

Experience of parenthood, couple relationship, social support, and child-rearing goals in planned lesbian mother families

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Background: The phenomenon of planned lesbian families (i.e., two-mother families in which the child was born to the lesbian relationship) is relatively new and very little research has been conducted among those families. The overall aim of this research was to examine whether planned lesbian mother families differ from heterosexual families on factors that are assumed to influence the parent–child relationship, such as experience of parenthood, child-rearing goals, couple relationship, and social support. **Method:** A hundred lesbian two-mother families were compared with 100 heterosexual families having naturally conceived children. A variety of measures were used to collect the data, including questionnaires and a diary of activities kept by the parents. **Results:** Lesbian parents are no less competent or more burdened than heterosexual parents. Both lesbian and heterosexual parents consider it important to develop qualities of independence in their child. However, ‘conformity’ as a child-rearing goal is less important to lesbian mothers. Furthermore, lesbian social mothers feel more often than fathers in heterosexual families that they must justify the quality of their parenthood. **Conclusion:** There are few differences between lesbian couples and heterosexual couples, except that lesbian mothers appear less attuned to traditional child-rearing goals and lesbian social mothers appear more to defend their position as mother. **Keywords:** Lesbian mothers, planned lesbian families, parental stress, relationship satisfaction, child-rearing goals.

The phenomenon of planned lesbian families (i.e., lesbians who have opted for motherhood within a lesbian relationship) is relatively new. Although the number of planned lesbian families in Western societies has been growing in recent years, little research has been reported about these families. The present article reports a study of planned lesbian families and compares them with heterosexual families on factors that are important because they are assumed to influence the parent–child relationship, such as experience of parenthood, child-rearing goals, couple relationship, and social support.

In the past, many women who were attracted to other women faced strong societal pressure to marry a man and have children. Same-sex feelings were repressed or expressed in a highly secretive way (Golombok, 2000; Slater, 1999). As a result of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, increasing numbers of lesbians have abandoned secrecy. Lesbian women who had become a parent in a heterosexual relationship came out of the closet and openly identified themselves as lesbian (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988). After a divorce, they continued to raise their children, either alone or with same-sex partners. As a result of the increasing tolerance of homosexuality, an increasing number of women are becoming parents after coming out as lesbians. Some of them are single mothers, while others are couples who planned their family together and share the parenting role (Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1994; Patterson & Chan, 1999).

The majority of research has been conducted in lesbian families in which the mother initially raised the child in a previous heterosexual relationship. Lesbian families with children originating from a heterosexual relationship differ from planned lesbian families. In the former families the parental composition has changed, and parent and child experience divorce and the coming out of the mother. The present investigation was unique in that it focused on a large group of planned lesbian families in order to eliminate the possible confounding aspects of parental divorce, re-parenting, and coming out.

The few studies on planned lesbian families address the potential negative consequences for the developing child. The most common concern was that children’s development with respect to sexual identity, mental health and social relationships would be impaired. Hence, researchers predominantly have posed questions concerning the developmental outcomes of children. Investigations in which planned lesbian families are compared with heterosexual families have, on the contrary, revealed no differences in child outcomes such as social competence, behavioural adjustment, and gender identity (Brewaeyns, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; McCandlish, 1987; Patterson, 1994; Patterson, 1995a, b; Steckel, 1987). Only a few studies have focused on parenting behaviour, and these found indications that non-biological mothers

in planned lesbian families have a superior quality of parent-child interaction (Brewaeyts et al., 1997; Golombok et al., 1997) and parenting awareness skills (Flaks et al., 1995) than do fathers in heterosexual families. Furthermore, in most studies a pattern is observed in which lesbian partners in the two-mother families enjoy a greater level of synchronicity in parenting than partners within heterosexual families (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Within heterosexual families, mothers scored significantly higher than fathers on, for example, quality of parent-child interaction, but within the lesbian mother families there was no difference between the two parents (Brewaeyts et al., 1997). No research has been done on whether planned lesbian families and heterosexual families differ from each other on factors that are assumed to influence the parent-child relationship. The purpose of the present research was to expand what is known about planned lesbian families regarding such factors as experience of parenthood, couple relationship, social support, and child-rearing goals.

