7. Weighing Intimate Partner Relationships

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Weighing Intimate Partner Relationships

Having or not having an intimate partner was the factor the lesbians I interviewed most readily identified as influencing their decisions to become mothers or remain childfree. Intimate relationships greatly influence decisions to mother or remain childfree, regardless of sexuality, although the ways in which they do so vary by sexual identity as well as by race and class. For example, among heterosexuals, fragile or impermanent relationships often lead middle-class and working-class White women to remain childfree. Without a strong marriage, motherhood does not seem to be a true option for them (Gerson, 1985). Among poor Black women, however, this is not necessarily the case. Whereas White women see independence and strength along with a lack of a stable partner as reasons not to have children, Black women stress that their own independence and strength mean that they do not need permanent partners in order to successfully mother their children (Blum and Deussen, 1996).

For some heterosexual women, strong relationships with men can also prompt them to remain childfree. Women who have strong relationships with their husbands often do not want to disrupt those relationships. In addition to the fear of changing the division of labor at home and compromising family finances, many women fear that
the presence of children will detract from the close interpersonal and sexual relationships they have with their husbands (Faux, 1984; Gerson, 1985). Men’s parenting desires may also influence heterosexual women’s decisions to become mothers. In particular, fear of losing a spouse or partner with strong parenting desires encourages women who may not personally desire children to become mothers in order to satisfy the desires of their husbands (Gerson, 1985).

As with heterosexual women, the attitude of partners can influence lesbians’ mothering decisions. Many lesbian couples break up after disagreeing about whether or not to have children (Martin, 1993; Morningstar, 1999; Pies, 1988; Silber, 1991). Couples must negotiate who will birth or adopt the child. Once decided, negotiating the relationship of both partners to the child is of particular concern (Dunne, 2000). In addition, very few states allow second-parent adoptions where same-sex couples can adopt children together, creating a legal two-parent family Moskovitz, 1995; Stacey, 1996). Therefore, lesbian couples in which one partner has adopted or birthed the child need to discuss the role and relationship of the “other” mother (Muzio, 1999; Sullivan, 2004). For some couples this is not a difficult issue to resolve. For others, it can create great divides between partners (Martin, 1993; Pies, 1988; Silber, 1991). Lesbians who become pregnant using a known donor or through a previous heterosexual relationship face additional concerns. Not only do they need to negotiate their and their partner’s relationship (if a partner is present), but they must also negotiate the role of the donor or father (Lewin, 1993).

The lesbians I interviewed revealed three main ways in which they weighed intimate partner relationships in making their mothering decisions. Some lesbians who were ambivalent or really did not want to have children found that their partners encouraged them to become mothers. Some lesbians who wanted to be mothers or were ambivalent about motherhood found that their intimate partners encouraged them to remain childfree. And in other instances, lesbians found that their desire to become a mother or remain childfree was not influenced by their intimate partner relationships at all. This chapter looks at these three situations to understand how lesbians weigh the desires
new choices, new families

of their intimate partners in relation to their own desires, and how they ultimately draw on their relationships to make a decision to become a mother or remain childfree.

**Partners who encourage lesbians to remain childfree**

Many of the lesbians in my study described how their intimate partner relationships encouraged them to remain childfree. Although the decision to remain childfree was affected by how much the individual wanted to become a mother, the bottom line was that many lesbians did not want to be single parents. Some lesbians who really wanted to become mothers decided to remain childfree because they did not find the right partner at the right time. Although both working- and middle-class lesbians said this, the meaning of the “right” partner and the “right” time differed by class. For middle-class lesbians, the right partner was someone who was emotionally stable, who was willing to commit to the relationship, and who wanted to have children. The right time was a time in a lesbian’s life when she was ready to settle down and was not too old to mother. Barb, a middle-class White lesbian, had a strong desire to mother but ultimately decided to remain childfree. She said that not finding the right partner at the right time was the most salient factor in preventing her from becoming a mother:

>I always thought I wanted to be a parent and be involved in that. Through my various relationships, most of them have not wanted to have children. The one that did want to have children, fortunately I had the foresight to see that was not a good relationship, or a healthy individual, so the relationship ended. And now [my current partner] was married and had two children from that and is definitely over any child-rearing things. So we may do things with the grandchildren and that’s it. Had I been involved in a relationship I probably would have very easily, could have been, in a parent relationship right now.

