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Work in Progress

On the Integration of Sexuality: Lesbians and Their Mothers

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Work in Progress

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Abstract

The articulation and integration of women's sexuality is an aspect of development that is strongly influenced by its cultural context. Western culture, with its patriarchal underpinnings, is grounded in a system of values and beliefs dictated by both sexism and heterosexism; thus, the development of lesbian sexuality is prone to strong countervailing forces. This paper examines the lesbian daughter's relationship with her mother in the context of the lesbian's evolving sexuality and suggests that some form of mutual empathic rupture is practically an inevitable occurrence in a cultural context dictated by sexism and heterosexism. The implications for relational development and women's sexuality in general are addressed.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on December 4, 1991.

In both my personal experience as a lesbian and my professional experience as a therapist working with lesbians, I have been privy to countless coming out stories and have been struck by the centrality of concern regarding the impact of the disclosure on the mother-daughter relationship. "What did your mother say?" is a commonly asked question that can easily spark a string of responses among a group of lesbians, ranging from hilarity to tears. Neutrality is virtually absent in the repertoire of possible reactions to this issue. While there are certainly lesbians who deem their experiences in disclosing their sexual identity to their mothers as positive and productive, more often this is the exception, rather than the rule, especially in the initial stages of the disclosure.

What is there about the particular nature of the negotiation between the lesbian and her mother, and why is this issue so profoundly charged and the impact potentially so damaging to their relationship? In an effort to answer these questions, I have chosen to retrospectively explore the lesbian's relationship with her mother and her evolving experience of herself over the course of several years prior to, during, and following her disclosure of her lesbian sexuality to her mother. This is not to suggest that all lesbians do come out to their mothers, but rather that with or without disclosure, it is a preoccupying theme in the lives of most lesbians.

The ideas in this paper are based on some of the findings from a recent exploratory study I conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation, in which I focused on the normal developmental experiences of lesbians. It is a well-known fact that the bulk of the clinical literature on homosexuality is couched in heterosexist and homophobic assumptions, and thus, inevitably casts lesbianism in a pathological light. Secondly, most of the literature, whether biased or gay-affirmative, is focused on gay men. That lesbians are underrepresented in the literature has obvious

parallels to the literature on women's developmental experience, in general. Just as women's psychology simply cannot be extrapolated from male-based theoretical constructions, so the developmental experiences of lesbians cannot be understood by studying gay men. Both cases are as clearly off base as is the assumption of a uniform similarity of developmental process between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Heterosexist assumptions in the realm of sexuality present ramifications as dangerous and damaging as sexist assumptions with regard to gender. Such biases, nevertheless, are rampant and ubiquitous in this culture. It should be noted that all the women who volunteered as subjects, and who are represented in this study, are white.

An Illustration

As a way of illustrating the lesbian's experience of disclosure to her mother, I will sketch a not-so-brief, but highly elaborate vignette. Barbara is a thirty-two year old, white lesbian, who is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. She has been in a relationship with the same woman for seven years, and they have been sharing a home together for five of those years. Barbara is the second of four children and grew up in an Italian Catholic, middle-class family. Her father is an engineer, and her mother, who completed secretarial school, devoted her earlier married years to raising a family. When the youngest child was in high school, her mother began to work part-time. All of Barbara's siblings, consisting of an older, married brother and a younger brother and sister, are heterosexual. Her sister, one and one-half years younger, is currently engaged to be married.

Barbara described her childhood as relatively uneventful, except that she never felt very close to her mother. She had no concrete explanation for this, only that she always perceived herself as somewhat "different" within the family context. Barbara characterized herself as a strong-willed, active and independent child, bright and athletic." One thing she recalled that really set her apart from her Italian Catholic family was that she, unlike her siblings, never entertained a fantasy of or desire to get married. This was a serious family departure, since talk often focused on family, marriage, and weddings. She recalled:

I never thought about marriage ever! I remember, in my family, you learned as a girl to make tomato sauce, so as a woman, when you get married, you would have that important skill. But I learned it, because I was growing up,

and I thought it was just part of that. It was different. . . for *me*, it felt different. I felt like a different person.

The perceived estrangement from her mother was quite painful for Barbara, and she often suffered confusing bouts of sadness and loneliness. She recalled making extra efforts at being a "good girl" by working excessively at her schoolwork, excelling at sports, and trying to entertain her mother, getting her to smile or laugh. On the whole, however, she felt quite alienated and sensed that she somehow must be a fundamentally bad or defective kid.

