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Adolescents in planned lesbian families in the U.S. and the Netherlands: Stigmatization, psychological adjustment, and resilience

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CHAPTER

1

General introduction



1 General introduction

1.1 Introduction

Since the 1950s, there have been major changes in family structures as the proportion of families comprising married heterosexual parents and their biological children has steadily declined (De Graaf, 2011; Martin & Kats, 2003; Sheppard, 2009). At the same time, the proportion of non-nuclear families—such as single-adult households, single-mother families, cohabiting heterosexual couples, cohabiting or married gay/lesbian couples, patchwork families, and foster families—has increased (De Graaf, 2011; Sheppard, 2009).

There were 74.5 million American children in 2011, and about 2–2.8 million of them were living with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transsexual parents (Movement Advancement Project, Family Equality Council, & Center for American Progress, 2011). Such data are not available for the Netherlands. However, it is known that in 2009, about 5000 Dutch same-sex female couples were raising one or more children (Bos & van Gelderen, 2010). Unfortunately, there is no specific additional information about whether these children were born in these relationships or conceived in previous heterosexual relationships (De Graaf, 2011).

Although the number of offspring living in same-sex headed households has increased, societal attitudes toward gay and lesbian parenting are mixed. For example, the results of the 2009 Gallup Poll showed that 54% of American respondents indicated that they believed that lesbians and gays should be allowed to adopt children, 44% felt that lesbians and gays should not be allowed to do so, and 2% had no opinion (Gallup Poll, 2009). In addition, the results of the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2007), a Europe-wide survey carried out for the European Commission, showed that the percentage of respondents who supported same-sex parent adoptions was higher in the Netherlands than in any other participating European country: 69% answered positively when asked to respond to the statement “Adoption of children should be authorized for homosexual couples throughout Europe.” The results of a Dutch survey held two years later revealed that although this percentage had increased, 27% of the participants were still unfavorably disposed toward the adoption of children by same-sex couples (Keuzenkamp, 2010).

The focus of this dissertation is on the psychological adjustment of American and Dutch adolescents who are born to families in which the mothers identified themselves as lesbians before they gave birth, so-called planned lesbian families (Bos, Van Balen, & Van, 2004; Golombok, 2000). It is important to note that these adolescents differ from those whose mothers identified as lesbian (“came out”) after they conceived a child within a heterosexual relationship, because the “planned” adolescents do not experience the

“coming out” of their mothers, or the divorce of their parents due to this “coming out” process.

1.2 Conceptual framework

Earlier studies on child and adolescent development were mainly conducted in laboratories and testing rooms. These studies provided important insights into specific developmental trajectories, but were less valuable to investigate the relation between various social contexts and the development of human beings in their everyday environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Scholte, 2005). To study fully the development of children, one must take into account individuals’ interactions with their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development is a model that provides a conceptual framework to understand which contextual factors could contribute to the development of children, adolescents, and adults.

The main point of Bronfenbrenner’s conceptual framework is that development does not occur solely within a developing human being, but *“takes place through processes of progressively more complex, reciprocal interactions between a bio psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment”* (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Bronfenbrenner divided the various settings in which people participate into four groups: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). With regard to adolescents, the microsystem includes all the settings a teenager inhabits on a daily basis, such as the home environment, the school environment, and his/her neighborhood. The relations between these various microsystems, such as the relation between parents and teachers, are called mesosystems. Exosystems are the systems that are linked to settings and social institutions of which adolescents are not part, but that have an important influence on their development. An example of an exosystem is the work situation of their parents. Finally, the cultural values, traditions, and laws of the society in which the adolescent lives are considered macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Cole, Cole, & Lightfoot, 2005).

In this dissertation, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model is used as a conceptual framework to study the psychological adjustment of adolescent offspring in lesbian families. It is thought that, because of the prevalent heterosexism in society, factors in the environment may play a more important role in their adjustment than in the case of other adolescents. Heterosexism can be described as *“... the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationship or community”* (Herek, 1995, p. 321).

