

Lesbian families and family functioning: an overview

H.M.W. Bos, F. van Balen, D.C. van den Boom

Department of Education, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam,
Wibautstraat 4, 1090 GE Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Abstract

Objectives: In the last 30 years a growing body of studies on lesbian parents and the development of children has been published.

Methods: Four computerized databases were identified studies for inclusion in this review of research on lesbian families, namely PsychInfo, Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Medline, and the Social Sciences Citation Index.

Results: Forty-four empirical studies on lesbian families published between 1978 and 2003 were reviewed. In the research on lesbian families two phases were identified. To begin with, systematic studies on lesbian families focused on lesbian families with children who were born in a previous heterosexual relationship. More recently, studies included lesbian families whose children were born to the lesbian couple (planned lesbian families). In both phases, articles reporting results on children's development (such as sexual identity, emotional/behavioral development, social relationships and cognitive functioning), and parental functioning (such as mental psychological health and parenting skills). This paper presents and discusses major finding of the reviewed articles.

Conclusion: Studies in both phases have emphasized that lesbian and heterosexual families are very much alike. However, it is the stigma of lesbianism that makes the family situation of lesbian families different.

Practice: implications Healthcare workers should be informed about the similarities and differences between lesbian families and heterosexual families, and about the non-traditional family situation of planned lesbian families.

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1. Introduction

Lesbian families are a relatively new phenomenon in our society. In recent years, the concept of what makes a family has changed and in many of today's Western societies there are a variety of family types. Nowadays, some children are growing up in a one-parent rather than in a traditional mother-and-father family. Other children are growing up in a 'patchwork' or 'blended' family, because after divorce one of the parents found a new partner who had children out of a former relationship and together they have created a new family. In addition, more and more parents are choosing for co-parenting after a separation. Another type of non-traditional family is the two-mother lesbian family. The aim

of this article is to provide an overview of existing studies on lesbian parenthood.

In the past, most women who were attracted to other women faced enormous societal pressure to marry a man and have children, and they had to repress their sexual feelings for women or to express them in a highly secretive way [1]. As a result of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, increasing numbers of lesbians have abandoned secrecy. Lesbian women who were a parent in a heterosexual relationship openly identified themselves as lesbians, and they divorced from their husbands. In the 1970s, these lesbian women began to fight for the custody of their children after divorce.

As a result of the increasing tolerance of homosexuality, an increasing number of women become mother after coming out as a lesbian. Some of these are single mothers, and others are couples who planned their family together and share the parenting role. In the literature these families are

Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 20 525 1206.

E-mail address: h.m.w.bos@uva.nl (H.M.W. Bos).

characterized as ‘planned lesbian families’ [1]. This is in contrast to lesbian families whose children had been born to the mother in a previous heterosexual relationship before coming out of the closet. It is difficult to say how many planned lesbian families there are; however, several social scientists made estimates. In the US, for example, the number of lesbians who became a mother, after coming out as a lesbian, was in 1990 estimated as 5000–10,000 [2]. In the Netherlands, it is estimated that there are 21,000 cohabiting lesbian couples, and that almost 15% of these couples have children [3]. In autumn 2001, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey of 405 randomly selected, self-identified lesbians, gays and bisexuals in the US indicated that 8% of the respondents was a parent or legal guardian of a child under 18 who lived in their home. Among those lesbians, gays and bisexuals who were not parents at the time of the survey, almost half (49%) indicated that they would like to have children of their own some time [4]. Regardless of the estimates, it is evident that a large number of children are growing up in lesbian families. This increase in children in planned lesbian families has been characterized as a baby boom among lesbians [5].

As a result of the introduction of gay and lesbian marriage and the legal recognition of lesbian parenthood (the non-biological mother can legally adopt the children born in the lesbian relationship), the Netherlands has become one of the most liberal countries in this respect [6]. However, public opinion in the Netherlands still holds that a traditional rather than a lesbian or gay family is the ideal environment in which to raise children [7], and dominant public opinion is not in favor of equal rights for lesbians when it comes to adoption [6]. In other countries, there are less favorable attitudes towards lesbian motherhood [8].

During the last 30 years, lesbian families have been of special interest in a number of contexts, such as the legal and policy arena, in the media and in empirical research [9]. Arguments against lesbian parenting have focused on the absence of a father, the homosexual orientation of the mother, and their negative consequences on the development of the children [10]. Research on parenting and child rearing has repeatedly compared lesbian and heterosexual families, and in the last 30 years a growing body of studies on lesbian parents and the development of their children has been published. The purpose of this review is to describe the focus and context of the existing literature on lesbian parenthood, and to provide an overview of the results and research methods in this literature. A further objective is to outline challenges for future research on lesbian families.