During adolescence, Barbara had several close girlfriends and periodically dated boys, which involved some heterosexual sexual experimentation. Her strained relationship with her mother continued during this period, and Barbara remembers that her mother was particularly interested in the quality of her daughter's social life, especially regarding boyfriends. This was disturbing to Barbara, since it never felt central to her, especially in contrast to her friendships, academic work, and athletics. Once again, then, she felt out of sync with her mother. Often, she would get drunk in order to endure going out on dates and "getting with the program." It's not that she disliked boys, but rather that she often felt as if she was "going through the motions" of dating them without ever feeling any appreciable intensity of emotion or sexual desire for them. As Barbara put it:

I really just wanted to chum around with them. I thought there must have been something wrong with me. I remember saying to someone that I just didn't get it, the whole world of dating and attraction. Some people are born blind. Some are born not being able to hear, and I was born without this. . . whatever the "this" is.

The relationship with her mother was particularly strained, since Barbara felt compelled to date boys, like other girls, in order to please her. But she could not find a way to tell her mother about her conflict, and she began to hate herself for not being like other girls. Her mother was in the dark about Barbara's pain and saw her daughter as willful and withholding. The tension between them continued. Barbara recalls that her sister and mother grew quite close during this time, and that they would often have conversations about marriage, children, and so on. She described her sister as "kind of boy crazy." Barbara, on the other hand, had very intense attachments with her girlfriends, and, overall, preferred their company to that of boys. Since this was not a popular position to acknowledge openly,

she would often manage it by spending long, lazy, loving afternoons with a girlfriend discussing boys.

Barbara began to be aware of her feelings of sexual attractions to other young women when, at about eighteen, she went off to college. At first she was enormously conflicted. I'll let her words convey the essence of her very powerful feelings:

I panicked. This was a conflict, a major conflict. I didn't tell a soul for a year and a half. I was denying that I was a lesbian. I was ashamed and afraid of what my family would say and think. I grew up thinking I must be some kind of terrible person. . . suddenly horribly immoral. I was horrified. It seemed unnatural. I had the most violent self-hate. I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror. My drinking became heavy during this time. I cried. I was angry. I thought, "Oh my God. I'm a lesbian. I'm not going to get married. I'm not going to have kids. What am I going to tell my grandparents?"

Barbara described her fear and self-loathing, as her feelings toward women went against absolutely everything she was raised to believe was valuable and acceptable — including the tenets of her Catholicism and the strongly heterosexual system of values and prescribed modes of relating for a young woman. Barbara felt wracked with guilt, especially with regard to her mother, whom she felt she was hurting, disappointing, and in jeopardy of losing altogether. She saw her mother as having devoted her whole life to raising her family and preparing her children to marry and raise their families and felt that, as a lesbian, she represented a glaring and shameful failure in her mother's life task. Barbara was terrified of the rift that easily might ensue.

Furthermore, Barbara felt adrift in the world of social interaction. Despite the fact that she never fully embraced the world of heterosexual dating and romance, she at least knew what a heterosexual girl was supposed to do. As a lesbian, she knew about her love for women, but had always understood it to be the man's job to initiate a more intimate, sexual relationship.

During this time, Barbara's contacts with her mother diminished markedly. Calls and visits were infrequent. Barbara felt she had less and less to say to her mother, less and less that she comfortably could tell about her life. When her mother would ask questions about Barbara's social life, Barbara could speak only of the women in her life, focusing on various activities with "friends." She would dodge the issue of dating, saying that she did not have time

for it, that there was no one particularly interesting, and so on. Barbara's mother began to register consternation and worry, wondering openly if Barbara ever would get married and raising questions about whether Barbara was afraid of men or of intimacy. She began to question whether her daughter was destined for the religious life; perhaps she had a calling. She also was confused about Barbara's increasing aloofness and withdrawal, feeling hurt and angry about it. At the same time, she remained unaware of her daughter's tension and mounting despair at the two lives she was feeling forced to live simultaneously, one public and one private. Over time, increasing periods of silence replaced the awkwardness of these painful interactions between mother and daughter.

Barbara turned more and more to the new and expanding network of women friends that she met through the lesbian and gay organization at her college, and also, within the local women's community. She found enormous solace and relief in discovering that a community of lesbians existed, that she was not an isolated freak of nature, and that an alternative to heterosexuality was viable. Barbara also sought counseling at this time. It was only when she began to establish and maintain these connections that her depression gradually began to dissipate. In particular, her first relationship with a woman lover served an essential function with regard to her evolving sexuality. Barbara described it this way:

I really needed someone who could take me by the hand and lead me out, and I knew that. I met someone who was that. . . someone who was comfortable with her sexuality. It was like coming back to a place in myself that I hadn't been in a really long time. It felt really welcome. It felt innocent in that it was free from pretense, and it seemed to be me remembering me, rather than someone I was trying to be. With boys and men I always felt I was playing a particular role. . . The light finally went on. I knew I wasn't crazy.

