



SUSAN GOLOMBOK

Why I study...

# lesbian mothers

**I**N 1976 I read an article in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* that was to set me off on a research path that would occupy much of my working life for the next 25 years. The picture on the front of the magazine was of three women and

their three children, and the caption read 'Why could one of these women lose custody of her child?' The answer was that the mothers on the front cover were lesbian, and one of them was facing a custody dispute that would inevitably end with the loss of her child – simply on the grounds of her sexual orientation.

At that time I was a postgraduate student at the Institute of Education in London taking an MSc in child development and, like my fellow students, was rooting around for an interesting topic for a project. I desperately wanted to do research that had some social relevance. Carrying out complex experimental manipulations to address a theoretical question that was of interest to maybe three other people in the same field, I knew was not my cup of tea. I was 21 years old, an idealist, and believed that psychology could change peoples lives!

The *Spare Rib* article not only raised an issue that was of importance to the understanding of child development but also asked for a psychologist to volunteer to carry out an independent study of lesbian mothers and their children. This seemed like the perfect project for me. I responded to the request and soon began a series of studies that are going on to this day.

In 1976 it was generally assumed that a woman could either be a lesbian or a mother. In fact, the label 'lesbian mother' was seen as a contradiction in terms. When Rhodes Boyson MP said 'Children have a right to be born into a natural family with a father and a mother. Anything less will cause lifelong deprivation of the most acute kind', he was reflecting the prejudices of the time. It was taken as fact that growing up with a mother who was lesbian would not be in the best interests of the child. In custody disputes two major concerns were raised. Firstly, it was argued that were children to remain with their lesbian mother they would be teased and ostracised by their peers, and would develop emotional and behavioural problems as a result. Second, it was assumed that the children would show atypical gender development: that boys

would be less masculine in their identity and behaviour, and girls less feminine, than their counterparts from heterosexual homes. Intrinsic to this latter concern was the expectation that the children would grow up to be lesbian or gay themselves – an outcome that was considered to be undesirable by courts of law.

At that time no studies had been carried out of the psychological development of children in lesbian families. The custody battle was generally fought using expert witnesses, usually a psychoanalyst on the father's side arguing that the combination of an absent father and a lesbian mother was bound to harm the child, and a child psychiatrist on the mother's side suggesting that it was the quality of family relationships that mattered most. In the absence of information about the consequences of lesbian motherhood for children, custody was always awarded to the heterosexual father in preference to the lesbian mother. Fortunately, on occasion, the child psychiatrist was Michael Rutter. He strongly believed in the importance of empirical research, rather than blind speculation, to establish what actually happened to these children. It was due to his support that the research that followed became possible, research that has had an impact not only on our theoretical understanding of the role of parents in the development of their children but also on government policy.

Custody disputes involving lesbian mothers were also hitting the headlines across the Atlantic. As we began our research in the UK (Golombok *et al.*, 1983), other studies were being initiated in the US, notably those of Richard Green on the east coast and Martha Kirkpatrick on the west coast. All of the early investigations compared children in lesbian mother families with children raised in families headed by a single heterosexual mother. Children's social, emotional and gender development were assessed: the main areas of concern in child custody cases. The two types of family were alike in that the children were being raised by

women without the presence of a father, but differed in the sexual orientation of the mother. This allowed the influence of the mothers' sexual orientation on their children's development to be examined without the confound of the presence of a father in the family home.

Regardless of the geographic or demographic characteristics of the families studied, the findings of these early investigations were strikingly consistent. Firstly, children from lesbian mother families did not show a higher incidence of psychological disorder, or of difficulties in peer relationships, than did children from heterosexual homes. Second, no differences in gender role behaviour were found between children in lesbian and heterosexual families for either boys or girls. The daughters of lesbian mothers were no less feminine, and the sons no less masculine, than the daughters and sons of heterosexual mothers. This was in spite of the lesbian mothers' preference for less sex-typed toys and activities! These findings were replicated by other researchers over the years, culminating in a seminal review by Charlotte Patterson (1992).

But that wasn't the end of the story. A number of criticisms were made about this body of research. Firstly, a limitation of the existing investigations was that only school-age children had been studied, and it was argued that 'sleepers effects' may exist – that children raised in lesbian families would experience difficulties in emotional well-being, and in intimate relationships, when they grew up. In order to address this issue, Fiona Tasker and I followed up the children from the British study in 1991/92, 14 years after they had first been seen, when their average age was 24 years (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). An advantage of the study was that the majority of children were recruited before they reached adolescence, and so the results were not confounded by the knowledge of their sexual orientation in adult life. We found that children raised in lesbian mother families became well-adjusted adults. Interestingly, we also found them generally to have a positive relationship with their mother's female partner, unlike their counterparts from the comparison group who grew up with a stepfather. In addition, contrary to the assumptions that have

prevailed over the years, the large majority of young adults raised in lesbian homes identified as heterosexual.

Another criticism was that most of the children studied had spent their first years in a heterosexual home before making the transition to a lesbian family. To the extent that early experience influences later development, knowledge about these children could not be generalised to children raised by a lesbian mother from birth. Several studies have now been

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published, including a study in the UK by Fiona Tasker, Clare Murray and myself, showing similar outcomes for children who grow up in a lesbian family from the outset (Golombok *et al.*, 1997). The only clear difference to emerge was that co-mothers in lesbian families were more involved with their children than were fathers in heterosexual homes. Fiona MacCallum is following up these children at adolescence.

A remaining criticism is that the investigations of lesbian mothers to date have relied on volunteer samples that may be biased towards families with children without problems. My current study of lesbian mother families (Golombok *et al.*, in press) aims to address this issue by investigating a general population sample of lesbian mother families. This has become possible through collaboration with Jean Golding and her team on the Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood (ALSPAC), a population study of 14,000 mothers and their children beginning in pregnancy. In Bristol, where ALSPAC is based, Amanda Burston, Beth Perry and Madeleine Stevens are investigating children aged around seven years. Charlotte Patterson is also carrying out a study based on a general population sample of adolescents in the United States. The findings of these two investigations should together provide conclusive answers to the question of what happens to children in lesbian mother families.

In the 21st century a lesbian sexual orientation is no longer considered to be

a reason to deny a mother the custody of her children. At present in the UK lesbian women are individually eligible to adopt children, and MPs have recently voted to allow unmarried couples, whatever their sexual orientation, to adopt children jointly. Lesbian women also have access to assisted reproduction clinics to allow them to conceive a child without the involvement of a male partner. This change in social attitudes has come about largely through the efforts of the women's movement and the gay liberation movement beginning in the 1970s.

However, psychology has also had a part to play. There will always be those who believe that it is morally wrong for lesbian women to rear children whatever the outcome for the child. But for others, whose objection was based on the belief that children would suffer from such an upbringing, the empirical evidence to the contrary has brought about a change of mind. Mothers no longer have to choose between their partner and their child, and children who would otherwise have remained in care are being adopted or fostered into loving homes. Psychological research has helped tackle the injustice and prejudice that has damaged people's lives. That is why I study lesbian mothers.

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