

“TWO SIDES OF A COIN”: NUANCES OF MATERNAL IDENTITY  
FOR LESBIAN MOTHERS

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
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In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
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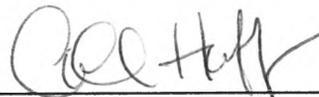
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San Francisco, California

May 2017

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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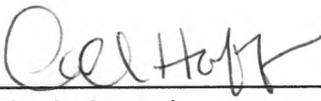
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“TWO SIDES OF A COIN”: NUANCES OF MATERNAL IDENTITY  
FOR LESBIAN MOTHERS

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San Francisco, California  
2017

When lesbian motherhood is discussed in psychological research, it is often with the assumption that two identities—mother and lesbian—are contradictory. I examine how lesbian mothers’ sexual identity influences their parental identity. In an analysis of 11 interviews with lesbian mothers, seven thematic nuances were explored: contradictions in identities, forging connection, experiences of discrimination, community formation, legal access, language use, and queering parenting. Findings suggest identity integration for lesbian mothers involves nuanced experiences that are not necessarily negative and do not inherently involve contradictions between the identities of “lesbian” and “mother.” When lesbian mothers experience tension in their identities, it is often because of outsiders’ influence, such as using non-inclusive language or posing invasive questions about paths to parenthood or biological connections with children.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
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Chair, Thesis Committee

5/17/17  
Date

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Girls in the United States grow up with the cultural expectation that their most important rite of passage is to have children and be nothing less than excited to become mothers (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979, Hequembourg, 2007, Laney, Carruthers, Hall, & Anderson, 2014, Mamo, 2007, Mezey, 2008, Shelton & Johnson, 2006, Wall, 2011). However, this expectation for girls to grow up to become woman and subsequently become mothers is not necessarily meant to apply to everyone (Epstein, 2002, Thompson, 2002). The cultural expectation of motherhood is meant for a very specific kind of woman. Many women of varying identities do not fit into this ideal, and preferred, character of motherhood. In particular, the right to motherhood has been raced and classed, limiting access and rights of an ideal mother to white, middle-upper class women (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991, Roberts, 1997). Additionally, not all paths to motherhood meet the acceptable circumstances in which this status is supposed to be obtained (DiLapi 1989, Hequembourg, 2007, Lewin, 1993, Mezey, 2008).

There is a plethora of literature exploring the experiences of heterosexual women who become mothers and their experiences with identity development on their path to motherhood (Laney, Carruthers, Hall, & Anderson, 2014, Laney, Hall, Anderson, & Willingham, 2015). However, lesbian mothers who are also subjected to the same messages of motherhood, yet do not fit the ideal image of motherhood to whom these messages are directed toward, have been excluded from psychological maternal identity formation literature. While it is not a decision that every lesbian couple makes, there are indeed many women having and raising children within their lesbian-headed families

(MAP, 2016). These women are then developing identities as mothers just as a heterosexual mother does. Although little is known of how lesbian mothers' identity influences their maternal identity formation, it is important to examine given that there may be unique aspects of maternal identity for lesbian mothers compared to heterosexual mothers.

## **Literature Review**

### **“Maternity” Identity Development in Psychological Research**

Motherhood is an expectation for most women. There is, in fact, a “motherhood mandate” that is permeated into our societal formation so intensely that it is meant to be a part of a woman’s identity (Russo, 1976, 1979). While this strict expectation is slowly changing since the 1970s when much of the literature reviewed here was conducted, there are still many stereotypes and messages that women receive growing up and into their adulthood (Laney et al., 2014). These expectations do not only include that a woman should be a mother but *how* it is that she is to be a *good* mother (Arendell, 1999). It is the concept of a *right* way that one is to be a mother that Laney, Carruthers, Hall, and Anderson (2014) and Laney, Hall, Anderson, and Willingham (2015) deconstruct and offer alternatives in their work on maternal identity development. Laney et al. (2014) argue that women have to, “reevaluate how their autonomy, physical appearance, sexuality and occupations influence their identities differently than they had before motherhood” in their process of development and examine how those align with the expectations to be an ideal mother. These ideals translate to meeting the expectations of

being completely selfless and available for their children, being feminine, straight and working minimally enough (if at all) in order to accommodate the first expectation of selflessness and availability. As such these ideals are also highly varied and racialized, classed, and shaped by other lines of social stratification (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991).

While Laney et al. (2014) then steer their focus to selflessness as the main expectation to problematize and deconstruct, it is already obvious in the list that women in lesbian relationships do not qualify for the category of “straight” as an ideal for motherhood. While prioritizing the problematizing of motherhood is taken as a “necessary corrective,” this is still done through a heterosexual lens, completely ignoring the importance that ‘straightness’ may be an imperative ideology some women have to face in their developmental process. This is crucial to include in the analysis of motherhood identity development because Laney et al. (2015) found that one of the aspects of identity change for mothers after having children was, “the potentiating effect”, in which many women discussed motherhood as “intensifying” their other identities that existed prior to having children. Therefore, lesbian women may be experiencing the intersection of their identities as both heightened by the new identity as a mom as well as struggling with its contradiction with the concept of an ideal mother.

Another important conclusion that Laney et al. (2014) makes, also found by Smith (1999), is the influence of community for mothers or mothers-to-be. Laney et al. highlight the fact that women evaluated themselves based on their “web of relationships” and that developing their motherhood identity changed the way that they related to others

through an expanded self. Smith (1999) also highlights connections to others as important for women in their psychological development as mothers, finding that beginning in pregnancy women were more likely to turn to their close relationships for support and information. However, what is not considered is if finding this connection within an identity group is salient, such as LGBTQ moms connecting with other LGBTQ moms specifically.

Along with community connections, other changes occurred for women in these studies during their transition to motherhood that was important for their maternal identity formation. Many of which stemmed from an overall concept of an expansion of the self (Laney et al., 2015). This expansion manifested itself in participants through the growth of new qualities like expanded consciousness, increased compassion, and changes in how they related to others (Laney et al., 2014, Laney et al., 2015). Again, this research has only been explored within heterosexual partnerships and similar overarching changes may hold true within lesbian partnerships as well, although the way in which this development occurs and particular nuances may be different. Smith (1999) also suggests that pregnancy may be an important time for this development as it serves as an in-between from the onset of such psychological changes and when an actual child enters their world. This is also important to be thinking about for co-mothers who did not carry the pregnancy or for couples who chose to adopt.

While limited to a narrow scope of experiences, research on motherhood identity development paints a vivid picture of what identity formation looks like for heterosexual

mothers; however, there is no inclusion of lesbian partnered families. To this extent, the authors of Laney et al. (2014) discuss the limited breadth of their research and suggest future research be conducted to understand the differences in motherhood identity development in diverse communities. Given the emphasis on an expansive self by the participants in Laney et al.'s study, the authors conclude that the research, "indicate(s) that identity is a multifaceted concept and that the major aspects of one's identity should be studied in concert with one another". Therefore, I shall move on to examining what is known about lesbian couples that choose to have children in a variety of disciplines in an effort to understand how the influence of intersecting identities as mother and lesbian may influence one another through a critical lens.

### **Interdisciplinary Research with Lesbian Mothers**

**Contradiction in identities.** The concept of the "motherhood mandate" suggests that all women are expected to embrace reproduction (Russo, 1976, 1979). Many researchers have found that lesbian mothers struggled with identifying with the "self-concept" of mother because of the exact distinction as both a lesbian and a mother (Hayman, Wilkes, Jackson, & Halcomb, 2013, Mamo, 2007, Miller, 2012, Wall, 2011). As pointed out from the work of Laney et al. (2014), being straight is only one of many expectations for women; therefore being a lesbian within itself is already a "deviance" (Mamo, 2007). We see the construction of these expectations and boundaries for mothers clearly defined through Butler's (1990) definition of a heterosexual matrix. Butler argues that the sexed male or female body is therefore their gender as a man or women

(masculine/feminine) which is then their desire or sexuality, which is heterosexual. Mamo (2007) subsequently makes the connection that within women's self-concept the desire is "hetero(sex) [that] leads to their parenthood." These links operate on a set of assumptions about how sex, gender, and desire are all connected and perpetrate such connections as the only right way for them to lead to one another. The only way to mother is to be a heterosexual cis-women, partnered with a heterosexual cis-man, and engaged in the desire of one another, which leads to the "natural" creation of new life. This binary system establishes a world in which we cannot understand one without the other. Thus, it should come as no surprise that researchers have found that integrating one's self-concept as a lesbian and a mother challenging for the women they have interviewed. Mamo (2007) argues that this conflict can even act as a successful barrier to women making the decision to become mothers.