As argued by Vynke and Julien (2007), heterosexism can work through the

microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. For example, the interactions that adolescents in lesbian families have with people outside their families, might be negatively colored due to the negative attitudes toward lesbian parenting held by the significant others. Mothers might have internalized homophobia, and it is possible that that has an influence on their parenting styles, which in turn might affect the psychological adjustment of their offspring. In the macrosystem, heterosexism is reflected in discriminatory laws, the use of heterosexist language, and the disaffirmation of culture-specific experiences (American Psychological Association, 2000).

1.3 Previous studies on offspring of lesbian mothers

There are currently three lines of research on lesbian mothers and their children (Bos, Van Balen, & Van den Boom, 2005; Johnson, 2012). The first consists of studies in which the children of lesbian mothers who were born in a previous heterosexual relationship were compared with children in heterosexual parent families. The second research line comprises studies in which children growing up in lesbian families from birth are compared with children in heterosexual parent families. A new trend has recently appeared in the scientific landscape, in which the focus is not on studying the differences and similarities between children in lesbian and heterosexual families, but on the diversity within planned lesbian families (Bos, in press; Johnson, 2012). All three lines of research focus on the development of the children, mostly with respect to psychological wellbeing and problem behavior.

1.3.1 The first line of research

The first studies on lesbian mothers and their children were conducted in the 1970s, when lesbian mothers gained public attention due to child custody court cases (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). In those days, in a number of countries, lesbian mothers were often denied custody because judges assumed that lesbian mothers would have a detrimental effect on the development of their children (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988; Golombok & Tasker, 1996). For example, it was argued that lesbian mothers would raise unhealthy children with impaired gender role development, and with a higher chance of becoming homosexual than their counterparts in heterosexual families. It was also thought that these children would be traumatized or stigmatized by society and their peers (Cantor, Cantor, Black, & Barrett, 2006). However, all these arguments were based on general assumptions, and not on empirical research (Falk, 1989). The aim of the first studies was to examine whether the grounds for the custody denials were valid. Overall, the results indicated that, although there was a scarcity of research, there were no differences between the children raised by lesbian mothers and their counterparts in heterosexual families (Bos et al., 2005; Falk, 1989; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

1.3.2 *The second line of research*

During the 1980s, donor insemination (DI) became available to lesbian women in various countries such as the U.S. and the Netherlands. As a result, the cohort of lesbian mothers was no longer predominantly made up of women who became mothers while in a heterosexual marriage or relationship (e.g., Johnson, 2012). The use of DI to achieve pregnancy led to a lesbian “baby boom” and the second line of research on the psychological development of these offspring. Studies that followed this second line found no evidence that the sexual orientation of the mothers has a negative impact on the psychological adjustment of the children (see for an overview: Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Most of these studies focused on young children, although some recent studies have focused on adolescent wellbeing (Gartrell & Bos, 2010; Golombok & Badger, 2010).

1.3.3 *The third line of research*

The studies that are part of the first and second lines of research primarily used comparison analyses to investigate whether the children of lesbian mothers develop similarly to their counterparts in heterosexual families. This has led to criticism from various researchers. For example, Clarke (2001) and other scholars, such as Stacey and Biblarz (2001), argued that by focusing mainly on similarities in the development of the children, these studies missed the opportunity to untangle differences between lesbian and heterosexual families. To obtain a complete view on lesbian families, it is necessary to untangle these differences, because lesbian families differ from their heterosexual counterparts due to the special circumstances surrounding lesbian families (Tasker, 2010).

In recent years, some investigators have started to focus on the differences within the group of children who are growing up in planned lesbian families (e.g., Gershon, Tschann, & Jemerin, 1999). With regard to diversity within planned lesbian families, various topics have been studied. For example, researchers have studied the rates of stigmatization experiences, and the relationship between stigmatization experiences and psychological adjustment. These studies showed that the young children of lesbian mothers had experienced stigmatization, and that these experiences were related to more behavioral problems (see Chapter 2 for an overview). The other topics that have been studied are donor status (known or as yet unknown donor) and the absence of male role figures (see for an overview: Bos, in press). Together, these studies form the third research tradition in the field of the psychological development of the offspring of lesbian mothers.