2. Methods

Four computerized databases were identified as studies for inclusion in this review of research on lesbian families, namely PsychInfo, Educational Resources Information

Centre (ERIC), Medline, and the Social Sciences Citation Index. Keywords were used in various combinations, namely lesbian women, lesbian mothers, lesbian families, children, child development, child outcomes, parenting, parental behavioral, child rearing, and parent–child relationship. In addition, the references of the collected articles were examined.

This systematic search yielded 44 studies on (1) lesbian families whose children had been born to the mother in a previous heterosexual relationship, and (2) lesbian families whose children had been born in the lesbian relationships (planned lesbian families). The studies selected in these two categories were assessed and categorized according to topic, sample and design, measures and main results (see Tables 1 and 2). Unpublished studies were not included.

3. Results

3.1. Focus and context of the studies

Concerns raised in custody disputes in which lesbian women fought for the custody of their children born in a heterosexual relationship were an important impetus for research on lesbian families. When custody or visitation rights were denied or curtailed, courts based their judgments on a lack of a male role model in lesbian families and on the inevitability of children being subject to bullying and social stigmatization [11]. Judges assumed that the absence of a father combined with the presence of a lesbian mother would lead to atypical gender development in children. Boys were assumed to be less masculine in their identity and behavior and would grow up to be homosexual. Girls were supposed to be less feminine and would grow up to be lesbian. Judgments included outcomes of reports that showed detrimental effects of the absence of a father on children’s cognitive development. Another argument to deny custody was based on the idea that children having a lesbian mother would be teased, mobbed and/or ostracized by other children. As a consequence they would develop more psychological problems. Another argument to deny custody consisted of concern about the lesbian mothers, especially their child rearing behavior, the state of their mental health, and overall adjustment.

There was, however, a lack of empirical knowledge to base these judgments on. This lack of evidence prompted the first systematic studies on lesbian families. Initial research focused on the concerns raised in custody disputes, such as the development of children – especially their gender development and psychological adjustment – and the psychological health and well being of lesbian mothers [11]. In later studies of lesbian families with children born to the lesbian couple, focused on the same issues.

According to several authors [12,13], the implicit aim of these studies was to demonstrate that lesbian parents and their children are not different from heterosexual parents and

their children, and that lesbian parents are no less successful or less worthy than heterosexual parents are. Against this background the studies on lesbian parenting were undertaken.

3.2. Lesbian families with children born in a previous heterosexual relationship

Twenty-three of the articles describe the results of studies of lesbian families whose children were born in a previous heterosexual relationship (see Table 1). In some studies, the sample consisted of either single- or two-mother lesbian families. Other studies focus on a combination of the two types of families. In most studies, families were compared with families consisting of single heterosexual mothers. However, a few studies reported different comparisons. One study compared divorced lesbian mothers with divorced gay fathers [14], and another compared lesbian couples who had children with those who did not [15]. In most studies, the data were collected using more or less structured interviews and self-administered questionnaires. Some studies exposed children to standardized instruments other than questionnaires in order to obtain their responses. In none of the studies were observations used to collect data. Furthermore, findings are based on convenience samples. Respondents were recruited via gay and lesbian organizations or through snowball techniques. Most studies were restricted to relatively small samples. Most studies in this first category focused on the development of children, although some did include issues about parental functioning.

3.2.1. Child development

Studies investigating the development of children raised in lesbian families but born to the (lesbian) mother in a previous relationship mainly focus on sexual identity. In several small sample studies, three important aspects of sexual identity (gender identity, gender role behavior and sexual orientation) are examined in children of lesbian mothers and compared with the sexual identity aspects of children of single heterosexual mothers. Furthermore, studies examined differences between children raised in lesbian families but born to the (lesbian) mother in a previous relationship and children in heterosexual families on emotional/behavioral development, social relationships and cognitive functioning of the children.

3.2.1.1. Gender identity. Gender identity (self-identification as male/boy or female/girl) was investigated using interviews, projective techniques [16–20], or standardized questionnaires in case of older children [21]. None of these studies reported evidence were having difficulties with their gender identity.

3.2.1.2. Gender role behavior. Gender role behavior was investigated by interviewing mothers and children about, for

example, children's preferences for gender-typical activities. Green et al. reported no differences for boys on gender role behavior [18]. However, more daughters of lesbian mothers than those of heterosexual mothers preferred masculine activities and more often showed a preference for masculine occupations. However, in other studies no differences between children in the two kinds of families were found on gender role behavior [16,19–23]. Hoeffler examined lesbian and heterosexual mothers' toy preference for their children [22]. Results revealed that lesbian mothers more frequently preferred a mixture of typical toys for boys and girls than did heterosexual mothers. In a study of divorced lesbian mothers and divorced gay fathers [14], it was found that fathers were more likely to report encouraging typical toys for boys and girls compared to mothers.

