

no place like

H O M E

*Relationships and Family Life among
Lesbians and Gay Men*



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To James Arthur Dibble and

To Lesbian and Gay Homemaking and Homemakers

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cities (Mohr 1994; Stacey 1996). However, a pervasive sense of crisis in the American family has existed throughout much of American history (Skolnick 1991; Coontz 1992), and the national debate concerning lesbian and gay families is but the latest grist for the mill. This sense of family crisis pervades the political efforts to block lesbian and gay people from attaining legal marriage and the benefits of domestic partnership. The sense of crisis, and the rhetorical overkill that accompanies it, not only makes it difficult for political debate to focus on the everyday realities of lesbian and gay families but insures that many people will both understand such families in stereotypical ways and impede efforts to improve the quality of lesbian and gay family life. The quotation at the beginning of this chapter from Ms. Hamrick denies the possibility that lesbian and gay families exist, much less acknowledges that they should enjoy any kind of cultural recognition.

The debate over the cultural place of lesbian and gay families rages not only among the predominantly heterosexual, mostly male, affluent European Americans in the centers of economic and political power but within the various lesbian, bisexual, and gay communities as well. It remains an open question in the minds of at least some lesbians, gays, and bisexuals whether "marriage" is worthy of the political capital it will take to achieve it, or even worthy at all (Eskridge 1996; Polikoff 1993; Ettelbrick 1989; Sullivan 1995). And the same rhetorical overkill that characterizes the national debate also permeates the lesbian, bisexual, and gay communities. William Eskridge, a gay-male proponent of same-sex marriage, in a rhetorical flourish conceives of same-sex marriages as a move from "sexual liberty to civilized commitment" (1996). This formulation implies the presence of some uncivilized menace in the present lives of lesbian and gay families. Don't believe it. For while many lesbian and gay families face difficulties in their family lives, difficulties often resulting from heterosexism and homophobia, the notion of some uncivilized phantom dwelling at the heart of such families is demonstrably false. Actual lesbian and gay families, like most other American families, face the struggles of balancing work and family commitments, of managing the stresses and strains of waxing and waning sexual desires, of maintaining open and honest communication, of fighting over household responsibilities, and, most frequently, of simply trying to make ends meet. The latter point deserves much more attention, for if any phantom lurks in the lives of lesbian and gay families, it is their inability to achieve financial security, the foundation of a happy, communicative, and stable relationship (Voydanoff 1992).

This is a study of "family life" among a group of fifty-two lesbian and gay families (twenty-six female and twenty-six male). This study provides an ethnographic and empirical account of how lesbians and gay men actually construct, sustain, enhance, or undermine a sense of family in their lives. Rather than an excursion into the frequently symbolic politics of gay marriage, or into the debates about the liberating possibilities of lesbian, bisexual, or gay-male sexuality, this work explores the seemingly ordinary terrain of everyday life within and among lesbian and gay families. I use the term *lesbigay*, which is coming into wider use, because it includes lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men, all of whom participate in the families I studied. Of the fifty-two adult women participants, two consider themselves bisexual, as does one of the fifty-three adult men.

In this study I reflect upon the *details* of everyday life in the households of lesbian and gay families, and explore the relationship of such detail to the actual experience of and creation of family in the lives of lesbian and gay people. The participants in this research, similar to many other citizens, use the term *family* in diverse and often contradictory ways. At one moment a participant will conceive of family as a legal and biological category, a category that they reject, and might even define themselves as over and against. In a different place and time that same participant will conceive of family as a way of behaving and will reject the formal understandings of family in favor of an understanding that emphasizes the labors involved and not the socially sanctioned roles. And at yet another place and time that same participant will embrace the legal and biological definitions of family with the hopes of achieving lesbian and gay inclusion into those categorizations (for example, advocating lesbian and gay legal marriage or attempting to secure custody of a child on the basis of biological linkage).

In my analysis the crucial element for defining what or who constitutes a family derives from whether the participants engage in a consistent and relatively reciprocal pattern of loving and caring activities and understand themselves to be bound to provide for, and entitled to partake of, the material and emotional needs and/or resources of other family members. I understand family as consisting of people who love and care for one another. This makes a couple a family. In other words, through their loving and caring activities, and their reflections upon them, people conceive of, construct, and maintain social relationships that they come to recognize and treat as family (Schneider 1984). In this sense a family, any family, is a social con-

struction, or a set of relationships recognized, edified, and sustained through human initiative. People “do” family.

This research ponders the deceptively simple activities that constitute love and care, activities that frequently go unnoticed in most families, including most lesbian families. These may entail trips to the store to pick up something special for dinner, phoning an order to a catalog company for someone’s birthday, tallying the money owed to friends, sorting the daily mail, remembering a couple’s anniversary, finishing up the laundry before one’s spouse returns home, maintaining a photo album, remembering the vegetables that family members dislike, or attending to myriad other small, often hidden, seemingly insignificant matters. Decidedly not insignificant, these small matters form the fabric of our daily lives as participants in families. Moreover, the proliferation of these small matters produces a stronger and more pervasive sense of the relationship(s) as a family, both in the eyes of the participants and in the eyes of others.

Conceiving of them as labors of love, people customarily romanticize many of these domestic activities (Abel and Nelson 1990) and fail to recognize them as forms of work that consume the time and energy of those who do them (Jones 1985; Romero 1992). The reality that families consist of a multitude of often small, frequently unrecognized, laborious acts of caregiving, in addition to some set of codified roles (for example, mother, father, spouse, brother), tells us something else about why Kristi Hamrick’s comments are so problematic. The notion that family cannot consist of a “fill in the blank”—that is, person(s) of one’s choosing—contributes to concealing the labors that actually produce and sustain a family, any family. Emphasizing formal roles, a common tendency of family politics, family policy, and family law, detracts from the more basic reality that various forms of work dwell at the heart of family life.