**Biological connection.** Another issue that derives from the cultural dominance of the heterosexual matrix and its connection to parenthood and identity development is the binary understanding of the *right* mother is the complications of biological privilege. Because we have this construction that motherhood is the result of being female-bodied and engaging in heterosexual desire, privilege is granted to women who birth their children. In considering the development of mother's identity, understanding how this privilege operates is imperative to understanding co-mothers' (women who did not birth their children) experiences and their sense of value in their relationship as a mother. Mamo (2007) specifically states in reference to the co-mothers that, "legible gender and

hetero(sexual) performances must be enacted to secure this belonging”. By being a co-mother, one is pushed even further outside of the heterosexual matrix by not being linked through a gestational connection. In considering the individual development of co-mothers this is important to explore because if a co-mother has not birthed her child society does not consider her a legitimate mother, even if she donated her eggs to her partner. In this context, a mother might construct the ‘deviance’ differently by personally understanding her biological link to her child, however, research with lesbian co-mothers has suggested that this struggle with biological privilege and a sense of legitimacy is common (Haymen et al., 2013, Mamo, 2007, Miller, 2012, Pelka, 2009).

Even though gestational mothers are still a part of a lesbian partnership and may experience challenges with identity formation, co-mothers are even further “outside the normal, or heterosexual, family construct [which] regulates her as powerless and vulnerable, essentially excluding her from the position of a legitimate mother” (Haymen et al., 2013). There are many things that co-mothers have done in order to assist in their own identity development as a mother including being involved in the “planning, conception, pregnancy and birth of her child, choosing particular names, engaging in ceremonies, and using methods of formal recognitions...to fortify the parental position” (Haymen et al., 2013). One method of legitimization that is common for many couples is “matching” (Haymen et al., 2013, Mamo, 2007, Wall, 2011). Matching was defined as, “optimizing the similarity of physical characteristics between the child and the [co-] mother” (Haymen et al., 2013). This is done through selecting a sperm donor with

*matching* characteristics to the co-mother, the most important one often being race. The concept is complicated for couples who planned to both be gestational mothers at some point or if the gestational mother is going to carry the co-mother's eggs, although most women reference this as a consideration and a part of their decision-making process with sperm donation (Mamo, 2007). This is clearly a way in which co-mothers are working against the de-legitimization assigned to them through the heterosexual matrix.

**Community formation.** Finally, it is also important to consider the literature on community, which was present in psychological research on maternal identity for heterosexual mothers and is also discussed extensively in research on lesbian parents in other disciplines. As reviewed previously, research done with women in heterosexual partnerships both turned inwards toward their community in motherhood and also sought their close communities for information (Laney et al., 2014, Nelson, 2007, Smith, 1999). Research with lesbian women also suggests that they seek information from other lesbian mothers for knowledge (Haymen et al., 2013, Mamo, 2007, Wall, 2011, Wall, 2013). This is important to understand when examining Foucault's (1978) analysis of discursive power because the power that is granted to categories and identities also dictates the knowledge that is dispersed and available. Therefore, it is imperative for lesbian mothers to be able to access *alternative* information in regards to their *alternative* way of having children. This becomes a problem when they cannot find that support (Haymen et al., 2013, Wall, 2011). In regards to challenging the heterosexual matrix, historically there were many women who were invested in second wave feminism who chose to have non-

heterosexual relationships and denounced motherhood as a political act, one considered to be important and crucial to their “liberation” (Wall 2011). From their perspective, this path was the only way to resist the requirement of gender and desire expectations and has led to women who have chosen motherhood to be at a loss of support. Today, there may be less pressure to resist the expectations in this particular way, although the contradictions in discursive understanding of the identity as lesbian and the identity as mother still infiltrate community ideals and relationships, potentially still creating a struggle to find support and knowledge from other lesbian mothers as found in multiple studies (Haymen et al., 2013, Wall, 2011). In both research with lesbian mothers and heterosexual mothers, this community formation is cited as important to the knowledge distribution and understanding of themselves and their practice as mothers, without it lesbian mothers are missing a crucial aspect of identity formation.

**Legal access.** Concepts of “liberal individualism” (Roberts 1997) and agency also play an important role, particularly around issues of legality and *choice*. There are recent laws implemented that have been important to supporting the rights of lesbian mothers, however, it is still a complex process. Given the recent federal law that has given same-sex couples the right to marriage (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015), one of the benefits that have come with that law is that if a woman, married to another woman, births a child within that marriage then the legal partner has the right to have their name on the birth certificate (MAP, 2016, NCLR, 2015). However, being named as the second parent on the birth certificate does not actually afford that second parent legal protection the way it

does the birth parent. This is not common knowledge because a biological father on a birth certificate is not at the same risk of having their legitimacy contested. It is still *highly* encouraged by all practitioners and lawyers that support lesbian couples to follow through with a legal adoption by the second parent no matter what in order to guarantee their legal rights to their children should anything happen to the gestational mother (NCLR, 2015). This process for adoption is most frequently referred to as a “stepparent adoption” or less commonly, a “second parent adoption”.

The complexities outlined here should explicitly show how challenging it can be for a co-mother to legitimize her role legally, calling into question what choices can actually be made when pursuing parenthood in a lesbian family. Even if a couple takes the steps to have a child, the mother who did not birth that child will have to take additional steps to be granted legal rights and there is no guarantee that she will even be awarded those rights. Roberts (1997) discusses liberty as, “a guarantee of government neutrality, as limited only to tangible harms, and as a negative right...Liberty allows each individual to live by her own understanding of procreation, as long as she causes no harm to others”. This contributes to our ideals of liberal individualism in which we are free to make our own choices in the world. Because of the laws currently put in place restricting lesbian families, there is clearly an element of agency that is taken from them. The conception of their *choice* is a complicated one that cannot be understood as operating outside of the constraints on their agency in decision-making and subsequently developing their families.

**Privilege in language.** Another influence within the challenges of legitimization of identity as a mother is that of language (Gabb, 2005, Miller, 2012). As Miller points out, there are not two separate terms to identify two mothers equally parenting within the same household. This is because traditionally the parent other than mother is termed father, which discursively holds power only for biologically connected men. Foucault (1978) examines the power of discursive construction and argues that the creation of categories in which we use to name produces and assigns power as well as knowledge. Creation of categorical words such as mother, mom, mommy or mama, are not discreetly understood. It is the knowledge that “mother” and all variations of it identify the woman who gave birth to a child or who is the sole woman raising the child within a two-parent, heterosexually coupled family. These categories also help to legitimize those that they apply to (Foucault, 1978). The legitimacy resonates with how a mother is to understand her own positionality as well as how we legitimize laws. Miller (2012) argues that these complications around language and the power that they strip co-mothers of inhibits identity development. She states that, “the limitations of language of maternal identity hinder their processes of identity formation and further exacerbate problems of recognition perpetuated by legal disenfranchisement and general social homophobia or heterosexism”. Even in regards to documented parental status, while the federal laws recently passed for same-sex marriage (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015) have helped co-mothers gain legal rights to their children, what they are now entitled to pursue with minimal cost/challenges is a stepparent adoption, even though they are not “step parents”.

Thus, even their legal entitlement to rights over their children is loaded with discourse that conveys particular elements of power as to just how legitimate they are as rightful parents. So while naming oneself in relation to their children and as a mark of parental status may be crucial to a co-mother's personal experience and identity, it also, "assign[s] power and agency to certain identifications. For this reasons, [other] names...are not rhetorically or ideologically neutral" (Miller, 2012).

Overall, there is indeed research amongst different disciplines discussing the experiences of lesbian women who have children. This literature has showcased the ways in which it overlaps with developmental psychological studies on maternal identity as well as how it departs from what we currently know about general motherhood identity development. As has been shown throughout there are issues of power, legitimacy and cultural frameworks at play, shaping these experiences, influencing the ways in which lesbian women develop their identity as mothers as different from what is known about heterosexual women. However, how do all of these different influences come together and shape how lesbian mothers experience their maternal identity formation when they have children? This question has yet to be explored.

### **Intersections With Race and Racism**

Up until this point, there has been a lack of conversation of how race, racism and socioeconomic status intersect with maternal identity formation. This is because the research that has been examined and the theories that have been utilized are most often based on and interpreted through whiteness, white bodies and lives, and a white lens

taken by researchers. The inclusion of women of color in the studies presented was incredibly minimal and did not speak at all to the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and identity. While the present study also does not have any participants of color, these intersections must still be addressed when talking about reproduction and having children, especially when talking about lesbian families. Without doing so, as Moore (2011) explains, this perpetuates the notion that non-white lesbian women do not exist or do not also create families.

