at their children's school or by other parents, or in the mothers' reports of their children experiencing harassment, threats, or discrimination for having an LGB parent.

### *Motherhood Variables by Race/Ethnicity*

To depict motherhood variables for women of color in more detail, in Table 4 we provide a descriptive presentation of each racial/ethnic group. Rather than conduct statistical comparisons between groups, we wanted to present a portrait of motherhood for LGB women within each racial ethnic group, and the table shows remarkable variability. Asian American and Pacific Islander lesbians and bisexual women had few children, but their rates of having children by insemination with an anonymous donor and through adoption were at least five times higher than those of other groups. Native American LGB women had the most children and were much more likely than women in other groups to be raising the children of a relative. Latinas were the most likely to have had children in the context of

marriage or a primary relationship with a man and the most likely to have been threatened with loss of custody of a child. African American LGB women were the least likely to have ever been married to a man and also the least likely to report having been threatened with loss of custody of a child. Caucasian LGB women reported high rates of responsibility for child rearing and were the most likely to report actually losing custody of a child.

### *Motherhood Status by Age Cohort*

Although we controlled for age in earlier analyses, we wanted to show how the various age groups of LGB women have been affected by motherhood. Table 5 depicts motherhood variables for women in each decade of age. The percentage of LGB women who have children increases steadily with age and then drops off for women aged 60 and over. Number of children, too, increases with age. Older women are more likely to have ever been married, to have had children in the context of marriage or a primary relationship with a man, and to have grandchildren. Younger women are more likely to have had children through sex with a man who was not the primary partner, to be raising the children of their female partner, and to report actually having lost custody of a child. The cohorts of LGB women in their 30s and 40s are the ones who are most likely to have had children through insemination from a known or unknown donor and (if not currently mothers) to report wanting children.

## Discussion

### *Who Are Lesbian Mothers? Demographic Factors*

Lesbian and bisexual mothers who had children before coming out differed from lesbians who had children after coming out on variables related to childbearing. The vast majority (over 90%) of women who had children before coming out had been legally married to a man at some point and had children in the context of marriage or a partnership with a man. Hardly any women who had children before coming out had had children by insemination, adoption, or foster placement or as a result of being in a relationship with a female partner who had children. In contrast, women who had children after coming out were about evenly divided between traditional and alternative methods of having children. It is interesting, however, that even among this group, a large percentage (44%) of women had children in the context of marriage or partnership with a man. Narrative accounts, such as those by Cassingham and O'Neil (1993), have described the diversity of ways in which previously married women negotiate the process of coming out lesbian, but this is the first large-scale study to do so quantitatively.

Roughly 30% of women in both groups reported having been threatened with loss of custody of children. This suggests that lesbian and bisexual mothers are threatened by loss of custody at about the same rate whether or not the

Table 3

*Comparison of Lesbian and Bisexual Mothers Who Had Children After Coming Out and Lesbian and Bisexual Mothers Who Had Children Before Coming Out on Variables Specific to Motherhood*

Variable	Children after coming out (n = 187)	Children before coming out (n = 313)	(df, N)
Ever legally married to a man (%)			106.2* (1, n = 501)
No	49.7	8.9	
Yes	50.3	91.1	
Had children in context of marriage or partnership with a man (%)			152.7* (1, n = 499)
No	55.9	6.4	
Yes	44.1	93.6	
Had children by sex with man who was not a primary partner (%)			11.4* (1, n = 500)
No	83.3	93.0	
Yes	16.7	7.0	
Had children by insemination with a known donor (%)			20.7* (1, n = 500)
No	93.5	100.0	
Yes	6.5	0.0	
Had children by insemination with an unknown donor (%)			14.5* (1, n = 500)
No	93.5	99.4	
Yes	6.5	0.6	
Had children by adoption (%)			15.7* (1, n = 500)
No	86.6	96.2	
Yes	13.4	3.8	
Had foster children (%)			12.8* (1, n = 500)
No	94.1	99.4	
Yes	5.9	0.6	
Had children of a relative (%)			4.9 (1, n = 500)
No	96.8	99.4	
Yes	3.2	0.6	
Coparented children of a female partner (%)			38.1* (1, n = 500)
No	76.9	95.2	
Yes	23.1	4.8	
Had children-other (%)			0.1 (1, n = 500)
No	96.2	96.8	
Yes	3.8	3.2	
Have grandchildren (%)			22.4* (1, n = 501)
No	89.8	71.9	
Yes	10.2	28.1	
Number of grandchildren <sup>a</sup>	2.5	3.3	1.3 <sup>b</sup> (1, 103)
Amount of childrearing responsible for (median) <sup>c</sup>	3	2	26,296 <sup>d</sup> (1)
Ever threatened with loss of custody of children for being LGB (%)			1.5 (1, n = 499)
No	72.7	67.5	
Yes	27.3	32.5	
Lost custody of children for being LGB (%)			1.6 (1, n = 499)
No	95.7	92.9	
Yes	4.3	7.1	
Experienced harassment, threats, or discrimination at children's school or by other parents (%)			0.1 (1, n = 498)
No	82.9	83.9	
Yes	17.1	16.1	
Children experienced harassment, threats, or discrimination because parent is LGB (%)			0.0 (1, n = 495)
No	78.5	78.9	
Yes	21.5	21.1	