Suggesting that various forms of work constitute the sum and substance of family life raises a number of questions about how to define work. While many citizens hold work in the highest regard in contemporary American society, viewing it as the answer to many of life’s most fundamental questions, as well as the elixir to a host of life’s problems, the question of what constitutes work eludes easy classification. Commonsensical notions of work often appeal to distinctions between productive and unproductive work, pleasant and unpleasant work, between producing and consuming, between the things we do for money and the things we do for love, or between activities

we are willing to pay for and those we are not. Such categorical distinctions tell us much more about how we value particular forms of work, and who does them, than they tell us about the actual characteristics of that work. In contrast to these commonsensical notions, many sociologists make a convincing case that the idea that work consists of some quintessential meaning that transcends political and cultural context is untenable (Becker 1963; du Gay 1996; Hughes 1971; Urry 1990). For example, if I were to provide cleaning services twenty hours a week for an hourly wage, and over the course of subsequent revisits I begin a relationship with my wealthy employer, fall in love with him, begin a relationship with him, and eventually move into that very same house where I continued my cleaning work, nothing will have necessarily changed in the content of that cleaning work but it is highly unlikely that I would continue to receive a wage for my labors, and I would quite possibly conceive of my cleaning work in new ways. In mainstream economic accounts of work, as I made that transition from paid worker to unpaid lover, I also shifted from being productive (that is, contributing to the gross domestic product) to unproductive. Such a scenario makes it patently clear that we need a social and an interactional conception of work, one emphasizing its socially constructed character.

Vantage Points: Situating Myself

My preoccupation with work and family matters reflects the confluence of my personal biography with my intellectual pursuits. My own experiences with work and family life have left an indelible mark upon my understanding of domesticity. I am an openly gay, Euro-American, educated, and affluent male. In contrast to my adult life, I grew up in a working-poor, female-headed, single-parent family. Through much of my childhood, in order to make ends meet, my mother worked nights as a bartender. There were periods where she could not get enough hours and our family had to turn to food stamps and welfare. I remember fighting intensely with the older of my two younger sisters over who would pay at the checkout counter because we both wanted to avoid the stigma that came with using those food stamps. We also received free lunches at school, although these lunches were not quite as free as one might believe. Our school principal thought it important that we learn the value of earning our keep, so, in the fourth grade, several other poor kids and I had to clean the

dining hall during the second half of our lunch hour. This included emptying the garbage cans into the dumpster. In order to do that, we had to drag the cans by all of the other kids on the playground over to the dumpster. One can well imagine the shame that I felt. Pile on top of these experiences the reality that I knew, and other kids seemed to know, that I was somehow "different" (gay) by the time I was ten years old, and one can appreciate the ferocity of my effort to escape such a life. I wanted to avoid stigma so badly that I would steal lunch money from my mother's inebriated customers at the bar. By the end of the fourth grade I had finagled and charmed my way into an illegal (in violation of child labor laws) after-school job at a flower shop where I could earn that lunch money. Such experiences fueled an intense desire within me to escape the working class and, for the most part, I have. None of this is to deny the importance of social-structural dynamics (job opportunities, educational opportunities, gender and racial privileges) that facilitated my escape, but it is to acknowledge the particular experiences that motivated me and subsequently influenced my perceptions of the world.

My childhood also taught me a great deal about domesticity. My mother's work as a bartender required her to work nights, which meant that she increasingly came to rely on me to keep the house going in her absence. We occasionally had baby-sitters, but they were frequently unreliable, and they rarely did any domestic work. By the time I was eleven years old, I knew how to do laundry, iron, clean, cook, baby-sit, and shop. Such experiences provided knowledge of things that most boys never come to know. It meant that much of the invisible work that women do became quite visible for me. My mother greatly appreciated these contributions, and I suspect that set the stage for me to question the widespread devaluation of domesticity. In some ways I was experiencing a nascent version of the second shift as an elementary-school kid. Each day I went to school until 3:00 P.M., to my paid job from 3:30 to 5:30 (which I held for three years), and then to my unpaid job at 6:00; my mother had to be to her shift starting at 6:00. In addition to my school-work each night, there was a meal to cook, cleaning activities, groceries to buy, and getting my sisters to take baths and get into bed. I would call my mother at work each night at around 9:00 to report that all was running smoothly and that my sisters were in bed.¹

As I entered into my own adult family life, I brought a set of skills and an understanding of domesticity that most men do not have, including most gay men. I have spent much of the past fifteen years both participating in the

everyday life of my own gay family, and those of others, and reflecting upon that participation as a budding sociologist. Over that period of time I came to realize just how problematic family life can actually become, especially for those gay men, bisexuals, and lesbians who wish simultaneously to pursue family, career, and community. I found myself increasingly identifying with and understanding the stresses and strategies heterosexual women use in their relationships to negotiate multiple commitments, to work, family, and community. I also found myself coming out of the domesticity closet. As the following pages reveal, gay or bisexual men who do domestic things, and lesbian or bisexual women who do not must carefully manage such information in order to avoid the stigma associated with violating widely held expectations about domesticity and its assumed links to gender. These expectations persist even if concealed by ideological commitments to egalitarianism among most straight, bisexual, lesbian, and gay people.