The concepts of the motherhood mandate and heterosexual matrix that have been discussed are both built upon and rely not only on the conception of a straight mother but also a *white* mother. Roberts (1997) provides a history of black women's sexuality and motherhood in the United States from slavery through present day regulation that explains the importance of our discursive power when discussing the mother, the "right" mother in regards to the mandate and matrix must be white. The social foundation of power and control that has been dominated by white bodies discriminating against and controlling bodies of color is the same foundation on which the discursive power of the heterosexual matrix was constructed. So in addition to the sentiment that a lesbian mother is already deviant from our understanding of the good, mandated mother, so is a mother of color. She is already othered, whether or not she is a lesbian *mother*, when she is both a woman of color and a lesbian the intersection of these identities continues to push away from the good, mandated mother. In other words, lesbian mothers of color are thought to be invisible (Moore, 2011). The fact that this study does not have any participants of

color is problematic because it perpetuate the false assumption that black mothers and other mothers of color do not exist.

As was argued by Laney et al. (2014), all major identities should be understood as developing within “concert” to one another, race is one of those identities that must be considered because of the historical and present day impact that racism and prejudice have influenced motherhood for women of color. This present study only expands upon Laney et al.’s work insofar as *white* lesbian mothers. And acknowledging the influence that their whiteness has on their experiences as lesbian mothers is an important context for the analysis of their identity development, even if the white mothers do not see their race as salient to their experiences (Moore, 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Seen throughout the literature review, queer theory has been a strong influence in the analysis of this work. In order to examine what has been studied about lesbian couples that choose to have children while analyzing the areas of overlap, ways in which lesbian couples depart from what is understood in current psychological development literature, I applied various queer theatrical lens through Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990). This application of queer theory provides insight to identifying the nuances in maternal identification that lesbian mothers struggle with. While there has been research in a variety of disciplines that examine experiences of lesbian mothers, it is through the application of queer theory that it is clear these different experiences may be impactful enough to shape maternal identity formation. Furthermore, I draw on the work of

Ginsburg & Rapp (1991), Moore (2011), and Roberts (1997) to understand how the social stratification of race and class have also granted privilege to the white, middle-upper class mothers in this study to navigate making space for their identities.

Additionally, I am also undertaking a specific call by Laney et al. (2014) and Laney et al. (2015) to further develop their theory of identity development and motherhood. Laney et al. (2014) specifically stated that the research, “indicate(s) that identity is a multifaceted concept and that the major aspects of one’s identity should be studied in concert with one another”. This study aims to build upon the foundational theory they have established to specifically gain better insight into identity formation of women in lesbian relationships.

### **The Present Study**

The main research question of this study is, *in what ways does a woman’s identity and experiences as lesbian influence her identity formation as mother?* How do the clearly outlined nuances found in the research of lesbian mother’s experiences each impact lesbian women’s identity as a mother? Each of these categories: contradiction in identity, biological connection, community formation, legal rights, and privilege in language, highlight unique aspects of identity formation and development that impact lesbian mothers in ways that heterosexual mothers do not experience because of their sexual orientation. In order to better support diverse mothers, this research on maternal identity formation hopes to parse out these and potentially more nuances.

Finally, it is also important that I comment on my specific choice of terminology for this study. For couples that have had children through pregnancy, I will utilize the term gestational mother in reference to the mother who gave birth to the child. Co-mother will be utilized in reference to the mother who did not give birth to the child. Co-mothers may still be biologically connected to their child if they donated their eggs to their partner who is the gestational mother. Most of the gestational mothers in this study are also biologically connected to their children, and most of the co-mothers are not biologically connected to their children. However, there is one participant in this study, Kerry, who donated her eggs to her partner therefore she is a co-mother and she is also biologically connected to her children. Additionally, there is one participant, Quinn, who is a gestational mother/biologically connected to two of her children and a co-mother and not biologically connected to one of her children. Lesbian couple(s)/women in lesbian relationships will be utilized to describe two women in a relationship who made the decision to have a child together.

It is important to acknowledge that many LGBTQ mothers reject the differential terms of 'gestational mother' and 'co-mother'. Or they may use different terms to signify their positionality to their child. In fact, these are research terms only and not part of the legal nomenclature where moms are made by biological, gestational, and social ties. Additionally, women in relationships with each other building families may not identify as a lesbian. They may identify as bisexual, asexual, queer or with one of the many other sexual orientation categories. The terminology that I employ in this study is not to signify

that this is the terminology that all women choose to utilize in their own lives, and each individual's choice of language is to be respected.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants of the present study (N=13) were women who planned for and brought their children into their family within a same-gender or same-sex relationship and identified as a mother. These mothers intentionally pursued parenthood. Additionally, at least one of their children had to be between the ages of 2-18 and living with them. Of the 13 women interviewed, 11 are included in the present analysis. In order to maintain cohesive analysis, only mothers who are located in California and had brought children into their family through birth are included in the present study. One mother was excluded because her path to motherhood was unique in comparison to the rest of the participants, as she had adopted her children after fostering them. One mother was excluded because she was not located in California. All other participants are either gestational mothers or co-mothers (their partner gave birth to their child) and live in California.

Of the mothers included in this study, eight self-identified their sexual orientation as lesbian (72%), two self-identified as queer (18%), and one self-identified as asexual (9%). All of the 11 participants self-identified as cis-gender woman (100%). Not all participants were still with the partner that they had their child with (N=2) but both participants who were no longer with the partner they had children with had remarried.

The range of number of children the participants had was one to three. Six of the mothers had one child (55%), four of the mothers had two children (36%) and one mother had three children (9%). Four participants were gestational mothers to all of their children (36%), six participants were co-mothers to all of their children (55%), and one participant was both a gestational mother and a co-mother (9%). The mom who was both a gestational and co-mom had given birth to her first and third child and was a co-mom to her middle child. The average age of participants was 40 years old (range 32-50). All participants had high levels of education; one participant had an AA degree, three held a bachelor's degree, three held a master's degree, and four participants held doctoral or professional degrees (MD, JD, etc.). All 11 participants self-identified as white. All 11 participants were located in Northern California. See Appendix 1 for a detailed chart of participants.

### **Procedure**

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited through a variety of methods. Flyers were posted and E-Newsletters posted at community resource centers for LGBTQ members as well as fertility and midwifery offices that serve LGBTQ families. Snow sampling with connections through the author's personal and professional contacts was also utilized. This produced a convenience sample of mothers for the present study. Women who contacted the study were screened either via email correspondence if they voluntarily shared their situational information when contacting the researcher, via a Qualtrics study if there was a hyperlink in the advertisement that led them to the study, or

video chat prior to the start of the interview to ensure that they identified as a mother who brought children into her family within a same-gender or same-sex relationship and that at least one of her children was between the ages of two and 18. See Appendix 2 for screening questions asked. Participants were given a \$15 gift card to Amazon.com as a thank you for their time. They received this gift card even if they decided to end the interview early or decline to answer a question and they were informed of this before the interview.

**Interviews.** All interviews were conducted via video chat (N=10) or in person (N=1). The length of the interviews lasted from 34 to 82 minutes. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were audio recorded. The author then transcribed the audio recordings. A pseudonym was given to each participant in order to protect confidentiality.

The semi-structured interviews for this study allowed mothers to reflect on their experiences of maternal identity formation and the ways in which their sexual orientation may have been meaningful in their identity formation as a mother. The semi-structured questions were modified based on the positionality of what this research categorized as the participant being a gestational mother or a co-mother. Additional questions were asked on an individual basis in order to follow salient areas of identity to the mother. Questions traced the mother's experiences with identity from prior to having children, to the present, and what they imagine the future to be like. Mothers were explicitly asked, "How you feel your identity as a mother and your sexual orientation identity intersect?" See Appendix 3 for full interview guide.

## **Data Analysis**

**Process.** The qualitative data analysis for this study was guided by modified grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017) in order for the author to explore themes that exist in current literature as well as leave room for other findings to emerge, as they exist. Data analysis was completed in three distinct phases. Upon completing a literature review for this study, the author determined that there would possibly be findings that related to six different themes: contradiction in identities, forging connection, experiences of discrimination, community formation, legal rights, and language use. For phase one of data analysis, the author first read through the transcripts coding for experiences that related to any of these six themes. Then the grounded theory process of coding and analysis occurred in three parts, all conducted by the author. For phase two of data analysis, the author first read through the transcripts in order to identify thematic categories that were not included within the six already defined categories. Secondly, the author created codes based on the categories and coded text for the new themes. Finally, for phase three of data analysis, the author enacted an axial interpretation approach with both the six predetermined categories as well as any new thematic categories to understand the conditions in which they emerged, examine how the codes intersected or related to one another, and to explain the participants' understanding of their identity with motherhood and their sexual orientation identity. The author concluded content analysis once theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation was reached when no new themes of maternal identity formation emerged.

