The Grandmother Role as Experienced by Lesbian Women

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ABSTRACT. This study explores the grandmother role as experienced by a nonrandom sample of nine lesbian women. It examines how they define the grandmother role, and the behaviors and actions through which they enact the role. During individual interviews each woman was asked to talk about what makes a woman a good grandmother, memories of her own grandmothers, and the relationship she has with one or more of her grandchildren. The effect of her sexual orientation on the relationship was not explored. These women define the grandmother role as providing emotional support to their grandchildren, providing varied experiences for their grandchildren, and providing support for the parents of their grandchildren. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>]

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Today, an estimated 70 to 75 percent of the population over 65 years of age are grandparents (Hagestad, 1988; Link, 1987; Nussbaum &
Bettini, 1994; Tinsley & Parke, 1987). Gender differences have been explored in a number of studies on grandparenting (Thomas, 1986; 1989). However, the sexual orientation of the grandparent has not been considered in any of the studies. Older adults, even single older adults, are assumed to be heterosexual, and consequently sexual orientation is not considered as a factor in general aging and adult development studies (Berger & Kelly, 1996; Jacobson & Grossman, 1996; Kehoe, 1986; Lee, 1987). Yet, within the grandparent population there are lesbian grandmothers and gay grandfathers.

Over the last 10 to 15 years a number of studies have been conducted specifically on issues relevant to aging homosexuals (Berger & Kelly, 1996; Deevey, 1990; Lee, 1987; Quam & Whitford, 1992). Just as sexual orientation is not considered in the general gerontological literature, intergenerational relationships go unstudied by researchers focusing on the homosexual population.

In families, women play import roles as caregivers and kin keepers. Hagestad (1988) asserts that women, especially older women, are the ones that hold the family and lineages together. To obtain insight into these roles in families headed by lesbian women this study explores the relationships a nonrandom sample of lesbian women have with their grandchildren.

The grandmothers in this study self-identify as lesbians and in this way are unique relative to the grandmothers in other grandparenting studies. However, the specific influence sexual orientation has on the grandmother role is not part of the study. Being the first known study focusing on lesbian grandmothers per se, the scope of the investigation is confined to describing the grandmother role from the viewpoint of these lesbian women.

Research on grandparenthood has focused primarily on either the meaning of the role or the style in which the role is enacted. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964), and Kivnick (1982) developed classification schemes for the meaning a grandparent derives from the grandparent role. While they named their dimensions differently, both of the researchers’ classification schemes included components that captured:

- The extent to which a grandparent was involved in the life of his/her grandchild;
- The grandparent’s self view of being a resource for his/her grandchild;
• The importance of the continuation of the family that the grandchild represented;
• The sense of achievement felt by the grandparent as a result of the grandchild's accomplishments; and
• The extent to which the grandparent indulged his/her grandchild.

Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) discuss a number of factors that affect the grandparent-grandchild relationship. They found geographical proximity, number of grandchildren, and the gender of the grandchildren to impact the overall relationship. In addition to these factors, Kennedy (1992b) found the gender of the grandparent, familial link, family form and birth order of the grandchildren, and parental attitudes toward grandchild/grandparent relation influenced the quality of the relationship. These findings are consistent with those reported by Hodgson (1992), and Creasey (1993). Miller and Cavanaugh (1990) have suggested that the meaning one derives from the grandparent role and how the role is enacted may be derived more from the opportunity to have a relationship with a grandchild than from some internal motivation.

Three similar typologies of grandparenting styles have been developed (Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Robertson, 1977; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). Neugarten and Weinstein's (1964) classification scheme of five styles—formal, fun seeker, surrogate parent, reservoir of family wisdom and distant figure—is often included in textbooks on adult development (Turner & Helms, 1994). In contrast Cherlin and Furstenberg's typology of grandparenting styles is composed of three categories corresponding to Neugarten and Weinstein's fun seeker, surrogate parent and distant figure. Robertson (1995) provides a good summary of the other research done on grandparenthood from the mid-1950s through the early 1990s.

