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"I Have Never Slept with a Man, and There Is No Star Rising in the East": Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Pregnancy Before Insemination

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The National Lesbian Health Care Survey (NLHCS) was the first major survey of lesbian and bisexual women's health and mental health, and was conducted in 1984–1985 with 1,927 participants from all U.S. states and several territories. The NLHCS included an open-ended item, about what had prevented respondents from becoming pregnant, that was never transcribed or analyzed, yet that reflected historical trends of that time. The survey was conducted immediately prior to the era when donor insemination was becoming available to lesbians and bisexual women in some urban clinics. Many respondents at the time wrote that they could not have

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children without heterosexual intercourse, feared losing custody of children in a homophobic or biphobic society, or knew that their family of origin or society in general would not accept their children. This article examines themes about lesbians, bisexual women, and pregnancy from this time period.

KEYWORDS lesbian mother, qualitative research, lesbian pregnancy, National Lesbian Health Care Survey

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1980s the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (NLHCS) was launched by Bradford and Ryan (1987, 1988) as the first major study to identify and gather information about lesbian and bisexual women's health and mental health needs. A major departure from the small, clinically focused samples of the 1980s, this survey of 1,927 women was developed based on interviews with health and mental health care providers of services to lesbians as well as with lesbians across the United States, and had a "core assumption of normalcy, of difference rather than deviance, of diversity rather than social conformity" (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994, p. 229). The NLHCS was a 10-page, quantitative questionnaire with sections about gynecological and general health, mental health and substance use, outness, participation in community activities, antigay discrimination, and use of health and mental health services (see Ryan & Bradford, 1988).

The NLHCS included an open-ended item asking about pregnancy plans. The responses to this item have never before been transcribed or analyzed, and the purpose of the present project was to examine the written comments and themes about pregnancy. We chose to embark on this project because the mid-1980s marked the end of the era when women, including lesbians and bisexual women, could only bear children in the context of relationships with men. Shortly after this time period donor insemination would become available to unmarried women, so that it would be possible to become pregnant outside of sexual relationships with men. Analysis of the present data set allows an understanding of how lesbians and bisexual women felt about having or not having children, given their choices in 1984–1985.

In order to place the results of this study within its historical context it is necessary to understand the meaning of feminism, lesbianism, and bisexuality in the 1980s. We will also provide an overview of the NLHCS in the context of the women's health movement of that time.

Feminism in the 1980s

The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s focused on women's rights in a number of arenas in the United States, including

education, employment, the law, athletic participation, sexuality, health, reproduction, and violence against women, among others. As the result of the contraceptive pill, legalization of abortion, more flexible divorce laws, and the U.S. "baby boom" generation reaching adolescence and young adulthood, there was a wave of sexual freedom (Evans, 1979). The so-called sexual revolution embraced sex outside marriage and non-monogamy, and some people experimented with or even celebrated bisexuality and homosexuality (Jeffreys, 1993).

Feminists also began to question women's roles as mothers. In her groundbreaking 1976 book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich contrasts motherhood as a personal relationship between women and children with the institution of motherhood, "... which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (p. xv). This book is an attempt to find collective meaning in motherhood and to distinguish it from each woman's personal experience giving birth and rearing children:

> Motherhood—unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. My individual seemingly private pains as a mother, the individual, seemingly private pains of the mothers around me and before me, whatever our class or color, the regulation of women's reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology, and extrauterine reproductive experiments—all are essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers. (p. 15)

Rich argues that there is no good language for women who are living freely without children; terms such as "child-free," "unchilded," or "childless" still define women in relation to children (p. 253).

Many of the rights that feminists fought for (e.g., contraception, divorce laws) assumed that women were heterosexual. The next sections will focus on how lesbians and bisexual women related to feminism and to motherhood.

Lesbian and Bisexual Women in the 1980s

Lillian Faderman (1991) has described how the connection between feminism and lesbianism was sometimes used as a threat during the first wave of the feminist movement in the nineteenth century, but then during the second wave in the 1960s to the 1980s, "Lesbianism even came to be regarded as the quintessence of feminism" (p. 206). The slogan "Feminism is the theory;

lesbianism is the practice" (attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson according to Koedt, 1971) was popular at the time, and so was the bumper sticker "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." Lesbians viewed themselves as women-loving-women and celebrated their independence from men (Faderman, 1991).

