A BOY AND TWO MOTHERS: NEW VARIATIONS ON AN OLD THEME OR A NEW STORY OF TRIANGULATION?

Beginning Thoughts on the Psychosexual Development of Children in Nontraditional Families

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The author examines the ways in which a psychoanalytic perspective may illuminate the underlying developmental dynamics of children of lesbian parents. Families headed by gay and lesbian parents demand reconsideration of a theory of oedipal development based on heterosexual parents. If triangulation, the move from dyadic to triadic object relationships, depends on 2 primary processes—the child’s acceptance of the immutability of generations and the child’s recognition that children are excluded from the world of adult sexuality—parental gender or sexual orientation assumes less importance. The emergence of conscience from multifaceted processes of identification is consistent with this view of triangulation as a developmental phase. Children of gay and lesbian parents must be offered theories of healthy development that include them.

Although this article has had many beginnings over the past few years, its original impetus grew from a family visit to welcome the newborn son of our friends Nancy and Susan. As we drove away, our then 10-year-old son mused from the backseat, “I wonder what they’ll want him to be—whether they’ll want him to be like them and be with a man, or be like them and be with a woman.”

This question astounded and sobered his parents in the front seat. We had grown up in a world of closeted homosexuality and, until well into adulthood, had had little reason, either personally or professionally, to consider a universe that did not assume the hetero-
sexuality of parents. Not only would we not have been able to ask the question as succinctly, but at his age, we wouldn’t even have thought to ask such a question.

My incentive for pursuing this inquiry stems, in large part, from my recognition that I did not even begin to have an answer to my son’s very intriguing and legitimate question. Often I have thought I’ve begun to find a way into questions about how a male child parented by two women might experience himself as a sexual being in relation to his parents and the world. More often than not, I have found myself lost in the confusions and contradictions offered by my own musings and the theoretical constructions and deconstructions offered by professional writings and conversations with colleagues.

**Triangulation**

In an effort to step outside the heterocentric assumptions and theories that have shaped and continue to influence our ideas about children and families, I have posited a model that recognizes the essential elements of this pivotal developmental stage without reference to the parents’ sexual orientation or sexual object choice. However, this model does not exclude sexuality; it simply demands that children recognize and accept their parents as living in the world of adult sexuality. This world, from which the male child of lesbian parents is excluded, can and does include men whose sexual partners are women and those whose partners are men. It includes women whose romantic eyes are for men and those who long for and seek romance with other women. It is a model that recognizes that our inherent bissexuality is expressed in different ways by parents and their children.

**Theoretical Homophobia**

We have spent decades trying to understand the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes by which children of heterosexual parents develop healthy heterosexual identities. In the past decade we have witnessed significant, sustained attention to the development of a fuller understanding of the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes by which some children of heterosexual parents develop healthy homosexual identities (see, e.g., Benjamin, 2002; Corbett, 1993; Dimen & Goldner, 2002; Ehrensaft, 2001; Elise, 1999; Grossman, 1996; Lewes, 1988; Stein, 1998). Although alternative and nontraditional families have begun to appear in our clinical discussions, the developmental and theoretical questions posed by families headed by two men, two women, or multiple parents with a variety of sexual orientations have not made their way into the mainstream of psychoanalytic discourse.

The past decade of theoretical writing enormously expanded our understanding of the development of gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual object choice (see, e.g., Burch, 1995, 1998; Butler, 1995; Corbett, 1993; Dimen, 2001; Domenici & Lesser, 1995; Hansell, 1998; Kernberg, 2002; Schwartz, 1998; Schafer, 1999). This continuing struggle to understand the development of the full range of human sexuality has heightened our appreciation for the shifting nuances of individual sexual desires, choices, and constructions (Aron, 1995; Chodorow, 1994; Freud, 1905/1953). Yet when considering sexual development, we tend to assume that children continue to grow up in families virtually identical to the generic father–mother–child configuration on which Freud founded his original theories of sexuality. Consequently, we continue to rely on theories based, wheth-
er explicitly or implicitly, on the presumption that all children are raised by heterosexual parents. We have failed to devote concerted theoretical attention to the question of whether or in what ways children’s development may be influenced by the sexual orientation of their parents; that failure bears examination.

No doubt the reasons for this deficiency are multiple and interconnected. First, on a practical level, only in very recent history have the social and legal sanctions against lesbian and gay parenting begun to be lifted enough that these couples have felt free to parent openly. Closeted families not only did not demand our psychoanalytic attention but also the institutionalized homophobic assumption of heterosexual parents for all children to persist unquestioned. Although case studies or clinical papers may specify the particulars of a child’s family configuration, theoretical considerations of psychosexual development continue to assume that “parents” refers to mother and father. No doubt this supposition stems, in large part, from the biological necessity of an egg and a sperm to create a child. However, it is unclear whether and to what extent a child’s unconscious construction that parents equals mother and father is altered by the gender of parents of daily life.

