
Lesbian-Mother Families Formed Through Donor Insemination

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For decades, theory and research on family functioning focused on two-parent families consisting of a father and a mother. Over the past 30 years, however, the concept of what makes a “family” has changed. Some children now grow up in “patchwork” or “blended” families; namely, families headed by two parents, one of whom has a child or children from a previous relationship. Other children grow up in “planned” lesbian-parent families; that is, families headed by two lesbian mothers who decided to have children together through adoption, foster care, or donor insemination. These lesbian mothers and their children differ from lesbian mothers whose children were born into previous heterosexual relationships. A child who was born into a previous heterosexual relationship of the mother before she identified herself as a lesbian will have experienced the mother’s divorce and coming-out process, and this transition might influence the child’s psychological well-being. Many other variations in family structures, or combinations of the above-mentioned family types, are possible; for example, a situation where two lesbian

women have a relationship and a child has been born into that relationship, but both mothers also have a child or children from a previous heterosexual relationship or marriage (Chap 1). This chapter, however, focuses only on lesbian-mother families in which all children were conceived through donor insemination (planned lesbian-mother families).

Since the 1980s, assisted reproductive technologies have made it possible for lesbians with the economic means to access sperm banks and thus become parents. As a result, planned lesbian-mother families are now an integral part of the social structure of many Western countries (Parke, 2004). For example, at the time of the 2000 United States Census, one third of female-partnered households contained children (Simmons & O’Connell, 2003). In 2002 there were an estimated 21,000 female cohabiting couples in the Netherlands, and almost 15% of these couples had children younger than 18 years old; in 2009, there were 25,000 female cohabiting couples in the Netherlands, of which 20% had children younger than 18 years old (Bos & van Gelderen, 2010; Steenhof & Harmsen, 2003). It is unclear, however, whether these children were born into lesbian relationships.

It is expected that the number of children born into lesbian relationships and raised by two lesbian mothers will continue to increase. In 2001, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey of 405 randomly selected, self-identified lesbians in the USA found that almost half (49%) of those who

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were not already parents indicated that they would like to have children of their own in the future. A recent study in the Netherlands found that among 1,101 lesbian and bisexual women between aged 16 and 25, 60% of the women wanted to become parents in the future (Van Bergen & van Lisdonk, 2010).

The right and fitness of lesbians to parent is widely disputed in the media and in the legal and policy arena. Opponents of lesbian parenting claim that the children of lesbian parents are at risk of developing a variety of behavior problems, because they are raised in fatherless households, lack a biological tie with one of the mothers, and might be teased by their peers because their mothers are lesbian (for an analysis of the arguments of opponents, see Clarke, 2001). To deflect these concerns, advocates of same-sex marriage and lesbian parenthood rely on the few studies that have been conducted on planned lesbian-mother families. These advocates emphasize that in these studies no evidence was found for the proposition that the traditional, nuclear mother–father family is the ideal environment in which to raise children (Rosky, 2009).

In the present literature review I distinguish among three types of foci in studies on planned lesbian-mother families; namely, questions that focus on (a) a comparison between planned lesbian-mother families and two-parent heterosexual families on family characteristics, parenting, and child outcomes; (b) differences and/or similarities between biological mothers (or “birthmothers”) and nonbiological mothers (or “co-mothers” or “social mothers”) on such aspects as motives to become a mother, parenting, and division of labor; and (c) the diversity within planned lesbian-mother families (in areas such as experiences of stigmatization and donor status) and the consequences of this diversity on parenting and child outcomes. These three research areas are grounded in different theoretical backgrounds. I then present an overview of the most important findings of each category of research. Finally, I describe some scientific limitations of the summarized studies as well as challenges of future research.

Planned Lesbian-Mother Families Compared with Two-Parent Heterosexual Parent Families

Early studies, in particular, on planned lesbian-mother families were often aimed at establishing whether lesbians can be good parents, whether they should be granted legal parenthood, and whether they should have access to assisted reproductive technologies (e.g., Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981; Mucklow & Phelan, 1979). The emphasis was originally on proving the normality of planned lesbian-mother families and the children who grow up in them (for overviews, see Clarke, 2008; Sandfort, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). To inform family policy and regulations on assisted reproduction, it continues to be important to compare parents and children in planned lesbian-mother families and two-parent heterosexual-parent families. It is also important to continue this research focus to further theoretical understanding of the influence of family structure (same-sex vs. opposite-sex parents) and family processes (parent–child relationships, relationships between parents) on child development. The association between family structure and outcomes for children can be complex, with family structure often playing a less important role in children’s psychological development than the quality of the family relationships (Parke, 2004).

The results of studies that compare planned lesbian-mother families and two-parent heterosexual-parent families are presented below. These studies tended to focus on three main areas (a) family characteristics, (b) parenting, and (c) the development of offspring.

Family Characteristics

Age of Mother and Desire and Motivation to Have Children

In a Dutch study of 100 planned lesbian-mother families and 100 heterosexual two-parent families (with children between 4 and 8 years old), Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom (2003) found

that both biological and co-mothers in planned lesbian-mother families were, on average, older than heterosexual parents. This age difference might be related to several issues: Lesbian women start to think about having children at an older age than heterosexual women; they have to make several decisions regarding the conception (e.g., deciding on donors, which takes time; and it takes longer to get pregnant through donor insemination than by natural conception (Botchan et al., 2001).

