

LESBIAN FATHERHOOD

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LESBIAN FATHERHOOD NAMES an experience and identity that characterize some lesbian or queer female parents. Lesbian fatherhood emerges at the intersection of lesbian or queer culture *as an alternative gender culture*, and the nuclear family as manifested in the lesbian-parent family. It is a hybrid category in which lesbian gender^r inflects kinship.²

Lesbian dads are lesbian parents with a significant investment in masculinity that inflects their parental identity. Many butch or masculine-of-center lesbians embrace – happily or by default – the designation “mother,” and attempt to un-tether motherhood from femininity and make room for a broader range of gender expression within the category “mother.” Lesbian dads, however, are those whose parental role and identity are shaped by their masculine identification – those who understand themselves, their familial position, and their relationship with their children through the category “father.”

Lesbian and queer culture has developed various categories that denote different gradations and styles of masculinity in women (Rubin 1992; Halberstam 1998). They recognize, affirm, and value female masculinity, lending intelligibility and ontological solidity to the masculine identifications and performances of individuals. Lesbian fatherhood comes into being when lesbian/queer subjects entering the realm of reproduction carry over their subcultural identity into the familial sphere letting it inform their parental role. In other words, the fatherhood in “lesbian fatherhood” is contingent on the qualifier “lesbian” – it

is only through recourse to lesbian/queer culture that cisgender women³ can stake a claim to fatherhood.

Empirically, self-identified lesbian dads are usually, but not always, the non-gestational parents in lesbian families. The complementarity of the terms “mother” and “father” makes it easier for the non-gestational parent to claim a paternal status, as the birth mother’s partner. Traditionally, what characterizes fathers, except for their maleness, is their socially recognized relation to the mother. The mother’s husband is the legal and social father of her children, as long as no other legal father exists. While social recognition of same-sex couples varies widely across cultures and political regimes, and in the vast majority of countries same-sex marriage or domestic partnership does not automatically confer parental status on the birth mother’s partner, nevertheless, claiming the status of “father” as the mother’s partner still makes (some) cultural sense. For gestational parents, on the other hand, such a status would seem unavailable or incoherent, because gestation and birth are so clearly and incontestably labeled female bodily experiences that those who undergo them are forcefully interpellated to the identity “mother.”⁴ In addition, because parental identities are relational, in the sense of being defined and shaped in relation to the parental roles of the other adults in the family unit, a lesbian in a parenting constellation that includes a biological father is not likely to define herself as a “dad,” even if she is the birth mother’s partner. However, the fact that some resignifications are more difficult to effect than others does not render them impossible altogether.

In contemporary Euro-American understandings of kinship, the categories “mother” and “father” refer simultaneously to three disparate dimensions:

I. Reproductive role. A father is the one who provides the sperm, and a mother is the one who provides the egg and carries the fetus.

II. Social gender. A father is a parent who is a man and a mother is a parent who is a woman.

III. Parental role. “Father” and “mother” each designates a specific parental role within the heterosexual division of labor in the family. The

mother is the primary parent (Chodorow 1999), the one responsible for daily care and the child's physical wellbeing. The father is traditionally the provider, and the less available parent who performs an auxiliary role in childcare.

Lesbian dads rest their fatherhood not on their reproductive contribution (though they often exert procreative agency)⁵ or social gender but rather on their masculine gender identification and subcultural gender, and shape their parental role drawing on elements of contemporary fatherhood. Lesbian dads' performance of fatherhood cites contemporary norms of fatherhood, (be it rough-and-tumble play, playing sports with the child, teaching her/him to ride a bicycle, building Lego models together, providing treats and thrills, driving the kids to school, doing errands, stepping in when the mother is worn out, etc.), norms that in any case are diverse and in flux. Following Jacob Hale's (1997) suggestion that one's sex/gender status is context-specific and purpose-specific, I propose to see the same-sex family as a semi-autonomous gender culture, informed both by the gender codes of mainstream culture, and by the codes and norms of lesbian and queer culture that recognize female masculinity as a distinct gender expression and support gender self-determination. Within this familial gender culture, a lesbian dad's "father" identity is sustained by her partner and children who read her parental performance as fatherly and address her by a paternal term, corroborating her fatherhood through their collaborative familial performance.