Women who came out as lesbian in the 1970s and early 1980s were strongly influenced by feminism, and often viewed their sexual orientation as a personal or political choice (thus the phrase "sexual preference," implying choice). Lesbian singer and songwriter Alix Dobkin sang "every woman can be a lesbian," and lesbian feminists viewed supporting men as taking energy away from women.

At the extreme continuum of lesbian feminism was lesbian separatism, a movement in which lesbians chose to spend their lives "in sisterhood" with other women. For some lesbians this involved buying land in the country and living collectively with other lesbians. For others it meant subscribing to magazines such as *Lesbian Connection* ("By and for Lesbians"), reading lesbian separatist science-fiction books, or attending lesbian-only events. Separatism was not without conflict, however; lesbians of color, who worked in coalition with men of color, often had to choose between the lesbian and the ethnic/racial communities.

Bisexual women embraced feminism as a way to unlearn traditional roles in relationships with men; sometimes it was the contrast to their relationships with women that served as the impetus for this change. Robin Ochs, a prominent bisexual activist and feminist, wrote,

> It was empowering to realize that men as romantic partners were optional, not required. I no longer feel pressured to lower my relationship standards in light of the shortage of good men. Yes, I might get involved with and spend the rest of my life with one, but then again I might choose to spend my life with a woman. Or perhaps simply with myself. This was to be my choice. (http://www.robynochs.com/writing/essays/bi_fem.html, accessed May 28, 2013)

Adrienne Rich's 1980 article critiquing heterosexuality as "compulsory" motivated women to try out relationships with women as well as men.

Bisexual women and lesbians often clashed over identity politics (see Rust, 1995, 1999). Lesbians accused bisexual women of benefiting from heterosexual privilege in their relationships with men. Bisexual women felt invisible and ignored in lesbian organizations and events, at a time when they were also stigmatized by heterosexual society.

Lesbians and bisexual women with children often felt unwelcome at women-only events. Some lesbians and bisexual women wanted to separate themselves from feminist issues that they viewed as products of heterosexuality (such as, according to Faderman, 1991, child care, abortion, and shelters

for battered wives). Other women wanted to get away from traditional gender roles, including those that involved taking care of children. In addition, women-only events often excluded boys, or were limited to very young boys only.

Lesbian and Bisexual Reproductive Issues in the 1980s

Before the 1980s, most lesbians and bisexual women had children either from a prior marriage or relationship with a man, or by co-parenting children with a female partner who had children with a former male partner (c.f., Patterson, 1992, for a review). Lesbians and bisexual women rearing children before the 1980s had to contend with an extremely homophobic and biphobic society, struggled with the decision to come out to children, and had to cope with negative remarks made to their children (Rothblum, 1990). Lesbian and bisexual mothers lost 80% of all custody battles in lower courts (Morgan, 1984). Consequently, lesbians and bisexual women often became pregnant with gay male sexual partners, fearing that heterosexual men could win custody of the children. At the same time, the lesbian separatist communities of the 1970s were not always welcoming to children, particularly male children.

The best-selling feminist book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Collective, 1971) has a chapter, "Considering Parenthood," that has sections on shared parenthood and parenting in a commune, but no mention of lesbians as parents. The chapter titled "In Amerika They Call Us Dykes" devotes a section to lesbian mothers, but the focus is on the courage to leave a heterosexual marriage, the desire to not alienate fathers who may be paying child support, the threat of losing custody in court, and negative comments made to the children. "For single gay mothers another challenge is raising sons without men," the section continues (p. 95), and presents a case of a lesbian who raised a child with her lover. When the lover (referred to in the book as the "natural mother") was hospitalized, the lover's parents came to take the child away (p. 95). The chapter states, "Gay women who would like to have children of their own but don't want to have sex with men find it almost impossible. Artificial insemination and adoption are not permitted to open lesbians, so they are forced to be bisexual. Many lesbians are married to men" (p. 96). Note the biphobia in this statement. This quote implies that women become bisexual under duress. It also conflates identity and behavior (c.f., Galupo, 2011, for continuing discussion of this issue in more recent years). The chapter was written by a Gay Women's Liberation Collective, who state in the introduction, "Bisexuality might be possible in a healthy society, but it's not possible in this one. Relationships with men in this society have a built-in power imbalance, and few of us who have explored the possibilities of relationships between women would choose again to start with that handicap" (p. 81).