For Barb, the right person (i.e., her current partner) came along at the wrong time (i.e., after her partner had already had children). But it is clear from Barb’s comment that she always planned on having chil-
dren. Because she did not find a willing or stable partner earlier in her life, she did not actualize her desire to mother.

Much like Barb, several working-class lesbians who were financially stable and had health insurance also decided to remain childfree because they did not have a partner. For example, Joy, a working-class Black lesbian, was originally ambivalent about motherhood but then decided to have children despite health problems. However, as she explained, trying to become a mother without a partner ultimately discouraged her original plans:

I actually enjoy my story. After getting the donor listing, I began discussing my plan with my [physician]. He stated that my condition [endometriosis] produced complications with actually getting pregnant. He stated that my plan, though a good one, might still not help me produce. I went ahead and had the procedure [laparoscopy] and while off work and watching the news I saw the most adorable dog on television who I rushed off and adopted. After a month of being a new puppy owner I knew that he was child enough for me. He is now 3½ years old and has settled quite a bit, but I have since had a hysterectomy. I would still love to have a child, but I do not want to be a single parent . . . I was single [when I tried to get pregnant] and though I had begun the process, I think that I may have been more inclined to follow through had I been partnered.

For Joy, the combination of not having a partner when she was trying to get pregnant, having endometriosis (which often prevents women from getting pregnant), and finding a puppy that took up much of her “mothering” time and need, discouraged her from becoming a mother.

Other working-class lesbians, however, were not as fortunate as Joy in that they were less financially stable and did not have good health insurance. For them, the “right” partner needed to be both emotionally and financially stable. In addition, the financially “right” time needed to correspond with the “right” time of wanting to have children. Pam, a middle-class Latina who came from a working-class background, said that at age 42—much to her surprise—she felt a biological urge to get pregnant but had to fight those urges because of her social situation:
For the first time in my life it was like biologically it almost felt like my eggs were crying out, “It’s now or never.” You know, like actually having a biological urge to duplicate yourself. And I had never had that feeling before. I didn’t have it when I was young. It’s just like, let’s get pregnant. You know, your body’s saying let’s get pregnant. And then I just decided, “No, you’re not doing this now. You’re just, you’re not going to do it. It would be selfish.” I decided it would be selfish of me to do it at that time when I was feeling this urge to do it and didn’t have a partner. I think not having a partner was a really big influence on my decision in two ways. One is I have seen people raising children, and I see how much sleep they don’t get. And I think trying to do it alone—I know people do it alone and they do great jobs, but boy, to have a partner, to have someone to help you raise that child. I think I would need to have someone else that you can share the joys and the responsibilities with. And the other thing, it’s combined with matters of money. If you have another person, then you have more income. ’Cause you’re probably—with lesbians, you’re probably both going to be working, or if one of them is staying home then that probably means the other person has a pretty good job and health benefits . . . The older I get the more I’m concerned about having adequate health insurance . . . So I think . . . at the time that I was thinking about [becoming a mother] and not having a partner really impacted on my decision. I think if I had been in a situation where I was with a partner and in a stable relationship, and we really loved each other and were in a position to have a child, I think my decision probably would have been different.

The combination of Pam’s financial situation, her health insurance, and her lack of an intimate partner created constraints that ultimately outweighed her biological urge, and any emotional desires accompanying that urge, to have children.

For many working-class lesbians, the financial stability of her partner determined if this was the right one at the right time. The importance of financial stability was crucial to many working-class lesbi-
ans because they understood the reality of economic hardship. They were very careful not to increase their economic hardships by having children or bringing a child into an economically strained situation. As Pam herself notes, it is a challenge to support a household on the salaries of two working women, unless one of them has a high income. But raising a child as a single parent adds a financial burden that many working-class lesbians did not want to incur. The result was that working-class definitions of the “right” partner have more criteria than those of middle-class lesbians, making it more difficult for the working-class lesbians in my study to become mothers. As discussed in chapter 3, the difficulty I had finding working-class mothers to participate in my study may be the result of a limited number of working-class lesbians who are willing and able to afford children.