In Bos et al.'s (2003) study, participants were also asked about their motives to become a parent. The lesbian biological mothers and co-mothers differed from heterosexual mothers and fathers in that they spent more time thinking about their motives for having children. This difference might be because lesbians more carefully weigh the pros and cons of having children, or because their process to parenthood is comparable to that of infertile heterosexual couples, whereby they possess an enhanced awareness of the importance of parenthood in one's life. However, lesbian parents and heterosexual parents seem to rank their parenthood motives rather similarly: Both reported feelings of affection and happiness in relation to having children, and the expectation that parenthood will provide life fulfillment, as their most important motives for having children (Bos et al., 2003).

Division of Family Tasks

How parents in lesbian-mother families and heterosexual two-parent families divide their time between family tasks (household tasks and childcare) and work tends to be measured in two ways. For example, Chan, Brooks, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) studied 30 lesbian couples and 16 heterosexual couples in the USA and asked each parent to complete a questionnaire, the "Who Does What" measure; Cowan & Cowan, (1988), indicating whether she/he or her/his partner carried out a specific tasks. In the earlier mentioned Dutch study by Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom (2007), the division of household tasks and childcare was evaluated by means of a structured diary record of activities. This diary was

completed by both parents in the 100 lesbian-mother families and both parents in the 100 heterosexual two-parent families (Bos et al., 2007). The findings of these studies were similar and did not differ as a function of approach to measuring the division of labor. Lesbian-parent families with young children were likely to share family tasks to a greater degree than heterosexual two-parent families. Perhaps the absence of gender polarization in lesbian-mother families leads to more equal burden sharing, which might explain findings that lesbian mothers are more satisfied with their partners as co-parents compared to heterosexual parents (Bos et al., 2007). Analysis of diary data also revealed that lesbian biological mothers and co-mothers spent similar amounts of time on employment outside the home, in contrast to heterosexual two-parent families (fathers spent much more time at their work outside the home than their partners did) (Bos et al., 2007). It might be that lesbian partners understand each other's career opportunities and challenges better than partners in a heterosexual relationship (see also Dunne, 1998).

Parental Justification

Bos et al. (2007) also examined whether Dutch lesbian mothers feel more pressure to demonstrate to people in their environment that they are good parents. A significant difference in this feeling, which can be described as "parental justification," was found only between lesbian co-mothers and heterosexual fathers: Lesbian co-mothers felt more pressured to justify the quality of their parenthood than heterosexual fathers. According to the authors, this finding might be explained by the co-mother's absence of a biological tie with the children, which drives them to do their utmost to be "good moms." Like adoptive parents, lesbian social mothers may face difficulties in developing an adequate sense of acting as full parents (Grotevant & Kohler, 1999). It is also likely that lesbian social mothers feel pressured to be visible as mothers (e.g., Nekkebroeck & Brewaeys, 2002), because they think that their position is different from that of biological parents, whether lesbian or heterosexual.

Parenting

Parental Stress

In their study of Dutch lesbian-mother families with young children, Bos, van Balen, Sandfort, and van den Boom (2004) found that lesbian mothers' experience of parental stress was comparable to that of heterosexual parents. These findings are congruent with other studies carried out in other countries which found that lesbian mothers do not differ from heterosexual mothers in two-parent families on parental stress (Shechner, Slone, Meir, & Kalish, 2010). Shechner et al. (2010), for example, examined maternal stress in 30 lesbian two-mother families, 30 heterosexual two-parent families, and 30 single-mother families (all with children between 4 and 8 years old). This study—which was carried out in Israel—found that single heterosexual mothers reported higher levels of stress than lesbian mothers and two-parent heterosexual mothers, and the lesbian mothers' stress scores did not differ from the heterosexual mothers in two-parent families. Patterson (2001) administered the Symptom Checklist (SCL-90; Derogatis, 1983) which addresses a variety of psychological and somatic symptoms, to 66 lesbian mothers (with children between 4 and 9 years old), and compared the mothers' scores with the norms of a female nonpatient sample (Derogatis, 1983). In this study, too, no significant differences between groups were found on any of the SCL-90 measured psychological or somatic symptoms.

Parenting Styles

Studies carried out in the UK, the USA, the Netherlands, and Belgium have shown that based on parent self-report data in lesbian-mother families with young children, the co-mothers had higher levels of emotional involvement, parental concern, and parenting awareness skills than fathers in heterosexual two-parent families (Bos et al., 2007; Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2004; Brewaeys, Ponjaert, van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997). In Bos et al.'s (2007) Dutch study of 100 lesbian-mother families and 100 heterosexual two-parent

families, data were also gathered by means of observations of the parent relationship during a home visit. During this visit, parent and child were videotaped performing two instructional tasks, which were later scored by two different trained raters. It was found that the co-mothers differed from the fathers in that they showed lower levels of limit setting during the parent-child interaction (Bos et al., 2007). These differences were not found between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers. These differences may be due to gender: Women are supposed to be more expressive, nurturant, and sensitive, while men more often exhibit instrumental competence (such as disciplining) (Lamb, 1999).

