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## Lesbian Mothers and Their Children

### An Interview with Nanette Gartrell

by Esther Rothblum



In the early 1980s lots of lesbians were beginning to figure out ways to have children by donor insemination. Nanette Gartrell, a lesbian psychiatrist, was interested in studying these pioneer lesbians. "We had no money," she said in a recent interview, "but of course none of the work I've ever done has been funded. It's usually too controversial to be funded by any of the traditional sources, such as the National Institutes of Health. It's years ahead of its time in terms of when such agencies would fund this kind of research. We decided if we waited for funding agencies to get over their homophobia to fund this study, we'd be waiting another decade. So we went ahead and funded it ourselves."

Nanette's study is now the longest-running study of lesbians who had children via donor insemination.

"It's already been well-documented that kids of lesbian moms are healthy," Nanette told me, "so we're not trying to re-establish that. What we're interested in is how they have coped with homophobia." At the time, Nanette's major collaborator was living in Washington, DC and Nanette was living in Boston, so they began the research with lesbians in those two cities. Then Nanette moved to San Francisco and included lesbians from the Bay Area.

The first step was finding lesbian mothers to participate. Nanette's research team advertised in bookstores and gay and lesbian newspapers. They made up flyers to distribute at lesbian films and community events. They went to all the workshops on choosing children and told participants about the study. The original study began with 154 mothers.

The first interviews took place when the mothers were pregnant. Then the mothers and co-mothers were interviewed again when the children were a year and a half old and when they were five. Nanette's team is currently interviewing the families now that the children are 10, and this for the first time includes interviews with the children themselves. Then the families will be interviewed next when the children are 17 and when they are 25.

"When we interviewed the mothers at first, when they were pregnant, they anticipated being out as lesbians," said Nanette. "For the most part they used unknown donors, because there was a lot more fear at that time that somehow the state would come in and take the children away. By the time of the next interviews, when the children were toddlers, many of them regretted this and wished they had used a known donor who could have participated in the child's life as a father. Lesbians that we interviewed even a few years later had begun to use known donors. We actually stopped inviting new participants in 1992 because the 'old' lesbians differed so much from the 'new' ones in terms of donor identity."

Not surprisingly, the children were very much desired. When the lesbians were first interviewed while pregnant, about half the women were in coupled relationships, and had been with their partners from a few months to a decade or more. Others were single mothers.

When Nanette's team re-interviewed the mothers when the children were a year and a half, they were not surprised to find completely exhausted, harried mothers who had very little time for their own lives other than childrearing and paid employment. One of the areas of difficulty was the little contact with their partners, and this was often a source of tension. By the time of the interviews when the children were five, a number of the couples had broken up. Those couples where the mothers had spent time away from the children, in order to have more time with each other, were more likely to still be together than the couples that had been most child-focused.

Now the team is interviewing the ten-year old children. "It's very exciting to be interviewing the kids for the first time," said Nanette. "Because we have these very articulate kids who are highly educated around issues of diversity, racism, and homophobia."

Doing longitudinal research is not easy. When Nanette had a flood in her basement a few years ago,

some of the file cabinets got wet. "I was frantically using a hair dryer to dry the pages of the interviews so the data wouldn't be lost," she recalls. Nanette phones all the families each year to see if they have moved, so she won't lose touch with them. A couple of women who once identified as lesbians are now involved with men; a few women have died. But Nanette has stayed in touch with just about all the women from the original sample. As couples break up and then get involved with new partners, Nanette incorporates all these "step-moms" in the study. "This means we may be the only study that has more participants at the end of the study than at the beginning!" she said. More information about the study results can be read in: Nanette Gartrell et al. (1996), 'The National Lesbian Family Study: Interviews With Prospective Mothers.' *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, volume 66, number 2, pp. 272-281. Esther Rothblum is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont and Editor of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. 'DYKE PSYCHE' is a monthly column.

### VFTMTF column

*continued from page nineteen*

regional coordinators in Franklin, Rutland, and Windsor Counties and throughout the Northeast Kingdom. Vermont Gay Pride is coming up and we need a coordinator. There is also a lot of behind the scenes work, writing press releases, creating posters, graphic art work, data entry and management, web site expansion... to keep a viable visible presence around the state. Plus there is fund raising. People can help and show their support for our work by making donations, hosting house parties, or participating in our scheduled fund raisers. Beth Robinson feels, "we are on the verge of eliminating the last vestige of state-sponsored discrimination against gay and lesbian Vermonters. It's wonderful to be part of that." What greater message could we give the youth of today and the children of tomorrow.

So check out the calendar to see what is happening around the state. Come to one of the events or call Wendy Beinler, 802 652-0723 or Bari Shamas, 802 387-5788, e mail vfmftf@sover.net or visit our web site, www.vtfreetomarry.org