Note. LGB = lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

<sup>a</sup>Adjusted mean (age = covariate). <sup>b</sup>F value for ANCOVA. <sup>c</sup>Amount of child-rearing responsible for was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = *all*, 3 = *half*, and 5 = *none*. <sup>d</sup>Mann-Whitney *U* value.

\*p < .005.

children were conceived in a heterosexual relationship. Thus, LGB mothers seem to face threatened custody loss not just to fathers, but also possibly to grandparents and other relatives, known sperm donors, and female coparents.

Although the percentage of women who reported that they actually lost custody of children was small, this study indicates that the threat of losing children through custody is a significant factor for lesbian mothers. There may be a sub-

Table 4  
*Demographic Variables and Motherhood Status by Race/Ethnicity*

Variable	Caucasian ( <i>n</i> = 1,823)	African American ( <i>n</i> = 238)	Latina ( <i>n</i> = 177)	Native American ( <i>n</i> = 89)	Asian American ( <i>n</i> = 64)
Have children <sup>a</sup> (%)	19.5	31.5	19.8	36.0	7.8
No. children (mean)	1.87	2.12	1.83	3.26	1.60
Context of becoming a mother <sup>b</sup> (%)					
Marriage or primary relationship with a man	76.5	64.4	82.9	71.9	20.0
Sex with a man who was not primary partner	7.9	20.5	8.6	25.0	0.0
Insemination with known donor	2.5	1.4	0.0	3.1	0.0
Insemination with anonymous donor	3.1	1.4	2.9	0.0	20.0
Adoption	6.5	12.3	5.7	0.0	40.0
Foster children	2.8	0.0	0.0	6.3	0.0
Raising children of a relative	0.6	0.0	0.0	9.4	0.0
Raising children of female partner	13.0	15.2	17.1	15.6	20.0
Other	2.5	6.1	2.9	12.5	0.0
Currently in a relationship with a female partner (%)	75.1	56.0	65.7	56.3	80.0
Ever married to a man (%)	78.0	54.7	85.7	68.8	60.0
Amount of child-rearing responsible for (mean) <sup>c</sup>	2.36	1.97	2.03	2.09	2.40
Have grandchildren (%)	19.8	28.4	14.3	9.0	0.0
No. grandchildren (mean)	3.00	3.10	2.67	5.13	0.00
Ever threatened with loss of custody of child (%)	32.2	7.6	34.3	28.1	20
Lost custody of child (%)	7.1	2.1	5.7	3.1	0.0
Nonmothers who want children (%)	36.1	37.6	46.7	35.2	46.3

*Note.* With the exception of the first and last items, all items refer to mothers only.

<sup>a</sup>Numbers reflect percentage of respondents in each ethnic group.

<sup>b</sup>Total percentage may be greater than 100; some respondents checked more than one category.

<sup>c</sup>Amount of child rearing responsible for was rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = all, 3 = *half*, and 5 = *none*. Low scores of older women may indicate that the children are adults and out of the home.

group of LGB mothers who remain closeted because of the perceived threat of custody loss, and although this is an important group to study, finding them will be difficult.