Golombok et al. (2003) examined, by means of standardized interviews, the quality of parent-child relationships of a community sample of 7-year-old children in 39 lesbian-mother families (20 headed by a single mother and 19 by a lesbian couple), 74 two-parent heterosexual families, and 60 families headed by single heterosexual mothers. When lesbian-mother families were compared with the two-parent heterosexual families, a significant difference was found for emotional involvement, with fathers scoring higher than co-mothers. According to the authors, this difference might have to do with the fact that although the children involved in this study were also born into lesbian relationships, a substantial number of the lesbian co-mothers were stepmothers, who were not actively involved in the decision to have a child and did not raise the child from birth. Another significant difference found in this study was that the frequency of smacking was greater among the fathers than among the co-mothers; this difference is an important finding because smacking is associated with aggressive behavior in children (Eamon, 2001).

In a longitudinal study in the UK, the researchers compared 20 families headed by lesbian mothers (11 couples and 9 single mothers) and 27 families headed by single heterosexual mothers with 36 two-parent heterosexual families, at the time the offspring reached adolescence (Golombok & Badger, 2010). They found that the mothers in the lesbian-mother families and in the single heterosexual-mother families were

more emotionally involved with their adolescents than mothers in traditional father–mother families. Lesbian mothers and single heterosexual mothers also showed lower levels of separation anxiety than mothers in the two-parent heterosexual families. Although no differences were found between the lesbian mothers and the single heterosexual mothers on these aspects, they did not differ on disciplinary techniques and conflicts: The lesbian mothers showed higher levels of these characteristics than the single mothers.

Thus, empirical studies reveal a consensus that there are some differences between lesbian and heterosexual parents: Lesbian mothers are more committed as parents, spend more time caring for their children, and report higher levels of emotional involvement with their children. The question is whether this more competent and involved parenting is reflected in the children's development.

Offspring Development

Psychosocial Development

Research on children and adolescents in planned lesbian-mother families has mainly focused on their psychological adjustment and peer relationships. In general, growing evidence suggests that there are no differences between young children raised in lesbian-parent families and those raised in two-parent heterosexual families with regard to problem behavior and well-being (Bos et al., 2007; Bos & van Balen, 2008; Brewaeys, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, van Steirteghem, & Devroey, 1993; Flaks et al., 1995; Patterson, 1994; Steckel, 1987). Thus, the higher levels of positive parenting found among lesbian-parent families do not generally translate into more positive child outcomes. In this respect, the findings of various studies support the ideas of Roberts and Strayer (1987) concerning a leveling-off effect (i.e., a sigmoid curve) of involved parenting.

There are, however, some exceptions to the above-mentioned findings. In the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (U.S. NLLFS), for example, the mean score of the thirty-eight 10-year-old girls in lesbian-mother

families on externalizing problem behavior (as measured by the Child Behavioral Checklist, or CBCL; Achenbach, 1991; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) was significantly lower than that of an age-matched control group of girls in heterosexual two-parent families (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005). For this publication of the U.S. NLLFS, CBCL norms were used as the comparison group (Achenbach, 1991; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). In their longitudinal study in the UK, Golombok et al. (1997) found that when the offspring of the planned lesbian mothers were 6 years old, they rated themselves less cognitively and physically competent than did their counterparts in father-present families. At the age of 9, however, there were no significant differences on psychological adjustment between the two groups (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004).

Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2002) also found a significant difference in their study in Belgium: Although the 24 children in lesbian-parent families were not more frequently teased than the 24 children in heterosexual two-parent families about such matters as clothes or physical appearance, family-related incidents of teasing were mentioned only by children from lesbian-parent families. Vanfraussen et al. (2002) also gathered data on the children's well-being through reports from teachers, parents, and children. Teachers reported more attention problem behavior by children from lesbian-mother families than by children from mother–father families. However, based on the reports from mothers and the children themselves, no significant differences on the children's problem behavior were found. An explanation for this discrepancy might be that teachers' evaluations are based on a different setting from that of mothers and children.

The above-mentioned studies on the psychological development of children were all based on convenience samples: The planned lesbian-mother families were recruited with the help of gay and lesbian organizations, through friendship networks, through hospital fertility departments, and sometimes through a combination of these methods. However, several studies used a different recruitment strategy. Golombok et al. (2003)

extracted household composition data from the U.K. Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children data set; they used this information to identify households headed by two women and compared them with two-parent heterosexual families. They found no differences in the psychological well-being of young children in the two types of households.

A similar strategy was used by Wainright and colleagues (Wainright & Patterson, 2006, 2008; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004), who used the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data set to identify households headed by two mothers. They could identify 44 families headed by two mothers, and each of them was matched with an adolescent of the Add Health data set who was reared in a two-parent heterosexual family. They found no differences in substance use, relationships with peers, and progress through school between adolescents in households headed by two women and those in two-parent heterosexual families.