**Thematic Categories Definitions.** The six thematic categories that the author coded for in phase one of data analysis are defined as follows; **contradiction in identities** was coded any time a participant indicated that was or is challenging to integrate their self-concept as a lesbian and their self-concept as a mother. However, upon additional analysis of the data, this code expanded to also include any time a participant discussed the integration of their self-concept as a lesbian and their self-concept, regardless of if they expressed it as challenging or not. **Forging connection** was coded any time a mother's biological connection to her child, or lack thereof, was discussed. Anytime a participant discussed either actual experiences with or the anticipation/fear of discrimination towards herself or her children, **experiences of discrimination** was coded. **Community formation** was coded anytime a participant referenced family, friends, community, or support for herself or her children. **Legal access** was coded anytime legal rights, action, or lack of legal access was mentioned. Finally, any reference to feelings of delegitimization or legitimization of identity through the language use of others or self was coded as **language use**.

The additional thematic category that emerged in phase two of data analysis was coded as **queering parenting**. Parenting was coded any time that a mother explicitly discussed her sexual orientation identity as influencing how she parented her child(ren). The actual frequency, depth, and relation to identity of all seven of these thematic categories are discussed within the results.

## Results

### Contradiction in Identities

As argued within the literature review on lesbian mothers and prefaced within the introduction, lesbian mothers are expected to experience a contradiction in their identities because they struggle to integrate their self-concept as a mother and as a lesbian (Hayman, Wilkes, Jackson, & Halcomb, 2013, Mamo, 2007, Miller, 2012, Wall, 2011). Four of the mothers in this study did express some barriers to situating their self-concept within motherhood because of their identity as a lesbian. However, by investigating the deeper experiences of the 11 women included in this study, it becomes clear that it is more complicated than that. Some mothers did not experience a contradiction in their identity at all, and while some women recognize their “lesbian motherhood” as always apparent, they still experience positive aspects to integrating those two identities.

Of the four mothers that did experience a contradiction in their identities, two of these mothers felt this contradiction before they had children because they thought that their identity as a lesbian limited their options to have children. Riley and Sam, both gestational mothers, shared how they had always wanted children, and even imagined themselves being mothers, however after they came out as a lesbian they doubted that possibility as a reality. As Sam stated:

I don't think I ever really thought about what would it be like to be in a- be a gay parent. I mean once I came out, I still thought about having kids, but I don't think I ever put the two together. I don't think I thought about being a lesbian and having kids. They were kind of like these separate thoughts. (Sam, gestational mother)

As her experiences suggests, Sam did feel as though her identity as a mom and as a lesbian could not fit together. As previous research suggests, these women could not put themselves within the model of what it means to be the 'right' kind of mothers, and therefore struggled to see themselves holding both identities at the same time.

Slightly different from Riley and Sam's experience, Quinn and Alex also struggled with moving into the identity as a mother but it was specifically because they had not pictured that being a part of their life prior to being with the partner they had children with. Both Quinn and Alex explained that they been more focused on their careers and simply hadn't thought about having children as a part of their family until it was something their partners wanted. Alex went on to say that this was the case predominately because she did not have any examples of what it would look like to have children within a lesbian relationship. She shared that:

I think a big part for me was not having a context for what that would look like. I didn't know any other queer parents and I was raised in a really conservative household...and then I did meet a couple that we became good friends with who were probably like ten years older than us who had a child. And I was like, 'oh yeah I could do this, I could see' I just had like a picture of what it actually could look like and I was like, 'this isn't weird or scary or like bad'. (Alex, co-mother)

For both of these mothers, they had not inherently felt a contradiction in their identity as a lesbian and the possibility of identifying as a mother, the barrier for them was simply not imagining it. For Alex, being able to see an example changed her ability to envision that possibility. This shows how important it can be to build community amongst queer parents because it can directly impact how other are able to envision their identity.

There were also two co-mothers who struggled to integrate their identity as a mother while their partner was pregnant. Kerry shared that while she could understand her inevitable role as a parent, she didn't necessarily feel that identity was hers yet:

...maybe intellectually but not necessarily biologically...I think, no. Not really. Like you know that kids is yours, and I knew it was genetically mine too, and so you have kind of that feeling. But feeling like I was a mother at that point? Or going to be? Nah. (Kerry, co-mother)

For her there was a disconnect between knowing she was going to have a child and actually identifying as a mother because of the physical disconnect from the process as a co-mother. She shared that she was not able to identify as a mother until after her partner gave birth. Morgan also highlighted the limited understanding of roles that exist for co-mother during pregnancy. She explained that:

I kind of felt like I was like the dude but I didn't want to be the dude. You know just in terms of heterosexual relationships and kind of walking down that path because if you're not experiencing actual pregnancy, you just don't understand what they're going through. (Morgan, co-mother)

The only experience that she felt she could connect her own to was society's role of a father in a heterosexual relationship because that is the only example of a non-birthing parent's role she knows. Because she also does not identify as "a dude" or a father, she could not situate her own identity within her real experiences. However, it was only during pregnancy that these two mothers struggled to integrate their identities; they did not express any difficulty in imagining themselves pursuing parenthood and they both felt like they integrated those identities after the birth of their children.

Unlike these four moms, there were also four moms that felt their two identities, as a lesbian and as a mom “seamlessly integrated”. Each of these moms also talked about what it is that contributed to the easy integration of these two identities. For Carmen, a co-mom, it was community, “I think I’m so immersed in my life and I’m surrounded by other queer families that I just- I don’t really have to think about it very much.” The fact that she felt represented as well as having similar experiences to those around her made it easy for her to feel the two identities within her own self-concept. Hayden, a gestational mom, shared that because she and a heterosexual co-worker were pregnant at the same time, and she was not treated differently than her peer by anyone in the office, that she felt she was able to have a “normal” pregnancy and not see anything different about her own entrance into motherhood. Dawn, a co-mom, discussed how important it was for her to be very involved in the planning and decision making process as a co-mother when her and her partner were trying to have a child. This heavy involvement allowed her to feel like a mom before her child was even born. Kerry, a co-mom, even though she struggled to connect to an identity as a mother in pregnancy, felt that once her kids were born her identities were like “two sides to a coin”, both identities are a part of her but neither one impact’s the others ability to be present and an active part of her self concept. Although manifested because of different experiences, these four mothers show that there are also lesbian women who do not struggle with integrating their two identities; their identity as a mom and identity as a lesbian are not contradictory at all.

It is also important to explain that there were a few mothers who expressed the feeling that, whether or not it was easy to integrate their two identities as a lesbian and a mom, the fact that they are a “gay mom” is always an apparent and present part of their experience with parenthood when they are interacting with other people. These mothers feel that their queer identity is constantly present as a part of their identity and experiences as mom because they experience things as different from the ‘right’ mother.

Sam shares her feelings as:

I’m always aware that I’m gay. I’m always aware that I’m a mother. When I’m talking to other mothers about my kid or my family, I am aware that it’s different than theirs...I think there is a universal mom experience, I do. But in my heard, when I’m talking to my friend I am aware, reality or not, but I am aware that my experience is different from hers. (Sam, gestational mom)

Sam explains that while she feels that her identity as a mother can still connect to other mothers, there are still consistent and present nuances to that experience in comparison to heterosexual moms. This impacts the way she sees her own identity as a mother when interacting with others. Andie, a gestational mom, also shared how the integration of her two identities explicitly impacts those around her, “the spaces we have to inhabit because we have little kids are mostly straight. And so for me it’s mostly like I am queer in parenting space more so than I’m like introducing parenting into queer space.” She shares that just by being around other parents as a queer parent she feels she challenges what the ‘normal’ parenting space typically looks like and what it is that a ‘normal’ mother looks like. This also inherently makes her identity as a queer mom as something different and nuanced, although not necessarily negative.

There are moms within this study that do show that it can be challenging to integrate the two identities as a lesbian and as a mom because there is an inherent contradiction in the two identities. However, there are also just as many moms within this study, that through their lived experiences, they have not felt that contradiction and therefore not struggled to integrate their different identities into their self-concept. This suggests that perhaps in current times, women's experience in becoming mothers are substantially more nuanced and maybe younger lesbians even feel more comfortable in that transition than previous generations because of progress in politics or the area in which they live. The following thematic categories of analysis explore these possibilities for identity integration for lesbian mothers more thoroughly.

