

M Living, “Difference”

Lesbian Perspectives
on Work and Family Life



Gillian A. Dunne
Editor

Living “Difference”: Lesbian Perspectives on Work and Family Life

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Gillian A. Dunne, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow at The Gender Institute of The London School of Economics and a former Senior Research Associate in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge University. Her research interests focus on key feminist and sociological issues through the experiences of lesbian women. For the past three years, Dr. Dunne has been researching lesbian couples with dependent children. She is currently studying the different dimensions of gay fatherhood. In addition, Dr. Dunne is the author of the book *Lesbian Lifestyles: Women's Work and the Politics of Sexuality* (1997).

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Introduction: Add Sexuality and Stir: Towards a Broader Understanding of the Gender Dynamics of Work and Family Life

Gillian A. Dunne

Such has been the impact of feminism on intellectual thought over the past twenty years that it would be a brave and foolhardy social scientist who could discuss the organization of work and family life, without reference to gender. The addition of gender into the analysis, while a source of irritation for more conventional thinkers in the past, can now be acknowledged as generating better understandings of change and continuity in the home and in the workplace.

There remains, however, a further intellectual blind spot in dominant accounts. This has been sustained by a lack of curiosity about

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the impact of sexual identity on people's experience of work and family life. Mainstream feminist thinking about the limitations and possibilities for transformation in the gender order is informed by empirical research which perpetuates an assumption that workers, parents, and households are heterosexual. Just as the tendency to conflate the category 'worker' with 'man' distorted and obscured understanding, this heterosexual framework limits our capacity to identify obstacles to the creation of a more egalitarian relationship between the sexes. For example, it conceals the significance of heterosexuality *itself* for shaping the lifechances of women and men. I argue that non-heterosexual experience provides important comparative reference points which can tell us as much about heterosexuality, gender, gender relations, and the mainstream as they do about anything else.

The contributions in this volume upset conventional understandings of work and family life by challenging many of the implicit assumptions that have anchored previous research. The issues explored in each essay demonstrate the need to bring the study of lesbian experience from the margins to the centre of feminist enquiry. In this introduction I shall briefly illustrate why better accounts can be produced by adding sexuality and stirring by focusing on two research projects that I have conducted. My conceptual framework in this respect is informed by four key feminist theoretical insights:

- i. Sexuality, like gender, is a social construction. The diversity of emotional and sexual expression across time and space flies in the face of beliefs that take sexuality as some innate natural expression (see Faderman 1985, Ortner and Whitehead 1981, Rubin 1975).
- ii. There is a powerful relationship between gender and sexuality in contemporary Western societies. For example, the categories lesbian and heterosexual are dependent on the social production of gender difference (Butler 1990, Connell 1987, Rubin 1975). I argue that cultural understandings of sexuality will influence what we can achieve and how we experience ourselves as women and men, as well as how we relate across gender boundaries.

- iii. That heterosexuality is a social institution that is central to the reproduction of patriarchy (Rich 1984). Its significance in supporting the status quo by providing the logic that draws men and women into relations of inequality gives it an institutional quality. This insight enables us to move beyond the more divisive focus on individual practice to one that is a more critical of social and ideological processes which police the boundaries of heterosexuality.
- iv. The critique of the separate nature of the public and private spheres (Pateman 1988). This, for example, illuminates the relationship between the organization of homelife and paid work opportunities.

Although each of these insights has informed feminist research, I believe that I have been the first to recognize the advantage to be gained by combining all four together in empirically grounded research. Thus, a new series of questions are opened which are best explored through the lives of lesbian women. With such a sample we can ask, what is the nature of the social processes that enable them to be different and, importantly, what difference does this difference make?

I began to explore these questions in my book *Lesbian Lifestyles: Women's Work and the Politics of Sexuality*. This was based on a life-history study of continuity and change in the lives of 60 non-heterosexual British women aged 17 to 60. In interviews, the women were encouraged to speak of their journey through heterosexuality, possibly marriage, and beyond. Woven into this were their remembrances of childhood, of schooling (see also Dunne, 1992), information about their employment and domestic lives. Within all the complexity of respondents' autobiographies, commonalities could be identified—one of the most striking being the relationship between lesbianism and empowerment. It could be seen, for example, that a lesbian lifestyle both *necessitates* and *facilitates* financial self-reliance. In contrast to heterosexual experience, respondents described their lesbian relationships as based on notions of co-independence. Thus, the capacity to make primary relationships with women, rather than men, central *necessitates* long-term financial self-reliance. This knowledge informed the decisions of