The effects of social demographic characteristics on parenting experience and family outcomes are widely investigated in heterosexual families; however, this has not previously been studied in lesbian families. In a more exploratory way, we therefore also examined in the present study the effect of social demographic characteristics on parenting experience and family outcomes in lesbian families.

In the present study, planned lesbian families were compared with heterosexual families with naturally conceived children. They were not compared with infertile heterosexual couples who had a child conceived with the help of new reproductive techniques, because the effect of the experience of infertility on these couples is associated with a greater awareness of the importance of parenthood, and a stronger involvement in parenting (Van Balen & Trimbos-Kemper, 1995; Van Balen, 1996). Infertile heterosexual couples, particularly those who sought medical help to get pregnant, may also be very committed to parenthood (Golombok, Cook, Bish, & Murray, 1995; Van Balen, 1998).

In the Netherlands, where our study was carried out, there is a relatively positive climate regarding homosexuality compared to other Western countries (Sandfort, 1998; Waaldijk, 1993; Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998). On the other hand, less favourable attitudes are observed in the Netherlands regarding lesbian and gay parenthood (van de Meerendonk & Scheepers, *in press*). Public opinion in the Netherlands still holds that a traditional family consisting of a heterosexual father and mother is the ideal environment in which to raise children, in contrast to a lesbian or gay family (van der Avort, Cuyvers, & de Hoog, 1996; van de Meerendonk & Scheepers, *in press*). Based on the idea that being a member of a differently valued minority group affects the lives of the members of

that group (Goffman, 1986), various expectations are formulated regarding lesbian parenthood (Gillespie, 1999). As a consequence of the more negative public evaluation of same-sex families, compared to mixed-sex families, lesbian mothers are thought to experience child-rearing as extraordinarily difficult, resulting in parenting stress (Clarke, 2002). They also feel under more pressure than heterosexual parents to justify the quality of their parenthood (Morningstar, 1999; Rothuizen, 2001; Slater, 1999). Lesbian mothers must cope with negative public opinion, which might have negative effects on the quality of the relationship (Weeks, Heaply, & Donovan, 2001). Although the number of planned lesbian families has been increasing in recent years, parents in lesbian two-headed families are still pioneers in society and it might be that the needs of lesbian parents as regards child-rearing support and child-rearing guidance are higher. Because of the non-traditional family situation and the minority situation, lesbian mothers might also find other aspects important in the development of their children. Such aspects as experiences of parenthood, quality of the relationship, social support or child-rearing goals are important because they are assumed to influence the parent-child relationship (Cochran & Niegro, 1995; Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Meyers, 1999); however, the few empirical studies on planned lesbian families have generally not included those aspects. Most of the studies on planned lesbian families employed relatively small samples, mainly recruited through one method: hospital fertility departments or friendship networks. The present study avoids these pitfalls by examining a large sample of planned lesbian families – recruited using several methods – on factors that are assumed to influence the parent-child relationship, and comparing them with heterosexual families.

Method

Research procedure

Participation in the study for both lesbian and heterosexual families was based on the following criteria: (1) the children have been raised in the family of origin from birth; (2) the age of the target child ranges from four to eight years; and (3) both parents are Dutch.

To ensure that the sample of lesbian families would not be selective and unrepresentative, lesbian mother families were recruited using several methods. The lesbian mother group was recruited first through the Medical Centre for Birth Control (MCBC), a centre providing artificial insemination services to clients regardless of sexual orientation or relationship status. The MCBC selected from its patients' files those two-mother families where the mother had attended the clinic between 1992 and 1996 and who met our criteria for participation. Furthermore, lesbian families were selected from a mailing list of an interest group for gay

and lesbian parents. This interest group is part of the most important and largest organisation for gay and lesbians in the Netherlands (the NVIH/COC). Most people on the mailing list aren't members of this organisation. In addition, lesbian families were selected with the help of individuals with expertise in the area of gay and lesbian parenting (i.e., counsellors working in the field of providing social work services to gay and lesbian persons). Finally, an advertisement was placed in a lesbian magazine.