For feminists who could find the much-expanded (at 647 pages) *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1984, the list price of $15.95 ($35.70 in today's dollars) was pricey. This edition included six chapters under the heading "Controlling Our Fertility," including one on the "New Reproductive Technologies" that has sections on donor insemination, surrogate motherhood, in vitro fertilization, sex preselection, and "the future: artificial parthenogenesis, egg fusion and cloning." Lesbians are mentioned twice in the section on donor insemination and once in the science-fiction section on parthenogenesis.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, some lesbians and bisexual women had access to donor insemination clinics, and the first cohort began to have children after, rather than before, coming out. Gartrell and her colleagues (1996) began their longitudinal, prospective study of lesbians who had children via donor insemination in 1986, focusing on the cities of San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, DC. At the time of that study, the prospective mothers in their sample were strongly identified as lesbians, and many were out to coworkers and families of origin. The original study was conducted when the birth mothers were pregnant; 38% of the lesbians had no preference for the sex of their child, but the majority of those that had a preference wanted a girl. About half the sample wanted a known donor, and half of those women anticipated that he would be involved in child rearing. The prospective lesbian mothers were concerned about rearing a child in a nontraditional family and in a homophobic society, expected at least some relatives to be supportive, and predicted that they would have less time and energy to spend on friends and leisure activities. That sample was predominantly white, highly educated, and earned moderately high incomes. Presumably, most lesbians and bisexual women who were not educated, white, privileged women in urban areas did not yet have access to donor insemination in the 1980s.

The Women's Health Movement and the National Lesbian Health Care Survey

U.S. feminists in the 1960s began to critique the health care system as inadequate for women's needs, lacking knowledge about women's bodies, and interested in profit rather than treatment. They began to define health more broadly—for example, the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) has chapters about nutrition and exercise, sexual relationships, rape and self-defense, birth control, abortion, parenthood, and menopause, among others. By 1984, the newer edition also includes chapters on body image, substance use, psychotherapy, environmental and occupational health, aging, the politics of women and medical care, organizing for change, and international awareness, demonstrating the burgeoning of interest in and information about women's health.

Yet there was little research about lesbians before the 1980s, and almost none about bisexual women. These limited early studies of lesbians focused on pathology or on lesbians who wished to change their sexual orientation, and it was not unusual for a published study to have only one or two dozen participants (Morin & Rothblum, 1991). By the end of the 1980s an American Psychological Association task force provided guidelines for conducting non-heterosexist research (Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991). That report indicated that research should not ignore the existence of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, or stigmatize or stereotype these populations.

The mid-1980s were thus an interesting time period for lesbians and bisexual women having children. That era was just at the cusp of when donor insemination became available to a few lesbians and bisexual women, at least those in large cities with some economic privilege. The present study used data from the NLHCS to consider ways in which lesbians and bisexual women viewed pregnancy at that time.

METHOD

The National Lesbian Health Care Survey

The NLHCS was distributed in 1984–1985 to identify and gather information about lesbian health and mental health. For a detailed description of the survey construction and distribution procedures, see Bradford and colleagues (1994) and Ryan and Bradford (1988). Of the 4,600 surveys distributed, 1,927 were returned from women from all 50 U.S. states, a response rate of 42%.

A 7-point Likert scale assessed sexual orientation (1 = lesbian only, 4 = bisexual, and 7 = heterosexual only; this was recoded to conform to the Kinsey scale such that 7 = lesbian only and 1 = heterosexual only). Due to the word "lesbian" in the title of the NLHCS, 1,044 women (54%) identified as 7 (lesbian only), 550 (28%) as 6, 199 (10%) as 5, 78 (4%) as 4 (marked as "bisexual" on the scale), 16 (1%) as 3, 8 (0.4%) as 2, and only 2 women identified as 1 (heterosexual only; 0.1%), with 30 women (1.5%) not answering this item.

Table 1 depicts demographic data of the NLHCS compared with 1980 U.S. census data for women. Ages of participants ranged from 17 to 80 years, with 80% between ages 25 and 44. The majority of the sample (88.5%) was white/non-Hispanic, 5.6% was African-American, 4.2% was Latina, and a very small number (under 1%) of women identified as Asian/Pacific Islander or as Native American. Most participants (66.2%) indicated that they had no religion, 11.5% were Protestant, 11.5% Catholic, and 7.4% Jewish. The sample was highly educated—69% had graduated from college and about one-third had an advanced degree. Two-thirds of the participants worked full time, mostly in professional or managerial jobs. However, personal income was not high—the vast majority of participants earned

TABLE 1 Demographic Characteristics of Lesbian Sample Compared with U.S. Census Data for Women

