Lesbian Mothers

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Published by Cornell University Press

Lewin, Ellen.
Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture.

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At the core of the lesbian mother’s predicament is her vulnerability to custody litigation. Though such threats are by no means confined to lesbian mothers, they do appear to be a more routine aspect of the lives of formerly married lesbian mothers in particular, and to shape their strategies more explicitly. Of the formerly married heterosexual women I interviewed, 24 percent had either experienced an actual custody action or been threatened by one. The proportion of lesbian mothers who reported such experiences rose to 41 percent.

Custody battles have come to be increasingly routine features of divorce negotiations. Despite the proliferation of no-fault divorce laws, the incidence of divorce-related litigation has grown in recent years, and a substantial proportion of these disputes center on child custody. Until children reach majority or the disputing parties exhaust their financial resources, nearly any change in the situation of either parent may be viewed as a “material change of circumstances” worthy of renewed legal inquiry.\(^1\)

Although only a small percentage of men actually seek custody in court, as many if not more of divorced women report that threats of custody litigation were raised in the course of divorce negotiations.\(^2\) The outcome of negotiations after a demand for custody has been made (even based on what fathers’ stated motivations notwithstanding, the threat serves to enforce compliance with their other demands—for low child and spousal support awards, for a larger share of the marital property, for visitation arrangements that are convenient for the father.\(^3\)

Even women who believe that they are “good mothers” tend to
Lesbian mothers capitulate to their husbands' demands when custody becomes an issue. Mothers know—or are advised by their attorneys—that the traditional judicial preference for maternal custody has been breaking down in recent years. The absolute number of fathers who actually become custodial parents is still small, but the reason is that few fathers attempt to win custody. Once a father brings a custody dispute to trial, his chances of winning are about equal to those of his former wife. Women are at a disadvantage in custody litigation because they have less to offer their children economically, or because their behavior may be more carefully scrutinized for evidence of immorality. Further, custody litigation is expensive, and women are more likely to agree to a compromise, or even to give up custody, because they cannot afford a long, costly battle. Finally, disputed custody can take a terrible toll on children, and mothers may compromise to spare their children a potentially traumatic ordeal.

Lesbian mothers are particularly vulnerable to such litigation. Judges tend to view them as unsuitable custodial parents solely because of their sexual orientation, even in the absence of any direct evidence of improper parental behavior. Because they are aware of their poor chances in a court of law, lesbian mothers tend to develop careful and consciously crafted strategies aimed at preventing themselves against custody litigation. More frequently than heterosexual mothers, lesbians may perceive a threat to exist even when no direct challenge has been made.

Motherhood and Gender

As we have seen, being a mother has generally been viewed as the natural, essential outcome of being a woman, a status ascribed, not achieved, and as the “cause,” in one way or another, of women’s predicament in the world. Threats to custody, however, compel women to define and redefine the qualities that make them suitable parents, to be self-conscious and reflective in ways otherwise rarely required. Too assumed to be based on sentiment become basic ob-
tress of strategies that will facilitate avoidance of custody litigation or, when it cannot be avoided, a successful outcome.

Courtroom battles over custody and the other legal machinations that may accompany, precede, or substitute for them can arise only when motherhood has come to be viewed as an achieved characteristic. The courts no longer assume that something essential about motherhood designates a woman for custody of her children. Rather, motherhood is seen, though not always explicitly, as a set of skills, resources, and moral entitlements that ensure adequate care of minor children. Victory in a custody dispute, then, depends on one's ability to refute the notion that motherhood, and therefore gender itself, is natural. Claimants to custody must display their skills, prove to others what would otherwise be assumed to emanate from biology.

When lesbianism is raised in a custody dispute, other factors tend to slip into the background. It is difficult in any case to prove one's maternal capabilities, and to do so when two aspects of one's identity are considered to be inherently opposed is even more difficult. Judges and others who make decisions about family policy tend to assume that homosexuality cannot be compatible with parenthood under any conditions. The assumption that homosexuality and parenthood cannot be harmoniously or morally combined emerges, of course, not only in custody determinations but in decisions about adoption and foster family policy, visitation rights for gay fathers, and even concerns about homosexuals working in such fields as teaching and child care.

The growth of custody challenges seems to indicate an increase in fathers' interest in child rearing and increasing social recognition of their importance as caretaking parents, a goal that has been at the heart of some feminists' recommendations. Advocates of "fathers' rights" generally question what they consider to be an unwarranted preference for the mother in most custody awards, and complain about the size of divorce settlements, alimony, and child-support payments. Several guides for fathers who wish to seek custody have been published, and the theme of paternal reinstatement has been popularized by such films as Kramer vs. Kramer.