3.2.1.3. Sexual orientation. Some studies investigated the sexual orientation (attraction to and choice of sexual partners) of adolescents and youngsters having a lesbian mother [17,19,21,24–27]. Although few children of lesbian mothers identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, the number of youngsters having a homosexual orientation did not differ from controls of youngsters having a heterosexual mother. However, it was found that the children of lesbian mothers were more likely to consider the possibility of a homosexual relationship [26,27,29].

3.2.1.4. Emotional/behavioral development, and social relationships. A variety of aspects of emotional and behavioral development of children from lesbian parents have been studied, such as their psychological adjustment [26,27] and self-concept [24]. It has been established that there are no differences between children of lesbian parents and those of heterosexual parents [16,26,27]. In addition, it seems that children do not have emotional problems or react negatively when they become fully aware of their mother's sexual orientation [30]. A few studies included aspects of children's peer relationships [19,26–28] and stigmatization [17,28,31]. As with gender development and emotional and behavioral development, studies on social relationships revealed no differences between the children of lesbian parents and those of heterosexual parents [19,21,26,27]. However, it was demonstrated that the children of lesbian mothers worried about the potential reactions of their peers [28,32], and minor incidents of teasing by peers were reported [17,28,32]. In the largest study to date on adolescent children of lesbian mothers, Gershon et al. examined the impact of societal factors on psychological well being [33]. The study shows that adolescents who perceive more stigmatization have lower self-esteem.

3.2.1.5. Cognitive functioning. Two studies [16,18] assessed children's cognitive functioning by using standardized tests. In these inquiries, no differences appeared

Table 1
 Overview of empirical studies on lesbian families with children born in a previous heterosexual relationship

Ref.	Main topics	Sample size	Age of children	Control group	Measures	Main results
[17]	Children's gender identity, gender role behavior, sexual orientation, stigmatization, marital attitudes	21 Children of non-single lesbian mothers	5–14	None	Structured interview, standardized tests	No atypical variation on gender identity, gender role behavior or sexual orientation, minor incidents of teasing
[34]	Self-concept of the mothers	34 Lesbian mothers	6–9	47 Heterosexual mothers	Standardized questionnaires	No differences between lesbian and heterosexual mothers on marital attitudes or self-concept
[31]	Stigmatization	21 Children of non-single lesbian mothers	9–26	None	Interviews	Children are worried about reactions from peers, however, no specific incidents were reported
[22]	Children's gender role behavior, mother's preference for gender-typed toys for their children	20 Single lesbian mothers and their children		20 Single heterosexual mothers and their children	Structured interview, standardized tests, standardized questionnaires	No differences between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual families on gender role behavior, lesbian mothers prefer more often a mixture of masculine and feminine toys for their children
[16]	Children's gender identity, gender role behavior, emotional functioning, cognitive functioning	20 Children of single lesbian mothers	5–12	20 Children of single heterosexual mothers	Semi-structured interview, standardized tests	No differences between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual families on gender identity, gender role behavior, emotional functioning or cognitive functioning
[36]	Child-orientation of mothers	34 Lesbian mothers		47 Heterosexual mothers	Standardized questionnaires, interviews	Lesbian mothers are more, child-oriented
[20]	Children's gender identity, gender role behavior, cognitive functioning	50 Children of lesbian mothers	3–11	35 Children of heterosexual mothers	Standardized tests (child), interviews with mother and child	No differences between children in lesbian and heterosexual families on gender identity, gender role behavior or cognitive functioning
[38]	Problems, experiences and support as coping strategy	43 Lesbian mothers		37 Single heterosexual mothers	Interviews	Families of origin, more than lesbian networks, relied on for support
[35]	Mothers' psychological health	25 Lesbian mothers		None	Standardized questionnaires, interviews	Psychological health of lesbian mothers within normal range