Mothers who had children before coming out were likely to be older than mothers who had children after coming out and nonmothers. This may be due at least partially to the fact that some of the younger respondents may want to have children in the future but have not yet done so. Examining the results by age cohort, we found younger mothers to be more likely than older mothers (over 50) to have used alternative methods such as donor insemination. These differences reflect the historical changes both culturally (lessened pressure to marry heterosexually) and medically (alternative reproduction options) over the past several decades.

Specific patterns of motherhood differ remarkably among each ethnic and racial group and point to possible cultural factors that need more empirical examination. For example, the high prevalence of Latina lesbians and bisexual women who had children in the context of marriage or a primary relationship with a man may reflect the more traditional, Catholic nature of Latino culture (Espin, 1984). In contrast, the relative acceptability of single mothers in the African American communities may explain why African American lesbians in the present study were less likely to have had children within marriage or a relationship with a man. Native American women were most likely to be raising the children of a relative, perhaps indicating the greater sense of family kinship among this ethnic group. Williams (1998) has described how lesbian and gay adults in Native Amer-

ican families often adopt children when a need arises in their communities. Asian American and Pacific Islander women showed the most nontraditional roles for women, in that they were less likely to have children and more likely to have children by donor insemination. Certainly these groups have been underrepresented in prior research on lesbian mothers. Although the subsamples of women of color are small compared with White/European American women, they are nevertheless equal to or larger than the total sample sizes of existing longitudinal studies.

Mothers who had children before coming out, those who had children after coming out, and nonmothers differed significantly on religion and frequency of attending religious services, but the means showed no consistent pattern. More than half of women in each group were either not currently religious or reported that their current spiritual beliefs did not fit a formal religion. This pattern is similar to results found in large national samples of lesbians (e.g., Bradford et al., 1994) and different from that found for heterosexual women (Rothblum & Factor, 2001).

Mean incomes for all three groups were low, and low income among lesbians has been found in other large-scale studies (e.g., Bradford et al., 1994). There was no significant difference in education or occupation, suggesting that presence of children had not interfered with women's ability to go to college or seek employment. There was no significant difference in the size of the city or town in which mothers and nonmothers are living. As with heterosexual parents, there may be lesbian mothers who choose to live in suburban areas or smaller towns for the benefit of their children.

Table 5  
Demographic Variables and Motherhood Status by Age Cohort

Variable	Age				
	20-29 ( <i>n</i> = 618)	30-39 ( <i>n</i> = 902)	40-49 ( <i>n</i> = 654)	50-59 ( <i>n</i> = 173)	60+ ( <i>n</i> = 48)
Have children (%)	5.3	17.0	31.8	51.4	43.8
No. children (mean)	1.24	1.71	1.78	2.89	3.30
Context of becoming a mothers (%)					
Marriage or primary relationship with a man	63.3	58.9	78.2	86.5	96.3
Sex with man who was not primary partner	21.2	13.2	10.1	4.5	7.4
Insemination with known donor	0.0	4.6	2.4	0.0	0.0
Insemination with anonymous donor	0.0	7.9	.5	0.0	3.7
Adoption	3.0	6.6	7.2	11.2	7.4
Foster children	0.0	3.3	1.0	5.6	3.7
Raising children of a relative	0.0	1.3	1.9	2.2	0.0
Raising children of female partner	15.2	19.9	10.6	5.6	3.7
Other	6.1	3.3	4.3	3.4	0.0
Currently in a relationship with a female partner (mothers) (%)	63.6	73.7	72.1	65.2	61.5
Ever married to a man (%)	45.5	60.8	80.3	89.9	92.6
Amount of child-rearing responsible for (mean) <sup>b</sup>	2.21	2.27	2.12	2.41	2.73
Have grandchildren	0.0	2.6	22.2	38.2	85.2
No. of grandchildren (mean)	0.00	1.83	2.37	3.62	4.35
Ever threatened with loss of custody of child (%)	24.2	34.7	34.5	22.5	14.8
Lost custody of child (%)	9.1	6.7	6.8	5.6	3.7
Nonmothers who want children (%)	63.8	37.5	8.8	1.2	0.0

Note. With the exception of the first and last items, all items refer to mothers only.

<sup>a</sup>Total percentage may be greater than 100; some respondents checked more than one category.

<sup>b</sup>Amount of child-rearing responsible for was rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = *all*, 3 = *half*, and 5 = *none*. Low scores of older women may indicate that the children are adults and out of the home.