While a father's efforts to gain custody have the stated goal of
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increasing his involvement in the rearing of his children, the strategies the mother employs to protect herself against this threat and the social organization that evolves from these strategies act instead to strengthen the template on the mother as head of her family. When the possibility of custody litigation throws its shadow over the divorced mother and her children, she tends to define parenthood as a solitary maternal enterprise that has little room for paternal contributions. Ironically, this outcome differs little from the picture of two-parent families that continues to emerge even in "postfeminist" times.14

Despite much celebration of the growing importance of fathers as primary parents and caretakers, studies reveal that mothers' employment notwithstanding, fathers spend only marginally more time caring for children and doing housework than they did in earlier times.15 Thus custody challenges have convergent with other factors that produce family patterns in which mothers serve as primary, if not sole, caretakers of children.

Mothers’ Strategies

Central to most mothers' efforts to protect themselves against custody challenges are what we might call strategies of appeasement. Mothers who fear such litigation typically keep a low profile (particularly if they are lesbians or are living with a lover), abandon claims to marital property and to child and spousal support, and compromise on such issues as visitation.

No matter how respectable a woman may be and no matter how much she really needs the economic or interactional involvement of her former husband to manage her child-rearing obligations, she tends to become extremely fearful when custody is raised as a point of contention, even when actual legal action is unlikely. These mothers felt that they have to defend their very being; that their essential value as persons is somehow under scrutiny. Custody cases thus provide the clearest instance in which mothers must explicitly and relatively consciously negotiate their identity as mothers and by extension as women.
Lesbians’ fears of custody litigation are even more intense than those of homonormous mothers, as even in heterosexual families mothers are familiar with cases of women who have lost their children solely because of their sexual orientation. Accusations of lesbianism are quite common in custody litigation, however, even when there is no foundation for them. It is not unusual for a heterosexual mother to confront charges of lesbianism when her husband seeks custody, charges that can be quite difficult to disprove once they have been introduced.

As appeasement requires a mother to abandon or reduce her claims not only to the father’s involvement but to financial support, she may find it difficult to maintain this stance unless she has female friends or kin who can provide emotional and material support. In the absence of a strong, effective network, particularly one that can rationalize economic uncertainty, mothers may come to believe that they can depend only on themselves. As we saw earlier, self-reliance, competence, and ingenuity become key elements of their approach to adversity—a strategy of autonomy. Like many other aspects of the marriage-divorce system as it is emerging in American culture, self-reliance has paradoxical benefits. At the same time that divorce represents the breakdown of the family and the wife’s personal failure, it gives her an opportunity to establish her self-reliance, to avoid the expected but morally ambiguous dependence that marriage implies for women. The woman who achieved adult status by marrying and having children advances toward the cultural ideal of autonomy when she is divorced.18

Mothers who face actual or potential custody challenges use strategies of appeasement, support, and autonomy in the course of protecting the integrity of their families. These three strategies sometimes intersect to produce unintended consequences for mother, father, and child. The claim to being a “good mother,” a key element of feminine gender identity in American culture, is transferred from a natural attribute into the product of self-conscious achievement at the same time that the mothers’ assumptions and behaviors are, in fact, drawn from elements and oppositions already in place in two-parent families.
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Strategies of Appeasement

A challenge to a mother's custody of her children before or after a divorce dominates her view of the proceedings. Most mothers are aware that success in avoiding a battle during the divorce does not provide a permanent resolution of the problem, as a husband can return to court at any time in the future to seek a new custody ruling. Thus strategies for avoiding litigation must remain in operation at least until the children turn eighteen.

Even heterosexual mothers perceive themselves as being extremely vulnerable to custody challenges by their former husbands. Though Linda Friedman, a law student at the time of her divorce, is not a lesbian and has no specific reason to fear being declared "unfit," she was terrified by her husband's hints that he might be contemplating a custody battle. The issues arose during their settlement negotiations.

"When I said you're not giving me enough money . . . he said, "Well, if we have to have a battle over money, we might as well have a battle over custody." So I just said, 'Well, if you want to have a battle over money, I just don't want to fight a custody battle with him.' So I agreed just to break the tie with the financial arrangements. I was not scared. Although he didn't file a custody suit at that time, I knew it was going to come sooner or later. I hoped I could postpone it until I was out of law school and could fight back.