Unlike those lesbians who really wanted to have children but ultimately chose not to because they did not find the right partner at the right time, another group of lesbians who were more ambivalent about motherhood said that if their partners had wanted children, they would have helped raise the child. However, they would not have taken the initiative themselves to become a mother. All of the lesbians who fell into this category were middle-class except for Terry, a working-class Black lesbian. Terry stated that she would be willing to parent, but only if both she and her partner were financially stable:

**Terry:** If I were to meet anyone else, you know, another woman and she has a child, I would love that child just as well. I mean, there’s nothing different about that. I’d help raise and support the child.

**NM:** And would you consider yourself to be a mother in that decision?

**Terry:** Yes, I would.

**NM:** Are you partnered now?

**Terry:** No, no. I need time for myself right now . . . I’m in a financial position to bring a child into the world. Yeah, I could, but then you have a partner too. You understand?
So that might put a little crunch, you know, and that’s why I said my job... right now I want to be to where I’m making, like, fifty thousand a year. I mean that’s real stable, you know? Thirty thousand is stable, but that’s not enough... If I have a partner and they’re not financially stable, then that won’t work. I’ll have these anxieties you know. [laughs] I’ll have hangups, and I have to support this person as well because [in] my past relationship I basically helped my other partner get out of debt.

Terry also stated that her partner would have to be the one to birth the child because she had no interest in being pregnant. In order to decide to become a mother, Terry would need to be financially stable, have a financially stable partner, and have that partner birth a child. Because this was a tall order, Terry ultimately decided to remain childfree.

Unlike Terry, the remaining lesbians who said they would become mothers only if their partners wanted children were middle-class. Their class privilege reduced their concerns about finances and allowed them to focus on needing to be in love with their partner in order to decide to become mothers. This sentiment was expressed by middle-class lesbians, regardless of race. Roxanne and Amy, both middle-class Blacks who strongly identified as childfree, best expressed this:

**Amy:** Partner, no partner, I still would not be the one to have a child. [If my] partner would want a child? Fine with me. ’Cause I think I could be a good parent... In my [current] relationship, we both have discussed this one issue, and we choose not to have children.

**Roxanne:** I’m sure maybe my viewpoint might be different if I was involved with someone, and they wanted to have a child. I really wouldn’t want that, but what could I say if this person was someone that I loved, and they really wanted to have a child?

Several of the middle-class White lesbians who either wanted to be childfree or were ambivalent about motherhood also shared Amy and Roxanne’s sentiments. Kristy summed it up well:
I never would have had a child of my own. If I’d gotten into a relationship with somebody who already had children, I would be willing to co-parent. But the choice for me would never have been to raise a child.

The middle-class lesbians who said they were willing to become mothers only if they had a partner whom they loved and who would take the initiative to mother all clearly stated that they were just as happy, and in fact preferred, to remain childfree. However, if they really loved their partner, they would not leave that partner because of the partner wanting children. In addition, they would help raise those children if that’s what it took to stay together.

While there were lesbians who wanted to become mothers but never found the right partner, and there were others who did not want to mother unless strongly encouraged to by their partners, a third group of lesbians said that their partners already had children from previous heterosexual or lesbian relationships and therefore encouraged them to remain childfree. As with Barb’s case, discussed above, because most of these partners did not want any more children, these lesbians had to choose between remaining with the partner or becoming mothers—and the partner often won. In these instances, even though their partners were mothers, the lesbians I interviewed were themselves not co-mothers, often because the children were already grown or because there was a divorced father involved who did not want to share parental responsibilities with his ex-wife’s lesbian lover. Because courts often discriminate against lesbians in determining custody cases, many previously married lesbians try not to push their ex-husbands in this regard for fear of losing custody battles (Andrews, 1995; Arnup, 1995; Hartman, 1999; Moskovitz, 1996; Robson, 1992). This was true in my study as well, as Andrea, an ambivalent middle-class White lesbian, explained:

By the time that I got together with my partner, she had already been there, done it, had ’em. So I said, “Well, there’ll always be grandchildren.” I missed having the opportunity of knowing [her kids] when they were young, so I’ve never really bonded as a stepparent, particularly because when she and the kids moved
in with me, her relationship with her ex-husband was very strained. So I mean, she had already been there . . . And there’s enough difference in our ages. She’s thirteen years older [than me], [so] she was already past that point of having a discussion. So it was never a real push to do it. But had I been with somebody different, it’s possible I would have children.