All selected lesbian families received an invitation to participate in the study, a letter giving information about the study, a reply-card and a stamped return envelope. Families willing to participate returned the reply card to the university.

The comparison group of heterosexual families was randomly drawn from the population register of two cities. Heterosexual families were also contracted with the help of schools and referrals from members of the lesbian family group. All selected heterosexual families received an invitation to participate similar to the one sent to the lesbian families and according to the same procedure. By means of the reply card we also obtained information on social demographic variables. It was thus possible to match the heterosexual families with the lesbian mother families on degree of urbanisation, number of children, and age and gender of target child.

Response rate

A letter of invitation was sent to 178 lesbian families. Of these, 43 were contacted through the MCBC, 60 through the interest group and 75 through experts in the area of gay and lesbian parenting. The total response rate for the lesbian family group was 99 (55.6%), for the medical centre 18 (41.9%), for the interest group 47 (78.3%) and for the experts 34 (45.3%). Only one family responded to the advertisement.

All in all, 1172 heterosexual families received a letter of invitation (the population registration offices: 600 families; schools: 510 families; referrals from participants of the lesbian family group: 62). Of these invitations, 251 (21.4%) were returned. For the population registration offices the response rate was 104 (17.3%), for schools 123 (24.1%) and for referrals from participants in the lesbian family group 24 (38.7%). From this pool of 251 heterosexual families, 100 were selected using our matching criteria (population registration offices: 42 families; schools: 49 families; and referrals from participants in the lesbian family group: 9 families).

Differences were found between the overall response rates among the lesbian family group and that among the heterosexual family group, that is, 55.6% and 21.4% respectively. The non-response rate among heterosexual families was expected to be higher than among lesbian families, based on the findings of previous research (Brewaeys, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, Van Steirteghem, & Devroey, 1993; Jacob, Klock, & Maier, 1999; Wendland, Byrn, & Hill, 1996). Curiosity about the way lesbian parents function might have been an important reason for those couples to participate. The overall response rate among heterosexual families was normal for this research method (Brinkman, 2000; De Leeuw & De Heer, 2002).

Instruments

Experiences of parenthood. The NVOS – a Dutch questionnaire (Robbroeckx & Wels, 1989) for the measurement of family stress – was used to measure parental stress. Two dimensions were selected: parental burden (feeling burdened by the child) and parental competence (being able to handle the child). Examples of statements are 'Others (my partner) get too little attention because of my child' (parental burden) and 'I feel I'm slowly losing my grip on my child' (parental competence). For both scales the items have response categories ranging from one (fully disagree) to five (fully agree). Wels and Robbroeckx (1991) judged the validity, internal consistency and stability of these subscales as good. In the present study Cronbach's alpha for parental burden was good ($\alpha = .81$) and for parental competence was just sufficient ($\alpha = .53$).

For this study, a new scale was developed to measure the extent to which parents believe that they must justify the quality of their parenthood. This parental justification scale was based on theoretical considerations (Morningstar, 1999; Rothuizen, 2001; Slater, 1999), and on the results of small qualitative studies on lesbian motherhood (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999; Seyda & Herrera, 1998, Warmerdam & Gort, 1998). The scale consists of four items (for example: 'In anticipation of negative reactions from others, I give my children more attention than other parents do'). Each item is scored on a 6-point scale, ranging from one (fully disagree) to six (fully agree). Cronbach's alpha on this scale was .68.