[19]	Children's gender identity, gender role behavior, sexual orientation, behavioral adjustment, emotional functioning and peer relationship, quality of parent-child relationship	37 Lesbian mothers (single and couples) and their children	5-17	38 Single heterosexual mothers	Structured interviews with mother and child separately, standardized questionnaires for mother and teacher (sexual orientation only for older children)	No differences between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual families on gender identity, gender role behavior, sexual orientation, peer relationship or quality of parent-child relationship Higher incidence of psychiatric problems among children of single heterosexual mothers Gay fathers report more often that they encouraged gender-typed toy play in comparison to lesbian women
[14]	Children's gender role behavior					No differences between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual families on gender identity, and emotional and cognitive functioning, girls in lesbian families more often prefer male-typed activities, clothes and occupations
[18]	Children's gender identity, gender role behavior, emotional functioning and cognitive functioning	56 Children of lesbian mothers (single and couples)	3-11	48 Single heterosexual mothers	Standardized questionnaires, structured interviews, standardized tests	No differences between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual families on self-concept and sexual orientation Lesbianism is a positive identity, support received from friends rather than from extended family
[24]	Children's self-concept and sexual orientation	18 Children of lesbian mothers	13-19	18 Children of heterosexual mothers	Standardized interviews and questionnaires	No differences between children of lesbian and of heterosexual mothers on gender identity, gender role behavior, sexual orientation and social adjustment
[37]	Identity and social support	31 Lesbian mothers	18-44	None	Interviews and questionnaires	Couples with children scored higher on relationship satisfaction
[21]	Children's gender identity, gender role behavior, sexual orientation, and social adjustment	33 Children of lesbian mothers		33 Children of heterosexual mothers	Standardized questionnaires	No differences in gender role behavior Children are worried about reactions from peers, no specific incidents were reported
[15]	Couple relationship satisfaction	47 Lesbian couples with children		32 Lesbian couples without children	Standardized questionnaires	Lack of support from lesbian social networks, families rely on social support from families of origin
[23]	Children's gender role behavior	26 Children of lesbian non-single mother		28 Children of single heterosexual mothers	Interviews with children and mothers	
[32]	Stigmatization	11 Children of lesbian mothers		None	Interviews	
[40]	Social networks and social support	45 Lesbian mothers		None	Interviews, questionnaires	

Table 1 (Continued)

Ref.	Main topics	Sample size	Age of children	Control group	Measures	Main results
[39]	Problems experiences and support as coping strategy	73 Lesbian mothers	17–35	62 Single heterosexual mothers	Interviews	Families of origin, more than lesbian networks, relied on for support
[25–27]	Family relationships, peers, psychological adjustment, sexual orientation, and stigmatization	25 Children of lesbian mothers (single and non-single)	17–35	21 Children of heterosexual mothers (single and non-single)	Semi-structured interviews, standardized questionnaires	No differences between children of lesbian and of heterosexual mothers on family relationships, peer relation, psychological adjustment and sexual orientation, a tendency for children with a lesbian mother to have been teased about their own sexual orientation
[33]	Self-esteem, perceived stigmatization	76 Children of lesbian mothers	11–18	None	Standardized questionnaires	Adolescents who experienced more stigmatization have lower self-esteem
[30]	How children deal towards others with sexual orientation of the mother openness	38 Lesbian mothers (28 born in a previous heterosexual relationship of the mother)	5–9	None	Standardized interviews	Children are aware of mother's sexual orientation, they developed this awareness gradually and did not react negatively on this

between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual families on intelligence scales.

3.2.2. Parental functioning

Most studies on parental functioning in lesbian families with children born in a previous heterosexual relationship examined two aspects, namely the mother's psychological health and her parenting skills. In some small sample studies, other aspects were investigated, such as partner relationship satisfaction and social support.

3.2.2.1. Mothers' psychological health. A number of studies have compared the overall mental health of lesbian mothers with that of heterosexual mothers. The results show that there are no differences in psychological health between lesbian mothers and divorced heterosexual mothers in self-concept [34,35], happiness [35] and overall adjustment and psychiatric status [19]. Furthermore, Rand et al. [35] showed that lesbian mothers who are open about their sexual orientation to their employer, ex-husband and children have fewer psychological health problems than do those who are not open about their sexual orientation or lifestyle.

3.2.2.2. Maternal skills. Miller et al. [36] investigated 34 lesbian and 47 heterosexual mothers, and reported that the former group was more child oriented in disciplinary techniques than the latter group was. Golombok et al. [19] compared the quality of the parent–child relationship measured using a standardized interview. No differences were established between the lesbian and the heterosexual mothers.

3.2.2.3. Other aspects. Koepke et al. [15] compared relationship satisfaction of lesbian couples having children with those who not having children. It appeared that couples having children were more satisfied with their partner relationship than were couples without children. With respect to social support, Levy's study (1989) [37] demonstrated that the 31 lesbian women interviewed especially received support from close networks of mostly lesbian friends. However, there have been conflicting findings on this matter. For example, it was found that families of origin are relied on more for support than lesbian networks are [38,39], and many lesbian parents were disillusioned by the lack of support from and acceptance by lesbian social networks [40].