A paternal term could be either the standard term for "father," or else a term with paternal connotations. Lesbian dads often opt for the latter either in order to avoid the contestation and conflict that staking a claim to a full-fledged father status might occasion, or to mark their difference from cisgender male fathers. There are two common strategies for forming paternal terms:

I. Cross-cultural borrowing – drawing on the paternal resonances of a term that denotes "father" in another language without squarely signifying "father" in one's own language. For example, an American lesbian-dad chose to be called *baba* (Pagenhart 2006).⁶

II. Hybridization – combining the terms for mother and father in one’s own language, for example *mapa*.

The problem with such parental terms is that they lack the universal force of the terms “mother” and “father.” Parental terms, such as mother and father, signify across a broad range of social contexts. They designate both a kin relationship and a role, in addition to functioning for the child as the parent’s appellation, and their usage runs the gamut from the most intimate contexts to formal and institutional ones. By contrast, alternative and fabricated parental terms have a far narrower range of application, and are susceptible to misunderstanding and misuse.

The notion and practice of lesbian fatherhood encounter resistance on several counts. It is met with hostility by guardians of the gender order because it brings gender non-conformity into view within the realm of parenthood, one of the most anxious sites of normative gendering. Yet it elicits objections from feminist and queer quarters as well, on the ground that adherence to a mother/father role division in a lesbian parent family is a conservative replication of the heteronormative order – as opposed to the truly progressive project of un-tethering motherhood from the ideological strictures of femininity, or attempting to outline a non-gendered parental category beyond the mother-father binary. To such charges, I would respond that the project of appropriating fatherhood as an available parental role for women is an equally valid one. If, as Judith Butler (1990) has famously argued, the construction “men” need not “accrue exclusively to the bodies of males,” neither does the gendered construction “father.” Performing fatherhood as a female-bodied person disrupts the expected/mandatory coherence between reproductive role, social gender, and parental role, and highlights the performativity of parenthood in general. Citing the mother-father norm in the sphere of queer kinship inevitably resignifies and queers it.

The fundamental transformation of the family institution already underway, at least in the global North, can be expected to continue in the 2020s, with the increasing normalization of same-sex families as part of this process. Lesbian fatherhood is one way in which queer families can maintain and affirm their queerness in the face of the dominant

assimilatory discourse on same-sex families that elides queer difference. As the LGBT movement embraces same-sex marriage and the nuclear family form (which it once repudiated), lesbian fatherhood is an instance of anti-normativity within the norm, subverting the norm the more it approximates it; an instance of imitation and gender insubordination (Butler 1993).

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NOTES

1. My use of the term "lesbian gender" follows Gayle Rubin (1992) who employs it in reference to the category "butch." The idea that sexual subcultures recognize and support different genders is elaborated by Jacob Hale (1997).
2. The discussion of the category "lesbian fatherhood" here draws on a forthcoming auto-ethnographic study (Ziv forthcoming).
3. I employ this term here with reservations since lesbian fathers certainly belong on the trans* spectrum.
4. Transmen who give birth make a notable exception, yet they manage to support their paternal status on male bodily traits as well as on an already-achieved legal status as male - though of course not without encountering contestation. (For instance, in Israel the Ministry of Interior changed the sex registration of a transman who gave birth back to female, and insisted on putting him under the rubric "Mother" in the child's birth certificate. <https://awiderbridge.org/israeli-attorney-general-forbids-switching-gender-of-trans-men-who-gave-birth/>).
5. Cf., Corinne Hayden's (1995) discussion of lesbian co-parents enacting "procreative agency," which places them in the realm of (male) authorship, and Petra Nordqvist's (2012) discussion of the co-parents as "originators."
6. Lesbian co-mothers often utilize similar strategies, choosing a maternal term derived from another language, often one to which one has some affinity in one's personal or family background (Gabb 2005; Brown and Perlesz 2007).