Quality of the couple relationship. Two dimensions of the quality of the relationship were measured: satisfaction with the relationship and satisfaction with the partner as co-parent. The Marital Satisfaction Scale (Gerris et al., 1993) was used to provide a global assessment of couple relationship satisfaction. This scale is a 7-item questionnaire designed to measure spouses' overall satisfaction with their heterosexual marriage. It can also be used for lesbian couples. An example of a statement is: 'If I had to make a choice again I would choose the same partner'. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on a 6-point scale, ranging from one (completely disagree) to six (completely agree). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .86. A subscale of the Parental Stress Index (Abidin, 1983; Groenendaal, Dekovic, & Noom, 1996) was used to measure the degree of satisfaction with the partner as a co-parent. This scale comprises 7 items (e.g., 'Since we've had children, my partner has been less supportive of me than I expected'). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on a 6-point scale, ranging from one (fully disagree) to six (fully agree). The reliability of this scale found in the present study was .87.

Social support. The VOO – a Dutch questionnaire for the measurement of support with respect to child-rearing practices – was used to measure how often respondents used informal social support (6 items) and formal social support (8 items) (Dekovic, Gerrits, Groenendaal, & Noom, 1996). Informal social support comprises support from friends, neighbours and relatives; formal social support is that provided by official

authorities (e.g., schoolteachers) or the media. Items have response categories ranging from one (never) to six (everyday). The reliability on the two scales was .66 and .68, respectively.

With respect to the use of both formal and informal social support, we also used two scales from the VOO to measure how satisfied respondents were with the support they received. The items had response categories ranging from one (dissatisfied) to five (satisfied). The reliability of these two scales found in the present study was good: satisfaction with informal social support (6 items), $\alpha = .88$; satisfaction with formal social support (8 items), $\alpha = .83$.

Child-rearing goals. The Child-rearing Goals List developed by Vermulst, Gerris, and Siebenheller (1987) was used to measure child-rearing goals. This list consists of 45 items, each of which describes a quality or personality trait that parents want their children to develop. The list is a Q-sort method list; however, in the present study this list was included in the set of questionnaires. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each item on a 4-point scale. The items have response categories ranging from one (completely not important) to four (very important). The subscale 'Conformity' (development of qualities that are valued as important in our society) consists of 23 items (e.g., 'self-control'). The reliability of this scale was good: $\alpha = .67$. The subscale 'Autonomy' (development of qualities that emphasise independence) consists of 12 items and their internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$). The subscale 'Development of a social personality' turned out to be unreliable and was omitted from the study.

In addition, data concerning *social demographic characteristics* (e.g., age and education) were also collected by means of questionnaires. Finally, how parents divided their time between work and family tasks was established by means of a structured diary record of activities. The diaries were divided into 15-minute time units and contained a checklist of activities, such as 'employment' for regular work and 'family tasks' for caring or helping children or preparing food. Respondents were asked to record the predominant activity performed in each time unit and to record events as soon as they occurred. Both parents completed the diary separately in an average week (Monday to Sunday) from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Although data collection with diaries has its limitations (e.g., during the activities interruptions occur, activities overlap or an event is forgotten) (Ås, 1978; Kalfs, 1993), the diary format is highly valid and reliable (Kalfs, 1993). For each parent separately, an Employment-Family Time Index was computed to measure the amount of time spent on work and that spent on family tasks: hours per week of employment / (hours per week of employment + household activities + childcare).

Subjects

Among lesbian families, the biological mother of the target child was defined as the lesbian biological mother. The other mother was designated as the lesbian

social mother. In all, 100 lesbian mother families and 100 heterosexual parent families participated in this study. Both groups were successfully matched on degree of urbanisation and age and gender of the target child. Most families in our study – both lesbian mother families and heterosexual parent families – lived in suburban areas (91% vs. 94%). The mean age of the target children at the time of our survey did not differ significantly between the lesbian mother group and the heterosexual parent group ($M = 5.8$ years, $SD = 1.37$ vs. $M = 6.1$ years, $SD = 1.21$); nor did the proportion of boys and girls (52 boys and 48 girls in the lesbian mother group, 51 boys and 49 girls in the heterosexual parent group). Significant differences between the lesbian mother families and the heterosexual parent families were found for number of children. The mean number of children in lesbian families ($M = 1.87$, $SD = .51$) is significantly lower than in heterosexual families ($M = 2.03$, $SD = .48$); however, the differences are very small, $F(1, 1.28) = 5.26$, $p < .05$.