As Barbara further established herself in a community of relationships, she became increasingly comfortable and open about herself as a lesbian. She came out more publicly at college and even ventured to tell one of her siblings, her sister. Her sister was not at all surprised, had suspected it for some time, but did not feel invited by Barbara to ask about it. Barbara, at the same time, felt increasingly pained and dissatisfied with the distance in her relationship with her mother. She felt she was living, at best, a half-truth

with her mother and that this was terribly compromising for each of them and for the relationship. On the other hand, she was terrified of telling her mother that she was a lesbian. Barbara feared her mother's possible horror and fury and ultimate wholesale rejection. Furthermore, Barbara never really had presented herself to her mother in the context of her sexuality. It was not the kind of relationship they shared, and suddenly, this information was to be the central topic of a potential disclosure. This left her feeling strangely both saddened and embarrassed.

How can we understand Barbara's experience? What has made the relationship between lesbian daughters and their mothers so painfully strained? Why is the anticipation of Barbara's disclosure of her lesbian sexuality to her mother such a charged and dreaded one?

Relational development in women

To answer these questions, I will begin by turning to the Stone Center's work, which, over the past decade, has afforded us an evolving conceptualization of women's development that posits the importance of relational movement as the lifeblood of self-growth. In particular, the mother-daughter relationship represents the earliest model of, and serves as the paradigm for, all future empathic connections. Before I begin an exploration of the relational rupture experienced by Barbara and her mother, I will review briefly a few of the central dynamic features of the mother-daughter relationship that capture relational development. From there, I will move on to describe the particular nature of the lesbian's developmental path as it, of necessity, diverges from the general developmental course for heterosexual women in this culture.

Three key relational concepts emerging from the work of the Stone Center form the main threads of the following discussion. The first of these is "mutual empathy," which Jordan (1984, 1985, 1987, 1989), Kaplan (1988), Mencher (1990), Miller (1982, 1984, 1986, 1988), Stiver (1986, 1990), and Surrey (1985, 1987) have variously described as central to the definition of relationship. Mutual empathy implies a relational flow that is grounded in the capacity of each person to be "attuned to and responsive to the subjective inner experience of the other, both at a cognitive and affective level" (Jordan, 1984). Surrey (1985) captures the mutually empathic experience as one in which "'being with' means 'being seen' and 'feeling seen' by the other and 'seeing the other' and sensing the other

'feeling seen.'" Miller *et al.* (1991) has described it in her words as "the attempt to be with the truth of the other person's experience in all of its aspects." I would phrase this as the capacity to know and be where the other truly lives. This capacity for mutual empathic processes ideally originates within the matrix of the mother-daughter connection and is founded on the early experience of mutual attunement (Chodorow, 1978). This is not to suggest that the mother-daughter relationship is the only source of mutual empathic processes, but rather that it is typically the earliest model and most likely the clearest example of such a relationship. Empathic development can and does occur in the context of other important relationships throughout one's life.

A second important concept, and one that follows from mutual empathy, is that of the "relationship authenticity," defined by Surrey (1985) as the "ongoing challenge to feel emotionally real, connected, vital, clear and purposeful in a relationship." It describes the ongoing and mutual need in a relationship to be seen and recognized for who one really is. Relationship authenticity, like mutual empathy, refers to a process, rather than a static state, particularly as a relationship, of necessity, must change to meet the growth of each person within it. Miller (1986) speaks of the ability to continuously "represent one's experience" within the relationship as such experience arises.

The third concept, one proposed by Surrey (1985) to describe relational development and put forth as an alternative to the object relations theory concept of separation-individuation is that of "relationship differentiation." She describes differentiation as "referring to a process which encompasses increasing levels of complexity, choice, fluidity, and articulation within the context of human development." The challenge is to maintain connection while fostering, and changing with, the growth of one another. With regard to the mother-daughter relationship, failure of this capacity to both continue in, and change within, the relationship leaves both feeling shamed and devalued. Jordan (1985) extends the notion of differentiation and suggests that movement toward personal integration occurs within a relational context. I would further emphasize that a derailment of relationship differentiation, an incapacity to maintain connection while adapting to one another's growth and changes, leads to complications in the realm of personal integration. I think one often sees evidence of such complications during adolescence, when a range of functional capacities is rapidly emerging and

simultaneously bumping up against a system of values and beliefs that affect the fluidity of relational resilience toward change.

In summary, three central features of relational development for women that typically find their source in the mother-daughter relationship are those of mutual empathy, relationship authenticity and relationship differentiation. Referring back to the vignette, in her relationship with her mother, Barbara was, in fact, derailed in all three of these relational processes. What can account for such ruptures of connection? What are the obstacles for Barbara and her mother?

The cultural context: Sexism and heterosexism

In further setting the stage for this exploration, it is important to consider a few central issues related to psychological development in general and to the societal context in which it occurs. If one thinks of human beings as having the potential to evolve in increasingly articulated ways, and further, if one thinks of the environment, that is, the culture and the context of relationships, as joining with this potential so as to produce a range of possible outcomes, then one can begin to outline a framework for understanding certain detours in the process. Among the myriad potentialities in the human template is that of sexuality. If you postulate that the self in all of its many aspects flourishes in the context of relationships, you include the realm of sexuality. In the mother-daughter relationship, as the earliest example of such a meeting between growth potential and the environment, it is the mother who ideally nurtures with openness and receptivity the full range of emergent possibilities for her daughter. I say “ideally,” because clearly, this is often not what happens in reality.