The results of two other studies on adolescents are also available. Gartrell and Bos (2010) found that at the age of 17 years, the U.S. NLLFS offspring (39 boys and 39 girls) demonstrated higher levels of social, school/academic, and total competence than gender-matched normative samples of American teenagers (49 girls and 44 boys), indicating the healthy psychological adjustment of the U.S. NLLFS offspring. Although the authors showed that the U.S. NLLFS sample and the comparison sample are similar in socioeconomic status, they were neither matched on nor did the authors control for race/ethnicity or region of residence. This matching, however, was done in another U.S. NLLFS publication about substance use (Goldberg, Bos & Gartrell, 2011). For this study, the researchers used the Monitoring the Future (MTF) data as a comparison group, and by using a 1:1 match procedure on gender, age, race/ethnicity, and parental education, they randomly selected seventy-eight 17-year-old adolescents from the MTF data set. Compared to the matched adolescents, U.S. NLLFS adolescents with same-sex parents were not more likely to report heavy substance use (Goldberg et al., 2011). Second, the above-mentioned U.K. longitudinal study by

Golombok and Badger (2010) found that at the age of 19, adolescents born into lesbian-mother families showed lower levels of anxiety, depression, hostility, and problematic alcohol use, and higher levels of self-esteem, than adolescents in traditional father-mother families. According to Bos and van Balen (2010), the positive findings regarding adolescents in planned lesbian-parent families may be partly explained by the mothers' commitment to and involvement in the rearing of their offspring, or by other aspects regarding the quality of the relationships within the family (e.g., having a supportive partner).

Gender Role, Sexual Questioning, and Sexual Behavior

Other frequently studied aspects of the development of children in planned lesbian-parent families are the children's gender roles and sexual behavior. MacCallum and Golombok (2004) studied 25 lesbian-mother families, 38 families headed by a single heterosexual mother, and 38 two-parent heterosexual families in the UK and found that boys in lesbian or single-mother families showed more feminine personality traits than boys in two-parent heterosexual families. However, other studies that focused on children's aspirations to traditionally masculine or feminine occupations and activities (and which were also carried out in Western countries) did not find differences between children in lesbian-parent families and those in two-parent heterosexual families (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008; Golombok et al., 2003).

Bos and Sandfort (2010) studied the gender development of the offspring of lesbian mothers in the Netherlands from a multidimensional perspective by focusing on five issues (a) gender typicality (the degree to which children felt that they were typical members of their gender category), (b) gender contentedness (the degree to which children felt happy with their assigned gender), (c) pressure to conform (the degree to which children felt pressure from parents and peers to conform to gender stereotypes), (d) intergroup bias (the degree to which children felt that their gender was superior to the other gender), and (e) children's anticipation of future heterosexual

romantic involvement. The authors found that when the offspring of the parents were between 8 and 12 years old, the 63 children in the lesbian-parent families felt less parental pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, were less likely to experience their own gender as superior (intergroup bias), and were more likely to question future heterosexual romantic involvement than the 68 children in the two-parent heterosexual families. An explanation for these findings might be that lesbian mothers have more liberal attitudes than heterosexual parents toward their children's gender-related behavior (Fulcher et al., 2008). That children in lesbian-mother families are less sure about future heterosexual romantic involvement might be because they grow up in a family environment that is more tolerant toward homosexual relationships.

The above-mentioned findings are all based on studies of children. The three studies that were conducted on adolescents also included questions about sexual and romantic behavior, and sexual orientation. The longitudinal U.K. study by Golombok and colleagues (2010) found that as young adults (mean age 19), individuals with lesbian mothers were more likely to have started dating than those from heterosexual-parent families. However, the U.S. NLLFS found that the 17-year-old offspring of lesbian mothers were significantly older at the time of their first heterosexual contact compared to an age- and gender-matched comparison group from the National Survey of Family Growth (Gartrell, Bos, & Goldberg 2010). A study using Add Health data, on the other hand, revealed no significant differences in heterosexual intercourse or romantic relationships between young adults with lesbian mothers and young adults with heterosexual parents (Wainright et al., 2004). In all three studies, almost all the children of the lesbian mothers identified themselves as heterosexual. However, the daughters of U.S. NLLFS lesbian mothers were significantly more likely to have had same-sex sexual contact (Gartrell et al., 2010), which might be because this type of family environment makes it more comfortable for adolescent girls with same-sex attractions to explore intimate relationships with

their peers (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

Comparison Between Biological Mothers and Nonbiological Mothers in Planned Lesbian-Mother Families

In studies that compare biological and nonbiological mothers in planned lesbian-parent families, there are three main topics of interest (a) the pregnancy decision-making process and the desire and motivation to have children, (b) the division of tasks, and (c) parenting. Interest in the differences and similarities between biological and nonbiological mothers is linked to the role and position of the mothers who did not bear a child, especially because these mothers are living in a societal context in which the biological relatedness of the parents is perceived as very important. In addition, for nonbiological mothers in planned lesbian-mother families, in many countries there is also the issue of the lack of legitimacy under the law (Waalwijk, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). As a consequence, nonbiological mothers might feel excluded in their role as parents by institutions. In addition to experiencing greater feelings of exclusion, nonbiological mothers might experience lack of recognition, entitlement, and security in their parental role.