Characteristic	Unweighted percentage of total ($N = 1{,}917$)	Weighted percentage of total ($N = 1{,}917$)	U.S. Census data on the adult female in 1980[a]
Age			
17–24	8.8	8.9	12.5
25–34	48.0	48.4	16.6
35–44	32.2	32.5	12.0
45–54	7.0	7.1	9.7
55 or older	3.1	3.1	23.4
Education			
Less than high school	2.4	2.5	29.1
High school	9.5	9.5	37.9
Vocational training	2.5	2.5	—
Some college	16.3	16.4	15.3
College	26.0	26.2	—
Advanced studies	11.6	11.6	17.7
Advanced degree	31.2	31.3	—
Type of work			
Professional	39.5	53.3	25.2
Manager/official	14.8	19.9	—
Clerical	6.9	9.3	42.5
Craftsperson	3.8	5.1	2.3
Operative/unskilled worker	2.9	4.1	9.7
Farmer	0.1	0.1	—
Relationship status			
Primary relationship with a woman	59.9	—	—
Single, somewhat involved with a woman	17.5	—	—
Single and uninvolved	19.1	—	—
Living with a male lover	0.4	—	—
Legally married to a man	2.2	—	—
Number of people in household			
1	20.9	22.7	23.2
2	45.7	49.7	31.7
3	13.0	14.1	17.5
4–5	8.7	9.4	22.7
6 or more	3.7	4.0	4.9
Race/ethnicity			
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.8	0.8	1.2
Aleut, Eskimo, or American Indian	0.6	0.6	0.6

(Continued on next page)

TABLE 1 Demographic Characteristics of Lesbian Sample Compared with U.S. Census Data for Women *(Continued)*

Characteristic	Unweighted percentage of total ($N = 1{,}917$)	Weighted percentage of total ($N = 1{,}917$)	U.S. Census data on the adult female in 1980[a]
Service worker	5.2	7.0	16.8
Private household worker	0.8	1.1	2.1
Worker status			
Employed full time	66.6	—	—
Employed part time	18.5	—	—
Student	21.6	—	—
Unemployed	9.0	—	—
Personal income			
$9,999 or less	27.6	27.9	—
$10,000–$19,999	35.8	36.2	—
$20,000–$29,999	23.5	23.8	—
$30,000–$39,999	7.9	8.0	—
$40,000 or more	4.1	4.2	—
Marital status			
Married	—	—	61.9
Single and never married	—	—	17.6
Divorced	—	—	
Separated	—	—	8.0
Widowed	—	—	12.5
Latina African-American (non-Hispanic)	4.2	4.2	6.4
	5.6	5.6	11.7
White (non-Hispanic)	88.2	88.5	83.1
Other	0.3	0.3	3.0
Religious affiliation			
None	64.5	66.2	—
Protestant	11.2	11.5	—
Catholic	7.8	8.0	—
Islamic	0.2	0.2	—
Jewish	7.3	7.4	—
Pagan, witch	0.8	0.8	—
Unitarian	1.0	1.0	—
Buddhist	0.5	0.5	—
Gay church	2.4	2.5	—
Christian Science	0.2	0.2	—
Quaker	0.5	0.5	—
Mormon	0.2	0.2	—
Unity	0.3	0.3	—
Mennonite	0.2	0.2	—
Other Christian	0.6	0.6	—

Note. From *The National Lesbian Health Care Survey: Final Report* (pp. 11–13) by J. Bradford and C. Ryan, 1988, Washington, DC: National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation. Copyright 1988 by J. Bradford and C. Ryan. Reprinted by permission. Dashes indicate that comparable data were not available.

[a]Data in this column were taken from the *1984 Statistical Abstract of the United States* (104th edition), published by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

less than $30,000 a year and two-thirds earned less than $20,000. Close to 60% of the participants were in a primary relationship with a woman. Only 0.4% were living with a male lover and 2.2% were legally married to a man.

Compared with 1980 U.S. census data, the NLHCS sample was younger, more highly educated, and employed in more professional and managerial jobs than women in the general population. The percentages of NLHCS participants who were white, Latina, Asian-American, and Native American were similar to U.S. census data, but the NLHCS had only half the percentage of African-Americans as that of the census. The percentage of NLHCS participants who were in primary relationships with women was comparable to the percentage of women in the U.S. census who were married to men (same-sex marriage would not be legal for another two decades).