Our knowledge and understanding of aging within the homosexual community is limited. The current cohort of older homosexuals grew up prior to the 1969 Stonewall riots, the event marking the start of the gay rights movement (Lee, 1987). They tend to be more secretive about their sexual orientation than younger individuals (Deevey, 1990; Kehoe, 1986; Kertzner & Sved, 1996) and tend to avoid participation in both homosexual community organizations as well as the organizations for the general older population (Slusher, Mayer & Dunkle, 1996). These factors make older gay and lesbian people a difficult group to study.
Estimates of the size of the older gay and lesbian community range from a low of 1.75 million to a high of 3.5 million (Berger, 1984; Friend, 1991; Slusher, Mayer & Dunkle, 1996). In addition to the issue of being closeted and hard to locate, estimates of the number of older homosexuals are limited by the lack of agreement on the definition of ‘old’ and of who is gay or lesbian (Jacobson & Grossman, 1996). Some researchers use an age of 40 years as the lower limit when studying ‘older’ gay and lesbian people because the homosexual community, in general, has seen those older than 40 as no longer being young (Berger, 1984). Other researchers have used a minimum age of 50 (Quam & Whitford, 1992) and 65 (Kehoe, 1986) for their sample of ‘older’ gay and lesbian people.

In the studies that have been undertaken on aging of gay and lesbian people, researchers have found older gay and lesbian people to be more similar than different in comparison to older heterosexual people (Adelman, 1991; Dorfman et al., 1995; Kehoe, 1986; Lee, 1987; Quam & Whitford, 1992). Many older gay and lesbian individuals have been in a traditional heterosexual marriage (Berger, 1984; Kehoe, 1986; Quam & Whitford, 1992). Like their heterosexual counterparts, many older homosexuals are caring for children as well as dealing with the issues of caregiving for their elderly parents (Deevey, 1990; Kimmel, 1992). Members of both groups are concerned about health, finances, aging, loneliness and isolation. For the most part, older gay and lesbian people are satisfied with their lives (Quam & Whitford, 1992).

Gay and lesbian people age within their family of origin, their family of spouse/partner and children, as well as surrogate families of friends and lovers. Within these various family configurations, gay and lesbian people are involved in the rearing and nurturing of children (Kimmel, 1992). Yet there is little empirical work on family roles, and none on extended family roles such as grandparent, as experienced by gay and lesbian people (Bozett & Sussman, 1990). This study is the first to examine the grandparent role as perceived by grandmothers who happen to be lesbian.

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to examine the grandmother role as lesbian women experience it. The study was designed as a qualitative,
phenomenological study. Semi-structured interviews with lesbian grandmothers were used to gain insight and understanding of the essence of their experience of the grandmother role. This approach was adopted for two reasons. First, the sample size was expected to be small, limiting the power of any statistical analysis. Second, the quantitative instruments that could be used have been developed based on knowledge and understanding of the heterosexual grandparent. As this was the first study using a sample of lesbian grandmothers the applicability of the existing instruments was unknown.

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

From the literature on grandparenting an eight-question interview guideline was developed. The questions used asked the women to:

- Describe a good grandmother;
- Talk about the relationship she has with one or more of her grandchildren;
- Describe what she gets out of the relationship with her grandchild(ren);
- Talk about what she wants her grandchild(ren) to get out of the relationship;
- Describe how she would like her grandchild to describe her to a friend;
- Talk about her own grandmothers;
- Talk about how she feels about being a grandmother; and
- Describe the advice she would offer a soon-to-be first time grandmother.

The guideline was used by the primary researcher to structure the interview. However, the specific order and wording of the questions asked were adapted to fit the general flow of each interview.

The interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient for the subject. Eight of the interviews took place at the subjects' homes and one in the subject's office. They all agreed to have the interviews tape recorded with the understanding that the tapes would be transcribed verbatim by either the primary researcher or a third party. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes.
SUBJECTS

Subjects for this study were solicited by the primary researcher distributing fliers to bookstores, gift shops, churches and various community organizations known to be gay and lesbian friendly along Colorado’s Front Range. The fliers asked for women that met the criteria (i.e., self-identify as lesbian and have at least one grandchild) to contact the principal researcher if they were interested in participating in a study on lesbian grandmothers. In addition to the fliers the researcher distributed, the flier was included by Fort Collins, Colorado’s chapter of the National Organization of Women November, 1997 newsletter and posted on internal gay and lesbian electronic bulletin boards at two, large companies with offices along Colorado’s Front Range.

Each participant made the initial contact with the principal researcher. At that time she was told more about the study and time requirements. If she was still interested and willing to participate a consent form, demographic questionnaire and a stamped return envelope were sent to her. Subsequently an interview time was scheduled. At the conclusion of each interview the subject was given additional fliers and asked to pass them on to friends that met the study criteria. A total of nine women contacted the researcher and all agreed to participate in the study. Five responded to the fliers posted by the researcher, two responded having seen the flier on corporate electronic bulletin boards, and two were recruited by other study participants.

This sample of nine lesbian grandmothers is not believed to be representative of the population of lesbian grandmothers. It is biased in that the women are all volunteers, white, and at least middle-class. They are also well educated, only two have less than a master’s degree. With one exception they rate their health as being very good or excellent. In these ways the participants in this study are similar to the subjects in studies by Deevey (1990), Almvig (1982), Kehoe (1986) and Berger (1984). The women all live along the Front Range in Colorado and report that they share their grandmother status with homosexual and heterosexual friends, as well as coworkers. Each of the nine women that participated in the study told the principal researcher, either during the initial telephone conversation or the interview, that she was open about her sexual orientation and was not concerned about issues of anonymity.
DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data consists of approximately 70 pages of text from the transcribed interviews. The audiotape made of one of the interviews could not be transcribed because of its poor quality. The process of reduction started with inductive, first level coding of each meaning segment of the transcribed interviews based on the principles of the constant comparative method as set forth by Miles and Huberman (1994). The computer software HyperRESEARCH (1994) was used to assist in tracking of codes and the source material assigned to each code. When all the source material had been coded, each code and its associated source material were reviewed for consistency and appropriateness. Code names and source material were adjusted until they were deemed to be consistent and appropriate.

When satisfied with the initial coding of the source material data reduction was continued with level two coding. Eight broader concepts emerged from the data. They were:

- Behaviors toward parents;
- Behaviors toward grandchildren;
- Benefits of being a grandmother;
- Emotional support to grandchild;
- Subject's grandmother(s) is(are) role model;
- Subject's grandmother(s) is(are) not role model;
- Varied experiences for grandchildren; and
- Wishes, worries and concerns.

Lastly, a structure was developed within which to give the data meaning. Two components of the structure for this study are implied by the study's stated purpose. They are role definition, and actions and behaviors through which the role is enacted. A third structural component emerged from the data itself. It is the perceived benefits the subjects derive from the grandmother role.

RESULTS

Role Definition

From these women's reflections on what makes a woman a good grandmother, their relationship with their grandchildren, how they
want to be thought of by their grandchildren and their memories of their own grandmothers a multifaceted grandmother role emerged. For them in the grandmother role they are to:

- Provide emotional support to their grandchildren;
- Provide varied experiences to their grandchildren, above and beyond those that the grandchildren will receive from their nuclear family; and
- Support the grandchildren’s parents.