Vantage Points: Intellectual Traditions and the Study of Domesticity

My intellectual concern with domesticity appears at the intersection of three distinct lines of theory and research. First, my analysis is informed by a feminist-inspired literature exploring the paid and unpaid work of caring performed mostly by women but occasionally by men (Fowlkes 1980; Hertz 1986; Weskott 1986; Tronto 1987; Di Leonardo 1987; Abel and Nelson 1990; DeVault 1991; Diamond 1992; Glazer 1993; Gerstel and Gallagher 1994). Like the mid-August San Francisco tourist peering through the fog, attempting to discern the contours of the Golden Gate Bridge, this literature strives to discern the expansive structure of the work of caring. This caring work is often hidden by the fog of gender ideology, by "official" definitions of what constitutes work, and by the persistent devaluation of women, and the forms of work associated with them (Kessler-Harris 1990; Kemp 1994; Lorber 1994). This same fog envelops much of the work of loving and caring within and among lesbian and gay families. Even much of the newer literature exploring caregiving is restricted to care within traditional families.

The second line of thought relevant to this study emerges from the sociological literature exploring the relationship of paid work to family life. This literature investigates the division and organization of domestic labor within

heterosexual families and includes the field-defining works of Komarovsky (1953; 1962), Lopata (1971), Oakley (1974), Stack (1974), Bernard (1982), Cowan (1983), Finch (1983), Gerstel and Gross (1984), Fenstermaker-Berk (1985), Rollins (1985), Hertz (1986), Smith (1987), Di Leonardo (1987), Daniels (1988), Coltrane (1989), Hochschild (1989), DeVault (1991), Romero (1992), and Glazer (1993). All of these scholars paid particular attention, either empirically and/or theoretically, to exploring the breadth and depth of domesticity and to integrating domesticity into social analysis and theory. The work of these scholars provided me with the "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1954) that guided my fieldwork among lesbian families and informed the kinds of questions asked of participants in the semistructured interviews (see appendix A).

Central among these sensitizing concepts are those that illuminate much of the *invisible* work of domesticity, including concepts like feeding work (DeVault 1991), kin work (Di Leonardo 1987), interaction work (Fishman 1982), consumption work (Weinbaum and Bridges 1976), emotion work (Hochschild 1983), and household status presentation (Collins 1992). These novel conceptualizations of work provide a wider and more inclusive understanding of what constitutes work encouraging us to recognize the political and economic factors that come into play in the process of defining what constitutes work worthy of wages and/or compensation (Zaretsky 1973; Tilly and Scott 1978; Collins and Gimenez 1990; Diamond 1992). Much of this kind of work remains invisible because individuals either are unaware of its presence or they lack a vocabulary for naming the activities that consume their time and energy. Some of this work is intentionally invisible for a variety of reasons. Sometimes making this work more visible might lead to conflict within the relationship. At other times the invisibility of such work contributes to the perception of its natural or normal status, or in other words, one didn't really need to work at it.

Moreover, many scholars have identified a persistent and vigorous effort to hide, and belie, the actual division of domestic labor and/or the extent of that labor (Hochschild 1989; Romero 1992; Glazer 1993). Hochschild discovered the use of "family myths" (1989, 19), which are myths intended to veil the actual unequal division of labor yet simultaneously affirm the basic equality of the relationship. Hochschild's discovery led me to wonder if such myths might exist within lesbian families as well. They do. When I first began the exploration of domesticity among lesbian families, I was perplexed

by the public responses to my inquiry. My field notes capture dozens of social occasions where couples, upon learning about my research, began to smile, giggle, laugh, and/or tease one another. Most of those occasions also ended with a clear public affirmation of the basically equal division of domesticity among those couples. Something was very strange about this. Why, if a basically egalitarian division of labor prevails in these families, should raising the topic provoke smiles, nervous laughter, teasing, and public affirmations of equality? Because lesbian families are neither as egalitarian as they would like to believe nor as we would prefer that others believe. This, of course, does not make lesbian families pathological or dysfunctional or exceptional. It makes them rather ordinary.

Finally, a third line of research and theory influencing my work consists of the cross-disciplinary literature exploring lesbian, bisexual, and gay relationships and family life. A review of the research into the domestic lives of lesbian families reveals the presence of a somewhat odd, historical pattern in the findings. Assuming the reliability of findings, lesbian families before the mid-1970s lived rather different family lives than they did thereafter. The question of whether a behavioral change or an ideological change took place deserves closer attention, but let me describe the historical distinction that exists in the research.

Social-scientific research efforts in the 1950s and 1960s examined gay and lesbian couples and concluded that one of the members of a gay or lesbian couple took on the "masculine" role while the other member took on the "feminine" role (Bieber 1965; Ellis 1965; Haist and Hewitt 1974; Jensen 1974). Such a pattern conformed to the classical sociological distinction between "instrumental" and "expressive" roles within the family articulated by Parsons and Bales (1955), who argued that such a distinction of roles constituted an efficient division of labor within the family and provided for the well-being of all members. For Parsons and Bales, women in heterosexual families usually play the expressive gender roles, taking care of nurture, maintaining personal relationships, providing emotional solace to men who spend their days in the male sphere of competition and practical achievement. Within this model men play instrumental roles characterized by pragmatic concerns with sustaining the family economically. This Parsonian model also fits the stereotypical butch/femme hypothesis that many people used to assume characterized gay and lesbian relationships (Tripp 1975). In this model the butch partner plays the instrumental roles while the femme partner plays the expressive roles.

with expectations that partners should be similar in age and equal in power and should share responsibilities fairly equally" (1990, 344).