### **Forging connection**

One co-mother, Carmen, worried about the impact not being a birth mother would have on forging a relationship with her child as a mom, "I wouldn't have done anything differently, but it was a big thing for me to give up [being pregnant/giving birth] and I worried a lot about how it would feel to not have a biological connection". She also worried about how her identity would be perceived and validated by others, "We all went somewhere together. It was just sooo obvious who his biological parents are. And he looks so much like both of them. That it was like, wow, I wonder if people think that I'm the nanny." For Carmen, she felt that her lack of biological connection might lead others to not seeing her as a part of the family. So in order to work through those feelings, she had to find meaning in her positionality as a mother,

But, I think what I wanted eventually, right before our son was born, was that I actually had this really important role. I think by [my wife] not acknowledging that, it didn't give me the space to realize what I was going to gain by not being related or not being a gestational parent. (Carmen, co-mom)

Carmen's identity integration with motherhood was not only impacted by her own concerns around a lack of a biological connection, but also by how her partner validated those concerns. Once she felt that her personal experience into motherhood was valid and given space, Carmen could come to understand her own role as a mom, find meaning in her positionality as a co-mother, and build that relationship with her child. Several other mothers also pursued alternative ways to make meaning of their position and forge a connection as a co-mother. In order to deepen the sense of connection Alex felt to her child, it was important for her find a sperm donor with similar characteristics to her family so that her child may look more like her,

We did specifically look for somebody who in their profile had characteristics that were a little bit more like mine. Or like who had features that looked a little bit like me or like different people in my family. So we tried to kind of balance that in that way. At least to make ourselves feel aesthetically better about it. Even though obviously it's not someone who's like apart of my family or it's not my genetics. But at least we still have this common family thread of how we look as a family. (Alex, co-mom)

Similar to Carmen, because of the lack of a biological connection, Alex was concerned about being validated as a part of the family, as their child's mother. Similar to how Mamo (2007) describes "matching" as a way in which mothers attempt to "maximize affinity", Alex felt affirmation through forging a possible physical connection with her

child as a way to forge a relational one with her family and subsequently, her own identity as a mom.

Some moms also discussed names as being an important part of crafting the relationship they wanted with their child as co-mothers. For example, Charlie “claimed” the name ‘mama’ for herself because she felt the name suited her best and that was an important way she could assert her own identity within the family as someone who was “not the primary parent”. The ability to choose the name that they would like to be called by their children helped these women feel legitimate in their role as a mom.

Kerry, the only co-mom in this study whose partner carried her eggs, felt it was important to pass on her genetics if she was not the gestational parent:

For me, there was always kind of a genetic component. The relationship to my kids that my mom always talked about, how you relate to your family because of genetics. And it kind of instilled that in me so for me it was kind of like, if I could, that would be my preference. That the kids be genetically related to me.  
(Kerry, co-mom)

For Kerry, the idea of not being a gestational parent was not a hard decision for her, she had no interest in being pregnant and giving birth, so being a co-mom felt easy to incorporate into her idea of a mom. However, it was important to Kerry that she constructed her position as a mother through being the genetic parent, so her wife carried her eggs. This allowed her to meet her own expectations for what a mother looks like, as was taught to her by her mother, which was through genetics not necessarily birth.

Holding and feeding was also an important aspect of asserting one’s identity and forging connection as a mother for co-mothers who did not have a biological connection

to their children. Three of the mothers said that they would try to hold their children in public in order to be read by others around them as a mom. Carmen, a co-mom, said, “If I’m holding him then it’s obvious that I’m connected with him. And then maybe there’s a question of who my wife is, but she looks so much like him that I feel like there’s probably less of that”. With a similar perspective, Quinn said:

It would bother me with our first that if she was holding him it was automatically assumed that she was the mother and I was just a friend or a sister and then vice versa. When she had our second and I would be holding him, that she automatically wasn’t the mom. It really kind of frustrated me. (Quinn, gestational and co-mom)

It de-legitimized the women’s identity as a mother, and her connection to her baby, when others around would not assume a maternal relationship. Therefore, they felt that holding the baby would re-assert their relationship with their child, and affirm their identity as a mom.

Four mothers also discussed the desire to incorporate bottle-feeding their child so that the co-mother could also maximize on the feeding experience in order to forge connection as well as support equal distribution of work between the two moms. When the baby would not want to take a bottle, it was a disappointing experience for co-mothers. One of the moms stated:

I was worried about how to bond in a way that was effective when I wasn’t the one nursing him...And he didn’t really like taking bottles so that wasn’t an easy thing for me to just do. He was fine with me at that age but after a couple months he definitely had a preference for my wife, which was hard. And I think she sensed that too. That I was feeling a little bit like, where do I fit with this? And I think that piece was hard to figure out. (Alex, co-mother)

Without the opportunity to participate in feeding, Alex struggled coping with the loss of that connection and situating herself as a mother within her family unit. She didn't know where she "fit" as a mom. Charlie also expressed this similar sentiment, "For awhile I was trying to insist on bottle feeding. [The baby] didn't like taking the bottle. But I felt like, 'where am I at in getting to do this?'" For the moms who were not able to successfully partake in feeding as a bonding activity in their child's early months, they had to find a way to cope with that feeling of loss as a maternal right. Some of the moms discussed simply having to wait out this phase. As Alex stated, "I kind of took solace just in knowing that it wasn't going to be like this forever". Some mothers were concerned about how their lack of biological or gestational connection would impact their relationship with their children. Feeding was a specific way in which several of these moms did feel their positionality impacted their relationship and then subsequently their role as a legitimate mother. Overall, many of the co-moms sought out ways to compensate for their non-gestational parent position by doing other things that enhanced their identity as a mom and assisted them in understanding where they "fit" in the family that is often confined by heteronormative parenting roles (Sullivan, 2004).

### **Language Use**

During the process to have a child, the language use of others seemed to deeply impact the experience of many mothers. How others referenced them as an individual or a family could easily delegitimize a mother's sense of maternal identity or right to be a

part of the process. In simply trying to research and find resources, Alex discussed how books were not as helpful as anticipated:

Every couple years it's just the language gets more and more, it just changes. And so if you read something that's from even ten years ago about sexuality or just like- who wrote this? Or what? Really?...I don't remember what it was that we were reading but I definitely didn't connect to the book, it was just kind of like, this is not a helpful resource. (Alex, co-mom)

Knowing that language is constantly changing within context for the queer community, Alex had a hard time finding resources in print that were even accurate in portraying her family and experience and often went online to find more accurate and up-to-date information that matched her experience as a queer co-mother.

Two mothers also cited the out-of-date language use of birth classes, a place parents-to-be normally turn to for support and guidance. Andie said that when she and her partner went to a birthing class:

The teacher was always diving us into groups. Like, 'okay well so moms you go over here and dad's and [Andie's partner] go over here...*moms* over here and *partners* over here' and I said, 'well actually, I mean she's a mom too'. (Andie, gestational mom)

By only referring to the pregnant person in the couple as a mom, Andie's partner was left out of being recognized as a mom too. Andie discussed that she actually had a very hard time self-identifying as mother while she was pregnant because it hurt her to see that her partner was not being respected in the same way. Others around them, not just at birth class, "started referring to [me] as a mom and it was really striking to me that people didn't do that with my partner because she wasn't pregnant". While this may have been

challenging for Andie's partner to experience, who was not interviewed, it was also challenging for Andie because she felt like she could not embrace her maternal identity while it was not equally being respected within her partner as well.

The hospital was also a common place for co-mothers to be delegitimized because of other's language use. When touring the hospital that her wife was supposed to give birth in, Dawn said that the guide was walking a large group through the tour saying:

Now father's you'll park here. And fathers you'll come here. And then father, this is what you'll do. And so I looked at the other lesbian couple [on the tour] and I said, 'so where do we park? Where do we sit? (laughs) What do we do?' (Dawn, co-mom)

While able to joke about the experience with another couple that was going through the same thing, Dawn still did not see herself being represented in the language use by the hospital practitioners. This experience led Dawn and her partner to making the decision to find a different hospital to give birth at, one in which their obstetrician had to get privileges to practice at in order to deliver their child. Sam also discussed the language of the legal documents used at the hospital for the birth certificate as not being inclusive of her family:

We made a big stink when [my daughter] was born, they kept bringing the forms in for the birth certificate and I kept saying 'no, I'm not putting [my partner] under father, I'm not doing it, you bring me one that says parent because I'm not'. But eventually, I also wasn't going to leave the hospital without her name on something so the birth certificate does read father/parent. (Sam, gestational mom)

Sam felt that the listing of her partner, the co-mother to their children, as a father instead of a mother or parent was delegitimizing to who her partner actually was to their children.

It did not encompass the actual identity of the co-mother so Sam attempted to fight this disrespectful legal document that her partner would have to sign, but to no avail had to or risk her partner having no claim to rights at their child's birth.