Linda believed that conciliatory behavior would make her husband less eager to pursue a custody challenge. But for lesbians, conciliation may not be enough. Avoidance of a custody suit frequently hinges on secrecy, maintaining strict separation of private and public lives, and, in some cases, deceiving the children. Mothers must weigh the potential damage that may result to their children "let something slip" to their father against the psychological effects on the family of keeping a secret.

Shortly before Elaine Weinstein, a suburban schoolteacher, filed for divorce, she had become the lover of another married woman. Her husband hired a private detective to assure her activities, and she soon found herself in the center of a custody trial.
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This only got resolved because I lied on the stand, and said it had been a passing phase but it was over. Interestingly enough, the shrink... got on the stand and also said it was a passing phase and he thought I was cured. So I got the kids.

Because Elaine lied at the trial, and also because her teaching position could be threatened by disclosure of her sexual orientation, she has had to be extremely cautious in the years since the divorce and has felt unable to challenge any of the financial arrangements she worked out with her former husband.

Here I am leading this double life. Publicly I'm a flaming heterosexual, when in truth I'm a lesbian and my kids don't even really know about it. To go back to court now child support would give my ex-husband the opportunity to bring in the lesbian issue again, so I just figured I'd make it. And I did make it financially. I took in boarders, rented out the garage.

Theresa Baldocchi, the mother of a nine-year-old son, went through a lengthy custody trial that left her virtually bankrupt. She was not a lesbian at the time of the trial and John, her former husband, was unable to substantiate his accusations that she was. Since the custody dispute, however, she has come out and now feels that she must carefully separate her lives as a mother and as a lesbian in order to protect herself against more litigation. She does not perceive her husband's history of psychiatric illness and her own record of social stability and professional accomplishment as improving her chances in any way.

Now that I'm gay, I'd lose. There's just no way in the world I would win, after having had my fitness questioned when I was Lady Madonna, for a case. So I would not simply tell him so, I won't go to court, if you were actually taking it... I've done everything to keep my ex-husband or my son from finding out.

The precautions Theresa has taken include living in a middle-class suburban neighborhood and arranging her house in a way that resembles unbearably "bourgeois." The Bay Bridge, which separates her home from San Francisco, where she works and meets her lesbian
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friends, has become a symbol to her of her divided life. She undergoes a transformation as she crosses the bridge back and forth, experiencing the commute as an opportunity to prepare herself for the requirements of her destination. The most vital factor in her strategy is her resolve to prevent her son from discovering her lesbianism, to keep him from bearing the burden of her secret.

Ironically, avoidance of her former husband, which would enable Theresa to relax her vigilance a bit, is the very thing that she refuses to consider. She demands John, who has a disability that keeps him from regular employment, as a model father, and he accepted his offer to care for Tom in her home while she works. On one level, this arrangement saves her a great deal of money and ensures that Tom has regular contact with his father, something she sees as desirable. On another level, the arrangement has eliminated any possibility of privacy for Theresa. She must not only restrict the kinds of friends who visit her home but make sure that no compromising material of any sort can be found in the house.

Many husbands only indirectly threaten to use lesbianism as a weapon. Jean Jacobs, a lesbian mother of two daughters, describes the negotiations surrounding her divorce, which ended only when she sacrificed nearly all of the money she had contributed to the purchase of a house.

He never brought it into the negotiations directly, but he would call me and harass me, and by innuendo suggest that there were many issues that he could bring up if I wanted to... So basically, I traded my equity in the house for the issue not being raised at that time.

Besides losing her share of the house, Jean was unable to get Richard to contribute to the children's education or their medical expenses. She has considered returning to court to change the agreement, but the possibility that Richard would raise the issue of her lesbianism has discouraged her from doing so. Richard rarely always sends his child-support payments late and has refused to contribute to the costs of the children's orthodontia. In an effort to improve relations with him, Jean offered to send him a monthly written report of
the children's activities. He said that he would like her to do so, but refused to consider doing the same for her when the children are with him in the summer.

Rita Garcia reports that she has no way to enforce the child-support and visitation agreement made at the time of her divorce because of her fear that a custody challenge might arise. Although Tony was supposed to pay her $300 a month and see their son every other weekend, he has never made a single payment and has almost never visited the child, failing even to remember his birthday. Despite this history, Rita still thinks that Tony might become interested in custody, perhaps if he were to remarry.