NLHCS Item on Pregnancy

The NLHCS included the open-ended item "What, if anything, has kept you from becoming pregnant?" in the section on gynecological care, following quantitative items asking if participants had ever been pregnant; had had a hysterectomy, abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth; had ever wanted to be pregnant; and had children. Quantitative results indicate that 29.1% of the sample reported that they had ever been pregnant and 16.3% had one or more children. In addition, 5.7% had had a hysterectomy, 14.7% had had an abortion, 6.7% had had a miscarriage, and 0.3% had a stillbirth. Of those who had not been previously pregnant, 30.3% stated that they wanted to be pregnant (this constitutes 20.7% of the entire sample when women who had been previously pregnant are included).

All written comments for the open-ended item about what, if anything, had prevented lesbians and bisexual women from pregnancy from the 1,927 women were transcribed and entered into an Excel file. Forty-seven percent of respondents (911 women) wrote a comment about this item.

The results were interpreted using thematic analysis, with an inductive approach to coding, in order to provide a descriptive account of participants' responses. As Braun and Clarke (2006) have indicated, thematic analysis is used to search for themes or patterns within an entire data set, and can be used within most theoretical frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were 12 themes, which are listed here, with sample quotes. Each quote indicates the participant's age, race/ethnicity, geographical region, and Kinsey scale score (from 1 = heterosexual only to 7 = lesbian only). Quotes are included verbatim, as written by respondents.

The themes were as follow:

1. I'm a lesbian and don't have sex with men;
2. Don't want children;
3. May have children in the future;
4. Being lucky;
5. Lover doesn't want children;
6. Reaction from family of origin;
7. Financial or job reasons;
8. Infertile or can't have children;
9. Don't want male children;
10. Don't want children in an unaccepting world;
11. Do not want to bring up a child in the lesbian or gay community; and
12. Methods of having children don't work for me.

I'm a lesbian and don't have sex with men.

In response to what, if anything, had kept them from getting pregnant, many women stated that they were lesbians and felt that this statement was a sufficient explanation. For example, one 40-year-old white woman from the South (Kinsey 7) simply responded, "Lesbian lifestyle." One woman indicated that "I'm now a lesbian" (25-year-old black woman from the Northeast, 7), and yet another responded, "Good sense and lesbianism" (38-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region, 7).

Other respondents did not explicitly refer to their sexual identity, but rather focused on the fact that they were exclusively intimate with women. This was indicated in the following quote by a 40-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7): "I am only sexual with other women."

In a similar vein, other women mentioned lack of sex with men, focusing on the fact that, without men, pregnancy was not possible. A 26-year-old Pacific Islander woman from the Northeast (6) wrote, "I have never slept with a man, and there is no star rising in the East." This point about lack of sex with men was phrased in various ways. A 25-year-old white woman from the South (7) wrote, "Never had sex with a man. Never wanted to—probably never will—and I don't want the responsibility of children." A 42-year-old black woman from the Northeast (7) responded, "No het sex," a 30-year-old black woman from the Northeast (7) stated, "No male activity," and a 27-year-old black woman from the Northeast (6) responded, "Having sex with a man doesn't appeal to me."

Some women combined comments about lack of sex with men with other issues, such as not liking children. For example, one stated, "I don't like kids; I don't sleep with men—a very simple technique!!" (34-year-old white woman from the South, 6). Some indicated they did not want the

change of appearance that can result from pregnancy: "I refuse to have sex with men and I wouldn't ruin a beautiful body" (33-year-old white woman from the South, 7).

As these quotes illustrate, lesbianism and motherhood were often viewed as separate and even mutually exclusive issues in the mid-1980s. Lesbians were women who didn't have sex with men, and sex with men was necessary in order to get pregnant. Stating that they were lesbian, or that they didn't have sex with men, was sufficient as an answer to the item about pregnancy.

These quotes also point out that identity (I am a lesbian) and behavior (I only have sex with women) were strongly conceptually interrelated. It was not until the 1990s that a number of scholars (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Morris & Rothblum, 1999) began to focus on various dimensions of sexuality (identity, behavior, fantasies, community participation, etc.) as only moderately correlated.

Don't Want Children

Other women stated that they just didn't want or like children or what children represented. A 30-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7) said, "I frankly don't like children that much" and a 37-year-old white woman from the Mountain Region (7) wrote, "Nothing has kept me I just don't want children."