In many situations, the lack of accurate language or language inclusivity in parenting spaces invalidated the mother's identity as a mom. This impacted the women's feeling that these parenting spaces were just as equally for them as they were for other heterosexual parents. Considering the significant time in US history that these women became mothers and this study was conducted, two-mom and two-dad families are becoming increasingly integrated into normative family structures, and yet the institutional language is still not advancing to meet the needs of these families. Considering the fact that co-mothers, such as Sam's partner, have the right to their name on their child's birth certificate if they are legally married to the gestational mother, forcing the legal parental identification as "father" has a significant impact on mother's ability to identify as a "mother". Additionally, others who did not think intentionally about how they referred to gestational moms and co-moms influenced the creation of a tension between gestational moms being validated and co-moms being invalidated in their identity.

### **Community Formation**

Community formation was a deeply enriching element of how these mothers created a normalized experience of motherhood for both themselves as well as their children. Four mothers specifically talked about how important it was for them to be

friends with other same-sex family parents who “get it”. They felt that it was meaningful to be able to discuss their experiences with parenting, or moment of prejudice from others, with another mother who would understand where she was coming from. In explaining why having other lesbian family friends was important to her, she said that:

I think that just in terms of safety, having people that you don’t have to explain things to. And also I think having people who can understand, like someone you can tell a story to who will understand the significance of it. (Andie, gestational mom)

Andie felt like she had experiences as a parent that only other two mom family parents could understand, such as strangers constantly asking who was the gestational parent in her relationship. She felt validated in her experiences and their impact by being able to share these with lesbian moms who understood.

More than half of the mothers discussed the importance of having an understanding outlet to ask questions and learn from other queer parents. As Kerry described it:

For the most part you can ask any families that you share values with, ‘what did you do as a parent? What do you recommend?’ But there are those few situations where it really helps to have an opinion of someone of another lesbian or gay family because they’ll understand more than anyone else. Even if your friends are the most empathetic people on the planet, it’s not quite the same. (Kerry, co-mom)

Having this support from other lesbian and gay parents supported Kerry in being able to explore her philosophies on how she wants to parent, and there are situations that she can’t do that with just any family. Hayden discusses this as well when she says that

because of the close lesbian parent friends that she's made, "we have a way more global understanding of issues and stuff. And so I think that now we definitely identify way more with the LGBTQ community." Hayden pursued friends with two mom families once she had her child and wanted to connect with other parents that shared experiences with her. Through these relationships she felt that she was able to learn more about the queer community, which consequently influenced how she identified within the LGBTQ community significantly. She described herself as not very active in queer events or community prior to having children and now her investment has grown. She started a LGBTQ parent meet up group and feels it is incredibly important to her to stay involved in the community, socially and politically.

Conception was a specific area that four moms discussed was incredibly important to have queer community for. All four of these mothers wanted to create community of other two mom partners trying to have a baby to build support as well as be able to ask advice during the process. Andie, who successfully created that community when she was trying to conceive and then became pregnant said that, "it's a very tender time, when you don't really want to be talk to too many people about it but you need to talk about it." She described the formation of this group as "intentional" and an important piece of the emotional journey of conception for two mom families. For others who were not able to find that kind of community with other moms in their area it was challenging. Riley described how she really needed that support to get through the process of fertility and when she couldn't find it in her immediate area, she reached out and found other

lesbian moms trying to conceive online. Alex said that she and her partner were the first to pursue parenthood out of their queer friend group so it was challenging because they didn't have anyone that they could ask their questions to about options for conception.

However, now that they are parents themselves, other moms like Alex discussed the heightened sense of community they've been able to build by providing that support to other lesbian moms who are trying to have children. Carmen said that she feels that:

A lot of people kind of watch us. And I know a lot of younger queer families that are like, 'we really want to have a baby, you guys are so amazing, you're like our role models'. And a lot of older families are like, 'we want to be [your children's] surrogate grandparents and we wish that we had had a family like yours' (Carmen, co-mom)

She felt that she has been able to make meaning of the experiences that she's gone through to support other people in their process to creating a family. Carmen also felt that that intergenerational aspect to these family connections with older queer people who did not have children was important to the influence that she now has in the parenting community.

Aside from connecting with other lesbian parents, four moms also said that their new identity as a parent also allowed them to form connections and community with people they felt like they couldn't connect with before, specifically heterosexual mothers. Most felt that there were people they did not connect with because of their queer identity but then felt that their new identity as a mother allowed them to forge bonds that they otherwise would not have been able. Riley gave the example of:

I felt, although I was out, I was never really apart of the mainstream. I would go out to lunch with...say I was going to a lunch with an executive director of a non-profit, I didn't really feel like I could connect on any level because I was a lesbian and they were not. And they were talking about their kids. And so for me it was real change because I felt like I could connect to people on a whole other level because I was a mom also. So it was a real shift in my comfort level. (Riley, gestational mom)

In this situation becoming a lesbian mom made her more comfortable in settings and with people she did not feel comfortable with before becoming a mom. It changed the way she could relate to people and increased the ways in which she could create community.

Additionally, almost all of the moms expressed how important it was to connect with other queer parents for their children. There were two main reasons that they described this connection for their kids as important, first, in order to normalize their family setup and secondly, so that their children did not feel alone as someone with two moms. Sam, a gestational mom, emphasized creating this normalization by spending time with other two mom families by explaining that, "we're not talking about [being a two mom family] all the time...but she's seeing it. I hope it just kind of imprints on her reality. So that is important." Sam felt that providing that example for her child was meaningful to her kid's understanding even though her family had to go out of their way to get to LGBTQ family meet-ups. Alex talked about how important it was that her child not feels alone in being a kid with two moms because she didn't want it to be an "isolating experience". Because of that, Alex and her wife were intentional in thinking about where they would live and make conscious geographical decisions because she

never wants to live somewhere where there would not be other queer families for her child to interact with.

It was clear that these mothers did not want their identity to have a negative impact on their children and see community formation with other queer families as a way to protect them from that. As Kerry put it, “you want to provide an explain for your kids...It’s okay to be who we are as a family.” These mothers realize that other people might try to teach their children it is not okay to be who there are as a family and these mothers fight to work against that from their children’s early ages.

Creating community through/because of their identity as a parent was incredibly important to most of the mothers. It not only felt like an important element of raising their child, but it was also crucial to the mother’s identities and experiences themselves. For these mothers, they wanted to connect with other queer parents in order to share information and get advice. They also found their identity as a mother opened up new outlets for connection, with other heterosexual moms, that many felt they otherwise did not connect with prior to becoming a mom.

### **Experiences of Discrimination**

Surprisingly, nearly every mother specifically stated that although they were “braced for the worst” they actually felt they had not really experienced discrimination as a lesbian family. Of the nine mothers that talked about anticipating hate, they all stated that they had never experienced an active act of discrimination against their family. Five of these mothers stated that they felt they had not experienced discrimination or prejudice

because they lived in California. Morgan, a co-mom, said that, “Given where we live, I think we’re incredibly lucky and blessed to live here. And I just don’t think it’s something that other people really even think about. And because of that, it’s just never an issue for us.” While this is not an accurate depiction of all two mom families’ experiences across the United States, it is clear that the fact that these mothers live in Northern California has a meaningful impact on how these women experience their motherhood in public because of the lack of intentional discrimination. Additionally, while the participants themselves did not discuss it, the identities of these mothers as both white and middle to upper class may influence the lack of discrimination that they experience because they do not have to also navigate the racism and structural inequalities that mothers of color do within their lived experiences with identity (Moore, 2011).

However, while these mothers had never experienced explicit discrimination, they did occasionally have experiences of prejudice in the form of invasive questions from heterosexual people. Some of the mothers described that they often are asked questions such as, ‘how did you get pregnant? Where did the baby come from? Who’s is it? Did one of you have to have sex with a man to get pregnant?’ These mothers felt that these were incredibly invasive and also questions that the heterosexual people who were asking would never ask of fellow straight couples. Additionally, it is important to specify that this sort of inquiry was different than when other queer people who want to be parents would ask them. Usually these invasive questions were coming from complete strangers

or disapproving family members. As Alex stated, “If it had been a friend of mine asking me it would have been fine, like if it was someone who was queer identified...I wouldn’t have been offended by them.” Alex was highlighting that the questions had a different impact if it was trusted friend or queer person seeking knowledge for their own journey, but when other people felt entitled to this private information just because, it was invasive and uncomfortable.

This invasive style of questioning can delegitimize a lesbian parent’s identity as a parent because they realize that heterosexual parents are often not subjected to such stigmatized inquiry. It causes lesbian mothers to feel othered. Kerry said that normally, “for day to day life, [I] feel way more like a parent. But I’m definitely aware of the fact that we don't look like all the other families that are around.” Kerry felt that the invasive questions from strangers forced her and her family to stand out as other/different from heterosexual families and when she is not subjected to this form of prejudice she can feel just like any other parent. So while these mothers did not describe explicit discrimination as a part of their experiences as two mom families, they do still experience some prejudice that can undermine their role as a parent and delegitimize their identity as a mom.