Although the increased visibility of nontraditional families forces us to reconsider and expand our understanding of parenting, the relative newness of such families does not alone provide a sufficient explanation for our lack of theoretical attention to such families. After all, since the beginning of psychoanalytic time and our intimate acquaintance with the conflicts confronting Oedipus, we have recognized that a child’s biological, psychological, and day-to-day parents exist as intertwined but distinct entities in the child’s internal and external worlds. Indeed, a significant body of psychoanalytic writing concerns the effects on development of actual variations in the traditional mother–father–child configuration, such as adoption, stepparents, single parents, or sibling position.

Homophobia is deeply embedded in psychoanalytic theory. Bringing the possibility of homosexuality into the sphere of “normal development” and interpersonal relationships has demanded extraordinary psychic and theoretical energy (Bonfilio, 2000). It follows that until we can accept the possibility of homosexual mental health, we have no way of considering the likelihood of homosexual parenting that falls within our consciously and unconsciously held ideas of “normal” parenting with the chance of producing emotionally healthy children.

Research on the children of gay and lesbian parents that focuses on comparisons with the children of heterosexual parents, including comparisons with children of single heterosexual mothers, runs the danger of perpetuating the heterocentric assumptions of our current developmental theories. This approach is certainly understandable and important in the larger psychological, social, and political arenas; comparative studies are undoubtedly necessary to dispel widely held, though unfounded, notions that homosexual parents are themselves perverted or can raise only children who are sexually deviant or otherwise defective (Cameron, 1999). Indeed, on many measures of mental health, psychological development, and social adjustment (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Clarke, 2000; Drexler, 2001; Dunne, 2000; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997; Patterson, 2000), comparative research has repeatedly and consistently demonstrated that there is no measurable difference between these groups of children. However, comparative studies sometimes inadvertently (Cortez, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1999) and sometimes deliberately support heterocentric values by actively asserting (Cameron & Cameron, 1999; Duncan, 1999) or implicitly suggesting that the heterosexual family is the gold standard against which all families must be measured.
Gay and Lesbian Families

Potentially important characteristics of gay and lesbian families have emerged from more recent professional attention (Brewaeys, Vanfraussen, & Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, 1997; Crespi, 2001; Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Dunne, 2000; Lamb, 1999; Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Particularly in families headed by lesbian parents, both child-care and income-generating work tend to be shared relatively equally, and both parents tend to be highly involved in the day-to-day raising of their children (Golombok, 1999). On another front, the family stories and shared narratives of gay and lesbian families are distinguished by their inclusion of the community in the definition and construction of family (Mitchell, 1998; Morrow, 1999; Stacey, 1998). These stories offer children a means of locating themselves and their families in a context of similarity. The personal narratives that describe and hold the history of the individual family and its members provide a link to the gay and lesbian community and opportunities to illustrate common family configurations. For parents, these stories may have particular importance in combating the internalized homophobia that they bring to parenting.

An insidious, reciprocal relationship between the institutionalized homophobia of psychoanalysis and the internalized homophobia of gay and lesbian parents may also have contributed to our lack of theoretical attention to the psychosexual development of children living and growing in these families (Tabin, 1995, 1996). The long-standing antipathy between the homosexual and psychoanalytic communities (Bonfilio, 2000) may certainly make homosexual parents wary of approaching us for help in forming and understanding their families. We seldom conduct professional, much less public, discussions about how psychoanalytic developmental theories do or do not apply to nontraditional families, which helps to explain the distance these families keep from us. Simultaneously, our individual and collective heterocentric biases and homophobic anxieties may prevent our approaching the community of gay and lesbian parents with a willingness to learn from and with them about the developmental vicissitudes of families headed by homosexual parents.

Lesbian couples often bring to parenthood a deeply rooted sense of fraudulence, paradoxically colluding with those who openly proclaim that their sexual orientation makes them unfit for parenting. They are vulnerable to seeing any problems or atypical behavior in their children as stemming from their homosexuality. One mother described her considerable anxiety when her young son went through extended periods of acting and dressing like a “drag queen.” Her intense guilt stemmed from her assumption that his behavior grew directly from his parents’ lesbianism. In contrast, when another young boy dashed for the dresses and dolls at every preschool opportunity, his heterosexual parents may have felt equally anxious and guilty about their contribution to their child’s behavior, but they did not assume that he was acting gay because they were straight.