Pregnancy Decision-Making Process, and Desire and Motivation to Have Children

Several studies have examined the decision-making process concerning which of the partners in lesbian couples will conceive and bear the children. Goldberg (2006), for example, interviewed 29 American lesbian couples about their decision regarding who would try to get pregnant and the reasons behind this decision. The most frequently mentioned reason was the biological mother's desire to experience pregnancy and childbirth; for some, it was also important to have a genetic connection with the child (Goldberg, 2006).

However, many couples had other reasons. For example, one reason was age: the older partner was chosen because it could have been her last chance to become pregnant, or the younger partner was chosen because they both thought that the age of the older partner might make it difficult for her to conceive. Another reason was employment situation: The partner with the most flexible job was chosen to conceive. Chabot and Ames (2004) interviewed 10 American lesbian couples (age of the children was between 3 months and 8 years) and also observed these couples during support group meetings for lesbian parents. Similar results were found on how the couples decided who would carry the child as in the above-mentioned study of Goldberg (2006).

Women in lesbian couples can theoretically have each partner carry a child. Studies, however, have shown that few couples make the decision to do this. For example, a study of 95 lesbian couples who were undergoing artificial donor insemination (AID) treatment at a infertility clinic in Belgium found that only 14% of the couples wanted both partners to become pregnant—first the older and then the younger partner (Baetens, Camus, & Devroey, 2003). A study of 100 Dutch lesbian couples who already had one or more children (with the oldest child between 4 and 8 years old) found that in only a minority (33%) of cases had both mothers given birth to a child (Bos et al., 2003). While in Baetens et al.'s (2003) study it was the oldest partner who had been the first to try to get pregnant, in Bos et al.'s (2003) study there was no significant age difference between the two would-be parents.

In Bos et al.'s (2003) study, the authors also compared the mothers who did get pregnant with those who did not. They found that the former group had spent more time on thinking about why they wanted to become mothers, stated more frequently that they had had to “give up almost everything” to get pregnant, and more frequently reported “parenthood as a life fulfillment” as a motive for seeking parenthood. Indeed, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which gender identity (i.e., the extent to which women use stereotyped feminine or masculine personal-

ity traits to describe themselves) is a predictor of the desire to experience pregnancy and childbirth. For a heterosexual woman in a Western society, being a mother is still considered evidence of her femininity (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000), and it would be interesting to look at how this perception is related to a lesbian woman's desire to become a mother or to give birth in a lesbian relationship.

Division of Tasks

Several studies have found that the biological lesbian mothers were more involved in childcare than their partners, that the nonbiological lesbian mothers spent more time working outside the home, and that the mothers shared the housework relatively equally (Bos et al., 2007; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Patterson, 2002; Short, 2007). Several other studies, however, found an equal division of both unpaid and paid work between the partners in planned lesbian-mother families. For example, Chan et al. (1998) studied 30 American lesbian-parent families and 16 heterosexual-parent families and found that same-sex couples shared childcare, housework, and employment fairly equally whereas heterosexual couples did not. These results are similar to findings from the third and fourth wave of the U.S. NLLFS (the children were then 4 and 10 years old, respectively); namely, in most families in which the mothers were still together, biological mother and nonbiological mother shared child rearing relatively equally (Gartrell et al., 1999, 2000).

Based on these inconsistent findings, one could conclude that there is a great deal of variability in the labor arrangements within lesbian couples (Goldberg, 2010). A next step is to investigate the differences between the planned lesbian-parent families that do have an equal division of labor and those that do not, and to gain more information (via in-depth interviews) about whether this division is based on a conscious decision. In the families in which this division is a conscious decision, it would be interesting to examine what factors (e.g., stereotyped feminine

or masculine personality traits, career opportunities, age, or socioeconomic status) are related to such decision.

Parenting

Only a few studies have examined whether there are differences in parenting styles and parenting behavior between partners in planned lesbian-mother families. When such a comparison is made, the unit of analyses is the biological tie (or its absence) with the child(ren). Goldberg, Downing, and Sauck (2008) asked the lesbian mothers whom they interviewed whether they observed in their children a preference for the biological or the nonbiological mother. Many of the women mentioned that as infants their children had preferred the birth mother, but that over the years this preference had faded such that at the time of the interviews, the children (who were then 3.5 years old) had no preference. According to the mothers, the initial preference of the child was related to the pregnancy and the experience of breastfeeding during the first months. Notably, some nonbiological mothers were jealous of these experiences of their partners. Gartrell et al. (1999) also found that lesbian co-mothers of 2-year-old children reported feelings of jealousy related to their partners' bonding with the child (see also Gartrell, Peyser, & Bos, 2011).

One of the publications emanating from the Dutch study by Bos et al., (2007) compared biological and nonbiological mothers in the 100 planned lesbian-mother families with respect to parenting styles and parental behavior. No differences were found between the partners on most of the variables: They did not differ significantly on emotional involvement, parental concern, power assertion, induction (all measured with questionnaires), supportive presence, or respect for the child's autonomy (all measured with observations of child-parent interactions). However, lesbian biological mothers scored higher on limit setting on the child's behavior during the observed parent-child interactions.