It goes without saying, at this point, that the larger cultural context contributes a great deal to processes of personal development, and that families typically serve as the primary conduits for the transmission of cultural definitions and messages. Western culture, as many have noted (Kaplan, 1988; Miller, 1986; Singer, 1977), predicates its system of values and beliefs on a hierarchical arrangement of dichotomous constructions — differences are set up as “either-or” and “better-worse.” Examples include, to name a few, those of masculine-feminine, independent-dependent, white-black, Christian-Jewish, heterosexual-homosexual — the list is endless. Of particular importance to this discussion and the

obstacles faced by Barbara and her mother, are the insidious, powerful, and pervasive cultural conditions of sexism and heterosexism. These value systems assume that men and maleness are better than women and femaleness. Further, they suggest that heterosexuality within this sexist culture is better than and preferable to homosexuality, which, by definition, challenges the balance of power that defines sexism. Homosexuality is seen as a threat to a sexist system in at least two ways: two women together suggests that a man might not be necessary for a woman to be fully competent and functional; two men together threatens the stereotypic and sexist assignment of gender roles in that it posits that one man in such a relationship is serving the devalued function of a woman. In general, and most importantly, both sexism and heterosexism, as the combined basis for a system of pervasive power imbalance and abuse, are each sources of severe relational damage in our culture.

Now, back to Barbara. Barbara’s representation of her preadolescent and, especially, her adolescent years is not an unusual one for many lesbians. Previous studies (Rosen, 1990; Troiden, 1979) have described a similar constellation of retrospectively recalled feelings and perceptions of interpersonal relationships, marked by confusion, isolation, fluctuating self-esteem, and an overall sense of being somehow different in inexplicable ways. As the eldest daughter in a rather traditional Italian Catholic family, Barbara’s early environment contained certain expectations and messages regarding who she was to become. These included, among other things, heterosexual, married, and sexually somewhat naive and unassertive. At the same time, certain possibilities, among others, were absent from the repertoire presented by her mother, such as lesbian, unmarried, and sexually both curious and active. Barbara’s experience vis-a-vis her mother is an extraordinarily familiar one and clearly contains the early seeds of a painful development set-up with multiple ramifications.

First, as a heterosexual woman, a wife and mother, Barbara’s mother comes to her tasks with a packaged set of predetermined criteria for her success in these roles. Such criteria are dictated by the tenets of both sexism and heterosexism, which demand that mothers in this culture pass the baton of the traditional woman’s role to their daughters, and thus assure the continuation of the existing balance of power in a patriarchal structure. Her own self-esteem and the stability of her “place” rest upon her capacity to fulfill her task of raising her daughter to carry on this role. In

this way, the culture demands the active disavowal of a whole range of possibilities that Barbara's mother could include as developmental "fits" for her daughter — in particular, those possibilities that challenge the existing cultural arrangement. It follows from this that Barbara's mother will engage in an inevitable empathic failure for her daughter whose sexuality is gradually evolving in a wholly different direction. That her daughter could become lesbian is simply not a culturally permissible image to which a mother can be openly receptive without threatening both the larger system and her own personal sense of order. The meaning of this is powerful — Barbara's mother will unavoidably miss the cues regarding her daughter's sexuality, in general, and her lesbianism, in particular, throughout Barbara's development. She will be, of necessity, selectively inattentive, and thus remain minimally attuned to the emotional manifestations of Barbara's evolving sexuality. She will be unable to serve as an empathic resource for her daughter in this aspect of her growth.

It is essential to note that the reverse is also true; that is, Barbara unavoidably will fail her mother empathically. As a lesbian, and thus as a woman who, of developmental necessity, claims active rights to and ownership of her own sexuality, Barbara is a living representation of her mother's culturally determined failure in her role and the task assigned to that role. By not moving in the direction of heterosexuality and marriage to a man, and further, by evolving sexually in the absence of a man as the active catalyst of her flourishing sexuality, Barbara is defying the cultural prescription for a woman. She is not providing a comfortable "fit" with her mother's requirements toward the cultural dictates for homeostasis. This creates friction and forestalls empathic resonance with the mother's evolving needs as a heterosexual woman and mother in a sexist and heterosexist culture.