Rita believes, though, that the longer Tony fails to pay child support, the stronger her position is in a possible custody case because, in a further effort to protect herself, Rita has not directly discussed her lesbianism with Jim, her son. She lives openly with her lover, sharing a bedroom with her, and nearly all of their friends are gay. Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, she feels sure that Jim is unaware of the situation and thus is protected from having to keep a secret. Rita has no faith that Tony's record of violence toward her (which once resulted in an arrest for battery) would help her in a custody battle.

Some custody threats are even less explicit, but still serve to affect the way mothers manage their relations with their former husbands. Judy Tolman, the mother of a nine-year-old son, left her marriage after she got involved in the women's movement and began a relationship with a woman. Judy works part-time in an office and is active in local feminist organizations.

I figured I should tell the lawyer I was gay, since he was really pushing to get a lot of money out of my husband...but I was saying no, don't push it, to the lawyer, because I'm gay and I don't want a custody hassle.

Judy's son, Michael, spends each summer with Patrick, and each summer Patrick raises the possibility of having the boy live with him year-round. Judy has given some thought to this request, seeing it as evidence of Patrick's commitment to their son. A lawyer she recently consulted, however, has advised her that such an arrangement, even
on a temporary basis, would open the door to a permanent transfer of
_custody. Judy also perceives any challenges to the existing financial
arrangement as too provocative to consider. Since the divorce, Judy's
husband has remarried and is doing very well financially. He has
never increased his small financial contribution, and has refused to
help pay for any unusual expenses, such as music lessons, claiming
that this stance is in line with Judy's feminist principles.

He's said that since I made this feminist decision to live on my own and not to de-
pend on a man, why should he give me more money? Which I sort of agree
with in a lot of ways. I don't really want to be dependent on him financially.

Patrick knows that Michael will not be deprived of anything he
really needs, because Judy's parents, who are well-to-do, are willing
to help her with expenses beyond her means.

The effect of Patrick's custody threat, subtle though it has been, is
to limit the amount of contact he has with his son and to make quite
unlikely any sort of authentically joint custody arrangement. If were
Judy not fearful that Patrick might launch a custody battle once he
had "possession" of Michael during the school year, she might be
willing to allow an arrangement that would give her son longer and
more meaningful exposure to his father. She also might be more
aggressive in seeking child-support payments that would reflect the
actual cost of raising her son and correspond more accurately to
Patrick's income. Judy's knowledge that she can depend on her par-
ents for assistance, however, mitigates her need to make further fi-
nancial claims on him. Rita and Jean have no such help, yet Rita
makes no effort to obtain a more significant financial and personal
commitment from Tony while Jean accepts the asymmetrical ar-
 rangement she has worked out with Richard.

_The Effect on Fathers_

The effect of these strategies is to reinforce the mothers' role as the
sole supporter of the household, to limit contact between father and
child, and to accentuate differences between the cultural and econom-
ic climates of her home and his. The need to keep distance from her
former husband makes him the last person with whom she discusses issues affecting the child, so she would be to admit to weakness or error, and the mothers whose custody claims are to donors cannot take such a stance. Thus, while the father’s interest in custody implies an interest in raising the child, the actual effect of his custody bid is to exclude him of most aspects of parenting.

Carol Martin lost custody of her son and daughter for several months but finally regained it after a lengthy trial. Although her children visit their father regularly, she never discusses any of their problems with him.

I do not want to talk with him about any of that kind of stuff because I think he would use it against me. I don’t trust him still and I feel that he would like custody if we ever get our divorce.

Similarly, Linda Friedman, the heterosexual law student, is conscious of not being able to rely on her ex-husband for any level of material or emotional support. He characterizes him as a “spectator” in his approach to fatherhood. He sees himself as doing a good job if he takes the children on excursions, but is unable to manage any of the problems that arise when they make their weekly visits.

If he has a headache, the kids come home. If one of the children has the sniffles, the kids come home. He packs up with the kids, but he doesn’t quite know how to handle the inconveniences. In fact, at times he’s just dropped them off on the doorstep and walked away.

Because of the continuing history of custody threats since the end of the marriage, Linda does not feel that she can discuss any parental matters with him.

When I do present problems to him, he points out what I’m doing wrong. And it makes me feel that he’s gathering evidence for another custody suit. He is not really willing to do anything to problems in me. We just can’t communicate at all.