My research findings stand in bold contrast to this more recent literature. In fact, my empirical findings strangely—and depending on one's perspective, perhaps disturbingly—resemble the work of the earlier generation of scholars. A number of factors contribute to this marked discrepancy in findings. First, unlike much of the recent research, I base my analysis upon both in-depth interviewing and upon ethnographic observation of the everyday lives of multiple lesbian families. This dual methodology reveals that a chasm exists between what many of my participants report during in-depth interviews and what they actually do in their day-to-day lives.

Moreover, unlike much of the recent research, I interviewed participants in lesbian families separately yet consecutively. This prevented the development of "seamless" accounts so common among joint interviews with couples (Aquilino 1993). This interview strategy results in significant discrepancies between partners in their portrayals of domesticity. Given the depth of the interview schedule, I conducted the wide majority of these interviews on Saturdays spending the morning with one partner and the afternoon with the other. In the early evening I would meet with both to gather the remaining information, including the square footage of the house, photos of the grocery list, the living room, and of the inside of the refrigerator, a look at the calendars, the budget, and a list of financial transactions for the last week.

Separate interviews with partners resulted in contradictory accounts of many aspects of domesticity. There were also many contradictions between what the interviews elicited and what I observed in the field study. Such contradictions point to the importance of recognizing that powerful ideological pressures influence participants' answers to questions about domestic work. Other researchers have noted this phenomenon as well. The research of Hochschild (1989) among heterosexual families parallels my findings. She revealed a persistent tendency among heterosexual couples to assert equality through appeal to myths that hide unequal divisions of domestic labor (1989, 19–21, 43–49). Not only does a similar dynamic exist among lesbian families, but it may even be stronger. Let me briefly review some of the possible reasons for this.

First, many gay men opt for quite traditional masculine images for themselves; these men often draw clear distinctions between themselves and highly effeminate gay men. How might this affect the portrayal of domestic-

ity within the household? Joseph Harry found that in gay-male couples, most individuals held that they "dominated" decision making in the couple (1984, 67). Apparently, individuals resisted acknowledging that they may hold a subordinate position in the relationship. Clearly, gay liberation has fought extensively against notions of the effeminate man, and a hypermasculinity came into existence in the American gay-male community over the past few decades to combat this notion (Humphreys 1971; Kleinberg 1992). In a recent study in Australia, Connell found that most gay men embody quite traditional patterns of masculinity: "In this sense, most gays are 'very straight'" (1993, 746). Gay men in my study often deny that they hold more of the responsibility for domestic work than do their partners, even when it is not true, and they fiercely declare allegiance to egalitarianism.

In parallel fashion, the extensive impact of the feminist critique of the heterosexual family has taken root among many lesbian families. Many lesbians, familiar with the extensive inequalities that exist in heterosexual relationships, perceive of lesbian identity as a way of escaping the dynamics of inequality. Among some lesbians there also exists a significant ideological commitment to egalitarianism, especially among the baby boomers. As Faderman observed, beginning in the 1970s, an intense critique of butch/femme roles for lesbians developed within feminism, and it became politically incorrect for lesbians to affirm such roles (Faderman 1992). This dynamic prevents many lesbian families from even acknowledging that any kind of differentiation takes place within the family unit, much less that some inequality might exist. Yet I found both differentiation and inequality in the domestic lives of many lesbian families, including among the baby boomers.

Furthermore, partners in many lesbian relationships work together to camouflage the actual divisions of domesticity and to prevent threats to the gender identities of their partners, particularly for women who do little domestic work and for men who do a lot. Countless examples of this dynamic appear in the pages that follow. Lesbian people, particularly those exposed to higher education, are quite aware of the politics of social research, and I suspect this influences their responses to social researchers, including me. I recall my own experience as an undergraduate, when my first partner and I were asked to participate in research conducted by the psychologist, Lawrence Kurdek (1988b; 1993).² We each filled out long survey forms multiple times over the course of many years. As I reflect back on those occasions now and talk to my first partner about them, we both have come to realize

that we shared an overwhelming concern about what the world was thinking about gay people. We were young gay men, in the midst of an epidemic, under attack from right-wing political forces, and craving our place at the table. We portrayed our relationship in the reigning ideals of the era—equal, compassionate, balanced, and stable. In fact, it probably wasn't quite as ideal as we portrayed it.

Perhaps we were unique. My subsequent research suggests otherwise. We were actually a lot like many families (both gay and straight), organizing our domestic life around our jobs with the resources (time, energy, money) available to us and strenuously avoiding the potential for stigma from others in how we portrayed and understood our family life. We also knew that we were tokens, meaning that others would draw conclusions not only about us as individuals but about other lesbian and gay people as well, based upon their appraisal of us. We harbored a deep-rooted concern about the public image of our community.

While a concern with the public images of the lesbian and gay community might well influence how lesbian and gay families portray themselves to the outside world, the possibility also exists that the social and historical context has shifted dramatically in the last two decades, and that this contributes to different empirical findings. Some of those researchers who found pervasive equality in the late 1970s among lesbian and gay families asserted that one of the primary reasons for this was the rejection of the model of heterosexual marriage for lesbian and gay relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, 323–25; Harry 1984). Lesbian and gay marriage is now all the rage. This suggests something has changed. Perhaps the more conservative cultural climate encourages the lesbian and gay families of today to organize their family lives in more traditional ways.