What, then, are the implications for Barbara and her mother of such cultural demands on women? The developmental setup goes as follows. For her mother to be truly empathic toward Barbara as she develops and matures, requires that she fail in one of her major culturally defined tasks as a heterosexual woman and mother. For Barbara to be truly empathic toward her mother requires that she disavow certain internal realities and remain inauthentic in the relationship. In other words, this culture, by virtue of its sexist and heterosexist underpinnings, violates the relationship between the lesbian and her mother, and, in most cases, ensures the lack of mutual empathy between them. Painful evidence of this deficiency abounds in

Barbara's story. For years, Barbara felt marginalized and disconnected. During her adolescence, especially, she found herself struggling to feel and behave in ways that were fundamentally dystonic, such as trying to date boys and to act as if her feelings of friendship with girlfriends included no sexual desires whatsoever. In order to sustain this heterosexual persona, Barbara resorted to dangerous means, such as heavy drinking. Eventually, she succumbed to feeling quite depressed, and it was only when she consciously realized that she was a lesbian that she could begin to make sense of her experience, one that forcefully had been couched in inauthenticity. Living had become increasingly a question of endurance. Barbara's culturally induced maladaptive efforts were designed, in part, to find some kind of mutually empathic resonance with her mother, who also was a victim of a damaging and inherently divisive cultural prescription. During these same years, Barbara's mother, while living with the illusion of success in her task as a heterosexual woman and mother, was also suffering with confusion at her daughter's pain, depression, drinking, and "failures" at sustaining heterosexual intimacy beyond her infrequent dating. She was unable to be empathic with her daughter's internal struggles; thus, her seeming "success" at passing the baton of heterosexual womanhood to her daughter was tantamount to relational failure as a mother. It is painful for mothers to fail their daughters empathically, just as it is painful for daughters to challenge and oppose their mothers' feelings. For a lesbian and her mother, this culture determines that such relational pain is almost a certainty.

Sexuality and shame

What feelings can be expected to accompany the disconnection associated with such ruptures of mutual empathy? The primary concomitant feeling is typically one of shame, given the central importance for women of relationship and the movement toward connection to others. Jordan captures succinctly the experience of shame as follows:

. . . shame is most importantly a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing awareness of how very much one wants to connect with others. While shame involves extreme self-consciousness, it also signals powerful relational longings and awareness of the other's response. There is a loss of the sense of "empathic possibility;" others are not experienced as empathic, and the capacity for self-empathy is

lost. One feels unworthy of love, not because of some discrete action which would be the cause for guilt, but because one is defective or flawed in some essential way. (1989, p. 6).

The principle point here is the deep feeling of isolation, the sense that one's very essence is damaged and is the source of relational disconnection.

Women in this culture are highly susceptible to feelings of shame (Jordan, 1989; Lewis, 1987). This is the case for many marginalized groups, and particularly true for lesbians, both as homosexuals and as women. Barbara's depression, her heavy drinking, her efforts at heterosexual pretense, were all manifestations of shame. Lesbians often experience shame at some point in their development with regard to their burgeoning sexuality. Often it is an amorphous feeling without a clear source, one that occurs prior to the conscious awareness of one's lesbianism. The conclusion that "something is wrong with me. . . I'm just not like other girls" is a typical deduction. In the context of the lesbian's relationship with her mother, as the case of Barbara so poignantly highlights, there are many relational ruptures that result in feelings of shame. In the realm of sexuality, the particular developmental path for a lesbian provides a ready setup for a shame-ridden interchange with her mother. Among other places, it is here where the lesbian's experience departs from that of a heterosexual woman's. The assumption that men are the bearers of active sexual desire and women the objects and the passive recipients of that desire (Jordan, 1987) suggests that men are the essential catalysts for and definers of women's sexuality, or to put it another way, women are coaxed into their sexuality by virtue of men's sexuality — reflected in the stereotypical image of the virginal bride in white being "deflowered" on her wedding night.

The lesbian's developmental path, on the other hand, clearly defies this patriarchal construction. Lesbians, by necessity, are forced to confront and actively own the existence of their sexuality in a way that heterosexual women are not. The assumption of heterosexuality together with the silencing of women's own active sexual "voice" provides a developmental obstacle for lesbians which can be negotiated only through conscious redefinition and some form of public rectification. Lesbians are forced to voice their reality in order to represent authentically their own truth (Miller, 1988). Such an open declaration of one's sexuality is not a necessity for heterosexual women because heterosexuality is assumed, and thus, their sexuality is not subject to the same kind of scrutinized,

and often shamemaking, exposure as is true for lesbians. It is an all-too-common experience for the lesbian to be in the position of coming out, only to be met with the private or not-so-private musings about just what it is she does in bed.