3.3. Studies on planned lesbian families

Twenty-one of the articles reviewed describe the results of studies on planned lesbian families (see Table 2). In these studies data were collected by means of interviews, self-administered questionnaires and standardized test as well. One study was based on observations. Most studies included a control group of heterosexual families. However, in several

Table 2
Overview of empirical studies on planned lesbian families

Authors	Main topics	Sample size	Age of children	Control group	Measures	Main results
[47]	Children's gender identity, behavioral adjustment and parental role	Seven lesbian couples and their children	2–7	None	Structured interviews (mother and child), observations of children during the interviews	No specific problems with respect to behavioral adjustment or gender identity, strong attachment between child and both parents
[46]	Separation/individuation process	11 Children of lesbian couples	3–4	11 Children of heterosexual couples	Structured interviews and questionnaires (mothers), standardized test (children)	No differences or difficulties in separation/individuation process
[61]	Attitudes parents towards donor insemination	25 Lesbian couples	3 Month–7 years	25 Heterosexual couples (who have used AID)	Structured interviews	Heterosexual couples chose secrecy and saw AID as an opportunity to become a 'normal' family, lesbian couples intended to inform their children
[57]	Social mother's parental responsibility and child's birth context (i.e. born during a previous heterosexual relationship or to the lesbian couple)				Structured interviews	Partners in planned lesbian families took more responsibility
[45]	Children's gender role behavior, social competence, behavioral adjustment, and self-concept	37 Lesbian mothers (single and couples) and their children	4–9	None	Structured interviews (mothers), standardized questionnaires	No differences with respect to norms
[62]	Opinions from lesbian mothers about donor anonymity	50 Lesbian couples	1–2	None	Standardized	Most couples were positive about donor identity registration
[42]	Children's behavioral adjustment, social competence and cognitive functioning, and parental skills	15 Lesbian couples and children	3–8	No	Standardized questionnaires for parent and teacher, standardized test (child)	No differences between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual family, lesbian parents more aware of parental skills
[54]	Division of labor and partner's relationship satisfaction	26 Lesbian couples	4–9	None	Standardized questionnaires	Biological mothers more involved in childcare; relationship satisfaction is high
[60]	Transition to parenthood	84 Lesbian families (single and couples)		None	Semi-structured interviews	Children are carefully planned and the decision to have children is made with support of close friends, networks and family
[53]	Division of family tasks	34 Lesbian couples		None	Interviews	Most families have a equitable practices with a equal sharing
[41]	Children's gender role behavior and behavioral adjustment, quality of parent-child relationship, partner relationship satisfaction, paid employment	30 Lesbian couples	4–8	52 Heterosexual couples (26 AID and 26 children conventionally conceived)	Standardized questionnaires and standardized interviews	Greater mother-child interaction in lesbian families compared to single heterosexual mothers, no differences between groups on mother's psychological status and child outcomes
[55]	Quality of parent-child relationship, psychological status of mother, children's behavioral adjustment	30 Lesbian mother families (single and couples)	3–9	42 Single heterosexual mothers, 41 two-parent heterosexual families	Standardized questionnaires, structured interviews	Greater mother-child interaction in lesbian families compared to single heterosexual families, no differences on child outcomes or mental health status of mother

Table 2 (Continued)

Authors	Main topics	Sample size	Age of children	Control group	Measures	Main results
[49]	Division of family tasks, couples' relationship satisfaction	30 Lesbian couples	5–?	16 Heterosexual couples (AID)	Standardized questionnaires	Lesbian biological and social mothers shared childcare tasks more equally than heterosexual parents did, lesbian social mothers who are more satisfied with the division were also more satisfied with their relationships and reported fewer behavioral problems
[42]	Behavioral adjustment, parental stress	55 Lesbian mothers (single and couples) and their children	Mean: 7	25 Heterosexual couples (single and couples)	Standardized questionnaires for parents and teachers	Children's behavioral adjustment was unrelated to parental sexual orientation or the number of parents
[52]	Division of tasks, parent–child relationship	156 Lesbian mothers			Interviews	Most couples shared parenting equally
[58]	Maternal mental health, child's adjustment	37 Lesbian families (all couples)	4–9	No	Standardized questionnaires (mothers), structured interviews (child)	Assessment of children's adjustment were associated with measures of maternal health
[59]	Demographics, mental health	1119 Non-lesbian mothers, 187 lesbian mothers with children before coming out, 3131 after coming out			Standardized questionnaires	Lesbian mothers who gave birth before coming out have psychosocial health problems
[50]	Children's psychological well being, and teasing	24 Children of lesbian families (single and couples)	7–17	24 Heterosexual families (children conventional conceived; single and couples)	Standardized questionnaires (children, parents and teacher), and structured interviews with children	Children share the fact that they live in a two-mother family with close friends who react positively, for some peers it is hard to understand this family situation, children of are more prone to family-related teasing incidents, no differences on child outcomes as reported by parents, teachers indicate that children from lesbian families experience more attention problems
[43]	Parent–child relationship, parent's psychological status, children's gender role behavior, psychological adjustment and peer relations	39 Lesbian mother families (20 single and 19 couples)	5–10	134 Heterosexual families (60 single mother families and 74 couples)	Standardized questionnaires (children and parents) and structured interviews	No differences between both families on child outcomes, lesbian social mothers were less emotional involved with the children than fathers
[56]	Quality of parent–child relationship	24 Lesbian mother families (single and couples)	Mean: 10.4	24 Heterosexual families (single and couples)	Standardized questionnaires and structured interviews with children	No differences in parent–child relationship between lesbian biological and social mother, fathers are less involved in child activities than social mothers