Families headed by lesbian parents—like other variations on the traditional mother–father–child family—often tempt us to understand and explain a child’s difficulties as a result of this variation. A greater or lesser degree of truth may inhere in this most obvious explanation, but the trees may also mask a psychological forest that offers a more complex and more accurate understanding of the external and internal factors impinging on a child. The following vignette illustrates some of the complexities involved in accurately assessing the sources of a child’s difficulties. When the 9-year-old daughter of gay parents was referred by her school for psychotherapy, the more vocal of her parents expressed his concern that her lack of friends was, at least to some extent, the result of a quiet homophobia among her teachers and the other parents. She had few friends at school. Her
teachers worried about her because she intruded on other children’s play, without seeming to understand how to make herself part of a group; typically she angrily resisted offers of help from adults. As an example of their concerns, her teachers described a lengthy father-daughter good-bye ritual every morning that involved one of her parents accompanying, sometimes carrying, the girl to her locker, helping her to hang her coat, stow her lunch box, and gather her materials for the day. Usually, the school’s insistence that she be dropped at the front door like the other children in her grade would result in a week or two of compliance before the family returned to the familiar pattern.

These men’s feelings about themselves as gay parents and/or the child’s feelings of being different by virtue of having gay parents may have contributed to this morning ritual; however, in this instance it was the inappropriateness of the behavior rather than the parents’ homosexuality that called negative attention to their daughter. Simultaneously, we might discover that the school’s hesitation in demanding that this family meet the standards expected of the other families does represent a quiet phobic avoidance of the anger and anxieties stirred by these fathers’ homosexuality. The school’s tolerance of unacceptable behavior might spring from an attempt to avoid accusations of an unacceptable attitude.

From this vignette we can imagine interactions among many complex feelings and ideas both motivating and gaining expression in the behavior described. I use it here simply to illustrate the importance of caution in assigning either too great or too little influence to homosexual parenting. We must remain open to the possibility that a child’s feelings, ideas, or behavior are operating relatively independently from his parents’ (hetero-, homo-, or bi-) sexuality.

From Dyadic to Triadic Relationships

In examining the ways in which a psychoanalytic perspective may illuminate the behavior and underlying developmental dynamics of children of gay and lesbian parents, I am going to limit my focus to a theoretical consideration of the movement from dyadic to triadic relationships in boys of lesbian parents. When we move away from a heterosexual family configuration, we encounter multiple possible variations, including but not limited to boys being raised by women and boys parented by men, and lesbian women or gay men parenting sons and/or daughters. I hope that by limiting my inquiry I might provide more clarity than if I were simultaneously to consider multiple variations in family structure.

Triangulation is the pivotal developmental phase of psychoanalytic theory; we tend to mark developmental time and conflicts as “pre-” and “postoedipal” (Schafer, 1995, p. 198). Although we have learned that the complexities of human sexuality have their beginnings in the earliest months of life, we also recognize that it is the preschool child’s shifting orientation toward triadic relationships that marks his awareness of his sexual self in relation to his parents and their sexuality. Therefore, without discounting the influence of parental gender (Chodorow, 1978) on early development or the adolescent reworkings and expanded integration of sexuality into self- and object representations, parental sexual orientation and object choice would seem to have a heightened saliency during the child’s initial conscious awareness and integration of his parents’ sexual relationship.

The richness in our understanding of human development arises from the confluence of actual and imagined parents in the child’s interpersonal interactions and internal relational world. However, psychoanalytic writings sometimes contain confusing, interchangeable references to the actual parents of the child’s day-to-day life; the child’s
internal, individual, and idiosyncratic parental constructions; and the more abstract, universal, mythological parental representations. This tendency to merge references can create difficulties when reading with an eye to applying these theories to nontraditional families.

For example, does it matter (and if so, in what ways) if the parent who returns home from the end of the workday is woman greeting another woman? Is this reality so different from the abstract, collectively held notions of family consisting of a mother, father, and children that the theories based on those ideas do not apply? If the child’s day-to-day reality differs in this basic way, will he feel himself excluded from, rather than embraced by and included in, the myths and fairy tales that contain and convey these representations of heterosexual triads and shared developmental conflicts? Alternatively, are the universal elements of developmental growth and change captured in and extrapolated by myth, shared fantasy, and articulated theory of triangulation so powerful that they will, to a greater or lesser extent, represent and shape a growing child’s ideas about and experiences of his sexual self in his family and the world, regardless of the configuration of his actual family or the sexual orientation of his parents?

Consider this mother’s description, posted in an Internet chat room for lesbian moms, of the play of her 5- and 6-year-old children:

> So I don’t think their play reflects their own family all the time, just social experience. You know, they don’t make doll houses with two moms, or two moms and one dad. (Although we’ve been tempted to remove the “father figure” and replace him with another woman, although sometimes they take the farmer from the farm set and make a family with two dad’s [sic]). The only time it gets confusing is when they play “Mom and Mom,” which also happens. Then when one of them says “Mom” three people answer, then they’ll say “Not you! I meant [pretend mom].”

Although the description of the play is somewhat confusing, it seems to suggest that these children’s play is not bound by the facts of their family but allows for imaginative exploration of families that include fathers.