Some women provided reasons why they did not want children. This included giving up freedom and autonomy. A 54-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7) wrote, "Did not want to give up my freedom" and a 30-year-old white woman from the Northeast (6) wrote, "For myself my lifestyle as a lesbian and the autonomy a child may take away from me." Other women mentioned the stress of child care ("The thought of 7 days a week 24/hr/day child care duty!" [35-year-old white woman from the South, 7]) or giving birth ("Not wanting to assume maternal role; not wanting birthing experience" [45-year-old white woman from the Mountain Region, 7]). "Came to senses—the world is overpopulated," wrote a 23-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (Kinsey scale item left blank).

These statements illustrate the feminist critiques of motherhood at the time (e.g., Rich, 1976). Feminism represented freedom and independence, not just from men but from the experience of pregnancy and child rearing. It was permissible to state that one didn't like children, something that would have been taboo for women to voice in earlier decades.

May Have Children in the Future

Women mentioned a number of reasons why they didn't want children yet, though some had plans to get pregnant in the future. A 30-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (6) explained how lesbians could get

pregnant when they wanted to rather than by accident when she wrote, "Being a lesbian makes conception a conscious choice—and I haven't decided to get pregnant yet, though I anticipate doing so either by donor insemination or fucking in the future."

Other women felt they were still too young to have children and wanted financial security. A 22-year-old white woman from the South (5) responded, "I don't want to have a baby by myself. Cannot afford to do so at this time, and I'm too immature to make such a commitment." A 27-year-old white woman from the Northeast (6) stated, "I am a student—I wish to have a decent job before having a child, at about age 33–35," and a 20-year-old white woman from the Northeast (5) said, "Too young, too much to do, future concern."

A 32-year-old white woman from the North Central Region (7) wrote, "I want the pregnancy and the child, not the heterosexual act / if I am able to arrange artificial insemination properly—I will pursue pregnancy." This comment indicates that some women were aware of donor insemination by this time.

As these comments indicate, by the mid-1980s the decision to have children could be put off until women felt emotionally or financially ready. Thanks to the women's health movement (e.g., Boston Women's Health Collective, 1971, 1984), reproduction was a matter of choice, including the timing and circumstances of pregnancy.

Being Lucky

Some women just wrote in the one word "luck." A 26-year-old white woman from the South (7) wrote, "Luck (when I was younger, before I became gay)"; a 30-year-old woman from the South (Kinsey scale 5) stated, "In the past—dumb luck."

The fact that women considered themselves lucky that they *didn't* have children is in stark contrast to women's traditional roles as mothers. In past decades women might have been considered unlucky by others if they failed to conceive or were "barren" (without children); now times had changed.

Lover Doesn't Want Children

Some women mentioned their lover as a barrier to having children. A 24-year-old black woman from the North Central Region (7) stated, "My lover really doesn't like kids!" "Lover wants to wait," wrote a 37-year-old white woman from the South (7). A 42-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (7) responded, "When married, husband didn't want children and had vasectomy. Now over 40 and lover does not want children."

Other women gave reasons why their lover did not want children. In some cases their lover was older and past the age of wanting children:

"Lover is 20 years older than self—does not want to start family" (29-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region, 5). In other cases the respondents themselves were uncertain or unwilling to have children and their lover shared this perspective. A 29-year-old white woman from the Northeast (5) explained, "Ambivalence and a partner who doesn't want to co-parent." A 34-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (7) wrote, "Don't want to raise a child alone—lover doesn't seem so thrilled about the idea." "Lack of strong desire—unwilling partner," stated a 29-year-old Native American woman from the Pacific Region (7).

If being lesbian or bisexual is viewed as incompatible with pregnancy and child rearing, then even women who want children may have a female lover who doesn't. Furthermore, the lesbian and bisexual women's communities were more likely at that time to share the lover's perspective about not wanting children (e.g., the Gay Women's Liberation Collective in Boston Women's Health Collective, 1971).

Reaction from Family of Origin

Women described negative reactions from family members if they were to have children as unmarried women or as lesbian or bisexual women. "Social and family impact," responded a 28-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7). A 22-year-old white woman from the Northeast (5) simply wrote, "My mother."

Other women explained that their family of origin would view them as unmarried or single parents, sometimes because the respondents were not out to their family. "Need to come out to family first," replied a 31-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7). A 31-year-old white woman from the North Central Region (5) stated, "Worrying about relatives and family attitudes toward me being a single parent and possibly finding out I'm gay." A 28-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7) wrote, "1) unmarried and parents would die! 2) fear of childbirth."