Diversity Within Planned Lesbian-Mother Families

The focus of the third set of studies is on diversity among planned lesbian-mother families and the potential effects of such diversity on child rearing and children. Three aspects of diversity within planned lesbian-mother studies that have been studied are (a) donor status (known or as yet unknown donor), (b) absence of male role figures, and (c) the mothers' and the offspring's experiences of stigmatization. The focus on diversity within lesbian-parent families represents a relatively new type of inquiry in studies of lesbian-mother families.

Questions regarding why mothers use known or as yet unknown donors, and what the choice means for the mothers and their offspring, should be placed in a broader discussion in which some authors have theorized that the absence of information about their donors may affect the offspring's identity and psychological development, especially during the vulnerable period of adolescence (for an overview see Hunfeld, Passchier, Bolt, & Buijsen, 2004). Interest in the role of male involvement in these families is based on theories and ideas about gender identification, and how the absence of a traditional father or father figure may affect children. Interest in the experience and role of stigmatization in lesbian-mother families should be understood in terms of perspectives emphasizing the role of personal, family, and community resources in reducing the negative impact of homophobia on the offspring's psychological development (Van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, & Hermanns, 2009).

Donor Status

Many fertility clinics in the USA offer couples the option of using either the sperm of a donor who will remain permanently anonymous (unknown donor) or that of a donor who may be met by the offspring when she or he reaches the age of 18 (identity-release donor) (Scheib, Riordan, & Rubin, 2005). In her US study of 29

pregnant lesbians and their partners, Goldberg (2006) found that 59% of the women wanted to have an unknown donor, and the main reason for this preference was that they wanted to raise their children without interference from a third party. Touroni and Coyle (2002), who interviewed nine lesbian couples in the UK, found that six of them made the decision for a known donor, and a reason that they gave for this was they believed that children have the right to know their genetic origins and/or to form relationships with their donors early in life. Gartrell et al. (1996) found that among the lesbian women in their study who preferred a known donor, many did this because they worried that children conceived by unknown donors might experience psychological and identity problems during adolescence or later in life.

There are few data on what it means for offspring to have known or unknown donors. In Belgium, Vanfraussen, Pontjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeyts (2003a, 2003b) asked 24 children (mean age = 10 years old) with lesbian mothers whether, if it were possible, they would want to have more information about their donors. Nearly 50% of the children answered “yes,” and they were especially curious about their donors’ physical features and personalities. Scheib et al. (2005) found that for adolescents conceived by identity-release donors and raised in lesbian-mother families, the most frequently mentioned questions were “What’s he like?,” “What does he look like?,” “What’s his family like?,” and “Is he like me?” The Belgian study also assessed whether the children who wanted to know more about their donors differed in self-esteem or emotional and behavioral functioning from their counterparts who did not share this curiosity. No significant differences were found on self-esteem or emotional and behavioral functioning between the group of children who wanted to learn more about their donors and those who did not have this curiosity (Vanfraussen et al., 2003a, 2003b).

At the time of the first U.S. NLLFS data collection, the mothers-to-be were either pregnant or inseminating, and the donor preferences were almost equally divided between permanently

anonymous and identity-release donors (Gartrell et al., 1996). In the fifth wave of the U.S. NLLFS, nearly 23% of the adolescents with unknown donors stated that they wished they knew their donors, while 67% of those who would have the option to meet their donors when they turned 18 planned to do so. Unfortunately, the U.S. NLLFS adolescents were not asked why they intended to contact their donors, nor what they hoped to experience by meeting them.

The U.S. NLLFS also gathered data on the offspring’s problem behavior by means of parental reports using the CBCL (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). This data collection by means of the parental reports of the CBCL was done in the fourth and fifth waves (when the children were 10 and 17 years old, respectively), which made it possible to assess the role of donor status regarding the offspring’s problem behavior over time. The authors (Bos & Gartrell, 2010a) found only a few differences between the offspring when they were 10 and when they were 17 years old: That is, when they were 17 years old, their scores on social problems and aggressive behavior were lower, and their scores on thought problems and rule-breaking behavior were higher, than when they were 10 (Bos & Gartrell, 2010a). For all findings, no differences were found between adolescents with known donors and those with as yet unknown donors. These findings are important, because lesbian women are often uncertain about the long-term consequences of donor selection and the well-being of their offspring, and these findings indicate that donor type has no bearing on the development of the psychological well-being of the offspring of lesbian mothers over a 7-year period from childhood through adolescence.

Male Role Models

Little research has focused on lesbian mothers’ ideas about male involvement in the lives of their offspring, and no studies have looked at what it means for children and adolescents growing up in lesbian-mother families with or without male role models. The U.S. NLLFS found that when the

mothers were pregnant or undergoing the process of insemination, 76% stated that they hoped to provide their children with positive male role models (often described as “good, loving men”) (Gartrell et al., 1996), and by the time the children were 10 years old, half of the families had incorporated male role models into these children’s lives (Gartrell et al., 2005).