I would suggest that this reflects not just the social influences of a heterosexual world on children of homosexual parents. It is also an unconscious recognition of the developmental importance of a different third. This progressive introduction of a new element into a primary relationship is usually represented by the father, in the stories and theories to describe, rather than determine, the powerful tension between the dyadic and triadic paradigms of human relationships. Couples—whether experienced in the engrossment of the parent–infant pair, the adoration of young love, the mutual work and joys of parenting partners, or the intimate bond grown from years of shared memories—provide us with a sense of belonging and exclusivity. Triadic relationships demand an opening up of the dyad to make psychic space for a third and for the creation of new and special dyadic interchanges. The internal, potential space of triadic relationships can be maintained only when each point exerts sufficient tension to avoid the actual or virtual collapse into a twosome that either physically or psychologically excludes the third. For example, when a couple decides to bring a child into their relationship, the creation of a triad offers the possibility that their relationship will be enriched by the exclusive dyadic relationship each person develops with the child as well as their shared experience of parenting. However, if the child, for whatever reason, absorbs too little or too much psychic energy in relation to the parental couple, the emotional currents of the family will be dyadic, each pair operating in parallel to the others.

The psychological paradox of triangulation is that triadic relationships simultaneously
exclude and include a third in relation to a twosome. I would understand the story of triangulation as a powerful theme in the conscious and unconscious lives of children whose world is filled with parenting couples and their children. This is a theme with numerous variations arising from individual differences in experiences of self and family. Although the children of gay and lesbian parents may respond to the possibilities of triadic relationships in different ways, these may chiefly represent new variations on the very old theme of the psychological negotiations demanded by developmental changes in parent–child relationships.

The Parental Complex

In A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men: Contributions to the Psychology of Love, Freud (1910/1957) introduced the term “Oedipus complex,” which at that time he used synonymously with “parental complex.” We cannot completely set aside all of the meanings, associations, and feelings that the term “Oedipus complex” has taken on in our individual and collective minds over the past 90 years. Therefore, I adopt this earlier, less meaning-laden term, “parental complex,” to denote the child’s complicated and conflicting sexual desires and rivalrous feelings in relation to the parental couple.

The little boy’s shift from his narcissistic, possessive attachment to his mother to a recognition of her as an object of his sexual desire is paralleled by his recognition of the parental couple. He comes to see these two lovely and adored creatures not merely as two parents in relation to him but as partners in relation to each other. As the egocentricism of his worldview lessens, he can begin to entertain the notion that they have a special relationship with each other that excludes him. Prior to this, the child lived at the center of the universe; to his mind, the vectors of emotional exchange in all relationships included him. Now he must come to know that there are exclusive exchanges of loving and knowing communication that move between those he loves. His parents inhabit the world of adult, genital sexuality—a world that is closed to him because of his physical, sexual, and emotional immaturity. As a child, he is neither a desirable nor an adequate sexual partner. Along with this blow to his self-esteem, he must also come to terms with the immutability of generations—he will always be a child in relation to his parents.

The parental complex makes rather extraordinary emotional and cognitive demands on a little fellow, which in turn promote his psychological and intellectual growth. Cognitively he moves from the world of concrete operations to the preoperational stage, in which he can begin to use symbols and increasingly representational mental processes (Phillips, 1981). This growing capacity to think frees the child from the world of action and the actual. He can begin to consider his own thoughts, as thoughts, and to recognize that his ideas and views may differ from the thoughts and motivations of others (Fonagy & Target, 1996). This period ushers in the child’s capacity for reflection—about the world around him and the world inside him. He becomes increasingly sensitive to the differences among the internal worlds of those he loves, and the world of intimate relationships that exclude him.

Traditional psychoanalytic theory offers the suggestion that the parental complex is resolved through the boy’s identification with the person he perceives as his rival for his mother’s sexual attention. The identification comes not only from his love for this parent

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1Mother is used to refer to one or more actual mothers along with the child’s internal representation of mother.
but out of a fear of the parent’s castrating retaliation for the little boy’s aggressive wish to displace his mother’s lover and assume the role of her exclusive sexual partner. More recent theory enables us to understand that the identificatory processes that allow the little boy to bury his incestuous wishes in the world of infantile repression are complex and involve incestuous wishes toward both parents as well as identifications with aspects of both parents.

The distressing aspects of this newly acquired knowledge can lead to temporary regressions as the little boy attempts to manage and integrate these difficult and competing feelings. However, developmentally, there really is no turning back; even though it can provide some temporary relief, regression to an earlier worldview can never completely erase what he has come to know about his parents and his place in their world. And, though problematic, his discoveries also offer the excitement of genital sexuality and the possibility of relationships in the world beyond the family. A child’s successful move from the infantile grandiosity of dyads into the world of triadic relationships, acceptance of an external reality that cannot be manipulated or governed by magical thinking, and the internalization of a relatively reliable, relatively benign conscience constitutes an extremely tumultuous journey. It is not surprising that children in the throes of this developmental phase often show transient symptoms in response to their heightened distress and efforts at mastery.