Finally, I suspect one of the central reasons for this discrepancy in findings results from distinct conceptualizations and measurements of domesticity. Unlike much of the previous research, I define domesticity broadly and avoid the reduction of the complex dimensions of domesticity into simple and narrow concepts. For instance, rather than reducing the processes of providing meals to a few questions about who cooks or who buys groceries, I instead observed and asked for details. In the next chapter, I explore *feeding work* (DeVault 1991) in lesbian and gay families, and as that chapter will show, reducing feeding work to who cooks actually conceals more than it reveals about meal preparation. Many participants “cook” meals—meals conceived of by their spouses during their morning break, meals consisting of grocery items bought

by their spouses during their lunch hour on dishes bought and washed and put away by their spouses. And these conceptions of what to have for dinner often subsume within them extensive rosters of knowledge about what spouses like and don't like to eat, about nutritional and dietary concerns, about family finances, of inventories of the food products at home in the cupboards and on the shelves at the local grocery store. So while someone may spend forty minutes cooking a meal, someone else may have spent hours enabling the cooking of that meal. Much of this labor will be hidden from view by asking who cooks. Too many of the recent studies of lesbian and gay families ask too few questions about domesticity, conceptualize that domesticity too narrowly, and ask questions that invite participants to portray their relationships in normative terms. Many of these same studies blithely accept verbal portrayals of domesticity without giving consideration to the ways in which that portrayal reflects complex personal and political strategies for the participants.

Caring and Domesticity among Lesbian and Gay Families

Many aspects of domesticity, from tending to the sick to planning an evening meal, involve care. Much of contemporary opinion about domesticity assumes that women, either by nature or by nurture, intrinsically care for others (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982). Care, in this widely held view, becomes an aspect of one's personality, often a component of a woman's femininity. This expectation, or perhaps more accurately, this imperative (Westcott 1986), that women care creates innumerable problems for lesbian and gay families. It creates problems because the assumption that care intrinsically dwells within the personalities of women, and less so among men, transforms the men who do more caregiving in gay-male families, and the women who do less caregiving in lesbian families, into gender deviants. The violation of these gender expectations, a violation that must occur for lesbian and gay families to exist, creates the potential for stigma, and it creates the need to manage such stigma.

Despite all the rhetoric of the modern era about the fluidity of gender expectations, and the praise of men who nurture or of women who pursue male-dominated careers, the stark reality remains that many if not most people are not comfortable with violating gender expectations. One will see this with great clarity when looking at the lives of lesbian women on male-oriented career ladders or looking at the lives of gay-male “homemakers.”

These women and men, as well as their friends and families, construct elaborate accounts to explain their identities to themselves and to others. The men struggle with issues of self-esteem and self-worth. The high-powered career women struggle with feelings of guilt about their lack of involvement in domestic matters. In the pages that follow I investigate the work involved in managing such stigmas, including the management of the feelings and emotions that such stigma generates among lesbian family members.

In contrast to the view that care or caregiving exists as an intrinsic aspect of personality, particularly of female personality, I will show that care is the product of caring behaviors, behaviors often structured by organizational and institutional needs and expectations. Those who engage in caregiving become known to others as caring personalities, and so I do not conceive of caregiving as some inherent aspect of womanhood. Male nurses and male flight attendants seem to me excellent examples of individuals who learn to care because the organizational context where they work expects them to do so. And even if heterosexual males in these professions seem to care in a more masculine way, in order to avoid the stigma associated with other people conceiving of them as gay (Williams 1989), the fact remains that they must engage in caring activities. There no doubt exists a strong cultural expectation that women should engage in caring activities—even women in high-powered careers must confront this expectation—but acknowledging that expectation is distinct from the assertion that caring dwells within women. Men care, and they sometimes develop nurturing, caregiving identities, depending on the expectations that others hold of them and the expectations they hold of themselves. Men in gay-male families serve as vivid reminders of this social fact because without their caring activities, their families would crumble. And even in those cases where their families are literally crumbling, as in the case of family members dying from HIV-related illnesses, the caring activities of gay men proliferate and flourish.

Even so, much of the caregiving that transpires in lesbian families remains hidden and frequently devalued. In so many respects, we do not possess vocabularies or typologies that capture the experiences of those who engage in domesticity. Many lesbian family members find it difficult to talk about domesticity, not only because of the potential for stigma among the men who do it and the women who don't but also because they are not sure where to start or how to say it. They know that these experiences eat up their time and energy, but how does one express these experiences? Dorothy Smith, in *The*

Everyday World as Problematic, explores the disjunction that prevails between the actual experiences of domesticity and the officially mediated accounts produced by legitimate authorities of those experiences. In my observations of lesbian households, and in my own experiences with domesticity, much of the work eludes parsimonious description. There is no easy way to express the experience of simultaneously waiting at home for a refrigerator repair person, conceiving of a dinner plan, answering a phone call from a telemarketer, envisioning a recreational activity for the weekend, noticing a spot on the carpet in the hallway, dreading a visit with someone at the hospital, worrying about the cost of the refrigerator repair and coming up with a plan to pay for it, all while sitting in one's home office working on a project that is due in a few days. Many of these discrete experiences and innumerable others constitute domesticity. All of them can occur simultaneously. Yet in official conceptions these experiences become "housework." Conventional measures of housework might capture the waiting at home for the repair person, or the time spent actually cleaning the carpet, but not the mental process of monitoring the carpet, or the anxiety of figuring out how to pay, or the dread of visiting the hospital, or the mental effort of thinking about dinner options in light of schedules, expenses, supplies, and the desires of family members. A valid measurement of housework requires much more attention to detail, a more rigorous effort to make visible the often invisible dimensions of domesticity.

The Work and Family Lives of Lesbian People

In recent decades, social scientists established a substantial literature concerning the influence of one's paid employment upon the character and extent of domestic work in heterosexual families, much of it relevant to lesbian families, but rarely applied to them. For instance, Janet Finch's *Married to the Job* (1983) explores the impact of particular occupations upon the organization of domestic life. Finch shows us the enormous variations in the extent and character of domesticity depending upon the character of one's paid employment, and she reveals the ways through which heterosexual women often become incorporated into their husband's occupation. To read the extant literature on lesbian families one would barely receive any hint that the character of one's paid employment greatly influences how much and what kind of domestic work happens in lesbian families.