Andrea’s statement suggests that for lesbians who find partners who already have children, it is often more difficult for them to become mothers themselves, unless they decide to find another partner or be a single parent. For lesbians who want to remain childfree, there is no need to find another partner. But lesbians who want to mother or who are ambivalent about motherhood need to seriously weigh their intimate partner relationships if the partner already has children and does not want any more.

**PARTNERS WHO ENCOURAGE LESBIANS TO BECOME MOTHERS**

Just as intimate partners can encourage lesbians to remain childfree, they can also influence lesbians’ decisions to become mothers. This was true regardless of lesbians’ original mothering desires. Again the decision largely came down to finding the right partner at the right time. The lesbians who were influenced by their partners to become mothers tended to be from the middle class, suggesting that finding the right partner is a benefit of class privilege. Some of these lesbians really wanted to become mothers but did not want to parent alone. Therefore, the ability to find a partner was critical to their decision. As Grace, a middle-class White lesbian, stated:

> I could not see myself having any children without having a partner, specifically my partner. But as much as I wanted kids, . . . I cannot see myself raising a child by myself.

Other lesbians were ambivalent but ultimately decided to become mothers in part because they found partners who wanted to have children. For example, Patricia, a middle-class White lesbian who was ambivalent about motherhood, stated:
I went back and forth as a young person: I was not going to have kids ever, I would never be a good mother. And I really didn’t want kids. And I think that as I got older and I started reaching sort of the biological clock point where it starts the countdown and I was single for a really long time and I thought, “Well, maybe I’ll have a kid by myself.” And that just seemed like that was, it was sort of so hard that I couldn’t really envision it. And then when I met my current partner she really wanted kids. And it was clear in her mind that she had never been in a relationship where she felt like that was a solid enough relationship, and stable enough too, to do that. We’ve been together now nine years, and when we first got together, probably within the first six or eight months, we started talking about that concept and that if we stayed together, [having kids] was something we wanted to do.

As Patricia’s story shows, for her, meeting the right person at the right time was critical to her decision. For her, having the “right” partner meant being in a solid relationship. Similarly, the “right” time was when she realized that biologically she did not have much more time to decide. Their decision and “good fit” as partners was eased by the fact that she and her partner both benefited from economic stability afforded by their middle-class status.

Like Patricia, other lesbians who were ambivalent about motherhood also found partners who encouraged them to have children. For example, Miriam, a middle-class Black lesbian who always expected to remain childfree, explained:

I always liked kids and without thinking it consciously, I think I just thought maybe I would never have any, or maybe I would hook up with someone who already had some and that would be cool. But . . . I never considered being a mother until my partner brought it up. That’s the first time I really thought about it: “Do I want it or not?”

As I discuss in chapter 8, Miriam was in a job she disliked and Desiree was tired of going to law school. The combination of declining
work aspirations and an encouraging partner were two factors that Miriam weighed heavily in her decision to become a mother, despite her earlier thoughts that she would remain childfree.

Carly, a middle-class White lesbian, was also ambivalent about motherhood before she met her partner. When she was younger, Carly had given up the thought of becoming a mother because she did not think lesbians could have children. Not only did her partner persuade her otherwise, but her partner’s desire to have children was a driving force in Carly’s decision to become a mother:

We decided to get married. And in that process we went through a lot of thinking about our likes and dislikes and what we had in common and what we didn’t have in common [and] discovered that we both wanted kids. And I think that [my partner] wanted kids more than I did. I think about it now, and I think that I kind of just went along. And I was perfectly happy with it, don’t get me wrong about that, [but] I don’t think that I would ever have had kids if I didn’t have a partner [who wanted them].

Like Miriam, Carly was happy with her mothering decision. However, it is likely that both of them, as well as other lesbians in the study, would have remained childfree had they been partnered with a woman who did not want children.