Until now we have understood many of the developmental conflicts of this period as stemming from the little boy’s attempts to come to terms with his parents’ heterosexual love for each other. However, the characteristic emotional dynamics may not be confined to children and parents in traditional families. When one lesbian mother talked about her son’s asking her to “rough me up,” I was reminded of my feelings of envy at the rough-and-tumble play that came so naturally to my sons and their father. In a pinch, they would turn to me as a substitute, but it never seemed to work quite as well. In contrast, a lesbian mother described her responses to her 4-year-old son’s demands for more exuberant physical contact. She reported silently wondering, “What do we think we’re doing...two women trying to raise a boy?” as she arranged to have regular “wrestling matches” with him. However, she found bringing some pleasures of the athletic activities of her childhood and adolescence into their relationship deeply satisfying.

One Mother or Two?

Even if heterosexual couples struggle against sex-role stereotypes in defining their parental roles, the titles of “mother” and “father” simply and clearly declare their shared legal status and presumed biological connection to their child or children. In parallel fashion, the terms “stepmother” and “stepfather” or “adoptive parents,” “foster parents,” and “legal guardians” not only designate parent–child relationships based on roles but include reminders of the absent biological parents. Women choosing to raise children together as coequal parents do not share legal equality and the psychological comfort that derives from a public recognition of parenthood. The laws regarding nonbiological parentage vary from state to state and have yet to clearly resolve complex situations such as, for example, determining the legal parent(s) of the child resulting from one woman’s carrying to term the fertilized ovum of her female partner. In the context of legal ambiguity, particularly if only one woman in the couple has a biological connection to the child, it is not surprising that the question of whether their child has one mother or two
often arouses anxiety and discord in lesbian couples as they struggle to come to terms with their conscious and unconscious ideas about parenting, motherhood, and the importance of biology in defining relationships (Benkov, 1998; Crespi, 2001; Mitchell, 1996).

In lesbian families in which the child’s primary parent is clearly designated, the psychological stage is set for the child to use the remaining parent as the necessary “other” who can occupy the third point on the triangle when that child moves toward mastery of the parental complex. This psychological configuration is well illustrated by the nonbiological mother of a 4-year-old boy:

We always said, and still do, that we want to co-parent equally, and mostly we are. But we also recognized early on that the biological factor makes a difference, especially with breastfeeding. He will still, if he’s hurt or something, want her and go to her. My sense is that there’s a physical security he gets from her body. It’s gotten progressively less as he gets older, but there’s a difference. (Benkov, 1994, p. 154)

In lesbian families in which both parents see themselves as primary parents, the child may refer to both parents with individual designations as well as with a single term. A call to “Mommy” or “Mama” will get a response from two parents. Whereas the parents initially decide how they wish their children to refer to them, over time the children may also make their own contributions to the naming process (Benkov, 1998; Cortez, 1996). In her report of her interviews with lesbian couples raising sons, Cortez (1996) described a family in which both of the women had borne a son. They had designated themselves as “Mama” and “Mommy,” which the children accepted until the younger boy, at about age three-and-a-half, insisted that each child refer to his biological parent as “Mommy.” At the time of the interview the parents offered no explanation for this shift (Cortez, 1996, p. 5).

In the context of examining the parental complex in lesbian families, I would suggest that this little boy may have needed to define his “mother” in order to create the “other” necessary for triangulation. Without knowing their child’s reasons for the name change, his parents recognized and accepted the importance of the shift. This instance illustrates the ways in which lesbian parents who have seen themselves as coequal parents may intuitively grasp a child’s changing needs and subtly change their roles and responses, with one parent allowing or offering herself as the other in relation to the infantile mother–child dyad.

Developmentally, the question of who is mother would seem to have particular saliency for a little boy with two female parents as he moves toward recognition of, competition with, and eventual acceptance of a third who captures his mother’s sexual attention. If, in the child’s mind, he has two mothers, as opposed to a clearly designated mother and other, he may need to rely on each of them, in turn, in order to loosen the infantile bonds. They may each need to accept, temporarily, the position of other as an adult available for identification who is “not mother,” thereby promoting his more autonomous relationship with each parent. A little boy may be particularly seductive toward and enamored of his mommy and fiercely rejecting of his mama one day and reverse his behavior toward them the next. For example, as the woman who had borne and nursed their son assumed the role of “wrestling mom,” the little boy turned a seductive eye toward his other parent and gleefully excluded his physical opponent from special activities with his “Mama.”