Grandmothers Provide Emotional Support to Grandchildren

The first facet of the grandmother role that emerged was that of providing emotional support to the grandchild. This theme is consistent throughout each case and across all of the cases. This theme was found in the subjects’ descriptions of what makes a woman a good grandmother, when reflecting on the relationship they had with their grandmothers, in response to questions about what they want their grandchild to get out of their relationship, and how they would like to be described by their grandchild. These women perceive their role vis-à-vis their grandchildren to provide support for the grandchildren’s emotional well being. Themes of loving, listening, and being a safe person flowed throughout the data. Typical responses included:

[A good grandmother] loves her grandchildren and just slathers them with love at every opportunity;

[My grandmother] was always there;

I want [granddaughter] to know she has unconditional love, that no matter what there’s someone who loves her no matter; and

[I would like my grandchild to say] my grandma loves me . . . grandma’s was a safe place to go.

Grandmothers Provide Varied Experiences for Grandchild

While a strong theme, providing varied experiences to their grandchildren did not come through as strongly nor as broadly as providing emotional support. This theme was addressed primarily when the
women talked about the relationship they have with their grandchildren. These women want to provide different experiences that will help their grandchildren grow and develop in many ways. They each focused on what they perceive may be missing for the grandchildren in their nuclear families. For some of the women the issue was one of providing more concrete experiences such as music or dance lessons and access to animals. Others see a need to influence their grandchildren’s values or to provide a sense of belonging. In their words the subjects said:

Provide him with the things that... I don’t foresee him getting in his biological family. ... There’s a different value system. The education and stuff like that isn’t necessarily as important to her [grandson’s mother] as it is to me; and

Experience, providing her new experiences or different experiences than she’d perhaps get from her parents. ... Here on this property I can have two large animals so one day I may have a horse or pony for her or something like that.

Grandmothers Provide Support to Grandchild’s Parent

The third theme that emerged from the data with respect to the grandmother role for these women was providing support to the parents of their grandchildren. No questions were asked specifically about the grandmother-parent relationship during the interviews. However, the theme of support emerged anyway. Typical thoughts the women expressed regarding their relationship with the parents of their grandchildren included:

I think it is really important to support my ex-daughter-in-law and my son;

Once I was able to embrace that [daughter’s pregnancy] whole-heartedly [I could] step back and say ‘okay, I’m here to support you. I don’t know if I can financially support you, but I can be there to maybe offer some counseling, to be a counsel person or to bounce ideas off’; and

I get to be here to support them [grandchild’s parents] and give them advice when they ask for it.
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ACTIONS AND BEHAVIORS
USED TO ENACT GRANDMOTHER ROLE

Actions and Behaviors Toward Grandchildren

The first and foremost behavior for these women was spending time with their grandchildren. Consistently, each woman in her own way expressed the need and desire to spend time with her grandchild(ren). As one of the subjects put it “a good grandmother spends time with her grandchildren.” Another commented “the main core is just to spend time with him. . . . with him being the focus of our time together.” When asked how often she saw her grandchildren one woman responded “I see them not often enough. I see them two or three times a week, but not enough. I make time.”

When spending time with their grandchildren these women engage in activities that provide varied experiences for the children and are fun for both of them. Specific activities depend on the age of the grandchild. When asked what types of activities they did with their preschool age grandchild a typical response was:

Well, right now we take walks. She comes over and loves to play the piano and so we do that sometimes. She loves to feed the fish, so we feed them tiny bits of lettuce. She has her basket of toys and she always plays with those. She loves the animals. This is the only dog she has in her life so she does the dog thing. I teach her how to be nice, gentle.

The activities change as the grandchildren get older, but the emphasis on doing things the grandchild enjoys remains. With her school age grandsons one grandmother reported going, roller-skating, bowling, or to the movies. The main point she made though was that the boys get to pick the activities. While a grandmother with an adolescent age granddaughter said:

[Granddaughter] and I spend most of our time talking with each other and sharing and we’ll do little hobbies like shirt painting or something or go to a movie once in a while or bowling, most of our time is spent in conversation and just sharing with each other.