Women in heterosexual couples may experience pressure from family of origin or in-laws to have children, but this was not the case for lesbians and bisexual women in this era. As these comments illustrate, women explained that their families would view them as unmarried or single parents. Pregnancy would require some explanation to their families of origin, and might involve coming out to them.

Financial or Job Reasons

Women mentioned lack of money or the cost of rearing children as a barrier. "Fear of not having the money to support a child," replied a 26-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (6). A 28-year-old white woman from the South (5) stated, "My inability to afford children at this time in my life" and a

52-year-old white woman from the North Central Region (7) wrote, "Unable to support and raise a child." "The financial reality of child rearing," wrote a 32-year-old Latina woman from the South (7). In addition to the cost, a 34-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (7) also stated that having a child would interfere with her education: "Financial considerations, desire to go to law school."

Other women mentioned wanting to focus on their job or career. "Not wanting to give up my life and my desire to have a career," wrote a 23-year-old white woman from the South (6). A 34-year-old Latina woman from the South (7) responded, "I do not want to have children—dogs are enough responsibility. My career and relationship with my lover are my priorities." As a 45-year-old white woman from the Mountain Region (6) explained, having a child would have put her job in jeopardy: "I couldn't keep my job—unmarried with a child—at that time—I am too old now."

Some women felt that lack of a partner meant that they could not afford the cost of having a child. "The responsibility of being a single parent, cost of artificial insemination," stated a white lesbian (age and region left blank, 7). "Economics, no partner" explained a 31-year-old Latina woman from the Pacific Region (7). "Can't afford a child and am not willing to couple with a man unless there can be no complications," said a 30-year-old black woman from the Northeast (7).

As the result of the feminist movement, women could openly state that they wanted to prioritize their own education or jobs over pregnancy and child rearing. The financial cost of having a child was balanced against other priorities more central to their own lives.

Infertile or Can't Have Children

Some women listed specific health reasons why they could not get pregnant. "No period," wrote a 42-year-old black woman from the Northeast (7). A 36-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (7) stated that she "Tried to conceive after son was born 8 years ago for about 6 years in former marriage, apparently infertile for no reasons tests could ascertain." A 33-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7) responded, "Have been trying with insemination for 1 year." A 27-year-old black woman from the Northeast (7) said, "Have primary sterility from endometriosis."

There are a number of reasons why women may be unable to conceive. It is interesting to speculate whether lesbians and bisexual women who are infertile may have experienced less stigma given that their communities were less child-focused than those of heterosexual women.

Don't Want Male Children

A few women mentioned not wanting boys, or only wanting girls. "I would only want a daughter," stated a 37-year-old white woman from the Pacific

Region (7). "I don't like boys," replied a 33-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7), and a 27-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region asked, "Am I ready to have a boy?"A 38-year-old white woman from the South (7) explained, "I believe that artificial insemination produces males and I do not want to rear a male child."

These comments reflect the anti-male sentiment of the lesbian communities, particularly those that were separatist. However, male children were unwelcome even at women-only events that were open to heterosexual and bisexual women (c.f., Morris, 2005).

Don't Want Children in an Unaccepting World

A number of women described the ways in which society wouldn't accept nontraditional families, or children of lesbians or bisexual women. "I'm bisexual and don't want to bring a child into my world," stated a 45-year-old white woman from the South (4). A 45-year-old black woman from the North Central Region (5) wrote, "Not wanting to be an 'unwed mother"' and a 28-year-old white woman from the South (5) stated, "Not wanting to have a 'bastard."' A 33-year-old white woman from the North Central Region (7) replied, "Society and family attitudes towards single mothers, especially lesbian mothers."

Women expressed their concerns about exposing their child to a homophobic and biphobic world. "Fear social and family pressures on child because I would have child w/no father," explained a 31-year-old white woman from the North Central Region (7). "Patriarchy—complications with sperm sources—reservations about what child would have to deal with," said a 36-year-old white woman from the South (6).

In a similar vein, some women felt that they might lose custody of their child because they were lesbian or bisexual. "No legal guarantee that someone wouldn't take kid away," said a 27-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7). A 26-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7) replied, "Fear of losing child in a court because I'm a lesbian. (Same reason for not adopting) Also—financial burden of a child." "Afraid to raise children—inability of legal and social systems to accept lesbian co-parenting," responded a 33-year-old white woman from the North Central Region (7).

These comments reflect the very real dangers of lesbians and bisexual women losing children in custody cases, or when heterosexual male sperm donors decided to exercise their rights to their biological children (Morgan, 1984). *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1984) had caveats for lesbians interested in donor insemination, including a reference to a legal guide.