Consider, in contrast, a situation in which the child’s seductive, charming behavior is directed at both parents simultaneously, alternating with angry rejection of the two of them. This suggests a problem of de-differentiation. Such a scenario likely indicates that the child’s parents are merged into a single object representation and must be treated as
if they were identical or interchangeable people. If the child feels compelled to treat the
two adults as one, then he is doing too much of the work—there is no parent available to
help him manage his sexual excitement, his rage at being excluded, or his fears of being
seduced.

The above emphasizes the importance, in exploring the development of boys of
lesbian parents, of attending to the varieties of family configurations within lesbian
partnerships. In particular, the parents’ definition of themselves as either “two mothers”
or a “mother” and an “other” may influence the manner in which their children negotiate
the transition from dyadic to triadic relationships. Women who have not sufficiently
resolved their own conflicts over the loss of a dyadic relationship will have understandable
difficulties in helping their child or children manage the feelings and negotiate the con-
flicts inherent in triadic relationships.

The Problem of Genital Inadequacy

In 1932, Karen Horney suggested that the little boy’s first encounter with the difficult
feelings associated with his emerging sexual awareness and desire stems from an affront
to his self-esteem:

The boy . . . feels or instinctively judges that his penis is much too small for his mother’s
genital and reacts with the dread of his own inadequacy, of being rejected and derided.
Thus . . . his original dread of women is not castration-anxiety at all, but a reaction to the
menace to his self-respect. (p. 356)

The little boy’s sense of humiliation can be overpowering as he recognizes that this
organ, of which he has been so proud and which offers him such pleasure, cannot satisfy
his mother. He anticipates that she will first turn away from him, not because she desires
another but because she finds his sexual equipment insufficient to meet her needs.

The fear and rage engendered by the fantasy of an overpowering, smothering mother
who must be warded off, lest her genital engulf his own, incorporates genital sexuality into
fears of engulfment arising from earlier developmental stages and relationships. Whether
these feelings are transitory or sustained, the little boy may defensively combat them with
a feminine identification. This alignment with the mother offers both the possibility of
sharing in her feminine power and an avenue of retreat from the boy’s humiliating wishes
to offer himself to her as a sexual object (Person, 1996). For a boy whose parents are two
female lovers, the confrontation with a feminine identification as a defensive solution to
genital inadequacy may be particularly intense.

Because identification with either or both parents includes the desire for a woman as
a sexual partner, it paradoxically preserves the possibilities of both homosexual and
heterosexual love for his parents. Identification with his “mother” that incorporates a
sexual longing for a female partner holds out the possibility of homosexual love for the
“other,” who has intruded on the narcissistic bliss of the mother–child dyad. However,
identification with the “other,” the “not mother” of this triangle, opens the possibility of
a relationship to his mother as a woman who is the object of his heterosexual desire.

As another possible response to the fear of rejection and dread, the little boy may
soothe himself with the fantasy of “marrying mommy” when he grows up. Now, we might
expect that this fantasy would not bring comfort to a boy of lesbian parents. However,
because children of this age are unlikely to allow reality to stand in their way, we can
imagine that the little boy might persist in the fantasy, perhaps with the idea that his
parents have turned to women as sexual partners simply because they “haven’t found the right guy.” In other words, though his organ may be too small to offer immediate sexual satisfaction, in time perhaps he will satisfy not only one but both parents!

This piece of the parental complex may be difficult for the little boy of lesbian parents to navigate. His trials may resemble those of the little girl in the process of separation–individuation who appears to respond to the separation from her mother with transitory depression because the compensatory identification with the father is not easily available to her (Mahler, Bergman, & Pine, 1975). I think we would not be surprised to find heightened, transient states of sadness or depression in little boys raised by two women when the identification with the father is not easily available to both soften the separation from the mother and compensate for his exclusion from the parental couple.

Perhaps as another possibility, the boy’s awareness that although his parents may enjoy and admire his masculinity, neither will desire his penis for sexual gratification either now or in the future might offer him some additional protection against the incest taboo. Without his sense of the mother’s desire for him and his imagined success at seducing her, he may not need to create a powerful rival to thwart his incestuous wishes. Maybe his pride in his masculinity and his parents’ enjoyment of his emerging sexuality can be managed more easily without the fear and guilt associated with powerfully aggressive wishes toward a beloved parent.

The Absent but Ever Present Father

In a discussion of male fantasies of lesbian sex, Person (1996) noted that these fantasies are remarkable for “the absence of the oedipal rival of childhood. . . . In both dyadic and triadic lesbian fantasies, the rival father has simply vanished” (p. 88). For the little boy of lesbian parents, the absence of a rival father in his day-to-day life may be a reality. However, it is not clear that this will necessarily correspond to an absence of an oedipal rival in his internal world. The absence of an actual father in a family headed by lesbian parents doesn’t mean that the little boy has no sense of father or fantasies about his father, regardless of the realities surrounding his absence.