These grandmothers like to have fun with their grandchildren and the types of activities they engage in are similar to those reported by Kennedy (1992a).
One behavior the women split on was whether a grandmother should spoil her grandchild(ren). They all agreed that spoiling meant, "giving into the child regardless of what the child is asking for whether it's candy, or gifts or attention. . . ." However, the women disagreed on the appropriateness of spoiling grandchildren. Some were definitely against spoiling. When asked, "do you think you spoil your grandchildren" one responded "No . . . that doesn't do anybody any good." While others responded along the line of "Have a great time. Go shopping. Spoil them rotten. Buy them everything you can find." The overall split between spoiling and not spoiling was about 50/50.

**Actions and Behaviors Toward Parents**

Consistent with providing support to the parents, the women also identified a number of actions and behaviors grandmothers should have towards the parents of their grandchildren. The women generally agreed that the parents and their decisions should be respected. Some of their responses were:

Grandmothers should get permission, be respectful, not just barge in; and

I think there does have to be some respect shown to the mom or dad, which ever the case may be, making decisions about the kid.

Respecting the parents' decisions and child rearing practices extend to the issue of the grandmother's sexual orientation. Of the three women that have grandchildren old enough to understand the concept of sexual orientation only one woman's grandchildren do not know that she is a lesbian. She responded to a question about whether her grandchildren know her sexual orientation as follows:

My daughter and I have talked about this. She and her husband decided that they would deal with it when the boys asked. The boys have met two of the women I have been with because I have traveled back there [another state] with those women and they seem curious about her, but they haven't asked. I want them to know. If it had been up to me they would know by now. But I honor their parents, how their parents want to handle it.

Her actions are consistent with the other women who identified support and respect of the parents as part of the grandmother role.
BENEFITS DERIVED FROM THE GRANDMOTHER ROLE

In previous studies benefits from the grandparenting role have been looked at quantitatively in terms of role satisfaction and mental health. This study did not lend itself to measuring benefits in those ways. However, when asked about what they received from the grandparent-grandchild relationship the grandmothers identified a number of different things that would be consistent with being satisfied in the role and helping maintain good emotional health. The item most often cited by the women was unconditional love. One typical response was “I get to love unconditionally and I feel that love from them.” Other benefits included the joy of seeing their children be parents, “I get to see my daughters raise children... I get to see a side of my daughters that is really wonderful that I wouldn’t get to see if they hadn’t had children.” The sense of family continuity, “the sense of family continuity, ... it’s kinda nice to know that your family doesn’t end where you are.” The women also mentioned the opportunity to play as a benefit of the grandmother role, “I think it allows adults to let their child play a little bit and that’s always fun.”

For the most part, these grandmothers have a special and rewarding relationship with their grandchildren. One captured the essence of the relationship when she said:

It just feels real special to me. Like something I wouldn’t just get from a neighbor child or something, or somebody else’s child. It isn’t even something I got from my own children.

DISCUSSION

The nine women in this study do not, in any way, reflect the general stereotypes of older lesbian women (Deevey, 1990) nor necessarily those about grandmothers (Robertson, 1995). These women are young grandmothers ranging in age from 35 to 64 years old. Six of the women are in their early to mid 50s. Two are younger than 50 and one is in her 60s. Except for the very youngest, these women were in their 20s and early 30s as the gay rights movement started to gain momentum. They have not had the benefit of older, openly lesbian woman as role models for either being an older lesbian, or being a lesbian grandmother (Kertzner & Sved, 1996). These nine women appear to be happy, active women engaged with their biological families, surrogate
families of other lesbian and gay people, and work. As with heterosexual women, the grandmother role for these women is only part of their identity (Wearing & Wearing, 1996).

The women that participated in this study truly want to have young children in their lives. Five of the women have gone to extremes to include children in their lives. One woman legally adopted two children younger than her grandchildren. Another woman moved from another state to be near her grandchild. She described her decision this way:

I was living in [another state] about two years before [granddaughter] was even thought of. [Daughter] and [son-in-law] had been trying for quite a while to have a baby. And [daughter] called one day and said 'we’re getting real serious about it we’re going to fertility counseling and we’re getting really serious about having a baby.' . . . I remember what I said was ‘not without me.’