Do Not Want to Bring Up a Child in the Lesbian or Gay Community

A few women felt that the lesbian or gay community itself was not supportive of children. "Hesitant to bring child up in gay community," wrote a

26-year-old white woman from the Pacific Region (6). A 29-year-old white woman from the Northeast (7) stated, "Having a woman partner—thinking about the cost and social difficulties raising a child. Even the lesbian community frowns on it."

Not only are the lesbian communities viewed as against male children, but some women regarded their community as unfriendly to children in general. So the decision to have children would mean a complicated relationship with, or lack of access to, the gay or lesbian communities.

Methods of Having Children Don't Work for Me

Women wrote about their wish to have children with a female partner. "Inability to be inseminated by another woman or vice versa," said a 23-year-old white woman from the South (6). A 26–old Latina woman from the Northeast (6) wrote, "I want my lover's children and she is a woman."

Others mentioned the high cost of or difficulty getting access to insemination. A 35-year-old white woman from the South (7) stated, "That precious sperm is hard to get considering it's flowing in the streets!" "Accessible means of safe and confidential artificial insemination," stated a 33-year-old white woman from the North Central Region (6).

Women had mixed feelings about known versus anonymous donors. A 30-year-old white woman from the South (6) wrote, "I don't want to know who the father is and no sperm bank in Georgia will accept lesbians as mothers." "I haven't decided yet... I've thought of AI, but would like to know the donor" (35-year-old white woman from the South, 7). "The ability to support a child while on my own and the lack of desire to deal with my child's father on a permanent basis," explained a 25-year-old black woman from the Northeast (6). A 34-year-old white woman from the South (6) stated, "Not wanting to get sexually involved with men; having conflict about child needing to know who father is yet not trusting any gay or straight men friends to donate sperm and not harass me legally."

Despite the section on cloning, parthenogenesis (women producing an embryo without sperm), and egg fusion (joining the eggs of two women in vitro) as future possibilities in the 1984 edition of *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves*, women in the mid-1980s were aware that such technologies did not exist. Yet they yearned for ways to have children without men, or with the eggs or genes of their female partner.

CONCLUSION

As these written comments indicated, the 1980s was still a time when many women couldn't imagine having children without heterosexual intercourse. Participants explained that they were lesbian, or that they didn't have sex with men—ergo, no children. Other women didn't want children in the

context of a lesbian community that wasn't particularly child-friendly, or friendly to male children. This was a time when women knew that their family of origin in particular, and society in general, would not be supportive of children reared by lesbians or bisexual women. They feared losing custody of the child, or being viewed as "unwed mothers." Insemination clinics were largely unavailable to respondents of the NLHCS; in fact, only 1% of the entire sample mentioned the word "insemination" in any of the written items. Respondents who knew about insemination were concerned about known donors who would want contact with the child.

This survey was conducted just at the cusp of the lesbian and bisexual women's baby boom. A large survey of 2,431 lesbians and bisexual women conducted a decade later in the mid-1990s (Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002) found that older participants overwhelmingly had children in the context of marriage or a primary relationship with a man, whereas younger women were more likely than older women to be raising children with a female partner and to have had children via insemination with a known or anonymous donor. In that study, more than 60% of women in their twenties wanted to have children in the future, compared with 37.5% of women in their thirties and 8.8% of women in their forties. This increasing availability of alternative insemination and adoption in the 1990s changed pregnancy and child rearing for lesbians and bisexual women in profound ways.

This project had some limitations. It was conducted years before the first population-based national surveys included an item or two about same-sex sexual behavior or sexual identity, and before the Internet. The percentage of women of color was small, and African-American women were underrepresented relative to the U.S. census of the time. Due to the word "lesbian" in the title of the survey, bisexual women may not have felt included in the wording of the items or may not have chosen to answer the survey. This was an era of divisiveness between the lesbian and bisexual women's communities (Rust, 1995, 1999). Nevertheless, the 3,000-plus written comments represent a rich and diverse historical document of lesbian and bisexual women's lives in the 1980s.

In conclusion, it is hard to believe how much has changed for lesbians and bisexual women in the past quarter-century, including the considerable amount of research on health and mental health that succeeded the NLHCS. In hindsight, the mid-1980s were a turning point for sexual, health, and reproductive issues for lesbians and bisexual women, and the qualitative portions of the NLHCS depict how lesbians and bisexual women were living and coping with these issues across the nation.

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