studies single- and two-mother lesbian families were collapsed. In some studies the control group consisted of heterosexual families with either conventionally conceived children or children conceived with artificial insemination with donor sperm (AID). Other studies combined both types of heterosexual families.

The majority of studies have relied on convenience samples. Respondents were recruited via magazines, groups of gay and lesbian parents or gay and lesbian organizations, and snowball sampling. Exceptions are the studies by Brewaeys et al. [41], and Flaks et al. [42]. Both studies used samples of lesbian mother families with children conceived by sperm donor insemination through a fertility clinic. Another exception is the study of Golombok et al. [43] that was based on data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC). The ALSPAC is a population study of almost 14,000 mothers and their children beginning in pregnancy [44]. The ALSPAC-study was a unique opportunity for Golombok and her colleagues to study a representative sample of lesbian mother families. Additional advantages of the data set of the ALSPAC-study were that extensive background information was available on the families and that matched comparison groups of two-parent heterosexual families and single heterosexual mother families could easily be obtained because of the detailed information available on the parents' history of cohabiting relationships from the time of the child's birth. The aim of ALSPAC was thus to examine the quality of parent-child relationships and the socio-emotional and gender development of a representative sample of children with lesbian parents.

3.3.1. Development of children

Several studies examined topics related to the development of children, namely gender role behavior, emotional/social behavioral development, cognitive functioning, peer relationships, and stigmatization (e.g., being teased or bullied). In most studies more than one child outcome was examined. Furthermore, a Belgian follow-up study examined issues related to what children would like to know about their donor [41].

3.3.1.1. Gender role behavior. Patterson [45] examined gender role behavior of 37 children (aged 4–9) of lesbian mothers in an uncontrolled study using a standard child interview about preferences for gender role behavior (e.g., peer friendships, favorite toys, and games). She concluded that gender role preferences of children of lesbian mothers were within the expected range for children this age. In two other studies, gender role behavior was assessed using a validated questionnaire (Preschool Activity Inventory) filled out by the parents [41] or the children in a standard interview [43]. In neither study differences were reported between children in lesbian and children in heterosexual families. In one of the first inquiries on planned lesbian families, however, Steckel [46] did find differences between children

in both family types on gender role behavior. Steckel (1987) compared 11 preschool children of lesbian mothers with 11 same-age children of heterosexual couples, and found that the daughters of lesbian mothers tended to aspire non-traditional gender occupations more than the other children did.

3.3.1.2. Emotional/social behavioral development. Steckel [46] compared children of lesbian mothers with those of heterosexual couples on separation/individuation processes and aggression. Although no differences appeared between children in both kinds of families on separation/individuation, children of lesbian mothers were less likely to show aggressive behavior than children of heterosexual parents. Similar findings, based on interviews with seven lesbian mother families, were reported by McCandlish [47]. In several studies, results on emotional/social behavioral development were based on the Child Behavioral Checklist completed by mothers and teachers [41,45,47–49]. Chan et al. [48], and Flaks et al. [42] found no differences between children in lesbian and those in heterosexual families on emotional/social behavioral development. Patterson [45] demonstrated that children in lesbian families did not deviate from standards provided by the authors of the scale. Finally, Vanfraussen et al. [50] identified in a comparison of 24 planned lesbian families and 24 heterosexual families no differences on emotional/social development, as reported by the parents or the youngsters themselves. However, findings from the questionnaires filled in by their teachers indicated that the children in the former group display more attention problems than do those in the latter group.