Whereas both Carly’s and Miriam’s partners directly influenced their decisions to become mothers by discussing children and agreeing to co-mother, Janet, a working-class White lesbian, described how her partner indirectly—but very strongly—influenced her decision to become a mother. Janet’s partner had already decided to become a mother before Janet and she got together. Her partner did not try to persuade Janet to become a mother. Rather, it was the bond between Janet’s partner and her infant son that led Janet to decide to become a mother:

Janet: [My partner and I] had been really close friends prior to our becoming partners . . . I always thought there would be children in my life, I just didn’t realize that I was going to
deliver one. Like I said, [my partner] had already started the process. She had already been through two or three inseminations and had been unsuccessful. When we got together she took a few months off and started up again, and it was two more tries and she was pregnant, so our relationship, we had only been in it six months when she got pregnant.

NM: So you hadn’t necessarily thought about actually becoming a mother before you and your partner got together?

JANET: No, not at all. Nope. I just knew we were going to be partners, and she was going to have a kid, and I was going to help raise it, and it wasn’t until after we had a child that I realized there’s a lot more to this than just hanging out in the hospital holding her hand while she screams her guts out [laughs] and delivers that big-headed baby. I never wanted to do it myself . . . I was ambivalent, I think, is probably the best way to describe it . . . I wouldn’t do it by myself as a choice. There’s no way I would choose to be a parent alone. The one biggest deciding factor for me was . . . my partner having the first child and not feeling close the way I wanted to. It was almost immediate, [my partner and her son’s] bond. And it was obvious. Even though I loved him—I loved him a lot—but when he was in distress or upset, he wanted her. And I didn’t handle that well at first at all. I didn’t like it at all. But like I said, after a year or two of that I realized that maybe I just don’t know what to do, or how to do it, or how it feels, and so I thought I would try. And there wasn’t even a concerted effort. It was just, “Well, I’m going to try this. If it happens, it happens. And if not, wham, it wasn’t meant to happen. Yep, I don’t care if it happens.” Which was a lie, ’cause I cared a lot . . . That was the biggest issue for me to make the decision to try and do it myself, was wanting to feel close to my first one, and believing that doing it myself would teach me. And I lucked out and was right. [laughs] . . . And I don’t know if I even considered myself a true parent until then, to be honest, which is my prejudice, I guess. You
know, I never knew people that were adopted. It was out of my experience, completely out of my experience.

In addition to explaining the significant effect partners can have on mothering decisions, Janet’s experience also illustrates the importance some lesbians place on the biological connection between mother and child. Janet did not consider herself to be a true parent to the first child because she had not birthed him. Furthermore, she so strongly attributed to biology the bond her partner had with her son that Janet wanted to recreate that bond with her own biological child. She thought that having such a bond would make her a better parent to her partner’s son, which she said it did. Other lesbians in the study, particularly ones who adopted or who had infertility problems, did not place such a strong emphasis on biological connections between mother and child. Regardless of personal beliefs about what bonds parents and children, Janet’s story illustrates the various ways in which intimate partners figure in mothering decisions.

**WHEN PARTNERS JUST DON’T MATTER**

For most lesbians, partners were a major consideration in making mothering decisions. But several lesbians in the study made their decisions regardless of their partner status. When they weighed the prospect of a partner against their desires to remain childfree or to mother, they found that their desires outweighed their need for a partner; or they specifically chose partners who held similar mothering desires. Lily, a middle-class White lesbian who always wanted to become a mother, explained that if she ever dated a woman who did not want to have children, that woman was not an eligible life partner. When she and her partner were deciding to move in together, Lily said:

> It was the make-or-break question to me: “Well, if [having children] is okay, then we’ll get together. Otherwise, no.”

Lily would have left her partner if her partner had said she did not want children.

Just as choosing a partner was a strategy for lesbians who strongly desired motherhood, it was also a strategy for lesbians who wanted to
remain childfree. For some lesbians, the desire to remain childfree was so strong that they avoided relationships with women who wanted children, or they would leave a relationship because their partners wanted to have children. I found that this strategy was used particularly by White lesbians. Unlike Black lesbians such as Roxanne, Leslie, and Terry, who said they preferred not to parent but would not have left a partner had she wanted children, several White participants strongly expressed a desire to only be with a partner who wanted to remain childfree. White lesbians may have felt they could be more selective in their choice of partners because there was a larger pool of potential partners from which to choose than there was for Black lesbians. That larger pool was particularly available to middle-class White lesbians who were connected to larger lesbian communities (see chap. 6). My analysis of race differences assumes, however, that lesbians of color prefer to be partnered with other lesbians of color, an assumption that I did not explore in my research.