When looking at the occupational identities of lesbian family members, and the influence of those identities upon domesticity, some notable patterns do emerge. For instance, lesbian professionals (physicians, attorneys, optometrists, therapists, ministers) who serve lesbian clientele, in contrast to those who serve predominantly heterosexual populations, dwell in families thick in domesticity. This thickness results from greater resources and from the use of the private residence as a place to serve or entertain one's clients. This impacts the various forms of domesticity in different ways. For example, these professional households follow more rigorous standards of household cleanliness. They entertain more often than others do. They maintain more elaborate friend and family connections. While occupation influences the extent and character of domesticity, it also significantly influences the division of domesticity. Those individuals in higher-status, higher-paid occupations do less domestic work than do their partners. Those individuals with flexible work hours, who work at home, or who face shorter commutes do more domestic work than their partners do. In chapter 5 I explore the complex set of questions related to the division of domesticity. Some research asserts that lesbian families organize domesticity on the basis of choice or on the basis of individual interests (McWhirter and Mattison 1984; Harry 1984). This research leaves unexplored the question of context, the ways in which choices reflect the available options, and the ways in which interests develop over one's individual life course, and the life course of the relationship. The reflections of those individuals who have had multiple relationships, and who have witnessed the changed character of their own domestic responsibilities across those relationships, testify to the importance of context in matters of choice and interest.

Equality, Egalitarianism, and Fairness

The traumas of the sixties persuaded me that my generation's egalitarianism was a sentimental error. I now see the hierarchical as both beautiful and necessary. Efficiency liberates; egalitarianism tangles, delays, blocks, deadens. CAMILLE PAGLIA, *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (1992)

Equality, efficiency, and happiness do not necessarily coexist well with one another. Achieving equality certainly slows things down. In the pages that follow it will become clear that many lesbian families have opted for efficiency, not for equality. However, to suggest that they have "opted" for this

belies the importance of considering the social and economic contexts that frame their individual and familial choices. Emphasizing the "chosen" character of focusing on domestic matters or upon career must be tempered by attention to context. As chapter 5 will show in detail, those family members who gravitate toward domestic involvement often do so under circumstances that constrain their choices. The fact that they have come to like or even to love their circumstances does not detract from the reality that they have not achieved equality. Even so, many of the individuals who might recognize the inequalities within their relationships also consider their circumstances fair. One can theoretically argue that *fair* can mean different things. It is conceivable that a lesbian family might consider the domestically involved partner's contribution as the equivalent to the contribution of wages, wealth, or prestige. But it is more often the case that these family members are trading in different currencies, for very few consider domestic contributions the real equivalent of cash, assets, and prestige. And as I will suggest in the concluding chapter, the fact that individuals are trading in different currencies becomes patently clear if lesbian relationships end.

The foregoing comments should not be understood as suggesting that lesbian families are unique in this respect. They are not. In ways strikingly similar to heterosexual families, the character, extent, and division of domestic labor reflects the impact of influences well beyond any given relationship or household. The character of work-family relations in an industrial and consumer capitalist economy sets the stage for how households will be organized and what labors will take place within those households and which ones will take place outside. Any discussion of the equity and fairness of a given household arrangement must not lose sight of this broader context. For instance, a few lesbian families will achieve greater parity in their relationships through relying on the poorly paid labor of undocumented workers who clean their house, tend their garden, and do their laundry and other domestic tasks. Any discussion of equality within such a family must make clear that it is an equality premised upon on a broader pattern of inequality.

The Organization and Method of the Study

The organization of this study reflects my interest in creating a pool of participants that would allow me to both capture the diversity of lesbian fami-

lies and to make meaningful comparisons with much of the current literature investigating domesticity in American family life. To draw a sample for this study, I used four selection criteria: (1) participants identify themselves as gay, bisexual, lesbian or queer; (2) participants dwell together in the same residence; (3) participants identify themselves as a family or couple; and (4) participants have dwelled together for two years or more. I set a minimum of two years together because I wanted to focus on established patterns of domesticity. As McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found, in the early stages of a relationship, when romance intoxicates the partners, even cleaning the bathtub may be a time of joint activity and joyous celebration. I wanted to look at families after the initial romantic veneer fades.

Concerned with reflecting the class, race, occupational, and age diversity of lesbian/gay families, my approach to identifying participants took several years to carry out. I used a snowball sampling technique, asking individuals to provide the names of other potential participants. As Beirnacki and Waldorf (1981) assert, snowball sampling serves as an ideal method for locating individuals who tend to keep a low profile.

I carried out the snowball sample in two steps. First I located initial participants. I made these contacts through lesbian/gay organizations, clubs, religious communities, cafés, computer chat lines, bars, laundries, dance clubs, gyms, and other public sites. The second step of the snowball sample involved the initiation of referral chains. I established referral chains by asking the first participants to name other people who possessed the salient characteristics for participation in my research. Unfortunately, my initial referral chains produced a mostly middle- and upper-middle-class, predominantly Euro- and African-American sample with a strong presence of male Asian Americans. In order to gain access to working-class lesbian/gays, as well as to contact Latino/a- participants and Asian-American lesbians/bisexuals, I needed to make initial contacts and begin referral chains using strategies that would provide me better access to these populations.