3.3.1.3. Cognitive functioning. Flaks et al. [42] compared intelligence scores as measured by the WPPSI and the WISC-R, between children of lesbian couples and heterosexual couples. No differences were obtained.

3.3.1.4. Peer relationships. Vanfraussen et al. [50] reported that children in lesbian families were not teased more frequently than children in heterosexual families on matters such as clothing and physical appearance. However, family-related teasing incidents were mentioned only by the children in lesbian families. It appeared that children in lesbian families informed their peers spontaneously that they lived in a two-mother family. In general, close friends reacted positively. However, the children reported that it was hard for some peers to understand that someone has two mothers without having a father. Similar findings were reported in the National Lesbian Family Study of Gartrell et al. [51]. Golombok et al. [43] examined children's peer relationships in 39 lesbian and 134 heterosexual families. This study, where lesbian families were recruited through the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), was unique because findings on lesbian families were based on a non-convenience sample. No significant

differences emerged between children in lesbian families and those in heterosexual families on perceptions of peer interactions.

3.3.2. Parental functioning

The following topics with respect to parental functioning have been examined in studies of planned lesbian families: division of family tasks and employment, parental child rearing behavior (awareness of parental skills and quality of the parent–child relationship) and maternal psychological health. A few studies collected information about lesbian women's transition to parenthood and their opinion about using a sperm donor.

3.3.2.1. Division of family tasks and employment. Research on the division of family tasks shows that most lesbian couples with young children share child rearing [52–54], to a greater degree than heterosexual couples do [41,42]. Although lesbian parents share child rearing more equally than heterosexual parents, no differences emerged between lesbian and heterosexual parents on satisfaction with involvement in family tasks [42]. In these studies, division of time was measured primarily by means of questionnaires, that is, retrospectively. The questionnaires asked respondents to rate the distribution of time over several tasks.

3.3.2.2. Parental child rearing behavior. Only a few studies focused on parental child rearing behavior. McCandlish [47] reported in a study of seven lesbian families that both the biological and the social mother developed a strong attachment to the child. Other studies found indications that the non-biological mothers (the social mothers) in planned lesbian families demonstrated a higher quality of parent–child interaction [41,42,55] and parenting awareness skills [49] than do fathers in heterosexual families. In addition, in most studies it was observed that lesbian partners in the two-mother families experienced a higher level of synchronicity in parenting than did heterosexual partners. Thus in heterosexual families, mothers scored significantly higher than fathers on, for example, the quality of parent–child interaction. Within the lesbian families no differences emerged between the two parents. Vanfraussen et al. [56] showed that the quality of the parent–child relationship experienced by the social mother is comparable to that of the biological mother. Unlike fathers in heterosexual families, the lesbian social mother is equally involved in child activities as the lesbian biological mother is. These findings were based on parental self-reports from 24 lesbian families and 24 heterosexual families. In this study, the children were also interviewed about the parent–child relationship. Children in lesbian families experienced as much acceptance and authority from both parents as children in heterosexual families. Golombok et al. [43], however, found in the ALSPAC-study that social mothers were less likely to show raised levels of emotional involvement with their children than fathers in heterosexual

families. It should be mentioned that, although the children involved in this study were born to a lesbian couple, a large percentage of the lesbian social mothers were stepmothers. Hare and Richards [57] compared the parental role of social mothers in planned lesbian families with that of social mothers in lesbian families whose children were born in a heterosexual relationship. It turned out that social mothers in planned lesbian families took more parental responsibility.

3.3.2.3. Mothers' psychological health. No differences were found between the psychological health of lesbian mothers and that of heterosexual mothers [43]. Patterson [58] reported in study of 37 lesbian families that lesbian mothers who described their own psychological adjustment and self-esteem in positive terms were more likely to report that their children were developing well. Morris et al. [59] found that lesbians who gave birth to children before coming out were more likely to have had mental health counseling than were those who gave birth to children after coming out.

3.3.2.4. Transition to parenthood. Gartell et al. [60] collected descriptive information about 84 lesbian families. Their findings, which are based on interviews with mothers, show that children are highly desired and carefully planned. The women in this study made their decisions with the help of close friendship networks.

3.3.2.5. Opinion about donor insemination. Brewaeys et al. [61] interviewed 25 lesbian and 25 heterosexual parents who used an anonymous sperm donor. The interviews revealed different attitudes concerning the use of donor insemination. Heterosexual parents saw AID as an opportunity to become a 'normal' family, and most of them had decided not to tell their children or other people about the use of a donor. The lesbian parents, however, intended to inform their children that they had used a donor. In another study, Brewaeys et al. [62] investigated the opinion of lesbian mothers about the desirability of knowing the identity of the donor: 56% were positive about identity registration.