On the other hand, unlike heterosexual parents, some lesbian mothers may choose to live in urban areas, where they can be in closer proximity to other lesbian mothers. Thus, there is no evidence to suggest that lesbians and bisexual women who have children before they come out have less opportunity to obtain an education, pursue a career, or move to large urban areas in search of lesbian communities.

In sum, our hypothesis that lesbian and bisexual mothers who had children before coming out would differ from the other two groups on demographic factors was only partially confirmed. Mothers who had children before coming out were previously married to or in relationships with men and had children in this traditional context. However, the lack of group differences in education, occupation, and size of city or town in which women currently live indicates that there may be something about being lesbian or bisexual that allows women to live more nontraditional lives. It also indicates that prior speculation that lesbians are able to pursue education and move to larger cities because they don't have children is not correct. This is the first large study to compare lesbian mothers with nonmothers, and the results imply that the demographic differences are more related to how lesbians have children (i.e., in relationships with men vs. through insemination and adoption) than to demographic differences among the women themselves.

#### Milestones in the Coming-Out Process

Even when we controlled for age and income, lesbian and bisexual mothers who had children before coming out reached milestones in the coming out process at an older

age. Mothers who had children before coming out were more likely to have been married to men, and so the coming-out process for many of them may have begun when these marriages ended. Having young children may have delayed the coming-out process.

The data indicate that lesbian and bisexual women without children and those who have children after coming out begin questioning their sexual orientation on average while still in high school. By their early 20s they are likely to have had a sexual experience with another woman and to think of themselves as LGB. It takes a few more years, on average, to tell others, including family members, that they are LGB. As adults, these groups have been out for more years and have had a greater proportion of sexual experiences with women compared with the group of LGB mothers who had children before coming out.

In contrast, LGB mothers who had children before coming out are in their early 20s when they first question being LGB and in their late 20s when they have their first sexual experience with another woman. They are in their early 30s when they first think of themselves as LGB and come out to others, including family members. Mothers who had children before coming out undergo each milestone in the coming out process about 7-12 years later than women who had children after coming out and about 6-8 years later than women who have no children.

Furthermore, nonmothers and mothers who had children after coming out tend to first think of themselves as LGB about 6 months after their first sexual experience with another woman. For mothers who had children before com-

ing out, there is a longer time span (about 1.5 years, on average) between these two milestones. This longer period may indicate that women who are having sex with women when still married to or in a relationship with a man wait longer to self-identify as LGB. Thus, this group may be more isolated and consequently take longer to find a supportive lesbian or bisexual community.

This study also indicates that on the average, women report going through developmental milestones in the coming-out process approximately in the same order, regardless of status as a mother. However, on closer examination, the standard deviations of each of these findings indicate that there are large individual variations in the age and order in which women reach these milestones. Certainly the findings of this study imply that early adult heterosexual development (i.e., heterosexual marriage and children) does not always result in heterosexuality in later adulthood. It is interesting that lesbians who come out after having a traditional heterosexual marriage and children proceed through the milestones in the same general order as women who develop a lesbian identity without first developing an adult heterosexual identity. At the same time, nearly half of lesbians and bisexual women who had children after coming out had these children in the context of a relationship with a man. Further research needs to focus on the complexity of the coming-out process.

In sum, our second hypothesis was confirmed. Lesbians and bisexual women who had children before coming out reported reaching milestones in the coming-out process at significantly later ages than women who came out without children. The mean age difference at reaching each milestone was considerable, and this has a number of implications for further research. Women who leave heterosexual relationships to find a supportive lesbian or bisexual community may find themselves among women who are considerably younger. In fact, most lesbians and bisexual women in these communities may not have children at all. Those who had children after coming out may have much younger children, because women's low income means they need to wait longer before being able to afford the cost of donor insemination and certain adoptions. For women who are looking for sexual or romantic partners, women who are their age may be much further along in the coming-out process. This may be an added stressor for the relationship.

### *Stressors and Protective Factors for Lesbian Mothers*

Sexual orientation, unlike race and gender, may not be immediately apparent. Lesbians and bisexual women who have children, especially those who used to be married to men, may be viewed as divorced heterosexual women rather than lesbian or bisexual mothers. We predicted that prior marriage or relationships with men would protect LGB mothers from antilesbian hate crimes, and this was the case. Mothers who had children before coming out had lower rates of reported verbal attacks and physical attacks than did mothers who had children after coming out and nonmothers. However, we should add that other

interpretations of this result are possible. For example, mothers who have children while married may present a more conventional appearance and thus be less likely to attract the attention of perpetrators of hate crimes. Additionally, mothers who had children before coming out may have had fewer years of possible exposure to verbal antigay harassment simply because they have been out for significantly less time than nonmothers.