How does all of this translate for Barbara and her mother? In what ways does shame come into play for each of them? What meaning does this hold for their relationship and the capacity for growth and change within it? Barbara and her mother never really had discussed sexuality in any way. There had been talk of marriage, husband, and future children, and thus, some aspect of sexuality was at least implied, albeit couched in heterosexist assumptions. Barbara was not at all encouraged to notice, be curious about, or rejoice in her own sexual capacities, except as they were designed to fulfill her prescribed role as a heterosexual woman and future wife and mother. In order to correct the erroneous assumptions that her mother held about her daughter, and also to rectify the painful breach of silence between them, Barbara was faced with the need to acknowledge openly the truth of her lesbianism. Suddenly, and for the first time in her life, Barbara's sexuality was to become a focus of discussion between her and her mother. Any discussion of sex was thoroughly at odds with the nature of their relationship and with the heterosexual Catholic upbringing of which they were both a part. Barbara anticipated feeling exposed, embarrassed, and vulnerable. Barbara's mother conceivably would feel forced to face both her failure in her role, and her likely awkwardness about sexuality, particularly her own. Most importantly, there would be exposed that feeling of disconnection between them, a very frightening moment of relational truth. The anticipation of such a disclosure typically precipitates two possible choices for lesbians. One, because of unbearable shame, is to hide and remain secretive about the truth. The other is to risk disclosure in the potential service of some kind of relational reparation with the mother. Successful negotiation in the latter case presents an enormous challenge, though far from an impossible one, to the lesbian daughter and her mother in a sexist and heterosexist culture.

Jordan states that "in the extreme, shame contributes to dissociation and inner fragmentation as the person struggles to be free of the experience of personal defectiveness" (1989, p. 6). It is precisely in this respect that both relationship differentiation and personal integration suffer, at least in the realm of sexuality, for the lesbian and her mother. The inevitable presence of culturally-induced shame

associated with one's lesbianism, and by extension, one's acknowledgement and articulation of sexuality as a woman, serves as an obstacle in the path of relationship differentiation for mother and daughter insofar as the culture impinges in its demands for disavowal. Cultural requirements make it almost impossible for mother and daughter to adapt and grow and maintain connection in the face of these particular changes in the developmental realm of sexuality. Taken a step further, such circumstances contribute to a forestalling of integration with regard to the lesbian's sexuality. To me, successful integration, that is, the antithesis of dissociation and fragmentation and the antidote to shame, relies upon the capacity for successful relationship differentiation, beginning with the mother-daughter relationship. Where, then, does this leave the growing lesbian and her mother? Do Barbara and her mother have, as they say, a "snowball's chance"?

That processes of empathic development, in fact, can and do evolve in the context of other important relationships is an extraordinarily important factor for lesbians, and one that manifests itself with some regularity in most, if not all, their lives. This was certainly the case for Barbara. At the same time that she went to college and began to be consciously aware of her lesbianism, Barbara was approaching rapidly the height of disconnection with her mother and the depth of her own despair. It was at this point that she began to make relationships with other lesbians and eventually became involved in a fully intimate relationship with a woman lover. As a result of these connections and the reparative experience of mutual empathy that they offered with regard to her evolving lesbian sexuality, Barbara gradually could begin to feel whole, to become an integrated, competently functioning and feeling, active presence in the world. Her sense of shame began to dissipate, especially as her isolation decreased and was replaced by relationships that offered the opportunity for mutually empathic processes to develop further. Such opportunity was clearly essential to Barbara's continuing growth and integration in a context of sustained connections that could remain resilient to change. The developmental experience of most lesbians in this regard strongly endorses mutuality in relationships as a fundamental necessity in the movement toward personal integration.

So, why would Barbara choose to disclose her lesbianism to her mother at this point? She was able, after all, to compensate for the limitations in her relationship with her mother through the

establishment of other important, empathic connections with women. She was able to move toward increasing levels of integration with regard to her sexuality, as these relationships allowed for growth in her capacity to be adaptive and resilient. She was able to establish an intimate relationship with another woman that felt stable and promising. Why wreak havoc in her currently distant, but otherwise, nontumultuous relationship with her mother?

The answer is a simple one. The disconnection between Barbara and her mother felt bad. Disclosure, for Barbara, was very much in the service of connection. The relationship felt compromised by virtue of a sustained period of secrecy which left Barbara feeling inauthentic vis-a-vis her mother and left her mother feeling confused, hurt, angry, and unempathic toward her daughter. While Barbara did not really know with certainty all the reasons for their uneven relationship all along, she did know now that the hidden fact of her lesbianism was, at the very least, a contributing factor to the current distance between them. Disclosure to her mother, as she perceived it, offered the possibility for some clarification for each of them as to who they really were to one another, as well as for shedding light on just what the relationship could expand to include. Barbara felt that the issue was important unfinished business for each of them and that such an essential truth was fundamental to the authenticity and integrity of the relationship. Any possibility for reparation and further relational movement depended upon the disclosure. Although Barbara knew that coming out to her mother held absolutely no guarantee of growth in the relationship, it was important to her, nonetheless. She no longer could tolerate living a lie.