4. Discussion and conclusion

4.1. Discussion

Research on lesbian families only started about 25 years ago and proceeded two phases. To begin with, systematic studies of lesbian families focused on lesbian families with children who were born to the mother in a previous heterosexual relationship. Much of this early research was designed to evaluate judicial presumptions about the negative consequences for the psychological health and well being of the children in these families. More recently, however, studies included lesbian families whose children were born to the lesbian couple (planned lesbian families). Studies in the first phase were used to support lesbian parents

in custody cases, and those in the second phase to support lesbian women who were fighting for equal rights to adopt children or for access to donor insemination services [9,63].

In general, no differences emerged on aspects of child development and parental functioning between families consisting of a divorced lesbian mother and those with a divorced heterosexual mother. The findings of these early inquiries cannot be generalized to lesbian families with children raised by the lesbian mother from the start. Firstly, lesbian families with children originating from a heterosexual relationship differ from planned lesbian families, because the parental composition has changed and both parent and child have experienced divorce and coming out of the mother. In addition, most children in lesbian families who were born in a heterosexual couple lived with their father during the first years of life. Based on the assumption that early experiences may influence later development, these findings cannot be generalized to children born to lesbian couples [9,13].

Investigations in which planned lesbian families were compared with heterosexual families revealed no differences in child outcomes such as behavioral adjustment and gender identity. It is remarkable that the studies that examined parental behavior indicated that the parent–child relationship in planned lesbian families is better than it is in heterosexual families. In Bem's theory [64,65], androgynous individuals are postulated to be more effective parents. It might be that lesbian mothers are more androgynous individuals than heterosexual mothers and fathers. This might have a positive effect on their parenting skills. However, this assumption is not studied yet.

Furthermore, the reviewed studies on children in planned lesbian families showed that positive or negative consequences in psychological development of the child have not yet been established. It may be that increasing levels of warmth and parental involvement do not result in increasing levels of child well being once a certain threshold is passed [66,67]. On the other hand, the studies reviewed have shortcomings. For example, they did not take into account the divergent division of family tasks in planned lesbian families, or other aspects where lesbian families and heterosexual families might differ, such as desire to have children and division of tasks. Furthermore, most of the studies had relatively small samples. Samples were mainly recruited using one method, either through hospital fertility departments or through friendship networks or through gay and lesbian organizations. Most data consisted of self-reports (questionnaires or standardized interviews) by the parents. Another limitation is that in several studies, the sample comprised both single- and two-mother lesbian families. The control group of heterosexual parents was diverse. In some studies, children in lesbian families were compared with children in heterosexual families who had been conceived in a conventional way. In other studies a comparison was made with children in heterosexual families who had been conceived through donor insemination. To

date, researchers have only examined child development and parental functioning. They have not studied internal family processes – such as parenthood motives and desire, and parental experiences of parenthood and child rearing goals – or external relationships, such as the social support of these families in comparison to heterosexual families. Existing research considers planned lesbian families primarily as a homogenous group, rather than as a heterogeneous group with respect to, for example, experiences with negative attitudes towards their non-traditional family situation.

4.2. Conclusion

Research on lesbian families has failed to show processes in which lesbian and heterosexual families differ, for instance their desire and motivation to have children. Lesbian families and heterosexual families may differ in this respect because of their special circumstances. For lesbian women, for example, impregnation is a more complex process than it is for fertile heterosexual couples. Studying aspects in the family processes where lesbian and heterosexual families diverge would be a challenge for future research [12]. The next step would be to investigate whether these differences in family functioning result in differences in the parent–child relationship. Although family functioning in lesbian families might be just as varied, challenging, comforting, amusing and frustrating as it is in heterosexual families, it is the stigma of lesbianism and the lack of acknowledgement of lesbianism that makes their family life different [68]. Further examination of the stigmatization of these families would be another challenge for future research on planned lesbian families.

4.3. Practice implications

Professionals who are assisting lesbian couples in decision-making processes on parenthood should discuss with their clients the specific circumstances of becoming a parent and the pathways to parenthood for lesbian women. Interest groups of lesbian and gay parents should also inform 'future' lesbian parents about these issues. Professionals working in the area of family support should be informed about possible difficulties where lesbian parents and their children might be confronted with, such as experience with stigmatization and homophobia. Furthermore, specific knowledge about the differences and similarities between planned lesbian families and heterosexual families should be added in the teaching programs and textbooks in the education of health care providers.

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