On the other hand, women who appear to be lesbian may have an easier time finding a supportive lesbian community. Until recently, children were not always welcome in the lesbian communities (and until recently there were few bisexual communities except in a few large cities). Women who were still married to men, or those who were still in contact with former male partners because of shared custody or child rearing, were often made to feel unwelcome in lesbian communities. Thompson (1992) described the sense of mourning that former heterosexual women feel over the loss of this heterosexual privilege when they come out. The results of the current study indicate that mothers who had children before coming out were more likely to have ever had mental health counseling and specifically to have had mental health counseling to help with coming out than the other two groups. It is possible that women who had children before coming out were more conflicted or had more difficulty in coming out into the role of lesbian mother than those who came out without children. It is also possible that women who were married to or in relationships with men had more money or access to health insurance for counseling and that this permitted the luxury of mental health counseling. Certainly the rates of prior and current counseling were high (over 75%) for all three groups. Prior research (Jones & Gabriel, 1999; Morgan, 1992; Morgan & Eliason, 1992) has found lesbians to seek psychotherapy at much higher rates than heterosexual women. For example, Morgan (1992) found 77.5% of lesbians and 28.9% of heterosexual women to have ever been in therapy, comparable rates in the study by Rothblum and Factor (2001) were 72.3% for lesbians and 54.9% for their heterosexual sisters. This has been interpreted to reflect the high level of acceptance of therapy in the lesbian communities (see Davis, Cole, & Rothblum, 1996).

In sum, this was a nonrandom study of lesbians and bisexual women, yet the mothers and nonmothers were recruited through similar methods. It is the first large study to compare lesbian and bisexual mothers with nonmothers, in addition to comparing mothers who came out before and after having children. This method allowed us to compare groups on factors unique to the LGB experience, including milestones in the coming-out process, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and outness to others. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that data were based on self-report and that many items were nonstandardized. We do not know about lesbians and bisexual women who chose not to participate in the study, or those who are so closeted that they could not have been contacted through lesbian or bisexual sources.

### Implications for Application and Public Policy

The results of this study raise intriguing questions about how lesbians and bisexual women who had children before coming out still manage to obtain high educational levels. What is it about becoming a lesbian or bisexual woman that allows women to seek educational opportunities, even when they have children? Conversely, women who seek higher education may be more likely to identify as lesbian (Faderman, 1991). Once women with children come out as lesbian or bisexual, they are not demographically very different from women who came out without children. Further research should focus more specifically on the relationship between education and the coming-out process as lesbian and bisexual (and, ideally, through longitudinal research, on the direction of causality between these two variables). The fact that lesbians and bisexuals manage to seek higher education even when they have children has public policy implications for improving the educational levels of women in general. For example, lesbians tend to share childcare and housework (Dunne, 1998), and this may allow greater opportunities for women to pursue an education.

Women who had children in the context of a heterosexual marriage or relationship with a man reported taking longer to reach each milestone in the coming-out process than women who came out without children. Whereas women who came out without children reported questioning their sexual orientation in high school and having their first sexual experience, on average, while in college, women who had children before coming out were in their 20s when they reported negotiating these processes. Further research needs to investigate how women with children deal with the stress of coming out into a lesbian or bisexual community at an age at which the average community participant has already identified as lesbian or bisexual and has come out to her family and friends several years ago. The results of the present study indicate that one way in which women who had children before coming out may cope with the coming-out process is through psychotherapy. Over 40% of women in this group had counseling to help with coming out, compared with over 30% of women in the other two groups. This has implications for training therapists to have expertise in dealing not only with lesbian and bisexual clients but also with those who have children. It also implies that lesbian and bisexual communities should be more aware of older lesbians coming out into their communities. There are public policy implications from these findings that suggest educating service providers. Social services, such as medical care, mental health treatment, and child care, could be more responsive to specific needs of lesbian and bisexual mothers if these mothers were asked about having children before or after coming out.

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