To illustrate White lesbians’ desires to avoid relationships in which a potential partner might want children, Judy, a middle-class White lesbian, explained:

Any time anybody I dated ever started talking about children, I ran. I should’ve held the TV show on Who Wants to Be a Childless Lesbian Couple? [laughter] And my current partner feels pretty much the same way, too, very much the same way. She runs from the room when children come in.

Similarly, Eve, a working-class White lesbian, explained:

I was in a relationship for a short time, but during that time kids did come up. And I was the one who was going to get to have them, and there was a little pressure in that situation. But it was a short-term relationship, and I was out of there too fast to even have it come up again.

Both Eve and Judy made it clear that they did not want to be mothers and therefore were not willing to be partnered with someone who wanted children.

Other lesbians who were ambivalent about motherhood often
weighed a combination of factors related to intimate partner relationships in making their mothering decisions. Tammy, a middle-class White lesbian, turned away a partner who wanted to have children not solely because of the partner but because the partner wanted children before Tammy was ready to take on parenting responsibilities. On the basis of her own mother’s experience, Tammy had decided that she was not going to make any mothering decision until she was 30 years old, because she wanted to be settled into a career first:

I had always said it, watching my mom when she was married at 18 and had all her kids by 30, and there’s four of us, and I had said, “No, I’m going to wait until I’m 30 to make any decision whether to have children or not” . . . I guess I had said I’m going to [have] a career first, and I’m going to be settled in a career ’cause, going back to what I had mentioned earlier, I watched my mom raise all these children and not—I mean, she tried to go back to college and wasn’t able to do it ’cause there was just too many kids at home.

When I asked Tammy about how intimate partners factored into her decision to remain childfree, she told me that she had a previous partner who wanted children. I asked her why she was no longer with that partner. She responded:

Why I’m not with that person? Um, she really wanted to have children. She wanted me to have children, and I was like, “Ohhhh noooo” [laughter] . . . And I discussed with her that my thought was, “Oh no, I have to have a career first. I’m not going to sacrifice that.” And then at 30 and [the relationship] just wasn’t working and I moved on. I’m with a partner now who, I think she would probably go either way with whether we had a child or not, but is happy with not having a child. We love to go on vacation; we like to get up and just go. And you can’t really do that . . . with a child.

Tammy’s story illustrates how lesbians often weigh several factors in making their mothering decisions. Tammy was ambivalent about motherhood because of what she saw her mother go through. She
knew she wanted to have a career and wasn’t so sure she wanted to have children. When push came to shove with a partner who wanted to have children, Tammy chose a career over both the partner and motherhood. As she continued to live a childfree life, even with a partner who would have considered children, she realized that there were many advantages to remaining childfree. Her middle-class status, partially secured by her choice to pursue a career instead of motherhood, allowed her to participate in a variety of fulfilling activities. So after she made her decision to remain childfree, like most other childfree lesbians I interviewed, she felt good about the decision. In talking about leaving her partner who wanted children and focusing on her career, Tammy said:

It was a big life change to make that switch, but I’m comfortable. After I got to that point I said, “Oh, this is right.”

While some lesbians decided to forgo partners, or choose their partners carefully, in order to remain childfree, two lesbians I interviewed said they always wanted to become mothers and made conscious decisions to be single mothers, choosing motherhood over partners. Both single parents, Anita and Rita, were middle-class. Anita was Latina and Rita was White. Class privilege was key to their decisions, as both were financially able to support children without a second income. As Anita explained, she was partnered at the time when she adopted her first child. However, that relationship did not last, mostly because her partner did not want children:

I had been in this relationship for seven years, and for a couple of years we had talked about, or I had talked about, wanting to have a child, and it was like, “No, no, no, no.” And it just—you know, I would make agreements: “Okay, I’ll wait a year, and then we’ll talk about it again.” Well, it was always the same, so I went ahead. And once I decided to look into adoption, I went ahead and did that, and I actually had [that child] for several months, almost a year, in that relationship, and it wasn’t working out. It was definitely single parenting, trying to make this relationship work, and what became more important to me was
parenting, being a mom, and I remember saying—I remember the corner we were on as I said this—“I’m ready for another child.” And she said, “Well, you better find another girlfriend.” And I said, “Okay,” and that was pretty much it.