Goldberg and Allen (2007) interviewed 30 lesbian couples in the USA, during the pregnancy and when the children were 3 months old and found that more than two-thirds of the women were highly conscious of the fact that their children would grow up in the absence of a male figure; they believed this might have negative consequences for their offspring’s psychological well-being. Many of them, in turn, had already made plans to find such men. According to the authors, as well as Clarke and Kitzinger (2005), this awareness and anticipation may be a response to the cultural anxieties about the necessity of male role models in the development of children.

All of the above studies evaluated what mothers reported about male role figures in the lives of their offspring, and on what these mothers thought the presence or absence of such figures might mean for the development of their children. The influence of male role figures on the offspring’s gender role development and psychological adjustment has not yet been studied.

Stigmatization

Mothers’ Experiences of Stigmatization

The U.S. NLLFS found that while pregnant or undergoing the process of insemination, most mothers saw raising a child in a heterosexist and homophobic society as a challenge they would have to deal with in the future (Gartrell et al., 1996). Experiences of stigmatization and rejection were assessed in the Dutch longitudinal study by Bos et al. (2004). The 200 mothers (100 couples) were asked about such experiences when the children were between 4 and 8 years old. The authors developed a scale to measure the mothers’ perceived experiences of rejection.

This instrument included 7 forms of rejections related to being a lesbian mother. Lesbian mothers were asked to indicate how frequent (1=*never*, 2=*sometimes*, 3=*regularly*) each form of rejection had occurred in the previous year (Bos et al., 2004). The forms of rejection that were most frequently reported (i.e., the mothers answered that they sometimes or regularly experienced it) were “Other people asking me annoying questions related to my lifestyle” (reported by 68% and 72% of the biological mothers and the co-mothers, respectively) and “Other people gossiping about me” (27.3% and 32.7% of the biological and the co-mothers, respectively). Less frequently reported experiences were disapproving comments (13% and 12.1% of the biological and the co-mothers, respectively) and being excluded (12% and 9.1% of the biological and the co-mothers, respectively). The 7 items formed a reliable scale, and based on this scale the authors calculated the associations between rejection and the extent to which the mothers reported parental stress (parental burden), the need to demonstrate to others that they are good parents (parental justification), and feelings of not being able to handle their children (feeling incompetent as a parent). The results show that higher levels of rejection were associated with more experiences of parental stress, feeling a greater need to justify the quality of the parent–child relationship, and feeling less competent as a parent (Bos, van Balen, Sandfort et al., 2004).

It should be mentioned that the study from which these data are drawn was conducted in the Netherlands, which has a relatively positive climate regarding lesbian and gay people and same-sex marriage (Sandfort, McGaskey, & Bos, 2008). The level of stigmatization may therefore be more pronounced in other Western countries. Shapiro, Peterson, and Stewart (2009) also showed that differences in sociolegal context (namely countries in which same-sex marriage is possible compared to countries in which it is not) can influence the experience of lesbian parenthood: They found that lesbian mothers in Canada reported fewer worries about discrimination than lesbian mothers in the USA.

Children's and Adolescents' Experiences of Stigmatization

In the follow-up of the above-mentioned study that was carried out in the Netherlands, the children (who were now between 8 and 12 years old) were asked about their experiences of rejection (Bos & van Balen, 2008). Sixty percent of the children in the lesbian-mother families reported that peers made jokes about them because they had lesbian mothers. Other frequently reported negative forms of rejection were: annoying questions about the parents' sexual orientation (56.7%), abusive language related to the mothers' sexual orientation (45.2%), peers gossiping about the lesbian mothers (30.6%), and exclusion by peers because of their family situation (26.2%).

Here, differences in sociolegal context between countries are also important. In the fourth wave of the U.S. NLLFS, Gartrell et al. (2005) measured experiences with homophobia among the children by asking them: "Did other kids ever say mean things to you about your mom(s) being a lesbian?" Almost 38% of the 41 boys and 46% of the 38 girls answered "yes" on this question. Responding to exactly the same question to children in Dutch planned lesbian families, 14.7% of the 36 boys and 22.2% of the 38 girls answered "yes." In the last wave of the U.S. NLLFS data collection (when the offspring were 17 years old), 35.9% of the boys and 46.2% of the girls reported experiences of homophobic stigmatization.

Although studies that compared the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents showed that having same-sex parents is not in itself a risk factor (e.g., Bos et al., 2007; Golombok et al., 2003), both the Dutch longitudinal study and the U.S. NLLFS found that when children are confronted with their peers' disapproval of their lesbian mothers' sexual orientation, they lose self-confidence and exhibit more behavioral problems (Bos & van Balen, 2008; Bos, van Balen, Sandfort et al., 2004; Gartrell et al., 2005). However, among the children who reported being stigmatized, three groups exhibited greater resilience: namely, children who attended schools that had lesbian/gay awareness on their curricula; children whose mothers

described themselves as active members of the lesbian community; and children who had frequent contact with other offspring of same-sex parents (Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort, 2008; Bos & van Balen, 2008). In the fifth wave of the U.S. NLLFS it was found that among the adolescent offspring of lesbian mothers, stigmatization was associated with more problem behavior, but that having close, positive relationships with their mothers mitigated this negative influence (Bos & Gartrell, 2010b). Bos and Gartrell (2010b) hypothesized that family conversations about possible future homophobic stigmatization reduces the negative impact of these experiences on the well-being of the offspring; however, in the data on the 17-year-old offspring of the U.S. NLLFS, no evidence was found to support this hypothesis (Bos & Gartrell, 2010b).