She now lives in the same city as her daughter and family even though the city “is a lot bigger [than] I’m interested in being in right now.”

A third woman, in her words, “heart adopted” an adolescent that lives nearby to be her granddaughter because all her biological grandchildren live in other states. She explained it this way:

[Adopted granddaughter] has been a Godsend to me because of not being able to be as close to my grandkids. . . . Not being able to be as close to [daughter] as I’d like to be and as close to my other boys and their children as I’d like to be. [Adopted granddaughter] has been able to give me that second chance to really enjoy being a grandmother.

During the interview another woman shared that she, her partner, and second daughter who is living at home

Have plans to bring him [grandson] here to live with us. . . . So we asked her, my daughter [grandson’s mother], if she would allow him to come visit us for an extended period because we haven’t had a chance to be together much. . . . We don’t know how long, maybe a month. We’re hoping to extend it to three months and maybe longer if we can. . . . I want to have a more active role in his life.
A fifth woman identified herself as an involved and committed step-grandmother, often spending more time with her step-grandson than her partner, the child's biological grandmother, and the little boy's mother.

These women's desire to have young children in their lives is not surprising. Having intergenerational connections is basic to the development of both older individuals as well as young people (Erickson, 1976, 1984; McAdoo & McWright, 1994). Erickson refers to grandparenthood as the "grand-generative aspect of old age" (1984, p. 164). This need for intergenerational relationships also appears in the literature on gay and lesbian people (Kimmel, 1992). Kimmel's research was not on grandparenting by gay and lesbian people, but that is the role most likely to bring the older and younger generations together in heterosexual families (Link, 1987).

As perceived by these nine lesbian women the grandmother role is one of loving, spending time with, having fun with, and generally enjoying grandchildren. These women possibly would not have been distinguishable from those presumed to be heterosexual grandmothers had they been included in any of the previous studies on grandparenting or grandmotherhood (Hagestad, 1988; Tinsley & Park, 1987; Wearing & Wearing, 1996). As these women talked about the grandmother role they described many of the same dimensions of grandparenthood identified by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) and Kivnick (1982). For some grandmotherhood reflects a sense of family continuity. For others the grandmother role brings a sense of emotional self-fulfillment or the opportunity to spoil the grandchildren.

The perception of the grandmother role by the women in this study is remarkably similar to the predominant companionate style of grandparenthood described by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) or fun seeker as Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) labeled it. Cherlin and Furstenberg attached this style of grandparenting to grandparents who are:

playful companions, and the givers and receivers of love and affection . . . [who have] an easygoing, friendly style of interaction with their grandchildren [and engage in] emotionally satisfying, leisure-time activities [with their grandchildren]. (p. 52)

The participants in this study talked extensively about giving love to and receiving love from their grandchildren. They engage in activities that are fun for both themselves and their grandchildren. For the most
part, they do not have the daily responsibility for raising their grandchildren, rather they are friends and companions to them.

Given the research work on gay fathers and lesbian mothers it is not surprising to find little difference between homosexual and heterosexual grandmothers. In two studies of gay fathers Bigner and Jacobsen (1989a, 1989b) found gay men become fathers for similar reasons as heterosexual men and sexual orientation is not a factor in a man's ability to parent in an effective manner. Patterson (1996a, 1996b) reached a similar conclusion with respect to lesbian mothers. Likewise, Hare (1994) in her study of families headed by a lesbian parent found the daily lives of these families to be similar to, and for the lesbian couple to identify more closely with, dual-earner, heterosexual families than childless lesbian couples.