I did this in two ways. First I became involved in a labor caucus of one of the lesbian and gay political clubs. For the most part, those involved came from unions affiliated either with city and/or state government, as well as those affiliated with hotels and restaurants. These union activists provided me with excellent leads to lesbian/gay people in the working/service class. I dealt with the initial dearth of Latino/as and Asian-American women by becoming a participant at two ethnically identified dance clubs, one predominantly

Asian and one Latino. After several months of regular participation in these settings, I came to know and be known by a variety of mostly men. These men became "gatekeepers" (Atkinson and Hammersley 1993, 74-79) for me, and facilitated initial contacts to lesbian/gay families that I could not otherwise have contacted. The Asian men, mostly Chinese and Vietnamese, that I came to know provided me with links to Asian lesbian families. Similarly, the Latino men provided links to both male and female Latino/a lesbian/gay families.

The Participants

My analysis draws on in-depth interviews with fifty-two families³ and upon weeklong field observations of eight of the lesbian/gay households (four male and four female). Much of the fieldwork took place during the weeklong time periods when I would dwell with the families I was studying. If I could not spend the nights (usually because of inadequate space), I would arrive at the same time that the first morning alarm clocks went off and begin my observations at that time. I usually carried a small notepad and wrote down activities as they occurred. Whenever someone was home, I would try to be there. I also asked participants to keep track of any domestic activities they conducted at work, like phone calls to friends and family or making arrangements for some sort of service for the house (picking up dry cleaning, house painting, carpet cleaning, or tree trimming). I asked each family how they might respond to my presence for a weeklong period, and I chose families on the basis of their receptivity. There is nothing particularly representative about these families other than they appeared the most receptive to such observation. I had to cajole and beg several of them. I paid each family for my food expenses and took each family out to dinner. Clearly, the families that were the most receptive were families with whom I shared similar demographic characteristics. I also participated in the lives of numerous other families through accompanying them in their domestic activities. Instead of living with them I would tag along while they conducted their domestic affairs. For instance, I went grocery shopping with fifteen individuals and four couples. I went to the laundry with three individuals and one couple. I went shopping for furniture and other consumer products with seven individuals and two couples. I went shopping for holiday gifts with four couples and six

individuals. Throughout the research I attempted to observe families engaging in their domestic lives in whatever way I could. I was particularly interested in observing domesticity and listening to their reflections about their participation while they performed domestic tasks.

Characteristics of the Participants

One of the crucial distinctions that prevail among lesbian families in terms of the character and extent of domesticity is the family's socioeconomic context.⁴ As I will show, social class distinctions appear more significant to domesticity than are other distinctions like gender and ethnicity or race. However, because gender, race, and ethnicity are often conflated with class in American society, people often make the mistake of thinking of class-related differences as the product of gender or ethnic/racial differences (Steinberg 1989; Epstein 1988, 116). While few in number, the families of more affluent lesbians or more affluent African-, Latino-, Asian-American families, when compared with the family lives of poorer Euro-American males, reveal a great deal about the salience of class distinctions to family life.

There are three distinct class groupings of lesbian families in this study: working/service, middle, and upper middle class (appendix B, table B1). Overall, household incomes range from \$24,000 to \$230,000 per year, with a median household income of \$58,500. This income figure might seem high, but it must be understood in context. The San Francisco Bay Area is the most affluent metropolitan area in North America—a circumstance driven by the Silicon Valley and its place in the new world economy. The cost of renting, and of owning property, in the Bay Area far exceeds that of any other metropolitan area. The San Francisco Tenants Union reports that in 1997 the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the city was \$1200, while two bedrooms rented for \$1700 (*San Francisco Independent*, 15 Apr. 1997, 13). Median annual household income in the six counties of the Bay Area hovers just under \$50,000. Over one million households in the Bay Area earn \$50,000–\$75,000 a year, and another one million earn over \$75,000 (*San Francisco Examiner*, 16 Feb. 1997, W21). Put another way, those Bay Area households earning below the national median household income, as reported by the U.S. Census in 1990 (\$29,943), number about 1.5 million. The roughly four million remaining households in the Bay Area earn more, and

often substantially more, than the median national income. By national standards, Bay Area residents, including lesbian residents, are quite affluent. However, comparing Bay Area lesbian residents with heterosexual ones reveals something quite different.

In this context, the lesbian families of the Bay Area appear to mostly fall into the middle class. However, one should not generalize from lesbian families to the wider lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities of the Bay Area, many of whom are single, younger, living in multiple-adult households, and probably less affluent than those in relationships. According to the Census Bureau lesbian families who live in San Francisco proper live for the most part in the working- and middle-class neighborhoods of Castro, Upper Market, Western Addition, Bernal Heights, Inner Mission, and Hayes Valley (*San Francisco Examiner*, 12 Sept. 1993, 10). Relatively few lesbian families reside in the more affluent, and predominantly heterosexual, neighborhoods like the Marina, Russian/Nob Hill, Pacific Heights/Sea Cliff, Presidio Heights, Laurel Heights, Twin Peaks, Forest Hill/St. Francis Wood, and Ocean View. For instance, the Census Bureau reports that 15,008 households live in Pacific Heights, a wealthy, mostly Euro-American enclave in San Francisco. Of those 15,008 households, 235 are same-sex households, or about 1.5 percent (*ibid.*, 10). According to the same census data, the greatest number of lesbian families actually live in the Western Addition, a densely populated, mixed-income neighborhood not known for its affluence. The census estimates that one in twenty-seven households, or 835 of the 22,815 households in the Western Addition, is a same-sex household (*ibid.*, 10). One in four of the families I studied dwell in the Western Addition, including many of the less affluent Euro-American males, as well as many of the Asian- and African-American lesbian families. Overall, most lesbian families in this study dwell in relatively spartan apartments, live in more socially and economically “marginal” (that is, between more affluent and poor districts) city neighborhoods, or in distant suburbs, resolutely defy the stereotype of gay affluence, and seem to represent the average and range captured by the census data.