No significant differences were found between the groups concerning the educational level of the parents, and the majority of parents in both groups were well educated (e.g., 75.5% of all respondents studied at a higher professional or academic level). There were, however, significant differences between the mean age of lesbian biological mothers ($M = 40.8$, $SD = 3.22$) and that of heterosexual mothers ($M = 39.0$, $SD = 4.33$), $F(1, 167.75) = 11.54$, $p < .001$, and between the mean age of lesbian social mothers ($M = 42.1$, $SD = 5.90$) and that of heterosexual fathers ($M = 40.6$, $SD = 4.45$), $F(1, 108.40) = 3.98$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, there were no significant differences between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers on the Employment-Family Time Index ($M = .37$, $SD = .18$ vs. $M = .33$, $SD = .16$). In hours per week, lesbian biological mothers spent on average 26.93 ($SD = 13.08$) on employment, and 44.94 ($SD = 13.08$) on family tasks. Heterosexual mothers spent 24.00 hours per week ($SD = 12.23$) and 46.77 hours per week ($SD = 13.08$) on employment and family tasks, respectively. A significant difference, however, was revealed on this index between lesbian social mothers ($M = .40$, $SD = .18$) and heterosexual fathers ($M = .60$, $SD = .13$): the former spent more time on family tasks and less time on employment outside the home than the latter did, $F(1, 1.98) = 80.44$, $p < .001$. Lesbian social mothers spent on average 29.41 hours ($SD = 13.96$) and 42.15 hours ($SD = 10.15$) per week on employment and family tasks, respectively. The division of heterosexual fathers' hours per week on employment and family tasks was 43.11 ($SD = 10.7$) and 29.13 ($SD = 9.69$), respectively. Finally, the lesbian and heterosexual families had relationships of similar duration: the lesbian couples had been together for an average of 14.9 years ($SD = 3.87$), the heterosexual couples for an average of 14.8 years ($SD = 4.89$).

Data analysis

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were performed for all dependent variables to examine significant differences between the lesbian and heterosexual families. When Wilks' criterion was significant, a series

of one-way ANOVAs were carried out in order to compare: (1) lesbian biological mothers with heterosexual mothers, and (2) lesbian biological social mothers with heterosexual fathers.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, lesbian and heterosexual families differ from each other on parental age, the number of children in the family and the division of professional and childcare activities. These characteristics are more or less related to lesbian parenthood. Lesbian parents were expected to be significantly older than heterosexual parents. They start to consider having children at an older age than heterosexuals do, conception requires much forethought, and donor insemination takes more time compared to getting pregnant by natural conception (Botchan et al., 2001). We also had reason to believe that in lesbian families the division of professional employment, practical childcare activities and household activities between both parents would be more equal than in heterosexual families (Brewaeys et al., 1997). As a consequence of these differences between lesbian and heterosexual families, we decided that when one-way ANOVAs showed a significant difference between lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents, initial group comparison was followed by analysis of variance with parental age, the number of children and the Employment-Family Time Index as covariates.

Paired *t*-tests were conducted to examine significant differences between biological mothers and social mothers in lesbian families and mothers and fathers in heterosexual families.

To access the relationship between the studied variables and the social demographic characteristics of the lesbian parent (e.g., parental age, education and Employment-Family Time Index), correlation coefficients (Pearson's Product-Moment correlation *r*) were calculated between these variables separately for lesbian biological mothers and lesbian social mothers.

Results

Experience of parenthood, couple relationship, social support, and child-rearing goals

Multivariate analysis of variance was performed to analyse whether there were any significant differences between lesbian and heterosexual families on all dependent variables. The results of the Wilks' criterion reflected a significant effect, $F(11, 160) = 3.80, p < .001$.