While the definition of the grandmother role appears to be similar for lesbian and heterosexual women, two intriguing observations were made. First, overall the parents of the grandchildren in this study were relatively young and many were single when they became parents. Six of the women became grandparents for the first time while their children were younger than 21 years old. Having 2/3 of the subjects being mothers of teen parents seems high. Is early parenting by children of lesbian mother's indicative of some unique family dynamics? If so, does it affect the lesbian grandmother/grandchild relationship? Thomas (1990) found that single mothers were most likely to report that the best things about having grandparents were the support they provided to them and the quality of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. In contrast, the married mothers cited grandparent's provision of life experience and family heritage as the best thing about having grandparents.

The second intriguing observation arises from the fact that only two of the subjects have grandchildren by a son and it so happens that the sons' children are daughters. Is it just a fluke of the sample or are there differences in the quality of the relationship lesbian mothers have with adult sons and daughters that would curtail a lesbian woman's opportunity to be a grandmother to her son's children? From prior research it is known that heterosexual grandmothers tend to be closer to a daughter's children than those of a son (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Kennedy, 1991; Kivett, 1991). To understand these two observations and ascertain whether differences between heterosexual and homosexual grandmothers exist in these areas will require multigenerational studies.
LIMITATIONS

This study of lesbian grandmothers is limited in a number of ways. First, the small sample and its homogeneity limit the generalizability of the study results to other lesbian grandmothers. Second, the study did not include a comparison group of heterosexual grandmothers. A third limitation of the study is that it looked at the grandmother role in a socially isolated way.

A fourth limitation is that the study did not adequately address the issue of centrality of the grandmother role to these women. They clearly enjoy the role, and all said the role fits well with their other roles. However, as one of the woman put it:

Grandmother is probably not a label I have on myself. I know I'm their grandmother and they know I'm their grandmother, but if you had to say what titles do you hold in life or whatever, that would be pretty far down. Not that it's not important with my relationship with my granddaughter, but it is not an important title in how I function. So mother would be at the top of the list because I'm obviously involved still with little ones, and from there we would go through things like community worker. I'm on [various community organizations]. Those things are important to me. So you'd get down past some of those before friend and whatever then you would find grandmother stuck in there some where. Because it's important but not a predominate area of my life that comes up very often.

Had a direct question about ranking of roles been asked of all subjects, the question of centrality of the grandmother role could have been more adequately addressed.

Lastly, the effect sexual orientation has on a woman's perception of the grandmother role was beyond the scope of this study. The study was designed to examine the grandmother role in a descriptive manner, focusing on the perceptions of the role in a general. Future study, both quantitative and qualitative in design, is needed to provide a complete picture of the grandmother role as experienced by lesbian and heterosexual women.

IMPLICATIONS

The line of research started here needs to be expanded to include a broader, more contextual look at extended family roles, and how they
are enacted in both the families of lineage and surrogate families of gay and lesbian people. This study focused on the lesbian woman as a grandmother. Future studies need to include gay grandfathers. Based on this small, non-representative sample of lesbian grandmothers, there does not appear to be any major difference in how they perceive the grandmother role and how heterosexual women perceive it. To confirm this finding future research should include direct comparisons of homosexual and heterosexual grandparents. Also, efforts must be made to find a more representative sample of older gay and lesbian people to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Moreover, relationships, including those between grandparent and grandchild, develop over time. Efforts need to be made to track the development of the grandparent/grandchild relationship over time to understand the process of relationship development and how it changes over time.

**SUMMARY**

The lesbian women in this study enjoy being grandmothers. They provide emotional support to their grandchildren and provide them with varied experiences. They also support their children in the parent role. Moreover, these nine lesbian women are proud of being grandmothers. Pictures of grandchildren were prominently displayed in all the homes and offices. One grandmother’s dream is “to buy a T-shirt for [granddaughter] saying ‘I love my lesbian grandmother’ and have her march in the Gay Rights Parade with me.”

**REFERENCES**


RECEIVED: 06/08/99
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