Although Anita was a single mother for a while, she later met a woman with whom she was partnered at the time of the interview. Anita’s partner had her own grown children but was willing to co-mother the four children Anita had adopted. Even though Anita ultimately ended up with support and help from an intimate partner, she did not have that kind of support while making the decision to become a mother. Anita was willing to end a seven-year relationship in order to become a mother.

Whereas Anita left a partner to become a mother, Rita, a middle-class White lesbian, decided not to wait to be partnered before having children because she thought it might never happen. As she explained, she did not want to fall into the trap of not finding the “right” person at the “right” time, so she chose not to be bothered with looking:

I had always thought I wanted to have kids. And I thought I’d be in a relationship before I did it. But when I went through my last breakup I couldn’t see how I was going to get involved with somebody and have enough time to have that be stable and then—and then have kids at a time in my life where I felt comfortable with it.

Rita would have preferred to parent with a partner. But she said that given her history of relationships and how much energy they took to maintain, she found there is an advantage to being single. Not only could she put all her energy into her child, but she could make her own parenting decisions, thus avoiding the arguments around child-rearing practices that can arise in two-parent relationships.

Although Anita and Rita did not receive support from an intimate partner, their middle-class status gave them access to other forms of support, thus enabling them to become single mothers. In particular, both were well integrated into formal lesbian mother support networks. Furthermore, both were able to rely on the benefits of work
(e.g., stable, flexible jobs with good incomes) to compensate for the lack of support from another factor (intimate partners) in deciding to become mothers. Like many of the lesbians in my study, Anita and Rita weighed multiple factors in making their mothering decisions. Ultimately they chose motherhood over partners.

**FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNER AT THE RIGHT TIME**

As the preceding discussion suggests, intimate partner relationships were an important factor that lesbians weighed in their decisions to become mothers or remain childfree. Not finding the right partner at the right time could encourage lesbians who wanted to become mothers, or who were ambivalent about motherhood, to remain childfree. Finding the right partner at the right time could also persuade lesbians who never thought they would have children, or were not sure if they wanted to have children, to become mothers. And sometimes the desire to mother or remain childfree was so strong that no partner could change that desire into a differing mothering decision.

Class structures were key in shaping lesbians’ relationships with intimate partners because they shaped how lesbians defined the “right” partner and the “right” time. The constraints posed by class meant that working-class lesbians had more criteria than their middle-class counterparts for defining “right,” particularly the criterion of financial stability for both the lesbian herself and her partner at a time when both were emotionally ready for children. The constraints of class created numerous criteria, and therefore a narrow window of opportunity in which working-class lesbians could find the right partner at the right time. Conversely, the privilege of class meant that middle-class lesbians had fewer criteria, thus creating a wide window of opportunity for finding the right partner at the right time.

In addition, in the locale where I conducted my research, strong lesbian networks both of childfree lesbians and lesbian mothers were available mainly to middle-class lesbians, with some variations by race (see chap. 6). The class and race shaping of lesbian communities and support networks meant that middle-class lesbians were privileged by the availability of other lesbians from similar backgrounds. This
gave them more options not only to find the right partner at the right time but also to decide to leave a partner if the partner had a differing view of motherhood. Likewise, middle-class lesbians who wanted to remain childfree could find partners who also wanted to remain childfree. The childfree Black lesbians I interviewed were more willing than their White counterparts to stay with a partner who wanted children, perhaps because it was not so easy for them to find partners in a racially discriminatory lesbian community. White lesbians were perhaps more confident about leaving a partner if they had differing ideas about remaining childfree. Similarly, White lesbians made it clear that if they wanted children, their partners had to want them too, otherwise they would look elsewhere.

Although leaving a partner is rarely an easy decision, White lesbians may have had a larger pool of lesbians from which to choose after they left their partner. In addition to increased access to lesbian support networks and potential partners, lesbians who wanted to have children regardless of a partner were able to become mothers only because of their class-privileged financial situations, which gave them access to flexible, well-paying jobs with health benefits, a point I discuss more fully in chapter 8. Class and race structures created, therefore, more options for middle-class and White lesbians in weighing intimate partner relationships than for working-class lesbians and lesbians of color.