Even without exposure to the heterosexual world, the child has the sense of father as contained in and conveyed by his parents (Ogden, 1987). Presumably, because the women who are now parenting sons together were almost exclusively raised in heterosexual families, their internal representations of father encompass the actual father of the oedipal triangle. In this way, father is present in the boy’s relationship with each of his parents—standing as an object for identification and guarding against acting on incestuous wishes. In addition to the conscious and unconscious presence of father, the psychic space that lesbian parents make for the actual, genetic male who made possible the creation of this child is of utmost importance. Whether he is held, at one extreme, as a giver of life or, at the other, as a necessary evil—an unwanted intruder into the family—his psychic presence or absence will presumably exert a powerful influence on the family dynamics.

Obviously a major difficulty facing the child in the midst of triadic development is the recognition and acceptance of the immutability of generational distinctions. As with so many other unpleasant aspects of reality, children often try to undo reality by opposition in fantasy. In 1913 Ernest Jones (as noted by Sapisochin, 1999) addressed the child’s wish to reverse generations by imagining that adults get progressively smaller as children get larger. The triumphant child has now obliterated the generational distinction and “become father to the man”—that is, he has fathered himself. For a child who grows up with a lost
or absent father, this fantasy may allow him to create a father in his own image. Because father and child are one and the same, there is no rivalry for the mother’s affection, and the child can soothe himself with the fantasy of a homoerotic love that protects against “father hunger” (Blos, 1984, 1991; Herzog, 2001).

Although this fantasy represents a retreat to a dyadic position vis-à-vis the parental couple, it may provide the little boy a temporary haven from the disappointment of recognizing that in this family a penis, which is such an important part of his gender identity, was not a valued part of the baby-making process. It may also represent an attempt to master his confusion about reproduction; despite what they “know,” children (along with adults) typically have powerful unconscious ideas about where babies “really” come from. One of the women in Cortez’s (1996) group reported surprise at learning that their unborn child was male. “In the back of my mind, I never really thought that two women could have a boy—it wasn’t conscious, but it was there” (p. 6).

The fantasy that boys make boys and girls make girls is not uncommon in children’s attempts to sort out the many ideas and conflicted feelings about sex and reproduction (i.e., you have to have a penis to get a penis). Of course, the truth is that a penis, as a direct or indirect delivery system, is as necessary a part of producing children as a womb. At least at this point in human history, regardless of whether we have one mother or two, one or more fathers, present or absent parents, living or lost parents, we are all, at least unconsciously, mothered and fathered beings created from the joining of egg and sperm. Though young children may be introduced to a reproductive world inhabited by eggs and sperm, they live in a world populated by men and women—mothers and fathers. These are very concrete and object-driven little creatures, struggling to rework and maintain connections to both their actual and their imagined parents—both present and absent.

We have learned much about the idealization of the absent parent from our work with children who have lost a parent through death, divorce, or abandonment. We also know the importance of fantasy in children’s struggles to manage their longing for the lost “perfect” parents of their infancy. A child’s fantasy of idealized parents helps him both cope with the loss of a real or imagined parent and master the disappointment in the flawed parents of his daily existence (Heineman, 1999). We can imagine many variations on the family romances constructed by little boys of lesbian parents. For example, a child might create a fantasy of rescue by two women, perhaps a queen and princess who bear a striking resemblance to his two actual parents. This scenario may provide a temporary respite from disappointment, but it does not bring the absent father into his family. A contrasting fantasy might have his father, his “true parent,” appearing on the doorstep at any moment, perhaps to whisk him away to the life to which he believes he is entitled. Obviously, this is problematic because it would mean the loss of both mothers. However, if the fantasy is aimed primarily at creating an egg–sperm, mother–father union, the father’s appearance would seem to demand the elimination of one mother, which again creates a new anxiety-laden problem out of the solution to a different one. Of course, there is always the possibility that the child will simply invite this fantasy figure into the metaphorical world of his imagination. This would seem to suggest that the child’s sense of creation and procreation may not be locked into a male–female twosome. Given the anxiety that these fantasies typically stir in children, who really don’t entirely want to be rid of their parents, and their heightened concern about twos versus threes, I can also imagine these little boys constructing a family romance that centers on the arrival of two fathers—one to go with each mother!
Conscience: The Heir to the Parental Complex?

The term *superego* evokes, for me, the image of a powerful, watchful entity that inhabits an upper position in the mind. Perhaps this idea of a superego that watches over or looks down upon actions, thoughts, and feelings comes from a condensation of “superman” and “superego,” or from my own concrete representation of Freud’s tripartite model of the mind. However, the masculine nature of the superego derives from Freud’s formulation that it arises from the boy’s identification with the father, which, along with repression, permits the dissolution of the Oedipus complex.