In terms of ethnic and racial identities, of the 108 participants in the research, 63 were predominantly Euro-American, 15 Latino/a-American, 15 Asian-American, 13 Black/African-American, and 2 Native American (see table B4 in appendix B for further sample characteristics, and table B9 for ethnic/racial identities of particular participants).⁵ The wide majority of

Euro-American participants migrated to the Bay Area from somewhere else, while the great majority of Latino/a-, Asian-, and Black/African-Americans grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. The influence of racial and ethnic identities upon domesticity eludes parsimonious analysis. Such identity influences some aspects of domesticity in some families but not in others. Understandings of who constitutes family are a case in point. Notions of extended or "chosen" kin, and the stereotype that some racial/cultural groups value family more because they maintain large, extended families, impact how some lesbian-family members portray their family life, but not necessarily the kind of family life they lead. For example, I will show that many of the African-, Asian- and Latina/o-American lesbian families maintain stronger connections to "biolegal"⁶ relatives, but this may simply be a function of the fact that many of their biolegal relatives also live nearby. Chapter 4 considers these issues in greater detail.

Domestic Diversity

Lesbian family life takes many forms. Within this study I capture some of the diversity that exists among such families, particularly in terms of class, ethnicity/race, and occupation. However, there are multiple expressions of lesbian families that this study does not capture. For instance, this is a study of urban lesbian family life, and so does not capture the experiences of lesbian families dwelling in small towns, midsize cities, or in rural communities.⁷ Furthermore, as previously noted, San Francisco is somewhat unique among North American cities in that the urban core is not in economic decline.⁸ This limits some comparisons with other urban lesbian populations. This also impacts the urban/suburban distinctions that exist among lesbian families in the San Francisco Bay Area that I discuss later. For instance, many Bay Area suburban lesbian residents would like to live in the central city but economic costs prevent it. Moreover, I did not study lesbian families where members live separately, either in the same region or even in another city. Nor did I study lesbian single-parent families. Most of the families in this study consist of two adults, although one gay-male family consists of three adults. Children dwell with five of the families, although not always on a full-time basis. For instance, one gay-male couple shares custody of a child with

one of the partner's ex-wife. The ex-wife lives in a suburban community, and the child shifts from one household to the other.

While I did not and could not capture the full diversity of lesbian families, the methods used resulted in class, ethnic, race, gender, and occupational variation. I do not claim to have a representative sample. I suspect, based on what I know about several of the lesbian families that turned me down for interviews, that my sample is more economically affluent and economically independent. One family turned me down for fear that exposure might endanger the unemployment benefits that one of the members receive. Another, a Latina couple, turned me down because, as one of the women put it, "I can't risk my mother finding out right now, because I need her help to make ends meet, and I never know when she might stop by."

Overview

I have organized this work on the basis of the different kinds of domestic work that occur in lesbian families (for example, feeding work, kin work, consumption work, and housework). This organizational strategy reflects my commitment to providing lesbian families themselves, and those who study them, with a more accurate and extensive vocabulary for talking about those family experiences. In chapter 1 I explore the processes and labors involved in feeding the lesbian family, utilizing DeVault's typologies to make sense of feeding lesbian families, and reflects on some of the unique dimensions of feeding in the lesbian context. In chapter 2 I pursue housework, articulating a narrower conception of what constitutes housework, yet exploring that narrower conception in much greater depth. In chapter 3 I explore kin work by pursuing the question of who constitutes legitimate family in the eyes of lesbian people and what forms of domesticity come into play in the creation and maintenance of that family. I address questions recently brought to the fore by anthropologist Kath Weston's provocative work *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. My work brings a sociological perspective to these questions, emphasizing the significance of socioeconomic context to how lesbian families both think about and construct family life. In chapter 4 I examine consumption work. Often mistaken for leisure, frequently invisible, and always time consuming, consumerism eats up more

and more of Americans' time (Schor 1992). I reflect on the character of consumption work, the ways in which it has become central to family life, the distinct forms of work involved in doing consumption, and the importance of socioeconomic context to understanding consumption activities among lesbian families. In chapter 5 I examine the division of labor in lesbian families, focusing on the different patterns that division of labor takes, as well as the factors that appear to influence the division of labor. There I will reflect on the myths lesbian families use to make sense of and to portray the division of labor in their homes. It is true that some lesbian families achieve a great deal of "equality" in their domestic lives, but that often does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it occurs under a set of unique social and economic conditions. And the achievement of that equality does not correspond with a general sense of satisfaction with family life; in fact, just the opposite can happen. In the concluding chapter I reflect on the significance of this study for public policy debates, including those pertaining to domestic partnership and to lesbian and gay marriage.

feeding lesbian families

To housekeep, one had to plan ahead and carry items of motley nature around in the mind and at the same time preside, as mother had, at the table, just as if everything, from the liver and bacon, to the succotash, to the French toast and strawberry jam, had not been matters of forethought and speculation.

FANNIE HURST, *Imitation of Life*

Life's riches other rooms adorn. But in a kitchen home is born.

EPIGRAM HANGING IN THE KITCHEN OF A LESBIAN FAMILY

Preparing a meal occurs within an elaborate set of social, economic, and cultural frameworks that determine when and with whom we eat, what and how much we eat, what we buy and where we go to buy it, and when and with what tools and techniques we prepare a meal. Many people associate the activities of preparing and sharing meals together with family. As sociologist Marjorie DeVault convincingly argues in *Feeding the Family* (1991), the work of preparing and sharing meals