

Study highlights motherhood complexities for gay, bisexual women

November 3 2014, by Deann Gayman

In the popular narrative, motherhood among lesbians or bisexual women is usually viewed in one of two ways: non-existent, or seeking evidence of a lesbian baby boom.

However, a new University of Nebraska-Lincoln study suggests that the notion of [motherhood](#) is much broader and more complex in the minds of sexual-minority women than those stereotypes allow.

The study, based on responses from the National Survey of Fertility Barriers, focused on sexual-minority women's desires and intentions to parent and on the importance they place on being mothers. Its findings highlighted the unique choices lesbians and bisexuals often face and, researchers say, punched holes in stereotypes surrounding [sexual orientation](#) and motherhood.

Half of the study's respondents said it was important to have children. A quarter said it was not important to have a child, but did say it was important to raise a child—an important distinction, said lead author Emily Kazyak, UNL assistant professor of sociology. This suggested that lesbians and bisexuals often want children but don't necessarily view carrying their own child as important.

"Sexual minority women make this distinction between having children—being pregnant and giving birth—versus raising children," Kazyak, the study's lead author, said. "That was unique to sexual minority women; we didn't find that with heterosexual women."

Julia McQuillan, professor and chair of the Department of Sociology, said the idea of motherhood is different in a relationship with two women who are both biologically capable of having a child.

"Most heterosexual women can't choose who is going to carry the child," McQuillan said. "But for lesbian couples, there is a choice—they can ask who is going to have the child and who is going to raise the child and it could be different people. That opens up a really interesting dynamic."

Kazyak said she was surprised by the social barriers that were also uncovered. Many women want children, she said, but often face biomedical barriers to having them. In this study's case, those barriers were often societal, she said.

"There are narratives that say most lesbians are voluntarily [child](#)-free," she said. "It's more complex than that."

McQuillan said, "This is showing that just as there is a lot of variation among [heterosexual women](#), there's also a lot of variation among sexual [minority women](#), and we can't assume anything based off someone's sexual orientation."

The study was published in the *Journal of Family Issues*.

More information: "Attitudes Toward Motherhood Among Sexual Minority Women in the United States" *Journal of Family Issues* 0192513X14554396, first published on October 15, 2014 as [DOI: 10.1177/0192513X14554396](#)

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