### **Legal Access**

Nine out of the eleven mothers discussed the legal steps they took to establish both mother’s relationship with their child. All nine of these mothers cited being on the birth certificate as an important aspect of that establishment, as Charlie stated:

We were in a domestic partnership then we were legally married and we were like, oh we do have protections. I will be on the on the birth certificate, thank god we live in California. But then after that we felt everything was cool and kosher and all that stuff...

The co-mothers being able to put their name on the birth certificate was meaningful because it assisted in validating their identity and rights as a mother. However, Charlie then went onto say:

...until Donald Trump got elected. And last Monday we met with a lawyer to start the second parent adoption process, which is- Really hurts me in my heart but I know I have to do it. I mean philosophically, I shouldn't have to adopt my own daughter. (Charlie, co-mom)

While two of the mothers went through the adoption process for the co-mother right after their children were born, five of the co-mothers have begun the process to adopt their children as a result of the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, like Charlie. The only two mothers who were not pursuing a second/stepparent adoption for the co-mother were the two mothers who have since separated from the women they had their children with.

Prior to this election, the mothers felt confident in their name on their child's birth certificate and the political progress LGBTQ families have made in recent history. It felt like enough to validate and legitimize their motherhood. However, this election has shaken that confidence that the co-mother's right to their children will not be threatened. Alex stated that the process:

Is like a really invalidating kind of feeling or step to parenthood as a queer person. Where you feel like, it is a legal- it's a necessity to protect yourself in that way but it just feels like really frustrating that it exists. (Alex, co-mom)

Alex felt that this was a unique experience as a queer co-parent to require that she legally adopt her child even though she was a part of planning, conceiving, bringing into the world, and raising of her child. In regards to now pursuing an adoption post-election Morgan stated that:

It pisses me off. It makes me very, very angry. I'm on the birth certificate; I shouldn't have to go through a 'stepparent adoption'. Which I think is offensive. It's an offensive word for who I've been. And there's nothing wrong with stepparents...but I'm not a stepparent. I'm that child's parent. And so it angers me. It angers me that I have to- That my family has to do this. And spend this money. And other people don't. And it angers me that other people don't understand that I do have to do this and reason that I have to. (Morgan, co-mom)

Alex and Morgan both bring up the fact that the adoption does not accurately portray their role as a mother and that it is discriminatory that they have to go through this process as mothers in order to protect themselves as parents as well as their children.

It can also be confusing for co-mothers to decide how to navigate the emotional weight that this adoption should be given within the family. Alex, a co-mother, reflected by saying, "do you make it something where you're like this is a day to commemorate? Or is it just like, this is stupid that we had to do this and it's part of our story but like we don't really focus on it?" Alex was not sure how to reflect on this day, the day that she adopted her son, in the future both for her child or for her self because to her, it was an

unnecessary and undesirable process to begin with. Sam, said of her wife adopting their children:

But I've actually also decided that when we do that, because she has to sign something that makes it official that we're a family that I'm also at that time going to take her last name. Cause I feel like I want to do something that also reaffirms my commitment to us as a family unit. So I'm going to try to make it more of a celebratory we're a family thing, rather than, this sucks I can't believe we have to say that you're adopting them in case I die so they don't go to my parents or to foster care or whatever. (Sam, gestational mom)

Sam recognized that this process was insulting to her partner's position as a mother to their children and wanted to help make the process more of a positive experience by changing a piece of her own identity. She also did not want her wife to be alone in affirming their status as mothers and a family.

All but one of these interviews occurred within six weeks after the 2016 presidential election. It was clear how much it concerned the women that the co-mother's right within the family and legitimacy as a parent may be under threat within the impending political climate. Having felt that their identity as a mother and an acceptable family was acknowledged was quickly replaced with fear and doubt. At the time of the interviews some women were just beginning their research to figure out how to process an adoption and others already had paperwork in progress with the courts. While the new administration was not yet in place in the government, the inevitability of its influence already began to make co-mothers feel illegitimate and inspired the need to secure their rights and position as a rightful mother before it was possibly too late.

## **Queering Parenting**

An unanticipated finding that emerged in the analysis of this data was the influence that the mother's identity as lesbian had on her parenting. Seven of the mothers explicitly discussed her sexual orientation identity as influencing how she parented her child(ren). Most of these mothers explained this in direct response to the interview question, "How do you feel that your identity as a mother and your sexual orientation identity intersect or influence one another"? The specifics of how their identity influences their parenting is slightly different amongst the moms, however, they all cite their sexual orientation as the root of this change that they view to be different from non-lesbian parents.

Three mothers said that they focus on teaching their children about different kinds of families and encourage deep empathy for their peers. Dawn described why she teaches her child to be accepting of all families and people:

I want my kids to understand there there's these relationships, and there's these relationships, and none of them are wrong. I want them to be accepting of every walks of life. I think when you become a parent and you come from a classification of society that has had oppression...When you come from that, to being a parent, you want to make sure you teach your children to be better than those people were to you. (Dawn, co-mother)

For these mothers, because of their personal experience with lack of acceptance or empathy from others as a result of their sexual orientation, it has motivated them to parent their children as empathic and accepting people.

Alex and Morgan shared that their experiences as lesbians has influenced them to raise their children with gender neutral influences. For these moms gender-neutral parenting included providing their children with diverse options for clothing and toys as well as intentional language that avoided hyper-gendering when it wasn't necessary. In remembering a book she tried reading to her child, Alex was caught off guard by the hyper-gendered language of 'boy animals' and 'girl animals' because, "we NEVER use that language. We never talk about like boy-girl anything. We just talk about kids, friends, whatever...We just have a really genderless kind of household." These moms realized that not only lesbian parents try to promote gender-neutral experiences for their children but they did feel that their sexual identity was a strong influence in bringing them to that decision and style of parenting. Additionally, as Sullivan (2004) argues, lesbian mothers are more likely to enact less stringent gender performances within their relationship and home, exemplifying that the dynamics of their relationship truly may be a primary influence on their gender-neutral parenting strategies.

Overall, even though the actual unique ways in which they parent varied, these seven mothers all had something in common, they felt that their identity as a lesbian influenced their parenting in a way that challenged parenting norms. This is an important aspect of their parenting identity that they feel is greatly benefiting their children. Upon concluding the different ways that Alex uses a gender-neutral parenting style she stated that, "I think my experiences as a queer person in society have just made me challenge so many things about how people are taught or raised." This captures what many of the

mothers felt, because of their identity prior to having children they are aware that sometimes children are raised in ways that make them feel like they can't accept how they are unique or they are raised to not accept others who are different. It is having these experiences as a lesbian that then encourages them to parent their children different; it fundamentally influences their parenting identity and approach.

### **Discussion**

All six of the thematic categories that were anticipated prior to analysis, contradiction in identities, forging connection, language use, community formation, experiences of discrimination, and legal rights were brought up as a part of the maternal identity experiences from the 11 mothers in this study. Additionally, a thematic category, called parenting was also found within the data analysis as an important part of the mother's identity experiences.

Notably, the findings suggest that lesbian mothers may not so clearly experience a contradiction in their identities as is so intensely characterized in past literature. While there were a few mothers who did struggle to navigate the integration of their two identities, just as many expressed that their identities integrated without any struggle or concern. This is important because it suggests that perhaps, lesbian mothers are not as much of a contradiction as they use to be. It is possible that lesbian mothers are becoming more integrated into society and therefore are able to integrate their identities more readily. And even for those mothers who did initially struggle to understand their self-concept as both lesbian and mother, found it to be easier with time. Any contradiction

they felt between their motherhood and lesbian identity often was because of others making their identity apparent or calling attention to it.

Many of the other areas of salient experiences, forging connection, language use, experiences of discrimination, and legal rights, typically created rifts in a mother's identity only when it was caused by the lack of validation in the systematic structures or the desire for validation from others. When it comes to biological connection, many of the co-mothers wanted to be visibly understood and validated as a part of the family when out in public and if that was denied to them, that was when they felt that their identity as a mother was invalidated. For language use and experiences of discrimination, both of these experiences typically had to do with a lack of inclusion for both moms in parenting spaces, or if they were both recognized as mothers then the invasive inquiry about their family makeup that often followed. These mothers did not inherently feel that their identity was invalid or a contradiction in many of the circumstances, until another's response to them/their family suggested such through prejudice. The legal rights that these mothers have to fight for, as well as the political climate in which they were entering at the time of the study, also had a clear impact as a result of the imposition of others onto their families. The obstacles to parental validation legally also influenced co-mothers validation emotionally. In nearly all of these circumstances, biological connection, language use, experiences of discrimination, and legal rights, the most common reason for a mother to feel that her identity was invalidated, ignored, or in contradiction with her lesbian identity was because of *other* people's, not because she

herself felt that contradiction as inherent to her positionality with her children and within her self-concept.