Lastly, I have friends that I can talk about my concerns about the kids. The man that I’m involved with I talk to about them. My happiness I want to share...
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as much as the problem, and it makes me sad that I can’t share that with him. But there’s too much of a wall of bitterness to talk about the good things about our kids. And there’s not enough to share the problems, so there’s just a communication around that.

Even expressions of interest in spending more time with the children can cause mothers to become fearful. Mothers often suspect that custody threats are made cynically to reduce the amount of child support paid, to negotiate a more favorable property settlement, or otherwise to influence mothers to accept less than adequate economic arrangements. Yet because custody decisions are never final, even fathers who have a sincere interest in their children may find themselves distant from them as mothers avoid any kind of contact that might generate evidence usable in a custody challenge.

Strategies of Support

We have seen that support from relatives and women friends can enhance a mother’s ability to maintain the separateness of her family unit and so to withstand pressure from the children’s father. Both Rita Garcia and Judy Tulman, for example, rely on their parents’ support—in the form of child care in the first instance and financial assistance in the second—to enable them to do without the elusive benefits they might be able to obtain from their former husbands. In both cases, the threat of custody litigation seems remote, though both mothers are preoccupied with the possibility of such a challenge in the future.

Strategies of appeasement and strategies of support can dovetail neatly, with support systems enhancing mothers’ efforts to appease ex-husbands. But sometimes the two strategies conflict, as when the way to appease a litigious father appears to be to include him in the day-to-day family routine. Arrangements of this sort create particularly stressful situations for mothers, as it’s difficult to keep a “low profile” when one’s former husband is constantly on the scene.

Theresa Baldach’s situation, which gives her little choice but to involve her husband as her son’s regular caretaker, underlines her efforts to incorporate friends into her support system. The result is a
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The fragmented, highly specialized network. She gets her main emotional support from her friends at work, who accept her as a lesbian and respect her as a skilled professional. But these friends do not cross the bridge into her personal life. Theresa's lover also provides some needed emotional support, but it is compromised by the secrecy that threatens their relationship: the relationship itself is a source of as much stress as support, since it is the most likely point at which secrecy might be breached. Nor can Theresa look for concrete support from her family, in view of their own financial difficulties. She is protective toward them, and hesitant to share with them the information that might alarm them.

Similarly, the price of the extensive emotional and economic support Rita Garcia receives from her family has been the peripheralization of her tie with Jill Hacker. At the same time that her parents refuse to visit her home or to include Jill in family events, however, their assistance makes it easier for Rita to maintain a relationship that could discredit her in a custody action.

Maximizing Autonomy

Some mothers' ability to insulate themselves from threats to custody depends on self-reliance; these women find it difficult to form supportive networks, particularly when caution restricts their contacts with relatives and with their ex-husbands. As one lesbian mother said:

I feel like I'm some kind of a spy-agent or something like that with a secret assignment that I have to be protecting. Like the state secrets or something. It's a pressure on me.

Similarly, Theresa's inability to maintain enough distance from her ex-husband to bring supportive friends into her life has essentially pushed her toward a strategy of autonomy. Other women describe disappointments in their efforts to sustain supportive networks because their friends have no children and seem not to understand the problems that mothers face.
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It is not uncommon for a mother who describes herself as her child's only parent to see this condition as having begun while she was still married. Martha Kennedy, the lesbian mother of an eleven-year-old son, maintains a tense relationship with her ex-husband. Though he tends to send the child-support check late (he usually makes sure it reaches her by the end rather than the beginning of the month) she tries to keep on somewhat friendly terms with him so that their son will be able to visit him. Yet she feels that her life as a parent has changed little since she split up with her husband.

In terms of responsibility, I don't think there's been any change at all. The things that I am responsible for in terms of [my son] now are exactly the same responsibilities I had when I was married. I very much always felt like [my husband] was my child and that in the responsibility realm [my husband] was not there.

Rita Garcia, in contrast, views the end of her marriage as a significant step toward autonomy.

I feel I'm not tied down to a baby. I always had to make the decisions—Tony's decisions for him, even if they didn't involve me. . . . The older Jim gets, the better I like it, because he's more independent, you know. I don't want people to lean on me and I feel stifled by it . . . . I like freedom.

While for some women self-reliance implies the absence of an effective, reliable support system, for others it reveals competence and skill they were never able to display before, or couldn't acknowledge. As we saw in Chapter 2, Carol Marcus, the lesbian mother of two who won her children back from their father in a lengthy custody suit, described becoming a single mother in terms of personal growth and development. In her account, becoming a lesbian, ending her marriage, and managing on her own with her children merge into a unified struggle for autonomous personhood.