In contrast, *conscience*, for me, evokes an image of Walt Disney’s Jiminy Cricket dancing and singing on Pinocchio’s shoulder. Even though Jiminy is male, he seems a companionable little creature who’s charged with reminding—maybe even nagging—rather than scolding. He seems rather motherly, perhaps standing in for the absent mother in this story of longing that leads to the creation of a nontraditional family.

We have come to understand the intimate relationship between superego and gender identity development. As I suggested earlier, boys with two female parents may not experience either parent as a castrating threat, which would suggest that the aggression directed at and expected from the parent may be somewhat mitigated by the child’s lessened fear of retaliation. The fact of two female parents, of course, does not obviate the child’s fantasy of a retaliatory father. For example, looking back to Person’s (1996) discussion of male fantasies of lesbian sex, the child’s fantasies might include retribution from the father for having commanded the full attention of not one but two women. However, in another family the little boy may attribute the absence of a male parent to a castrating mother who has stolen the father’s penis, leaving him with one damaged and one damaging parent.

In the absence of an active day-to-day father, I believe that the cast of the little boy’s superego will stem from two primary forces. The way in which the father is held for and with him, including the manner in which his parents recognize and help him modulate his aggression and the real and imagined aggression he stirs in them, will influence the character of his conscience. The child’s response to his parents’ conscious and deliberate moral teachings (Drexler, 2001) will obviously influence his superego development. His identification with the unconscious dictates of their separate and interacting consciences and their individual and interacting strivings toward both autonomy and relatedness will also influence his construction of a superego. If, as many writers have suggested, women’s moral reasoning and choices tend to be grounded in object relatedness, it is possible that their male child’s conscience will be more object related as well.

**Conclusion**

This brings me back to the question that prompted this excursion into the triadic world of a boy with two female parents. What will they want for him? “Will they want him to be like them and be with a man, or be like them and be with a woman?” The question captures both the multiplicities of identificatory possibilities and the idea that sexuality can be as much about similarity as about difference (Chodorow, 1994; Dimen, 1995). It assumes, I believe correctly, that parents want their children to identify with them and by implication that children, regardless of their parents’ sexual orientation or expression, will want to find points of similarity while establishing an independent identity.
However, this returns us to comparative thinking. Heterosexual parents not only assume but desire their children’s heterosexual identification with them. The agony of homosexual children’s “coming out” to their heterosexual parents attests to the intensity of feeling when the expectation of sameness is not met. In contrast, gay parents frequently expect, and sometimes wish, that their children will be straight (Drucker, 1998; Gottman, 1989; Mitchell, 1996). Costello (1997) disputed the contention that there are no differences between children of heterosexual and those of homosexual parents: “There is copious evidence that the children of gay parents are distinguished from their straight counterparts because they do not tend to adopt the same sexual identity as their parents” (p. 68). Although most children of homosexual parents identify themselves as heterosexual, it is not surprising that they report more homosexual experimentation than the children of heterosexual parents (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Lesbian parents may offer their children a range of identificatory possibilities, at least in the area of sexual object choice—perhaps wishing for their children to be different from them, while being open to their being like them, in this regard.

Perhaps when we can put aside the heterocentric need to keep proving that the children of gay and lesbian parents are no different from (i.e., just as healthy as) children from heterosexual parents, we may find some interesting and important distinctions that will greatly enhance our understanding of the psychosexual development of all children. We need to pay careful attention to the effects of the lack of an adult male figure in competition for his mothers’ affections and to consequences of the having two female parents as the primary figures for identification. If we encounter sons of lesbian parents whose aggression is particularly heightened or diminished, we must take care not to conclude too quickly that this stems from his parents’ lesbianism, and equal care to consider fully the effects of having two female parents. Freud based his theories of oedipal development on the assumption of generic, good-enough parents. We must start from the same position when considering the development of children of gay and lesbian parents, by assuming that they are capable of triadic relationships and able to embrace both similarity and difference. From this vantage point we will be in a better position to understand both healthy and troubled development in these families.

We may find that children of gay and lesbian parents need to develop different psychological strategies, both conscious and unconscious, to come to terms with the demands of the parental complex. By attending to children’s reports of family romance fantasies, observing their play, listening to their stories and the stories adults provide for them we will learn something about how they understand and internalize the representations of self and family. When we no longer need to demonstrate the overriding mental health of children of gay and lesbian parents, then we can accord them equal rights to the conflicts, inevitable disappointments, hurts, triumphs, and struggles of human development. We know that development is not an easy or painless process; if the children of homosexual parents have struggles that are different—whether a little or a lot—from what we are used to, we need to know about them. We must adopt a truly analytically affirmative stance, from which we allow ourselves to observe and attempt to understand what these children have to show and tell us about how best to help them master the developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence.

References

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