Did Barbara's disclosure make an appreciable difference? Did it enhance their relational growth? The answer is yes and no. Barbara's mother was extremely dismayed and disappointed to learn that her daughter was a lesbian. She felt embarrassed and did not want her to share this news with the extended family. She was angry with Barbara for what she saw as her daughter's forsaking the Church and all of their cherished, traditional family values. Although not stunned by her mother's response, Barbara nevertheless was pained. She never really expected her mother simply to accept and welcome her lesbianism, given her understanding of all the cultural values and beliefs to which her mother adhered and with which Barbara was raised. She recognized that acceptance would entail a substantial and highly conflict-laden leap for her mother; but on the other

hand, this was her *mother*. . . and Barbara was her eldest daughter. That very fundamental connection should count for something and bear up against any assaults to it. Over time and with help, Barbara was able to feel that the important point was that the disclosure provided greater clarity about each of them, about some of the strengths and limitations of their relationship and about more realistic expectations that each of them could hold. Barbara had other essential relationships to fill in some of the gaps, and her mother found a way to appreciate Barbara, albeit in a somewhat circumscribed way, making it clear that her daughter could place emphasis on her sexuality elsewhere in her life. Each was left sadder and wiser.

Barbara and her mother's disclosure experience is not at all unusual for lesbians. A more or less mutually agreed upon level of relational compromise occurs between mother and daughter that, in some respects, resembles their predisclosure relationship. It typically does not predict monumental changes, but rather provides an opportunity for possible change, reparation and growth. As Heyward suggests, "the coming out process is a paradigm. . . for healing" (1989, p. 9). Such growth as does occur is not necessarily manifested as a deepening of the connection between mother and daughter nor as an increase in relational resilience and adaptation. Rather, it makes possible another kind of integrity in the relationship — one that allows for the relational bearing of differences, but often not without significant mutual loss and grief. There is a wound to the relationship and a degree of scarring in its aftermath. In the context of the strong sexist and the heterosexist cultural demands that exert their influence through so many institutionalized channels, such as the church and the traditional family structure, among others, it would seem almost impossible for any other mother-daughter relational outcome. A permanent sense of loss and grief associated with the relational rupture is seemingly the only logical extension.

The fact is, however, that alternative outcomes do occur. Sometimes permanent rupture and total loss are the result of disclosure. On the other hand, there are those mother-daughter relationships that do emerge with greater relational strength and flexibility, an enhancement of mutual empathy, as well as substantial movement toward increasing relationship differentiation, authenticity, and integrity. These relationships demonstrate a capacity to integrate a missing piece, in this case, that of lesbian sexuality, so that the relationship becomes clearer and less rigid,

stereotypical, and static. Given the insidious and pervasive sexist and heterosexist culture within which mother-daughter relationships occur, it is remarkable that certain mothers, in fact, are able to transcend these obstacles. As much as it takes a stunning degree of courage and belief in the power of relationships for the lesbian not only to come into her truth, but then to live it authentically, I believe their should be equal admiration for those mothers who, for whatever reasons, are able to find some power in themselves within their relational contexts to embrace a rather complicated truth, only to discover deeper truths hidden beneath it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am suggesting that the relational experience of lesbian daughters and their mothers is an extraordinarily complicated one to navigate in a culture that rests firmly on the foundation of sexism and heterosexism. In particular, I am asserting that lesbians and their mothers and the relationship between them suffer markedly as a result of these pervasive cultural influences. Shame, like a virus, invades the relationship and threatens to leave the lesbian and her mother locked into a dynamic of blame, self-recrimination, and overall, mutual empathic rupture. In the meantime, the real culprit, the patriarchal system of oppression, continues the spread of cultural disease.

I believe it is at this point that important questions arise. Is there a way in which the experiences of lesbian daughters and their mothers provide a window through which to view the experiences of women, in general, in this culture? Do we see the cultural damage imposed by a patriarchal system of sexism and heterosexism as a form of psychic trauma to all women, insofar as such trauma severs one's capacity to feel and to be in connection? Are mothers and daughters, by their very natures, inevitably doomed to be in conflict as a result of so-called oedipal disillusionment, preoedipal fears of engulfment, and other facile constructions derived from sexist and heterosexist assumptions? Or rather, have mothers and daughters, both lesbian and heterosexual, long been pitted against one another as collective victims of disempowerment as women? Mothers and daughters, women in relationship to one another, can form a remarkably powerful bond.

I will close with a brief disclosure story told to me some years ago by a lesbian friend in response to my query: "So, what did your mother say?" My friend described the following:

My mother said, 'How could this have happened to you?!' I thought for a minute, smiled and answered, 'Just lucky I guess!'

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium presentation a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session, Mses Mencher and Slater and Drs. Stiver and Heyward, joined Dr. Rosen in leading the discussion.

Question: What did you do in your work with Barbara and her mother? Did they get anywhere? What have you done with other mothers and daughters to help them effect a reconciliation?

Rosen: Barbara was a woman in my study, not a client. However, I have worked with other mothers and lesbian daughters and it is often very complicated and painful. It is a process that can take quite a long time. My aim largely is to help them listen to one another, to find their capacity to be empathic with regard to a mutual experience of pain and to lift the experience out of the blaming mode. The important point is for the two of them to realize the force of larger cultural issues impinging on their relationship and the resultant rigidified, stereotyped images that have been formed of one another.