The fact of being a mother is not enough for women involved in custody disputes; they come automatically to break down their roles into specific components and skills that fathers cannot or will not perform. Instead of looking to nature to legitimate her claims to
motherhood, a woman must both demonstrate her competence and encourage her father's claims, either in the formal legal system or through informal negotiation.

Women are perhaps most self-conscious about this process when they are forced to respond to accusations that have no foundation. Rosemary Herrera, a forty-year-old heterosexual mother of five, is now going through an extremely bitter divorce after twenty years of marriage. Although Rosemary has never had a lesbian relationship, her husband is gathering evidence about her friendships with other women to allege that she is a lesbian, apparently in an effort to get a more favorable financial settlement. So Rosemary is forced to do as lesbians do and prepare to defend her "fitness" in court.

"Intellectually, I know that my children are not going to be taken from me. But emotionally, I feel like I'm in a panic, because how do I go around and prove I'm a good parent? You can find a hell of a lot of proof to find you're bad. But you can't find proof that says you're good.

A further irony in Rosemary's situation stems from the conflict between her need to quell the rumors of her lesbianism and the vital support she gets from her friendships with women. As we saw in Chapter 6, her friendship with Charlotte Miller in particular has helped to sustain her during the emotional and financial ruin that followed the collapse of her marriage, and it is this close tie to another woman that may finally compromise her in the courtroom.

These mothers have lost the financial support once available to them from their children's fathers, but few suggest that divorce has deprived them of a collaborator in the business of parenting. When a woman faces or fears a custody battle, the need to defend her centrality of her position as a parent adds a larger irony to her situation: she usually knows that the custody challenge is a strategy for providing less rather than more care for her children. Even when the father's interest in the children is sincere, the mother understands that she will gain nothing if she offers what her husband ostensibly wants—more involvement in the daily business of parenting—as she will then be vulnerable to more litigation.
In this situation a competent mother is one who accedes to enough of her husband’s demands to discourage a custody challenge but not so much that her concessions can be turned against her. Being a “good mother” is then transformed from a state of being, a natural attribute, into evidence of skill, rewarded by the father’s inability to gain custody or, better yet, by his failure to pursue it at all. At the same time, then, that custody threats exacerbate the pressures on single mothers, they provide a context within which women can demonstrate their competence and achieve not only the status of “good mother” but that of autonomous adults. In establishing their claims to motherhood, women who face custody disputes also explicitly negotiate gender, deriving pride from their struggles and defining motherhood as achievement and strength.

Negotiating Motherhood in Custody Disputes

Lesbian and heterosexual mothers construct maternal obligations with respect to fathers along similar lines. These similarities are most clearly defined when custody disputes enter the picture: both lesbians and heterosexual women must demonstrate their goodness, and a major way of doing so is to enhance the children’s ties with their fathers. At the same time, all of these women have a stake in preserving the autonomy and integrity of their families. They emphasize biological links in the course of a general emphasis on blood relationships, but must at the same time limit the father’s ability to intrude on the female-headed household. The more cordial the relations between a mother and her former husband, the greater their mutual regard, the less she needs to view his involvement with their children as a threat to her autonomy. But if their relationship is acrimonious, she may find it necessary to limit his connections with the children at the same time that she feels obligated to provide them with a father. These are the situations in which the most poignant conflicts present themselves.

Mothers’ accounts of disputes with their children’s fathers provide particularly clear evidence of the ongoing process of negotiation between gender categories and one’s performance as a mother. More
than other domains of interaction, ongoing ties with fathers may require mothers to drop their personal preferences in favor of what they take to be the best interests of their children. The perpetuation of these ties also gives rise to tensions, particularly when disputes accelerate and litigation is threatened, in which taken-for-granted assumptions about motherhood must be made explicit and in which self-conscious strategies aimed at averting the threat to custody are apt to be implemented. Custody disputes provide a platform for the performance of gender, a platform on which claims to goodness and value are dramatized and in the process reinforced. They also constitute arenas in which the mother’s motivations conflict with each other. For enhancement of the children’s ties with their father, valued as an element of their kin network, may threaten her ability to sustain her position as the head of the family. Though this process can affect both lesbian and heterosexual mothers, lesbian mothers perceive themselves, accurately, as facing the greater risk when such situations arise. Their manipulations of behavior and demeanor are perhaps even more self-conscious, revealing the ways in which motherhood, like womanhood, must be constantly negotiated.