1.4 The current thesis

1.4.1 Aims

The second and the third research lines are followed in this thesis by performing between-group and within-group analyses to investigate how adolescents growing up in planned lesbian households have developed psychologically. The specific aim of this dissertation is to compare the psychological adjustment of adolescent girls and boys in planned lesbian families with their peers in heterosexual parent households. In addition, specific topics related to being born in a lesbian household, such as the adolescents' experiences with stigmatization and their reactions to such experiences (coping styles), are investigated. The relationship between donor status (having a known or unknown donor) and adolescent psychological wellbeing is also studied.

To achieve these aims, data are used from two longitudinal studies on lesbian families. Most chapters (Chapters 3–5) are based on data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS). The NLLFS was initiated in the 1980s by Dr. N. Gartrell to follow and report on a cohort of planned lesbian families with children conceived through DI. The NLLFS examines the social, psychological, and emotional development of the children, as well as the dynamics of planned lesbian families (e.g., Gartrell et al., 1996). Data have so far been collected in 5 waves—when the mothers were inseminating or pregnant (T1), and when the children were 2 years old (T2), 5 years old (T3), 10 years old (T4), and 17 years old (T5). For this thesis, data from T5 were used.

One chapter (Chapter 6) is based on data from the Dutch National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (DLLFS), which was initiated in 2000. It was the first study to focus on parental characteristics, child-rearing, and child development in a group of Dutch planned lesbian families. Data were collected in three waves, namely when the children were on average 5.8 years old (T1), 9.9 years old (T2), and 16.6 years old (T3). The present study focuses on data from T3.

1.4.2 Rationale

By fulfilling the research aims, this dissertation adds to the existing literature in various ways. First, all participants in the reported studies were adolescents. Thus far, most research conducted on planned lesbian families has focused on the development of young children. Adolescence is an important transitional life phase in which, along with biological and cognitive changes, the social context changes dramatically (Santrock, 2008). The beliefs and attitudes of individuals outside the family become increasingly important (Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008). It is also a time in which the offspring in same-sex-parent families develop a keener awareness of their minority status, which makes them more vulnerable to stigmatization (Baumrind, 1995). Second, adolescents themselves were the

sources of the data used here, whereas previous studies that focused on the psychological adjustment of adolescents in planned lesbian families mainly used mothers as sources (e.g., Gartrell & Bos, 2010). Because adolescents can be secretive as they strive for emotional autonomy from their parents (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002), adolescent self-reports offer a more nuanced window on their psychological functioning. Third, two studies in this dissertation focused on perceived quality of life and perceived life satisfaction, rather than psychological problems. Various researchers have argued that the mental health of youths consists not only of the absence of dysfunction, but also of optimal functioning in psychological domains (e.g., Kazdin, 1993). Up to now, studies have mainly assessed psychological adjustment by focusing on problem behavior. Finally, differences within the group of adolescents who are growing up in planned lesbian families are also investigated. This is in contrast with the majority of studies on adolescents in lesbian families, which mainly made comparisons between the psychological adjustment of adolescents with lesbian mothers and that of their counterparts with heterosexual parents. By focusing on diversity within the group of adolescents with lesbian mothers, social stressors related to being members of a minority group (lesbian families are considered a minority group), the effect of such social stressors on psychological adjustment, and the adolescent response towards these social stressors, can be studied. In sum, the studies reported in this dissertation are unique in different ways.

1.4.3 *Outline*

Chapter 2 reviews the historical and cultural milieu in which lesbians formed families in the late twentieth century, the psychosocial development of the children of lesbian mothers, and the influence of factors that protect them from the negative influence of homophobia. Chapter 3 reports on the perceived quality of life of the NLLFS adolescents, which is compared with that of a matched comparison group of adolescents with heterosexual parents. The possible effects of donor status, maternal relationship continuity, and self-reported stigmatization on NLLFS adolescent perceived quality of life were also studied. Chapter 4 describes a qualitative study that analyzed the experiences and coping strategies of the NLLFS adolescents when faced with stigmatization. Chapter 5 shows whether these stigmatization experiences are related to psychological health problems and life satisfaction, and if so, whether individual and interpersonal promotive factors can ameliorate these associations. In Chapter 6, the psychological adjustment of adolescents in Dutch planned lesbian families is compared with matched Dutch adolescents in heterosexual families. It is also shown whether experiences of stigmatization are associated with the psychological adjustment of adolescents with lesbian mothers. Chapter 7 presents a general conclusion and a discussion of the various studies.