Mencher: When I have worked with mothers and their lesbian daughters, the most powerful experience for the mother is when I validate that she has a right to her pain and shame and all her many feelings of yearning and longing and rage and envy. I think in many cases that a mother feels her daughter's lesbian path to be a rejection of her and her path as a heterosexual. The mother feels that she has made many compromises in her life in pursuit of her particular path, and her daughter's suggestion that there may be an alternative way to go is a real challenge to the mother's confidence in her own compromises. I try to help the mother see this as an opportunity toward greater authenticity for both herself and her daughter in their relationship to one another.

Rosen: I would emphasize here that it is the sense of failure that becomes contained in the mother-daughter relationship that is in need of reframing, such that the empathic failures of the culture are not erroneously felt as either individual or relational failures.

Slater: What Wendy is outlining here is, for most mothers, that inarticulated sense of loss. It is very rare that a mother can identify that her real pain is about something deeper than "I am in pain because you are a lesbian." That very non-mutual framing of the problem leaves mother and daughter feeling very

stuck. To do some of the naming that has been described here tonight would be very useful in terms of generating greater fluidity and movement between the two of them.

Rosen: I had the experience of supervising a family treatment in which a young adult lesbian came out to her parents, and her mother's reaction was extremely severe and regressive, falling to the floor into a fetal position. It emerged through therapy that, in fact, there were serious, longstanding marital difficulties between the parents that were being masked by the overdetermined focus on the daughter's lesbianism.

Stiver: You've implied this issue, but I do think that mothers in bad marriages are really terrified that they will be left absolutely alone without a mate and without a daughter. The terror is one of disconnection, which feels devastating and which comes out in many forms.

Comment: This is part question and part comment. What do you hear empirically in your therapy work and your research about the majority of lesbians' experiences in coming out? Is it always negative with shame, shock, and the like? Are there positive receptions by mothers? I had the experience of being told by a group of friends to come out to my mother, that it was "no big deal" and to just "get over it already." Well, of course it was a big deal to my mother, but she eventually did get over it. This is my comment: I agree that it is an enormous energy drain, and I really encourage women to get on with it and do it, because otherwise it is a much bigger deal than it needs to be.

Rosen: There were women in my study who had remarkably positive coming out experiences with their mothers, but they were extremely afraid going into it. That's where I think you see some of what I've been talking about. Even if the coming out experience turns out to be okay, there is an initial anticipation that is filled with fear and a lot of wasted time and misunderstanding between mothers and daughters. There were a number of mothers who were not merely receptive, but experience a real sense of mutual growth along with their daughters. These mothers managed to use the information as a catalyst for taking personal inventories regarding those ways in which they felt inauthentic in their own lives and began attending to repairs. I felt those to be some of the most heartwarming responses.

Mencher: I think that one of the things that Wendy is implying is that at the very moment of the exposure of disconnection that occurs in coming out to

a mother, there exists the only possibility for true, authentic future connection.

Slater: I might add that even in the occasional situation where someone is immediately responded to positively by her mother, that didn't change at all what it took to get to that point of bringing the relationship to a place of potential rupture in order to offer that authenticity and eventual healing. Even if it does go very well, I think that, regardless of the outcome, many of the components of lesbians' experiences prior to the disclosure are largely the same.

Question: I'm working with a woman in her sixties who has a daughter in her thirties, and as we have talked together, it seems apparent to both of us that the daughter is a lesbian. She, however, has not been able to raise the issue with her mother, who I think is quite ready to hear this information and realizes that the conspiracy of silence really creates a disconnection between the two of them. She very much feels that this discussion needs to be initiated by the daughter. I'm wondering how you feel about it and whether she can bring this to her daughter.

Rosen: Why does she feel it has to be initiated by her daughter? It's a very interesting story. One of the ways we can think about this is that this woman is very worried that she openly will fail her daughter empathically, that she will have missed something by asking her the wrong question. In fact, it would be no worse, really, than failing her by ignoring something altogether.

Heyward: This question helps me realize how much I think this whole issue really transcends the roles. Mother and daughter can become a lens into a larger relational quandary and possibility. Wendy has asked if it can become a window into all women's lives. I think the answer is yes, I think that is partly true, because so much has to do with the inauthenticity of both persons, and that's what I hear you saying, Wendy. Which one initiates does not seem to me finally to be the point, so much as the breakthrough into the realm of possibility. Sometimes mothers come out to their daughters, and a lot of the same issues are there when that happens. It seems to me that somewhere right in the middle of it all is largely unmet yearning that is bred into all of us in the heterosexist patriarchy for the intimacy and authenticity with women, with our mothers, with our friends, with our lovers, with ourselves. This is a quandary we all share, and I think it is unavoidable for all of us in a heterosexist patriarchy. So, I think that for a mother who is sitting on something that is authentically with her, to imagine initiating an

empathic conversation with a daughter is a very beautiful possibility.

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