Experience of parenthood. No significant differences occurred between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers on parental competence, parental burden and parental justification. Nor were significant differences obtained for parental competence and parental burden between lesbian social mothers on the one hand and heterosexual fathers on the other. There was, however, a significant difference between the rating of lesbian social mothers and heterosexual fathers on the parental justification scale, $F(1, 2.62) = 4.51, p < .05$. Lesbian social mothers reported significantly more often than fathers that they felt the need to justify the quality of their parenthood (see Table 1). This effect remained significant after controlling for parental age, number of children and Employment-Family Time Index, $F(1, 2.45) = 4.02, p < .05$.

Within the lesbian family group, there were no significant differences between biological mothers and social mothers on parental competence, parental burden and parental justification (experience of parenthood). Also, within heterosexual families, both parents reported no significant differences on how they experience parenthood.

Table 1 Parental experience of parenthood, couple relationship, social support, and childrearing goals

	Lesbian families				Heterosexual families				Lesbian biological mother versus heterosexual mothers	Lesbian social mother versus heterosexual fathers
	Biological mothers		Social mothers		Mothers		Fathers			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
<i>Parental experience of parenthood</i>										
Parental competence	4.44	.39	4.47	.38	4.42	.46	4.53	.33	.07	1.45
Parental burden	2.03	.78	2.05	.81	1.99	.80	1.88	.64	.13	2.73
Parental justification	1.83	.78	1.88	.93	1.76	.75	1.64	.60	.45	4.51*
<i>Quality of couple relationship</i>										
Relationship satisfaction	5.07	.83	5.17	.86	4.88	.98	4.88	1.00	2.19	4.70*
Satisfaction partner as co-parent	4.51	.70	4.54	.75	4.28	.79	4.67	.74	4.57*	.21
<i>Social support</i>										
Use of informal support	2.18	.54	2.14	.59	2.28	.70	1.97	.65	1.28	3.63
Use of formal support	1.66	.37	1.63	.37	1.66	.42	1.55	.43	.00	2.15
Satisfaction informal support	3.98	.73	4.13	.72	4.11	.73	3.85	.85	1.50	5.68**
Satisfaction formal support	3.84	.64	3.92	.66	3.99	.67	3.84	.77	2.61	.60
<i>Child rearing goals</i>										
Conformity	2.38	.18	2.42	.20	2.49	.22	2.50	.19	14.08***	8.20**
Autonomy	2.42	.28	2.41	.28	2.38	.28	2.40	.28	1.17	.14

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Furthermore, for lesbian biological mothers and lesbian social mothers we analysed whether the social demographic characteristics of lesbian parents showed a significant relation with parental competence, parental burden or parental justification. There appeared to be no significant correlations for lesbian social mothers. However, for lesbian biological mothers there appeared to be a significant correlation with Employment – Family Time Index and parental burden ($r = -20$, $p < .05$). Lesbian biological mothers, who more often felt burdened by the child, were likely to spend more time on family tasks.

Quality of couple relationship. No significant difference emerged between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers on couple relationship satisfaction. There was a significant difference, however, between how lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers experience the relationship with the partner as co-parent, $F(1, 2.55) = 4.57$, $p < .05$. Lesbian biological mothers were more satisfied with their partner as a co-parent than heterosexual mothers (see Table 1). After controlling for parent's age, number of children and Employment–Family Time Index, however, this effect was not significant. Although the differences between lesbian biological parents and heterosexual mothers disappeared when the covariates were added, none of the covariates appeared to have a significant contribution.

In comparison to heterosexual fathers, lesbian social mothers reported that they were significantly more satisfied with their couple relationship, $F(1, 3.32) = 4.70$, $p < .05$. This difference between lesbian social mothers and heterosexual fathers, however, was not significant after including age of the parent, number of children and amount of time spent on work and that spent on family tasks. Although the significant effect disappeared after controlling for the covariates, none of them had a significant contribution. With respect to satisfaction with the partner as a co-parent, no significant difference appeared between lesbian social mothers and heterosexual fathers (see Table 1).

Within the group of lesbian mother families, satisfaction with the couple's relationship did not differ significantly between the biological mother and the social mother, nor was there a significant difference on how satisfied they were with their partner as a co-parent. Within the group of heterosexual families, no significant difference emerged between fathers and mothers on satisfaction with the couple's relationship, but mothers were significantly less satisfied with the partner as co-parent than fathers (paired samples t -test: $df = 97$, $t = 4.84$, $p < .001$).