Limitations and Challenges

There are several limitations of the comparison studies and of the studies that focus solely on planned lesbian-parent families and the mechanisms within these families. First, most studies collected data by means of semi-structured interviews with parents or self-administered questionnaires completed by parents. It might be that results based on parental reports are biased because the mothers want to demonstrate that they are good parents. Gathering data on the parent-child relationship and the offspring's psychological adjustment from such sources as teacher reports or observations of parent-child interactions (which some studies already do) might counter the degree to which self-report bias is a limitation.

Second, there is the issue of the representativeness of the samples used in the studies, and the generalization of the findings. Most studies on planned lesbian-mother families used comparatively small samples, and respondents were recruited via such sources as organizations of lesbian and gay parents. As a consequence they are not representative, which has consequences for the generalizability of the findings (Tasker, 2010).

It should also be noted that most studies on planned lesbian-mother families are carried out among upper-middle-class, highly educated, urban-dwelling, White lesbian parents (Clarke, 2008; Gabb, 2004). This limitation means that there is an absence of class-based analysis, which also has consequences for the representativeness of the samples and the findings.

A practical solution to these issues of representativeness is to apply large, general sample frames, and to screen for households headed by two women (Sandfort, 2000). However, such a solution would be very costly. An alternative is to include some identifying questions about the family structure, genetic relationship between parents and offspring, and sexual orientation in general population studies set up by other researchers on topics that are related to the field of parenting or child development (Tasker, 2010). This strategy might also make it possible to get more diversity in SES and race in the samples of planned lesbian-mother families.

The above-mentioned strategy was used in two studies (Golombok et al., 2003; Wainright et al., 2004; Wainright & Patterson, 2007, 2008). However, in the data sets the researchers used there were only questions about the structure of the families in which the children and adolescents were living, and the parents' sexual orientation was not specified. Therefore the analyses may be confounded by the inclusion of women who live together but do not identify as lesbian (Gartrell & Bos, 2010).

It is also a limitation that in most studies, planned lesbian-mother families are compared with two-parent heterosexual families (e.g., Bos et al., 2007). In such a design, however, issues related to unraveling the influence of gender, a genetic link, and minority status remain unresolved. Researchers should therefore initiate other designs. A comparison, for example, between planned lesbian-families, two-parent heterosexual families, gay-father families and/or gay-father and lesbian-mother families in which the mother became a parent after her coming out and is sharing the child-rearing task, might help to tease apart the relative influences of gender, genetic link, and minority status on child rearing and child development.

Another limitation is that most of the previous studies on planned lesbian mother families used a cross-sectional design; thus, one has to be cautious in ascribing causal directions to the associations that were found (e.g., between experiences of stigmatization and the offspring's psychological adjustment). There are several studies in which data are gathered in several waves (e.g., Bos et al., 2007; Bos & Sandfort, 2010; Gartrell et al., 1996; Golombok et al., 1997; Golombok & Badger, 2010). However, the instruments that were used were different across phases, and as a consequence it was not possible to examine the psychological well-being of the offspring from a longitudinal perspective. Longitudinal studies, for example, on the long-term consequences of stigmatization and resilience are needed.

Conclusion

Most existing studies on planned lesbian-mother families made a comparison between planned lesbian-mother families and heterosexual two-parent families with the aim of gathering more information on whether lesbian women could be "good" parents. These comparative studies of the significance of the "critical ingredients" of child rearing and family processes are important, to gather more information about what they do and how they contribute to the healthy development of children's well-being. However, as a consequence of the tremendous diversity within the lesbian community, recent research has increasingly focused on diversity within lesbian-mother families and the effects of family variation on parenting and child outcomes. There has been a trend toward investigating new kinds of research questions that are more centered on the mechanisms within lesbian-parent families, instead of comparing them with heterosexual two-parent families. For example, these studies focus on differences and similarities in parenting between biological and nonbiological mothers, and on how lesbian mothers deal with circumstances in which they differ from heterosexual parents.

To evaluate the psychological development of offspring in planned lesbian-mother families, it is

important to consider the sociolegal context and cultural climate in which the families live (Bos, Gartrell, Peyser, & van Balen, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2009; Tasker, 2010). The comparison study of the U.S. NLLFS data and those of a Dutch study (Bos, Gartrell, van Balen et al., 2008) indicates that cross-national differences in the acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex parenthood have consequences for the well-being of children in lesbian-mother families, with greater acceptance of lesbian and gay people and same-sex parenting associated with less problem behavior among the children. Future research should compare the experiences of parents and their offspring in multiple countries that have different levels of official recognition of lesbian couples.

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