In fact, in regards to community formation and parenting, the findings of this study suggest that their identity as a lesbian mom actually had positive experiences on their identity and how they felt about their parenting ability. While community formation was crucial to these mother's experiences for many reasons, one interesting finding was that it allowed many of them to connect with heterosexual mothers, something several felt they were unable to do before becoming a mom. This new identity as a 'lesbian mom' opened doors that previously, as just a lesbian, they did not feel as though they had access to. Additionally, more than half of the mothers felt that their identity as a lesbian enabled them to better parent their children in different capacities. This included allowing their children access to diverse gender-neutral options, encouraging deep empathy for their peers, and educating their children about diversity from an early age. Their identity as a lesbian mom allows them to question what may be otherwise normative parenting practices and influences their identity as a parent.

Overall, there are several ways in which these findings support existing literature. Next why it is important in the context of existing literature and/or do your findings support existing literature or does it conflict with existing literature. For example, as discussed by Laney et al., 2014, Smith, 1999, Nelson, 2007, these findings show that building community is crucial for these women as they have become mothers and it was challenging when they were unable to find it (Haymen et al., 2013, Wall, 2011).

Additionally, there are co-mothers who seek to make their identity read as legitimate from outsiders and create an aesthetically cohesive family unit (Haymen et al., 2013, Mamo, 2007, Wall, 2011).

However, these findings depart from what most literature on lesbian mother's identity suggests in that lesbian mothers do not necessarily feel that their identity is inherently contradictory. The "motherhood mandate" (Russo, 1976, 1979) when analyzed against other studies does on lesbian mothers (Hayman, Wilkes, Jackson, & Halcomb, 2013, Miller, 2012, Wall, 2011) argue that the "deviance" in lesbian mother's contradicting identities is internalized by lesbian mothers themselves and therefore creates challenges to integrate the two identities into her self-concept. This study shows that that should no longer be thought of as the typical experience of lesbian mothers, but instead simply one experience and that there are also plenty of mothers that do not experience this struggle with integration of identities. This study does show that if anyone is still invested in this contradiction in the identities between "lesbian" and "mother", it is other people who are not lesbian mothers themselves. It is then when these other people impose their struggle to understand a cohesive "lesbian mother" identity onto lesbian mothers that these moms then feel that their identity may be invalid or illegitimate.

There are certainly limitations to this study, namely that the sample size was 11 and several of the participants were recruited through word of mouth, meaning some of the participants could have been friends with one another and share similar world views. Additionally, all participants included in the analysis were mothers who brought their

child into their family through conception/birth, which excluded mothers who adoption their children and may have different experiences with their identity. Finally, all participants were also based in California, a socially liberal and relatively LGBTQ friendly state to live in. The location in which these mothers are based I do believe has impact on the findings here. Many of the mothers felt that they experienced little to no discrimination because of where they lived; this may have impacted the extent to which they felt that others accepted their identity. However, these limitations do not undermine the findings here. The mothers in this study do represent a nuanced way to understanding the identity experiences of lesbian mothers that does not take away from mothers that do struggle with identity integration but instead, offers alternative narratives that should be added to and included in the conversation of lesbian mother's maternal identity.

The experiences of identity integration for lesbian mothers is indeed nuanced and it possess unique experiences that do not exist for heterosexual mothers. However, these nuances are not necessarily negative nor do they automatically create tension and a contradiction in the identities of "lesbian" and "mom" for these lesbian mothers themselves. If anything, folks who are not lesbian mothers themselves need to interrogate their expectations of motherhood because it is often outsider's influence that creates the invalidation of a lesbian mother's identity. Using inclusive language on legal documents or when referring to co-mothers and refraining from asking invasive questions about a lesbian mother's family would decrease these incidents that make lesbian mothers feel illegitimate in their role and identity as a mother. As the lesbian mothers expressed in this

study, there are many positive aspects to lesbian mother's parenting experiences that could otherwise be promoted when we talk about lesbian moms; like the fact that lesbian mothers explicitly work hard to raise inclusive, empathetic, empowered children. And what could be more validating then bringing loving, socially conscious, two-mom-having people into the world?

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### Appendix 1: Participant Chart

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age at time of interview</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Number of Children at time of interview</b>	<b>Positionality with child/ren</b>
Andy	36	White	Professional Degree	2	Gestational mother
Carmen	35	White	Professional Degree	1	Co-mother
Hayden	33	White	AA Degree	1	Gestational mother
Riley	43	White	Master Degree	2	Gestational mother
Quinn	34	White	Master Degree	3	Gestational mother and co-mother
Sam	39	White	Master Degree	2	Gestational mother
Alex	32	White	Doctorate Degree	1	Co-mother
Charlie	49	White	Bachelor Degree	1	Co-mother
Morgan	50	White	Bachelor Degree	1	Co-mother
Drew	44	White	Bachelor Degree	1	Co-mother
Kerry	40	White	Professional Degree	2	Co-mother

## Appendix 2: Screening Questions

1. Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation identity?
  - a. Lesbian
  - b. Gay
  - c. Queer
  - d. Bisexual
  - e. Fluid
  - f. Pansexual
  - g. Flexisexual
  - h. Polysexual
  - i. Asexual
  - j. Demisexual
  - k. Straight
  - l. Other
    - i. Please specify
2. Which of the following best describes your gender identity?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Transwoman
  - d. Transfemale
  - e. Transman
  - f. Transmale
  - g. Non-binary
  - h. Boi
  - i. Agender
  - j. Androgynous
  - k. Bigender
  - l. Gender Fluid
  - m. Genderqueer
  - n. Intersex
  - o. Pangender
  - p. Two-Spirit
  - q. Hijra
  - r. Kathoey
  - s. Mak nyah
  - t. Muxe
  - u. Waria
  - v. Mahū
  - w. Other
    - i. Please specify

3. Do you have children that you have planned for and brought into your family within a same-gender or same-sex partnership?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. How many children do you have?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. More than 4
5. How were your child(ren) brought into your family? Please select all that apply.
  - a. I was pregnant with at least one child
  - b. I was pregnant with all children (if you have more than 1 child)
  - c. My partner was pregnant with at least one child
  - d. My partner was pregnant with all children (if you have more than 1 child)
  - e. We adopted at least one child
  - f. We adopted all children (if you have more than 1 child)
  - g. Other
    - i. Please specify
6. Are at least one of your children between the ages of 2 and 18 and living at home with you?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. What is your date of birth? (MM/DD/YEAR)
8. What is the zip code of your primary residence?

### Appendix 3: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Describe yourself in terms of your identities and communities before you had children?
  - a. How was being child-free an identity of yours?
2. Before you had children, did you imagine yourself having children?
  - a. If so, tell me what you imaged having children to be like?
  - b. If so, how did you think about the relationship you would have with your child?
3. Tell me about your decision to have children with your current partner
  - a. What made you decide to bring your children into your family that way?
  - b. How did you feel about that decision?
4. What was your experience being pregnant? (Physically, emotionally)
  - a. OR what was your experience with your partner being pregnant?
5. When you were pregnant/your partner was pregnant how did you talk about and imagine  your identity?
6. How did you talk about and imagine your relationship to the future child?
7. How did you feel when you had your child?
  - a. Did you feel like a mom? (Or a parent or  something else?).
  - b. If so, when do you think you started to take on this identity?
8. Can you tell me what does this identity mean to you?
9. How supported did you feel in becoming a mother?
  - a. Who have you felt support from?
  - b. What has that support looked like for you?
10. How prepared to become a mother did you feel?
  - a. What contributed to you feeling (un) prepared?
11. Can you share with me the first experience in which you felt like a mother?
  - a. What was it like?
  - b. Did your feelings surprise you in anyway?
12. How has becoming a parent changed your identity?
  - a. How would you describe your identity now?
  - b. How connected do you feel to your identity now?
13. Has this identity changed over time and if so, how?
14. How you feel your identity as a mother and your sexual  orientation identity intersect?
15. Would you describe yourself as active in the LGBT/Queer community? (Before or after  having a kid)
  - a. If yes, what does that involvement look like?
  - b. If yes, how do you feel being a parent has influenced your activity in the  LGBT/Queer community, if at all?
  - c. If no, what makes you say you are not active in the LGBT/Queer community?

16. In non-specific LGBTQ spaces – even in parenting spaces – can you tell me how others engage with your family?
17. Have you found that others make assumptions about your identity as a parent based on the norms of opposite-gender parents?
  - a. Can you give me an example of a time when that happened? How did that experience impact you?
18. Tell me how you imagine your identity to change or stay the same in the coming years?