Among lesbian biological mothers, no significant correlations appeared between social demographic characteristics on the one hand and couple rela-

tionship satisfaction and satisfaction with the partner as co-parent on the other. For lesbian social mothers, there was a negative correlation between education and satisfaction with the partner as co-parent ($r = -31$, $p < .01$). Lesbian social mothers with a higher level of education were less satisfied with their partner as co-parent.

Social support. No significant differences were found between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers in their overall use of informal social support and formal social support in their child-rearing. Lesbian social mothers and heterosexual fathers did not differ from each other in overall use of social support, either formal or informal.

Furthermore, there were no significant differences between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers regarding satisfaction with available informal and formal social support. Lesbian social mothers, however, were significantly more satisfied than heterosexual fathers with the support provided by friends, neighbours and relatives (informal social support), $F(1, 3.53) = 5.68$, $p < .05$. After controlling for parent's age, number of children and Employment–Family Time Index, this relationship was not significant. The significant effect disappeared after controlling for the covariates; however, it appeared that none of them made a significant contribution in the analyses of covariates. Lesbian social mothers and heterosexual fathers did not differ significantly from each other on satisfaction with formal social support (see Table 1).

Within the group of lesbian families, the overall use of social support, both informal and formal, did not differ significantly between biological mothers and social mothers. This is in contrast to differences within the group of heterosexual families: significantly more mothers than fathers reported using informal social support with respect to child-rearing (paired samples t -test: $df = 97$, $t = 3.30$, $p < .001$).

Within the lesbian families, biological mothers and social mothers did not differ significantly from each other with respect to how satisfied they were with the available formal and informal social support. Mothers in heterosexual families, however, were more satisfied with the available informal social support than fathers were (paired samples t -test: $df = 97$, $t = 2.36$, $p < .05$). Parents in heterosexual families did not significantly differ from each other on satisfaction with formal social support.

For lesbian biological mothers, there appeared to be a significant correlation between age of the parent and use of informal social support ($r = -23$, $p < .05$). Younger lesbian biological mothers more often reported using support from friends and neighbours. For lesbian social mothers, the level of education was significantly correlated with the use of informal social support ($r = .25$, $p < .05$). Lesbian social mothers

with a higher level of education reported more often using social support from, for example, friends.

Child-rearing goals. Univariate analyses of variances between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers on conformity showed that the former found it significantly less important that their child develops qualities that are important in our society, such as ambition or self-control, than the latter mothers did, $F(1, 574) = 14.08, p < .001$. Analysis of covariance controlling for age of the parent, number of children and Employment–Family Time Index showed that this relationship was still significant, $F(1, 38) = 9.52, p < .01$. Lesbian social mothers also reported finding these qualities significantly less important in the development of their child than heterosexual fathers did, $F(1, 314) = 8.20, p < .01$; this difference remained significant after controlling for age of the parent, number of children and Employment–Family Time Index, $F(1, 29) = 7.32, p < .01$.

There was no significant difference between lesbian biological mothers and heterosexual mothers on the one hand, and between lesbian social mothers and heterosexual fathers on the other, on the scale that measured how important parents find the development of qualities emphasising the child's independence (autonomy)(see Table 1).

Furthermore, within the group of lesbian families, no significant differences were found between biological mothers and social mothers on child-rearing goals; within heterosexual families, there were no significant differences between parents.

There appeared to be no correlations between social demographic variables and child-rearing goals for lesbian biological mothers; however, significant correlations were found for lesbian social mothers. Younger lesbian social mothers and lesbian social mothers with a higher level of education were likely to find 'conformity' less important ($r = .21, p < .05$ and $r = -.21, p < .05$) and autonomy more important ($r = .32, p < .001$).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate differences between planned lesbian families and heterosexual families with naturally conceived children, on several factors that are assumed to influence the parent–child relationship. To do so, we investigated 100 planned lesbian families and compared them with 100 heterosexual families on experiences of parenthood, quality of couple relationship, social support, and child-rearing goals.

No confirmation was found in this study of the expectation that as a consequence of negative evaluation of lesbian parenthood, lesbian mothers experience child-rearing as more difficult. The findings revealed that the lesbian mothers' experience of

parental stress (parental burden and parental incompetence) was comparable to that of heterosexual parents. In addition, lesbian and heterosexual parents were comparable on the use of social support and on emphasising independence in the development of their child. One-way ANOVAs showed differences between lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents on relationship satisfaction and satisfaction with informal support. Apparently, the decision to pursue a socially less accepted lifestyle where lesbians made the decision to become mothers within a lesbian relationship implies an investment in a stable relationship (Giddens, 1992). This is in contrast to findings on gay couples without children. According to Meyer (1989), the lack of support gay couples received from their social network led to less stability in gay relationships. Significant differences found in our study between lesbian parents and heterosexual parents on family outcomes disappeared when covariates were added; however, none of the covariates were shown to be significant. One should take into account that the controlling variables – parental age, the division between family tasks and employment and, to a lesser extent the number of children – are more or less related to lesbian parenthood.

One should also bear in mind that the socio-economic status (SES) of the planned lesbian families involved in this study is relatively high. On the other hand, several studies have shown that lesbian women tend to be more highly educated (Steckel, 1987; McCandlish, 1987; Patterson, 1994; Flaks et al., 1995; Sandfort, 1998; Johnson, Wadsworth, Wellings, & Field, 1994). Nevertheless, it seems that children from low-SES lesbian mother families are more likely than those from middle-class lesbian mother families to experience peer stigma about issues related to the lesbian identity of the mother (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents differed remarkably on parental justification, and on the child-rearing goal of 'conformity'. That lesbian social mothers feel the need to justify the quality of their parenthood is probably due to the unique societal pressure these mothers feel they are under to be visible as a mother (De Kanter, 1996; Muzio, 1999; Nekkebroeck & Brewaeys, 2002). Some prudence is required regarding these findings, because the instrument used to measure parents' belief that they must justify the quality of their parenthood was a new scale developed for this study. Furthermore, lesbian parents scored low on the child-rearing goal of 'conformity'. Previous inquiries also found that lesbians feel more comfortable discussing sexuality with their children, accepting their children's sexuality whatever it may be, and that teenage children of lesbians communicate their feelings more openly (Golombok, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). In addition, several authors suggest that children brought up by lesbian parents may benefit from their

personal experience of diversity and may therefore be less restricted (Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Weeks et al., 2001).

Parents in lesbian families showed a high level of synchronicity. There were no differences between lesbian biological mothers and lesbian social mothers with regard to the time they spent on childcare activities and household activities, and on the factors assumed to influence the parent-child relationship, such as parental stress or parental justification. In heterosexual families, however, mothers spent more time than fathers on family tasks and mothers were less satisfied with their partner as co-parent, which may enhance their need for social support from neighbours and friends. Lesbian couples may be able to operate more easily on the basis of equality because partners in lesbian couples create their relationships without reference to traditional roles and come to their relationships with a history of being socialised into the same gender role (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 2001).

Finally, few correlations between social demographic variables and parenting experience and family outcomes were found to be significant for lesbian mothers. A pattern was found that highly educated lesbian social mothers make more frequent use of informal social support. Furthermore, highly educated lesbian social mothers were less concerned with conformity in their child-rearing goals and also found child independence to be more important.

A limitation of the present study – a limitation also found in other studies – is the difference in response rate between the lesbian family group and the heterosexual family group, which was lower in the latter group (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Jacob et al., 1999; Wendland et al., 1996). All similarities and differences described in this study are based on self-reports by the parents. Although valid instruments were used, there is a possibility that an objective observer might come to a different conclusion. However, we conclude that lesbian and heterosexual families have much in common, except that both family types differ from each other on parental justification and child-rearing goals.

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