Two mothers and a donor: exploration of children's family concepts in lesbian households

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Abstract

Background: Although children from lesbian families appear to make a distinction between a residential father and a donor, defining these two concepts seems to be a challenge. They need to appeal to more familiar concepts such as the hetero-normative concept of 'mother' to give a definition of the unfamiliar concepts they are confronted with.

Methods: The study is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with 6 children (9-10 years old) from lesbian families, all of which have been conceived using anonymous sperm donation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Results: Two findings stand out. First, in defining the concepts of biological and non-biological mother, both mothers were described as equal parents. No difference was attached by the children to the mothers' position as a parent. Second, the concepts 'non-biological mother' and 'donor' were defined by looking at the hetero-normative concepts of 'mummy' and 'daddy'. To define the non-biological mother, both a 'mummy' and a 'daddy' were used as a reference. To define the donor concept, often references were made to a daddy. This comparison with a 'daddy' turned out to be complex due to the conflict between the role as a progenitor and the lack of a social relationship. The lack of language surrounding this concept turned out to be difficult.

Wider implications of the findings: This study illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of children's experiences and perceptions when dealing with issues related to genetic and social parenthood.

Key words: Qualitative, children, lesbian families, family concept, donor, gamete donation.

Introduction

Plenty of research has been done focusing on the social and psychological development of children in lesbian families, often in comparison to children growing up in heterosexual families (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010; Brewaeys, 2001). These studies have shown that there are no significant differences between both groups with regard to child outcomes such as psychological adjustment, development during primary school, and academic achievements. They have also shown that children growing up in lesbian families function well in terms of family identity and relationships (Tasker, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2010).

Next to these outcome studies, other research has been focusing specifically on the experiences of the children growing up in lesbian families. Several studies concentrated on their experiences regarding the donor conception. Topics such as disclosure, the image they have of and their curiosity towards the donor were investigated before (Jadva et al., 2010; Vanfraussen, et al., 2001, 2002). Vanfraussen et al. (2001) suggested that especially boys were interested in information about 'who the donor is'. The difference between sexes may be due to the family structure, characterized by the absence of a father, and their search for a male role model. However, Vanfraussen et al. (2003) showed that the wish for information about the donor was mainly

driven by curiosity and was not linked to the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Defining family concepts

Recent research showed that children have a complex image of family, not so much focusing on biological ties and the nuclear family, but centring around affective ties (Anyan and Pryor, 2002; Rigg and Pryor, 2007). When it comes to research on how children from lesbian families talk about family structure, two 'new' – in contrast to children growing up in heterosexual families -elements come up: the absence of a father and the existence of a donor. In some families, the donor is an abstract concept, whereas in other families, this donor takes a prominent place in the family. Tasker and Granville (2006) asked children raised in lesbian families with a known donor how they defined their network of family relationships. One of the findings was that children had a clear idea about the differences between a donor and a father, although some donors clearly had the role of a father in some of the families. Malmquist et al. (2014) focused specifically on the children's father concept. They showed that these children described difficulties defining the father concept, one of the reasons being that they did not have a father. When children described the concept, they explained that a father was basically someone like a mother. Particularly interesting is that similar research with children from heterosexual families showed different results, namely that mothers were associated with caring and nurturing characteristics, while fathers were linked to sports and play (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2009). Perlesz et al. (2006) conducted a multigenerational qualitative study towards how children, their lesbian parents and their grandparents defined family. They found that during the development of the child, the understanding of and view on their parents being lesbian, changed, as well as how they handled information about their family structure in their social environment. Fear for being bullied leads them to be more careful in explaining their family structure to peers: being more conscious of the hetero-normative society leads to more secrecy about their 'not normal' family.

This study aims to contribute to the literature on family and parental concepts held by children growing up in lesbian families. We explore in detail the concepts the children construct regarding the three actors involved in the building of their families: the biological mother, the non-biological mother and the donor. In comparison with children growing up in heterosexual families, these children have two uncommon concepts they need to understand and define, both for themselves and for their social environment: a non-biological mother and a donor. Because these concepts are absent in the majority of families, it is particularly interesting to study the definition of these concepts in this particular family type.

Method

Participants

This study is part of a larger research project with multiple focuses related to the participants' thoughts on and experiences with different aspects of (parenthood after) donor conception. For this particular sub study, ten lesbian couples who had children via anonymous sperm donation were interviewed. After each interview, the parents were asked whether their child (aged 7 to 10 years) would also want to participate in the study and whether the parents themselves would agree to this interview. Six couples agreed to let their child(ren) participate. As a result, seven children were recruited. There were six boys (aged 9 to 10), and one girl (aged 7). The interview with the girl was eventually not included in the analysis because it contained little information. All children were aware of the anonymous donor conception. An informed consent form was signed by both mothers before the interview took place. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Ghent University Hospital.

The aim of qualitative research and in-depth interviews is to generate new insights into the experiences and understanding of the participants, and consequently to get insight into processes of a specific sample in a specific context. The views of six children therefore offer valuable information that can be meaningful and applicable to other contexts.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were performed by either H.V.P. or V.P. All children were interviewed at their home. The interview duration ranged from 20 to 50 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Anonymity was ensured by replacing all the names of persons and places by either pseudonyms or a single letter.

The semi-structured interview consisted of three main successive themes: the family, the conception story and the donor. To start, an elicitation technique

inspired by the Apple Tree Family, a technique for mapping children's view on family relationships, was used (Tasker and Granville, 2011). The results of this exercise were used further on in the interview as a tool for defining the concepts of biological and non-biological mother and as a point of reference for further questions about the child's family. At the start of the second part of the interview, an apple for the donor was offered only to children who had mentioned a donor in their conception story. The children were asked to put the apple somewhere on the sheet (the tree, or any other place). Based on what the children chose to do with this apple, the concept was discussed.

Analysis

The data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis consisted of a phased process, starting with familiarizing with the data and memo writing. The transcripts were then screened with the research question in mind and relevant text units were coded inductively. From these codes, higher-level codes and themes were derived. During this process, a team of auditors (second, third and last author) was invited to challenge the initial codes and themes via alternatives and counterexamples (Hill et al., 1997). The structure of the themes was written down in an analysis report which was extensively examined and discussed by the auditor team. Through discussions, the final structure of the themes was agreed upon. To improve data analysis, discussions and intensive trainings with the whole team were organised in order to learn from each other and to become aware of alternative viewpoints on the matter.

Findings

Four themes were identified offering insight into the children's concepts of the biological mother, non-biological mother and donor. The first theme focuses on the children's experience of their particular family structure within a heterosexual society. The three following themes focus on each actor involved in the building of their family.

A two-mother-family in a heterosexual society

The first theme is related to the societal context in which children's parental concepts are shaped. Already at a young age, these children learned that their family structure was not common. Especially in the school environment, the children were confronted with questions about their particular family structure. Peers had wondered about the reason for having two mothers instead of a mother and a father, and had asked the child to explain this.

> Tom: Uhm, yes, sometimes they ask if it's true that I have two mums. Yeah, they think it's a bit strange. And, uhm, most of them don't understand how that's even possible.

By describing it as weird and asking for a reason, the peers presented Tom's family structure as deviating from the norm.

Not only the presence of two mothers, also the method of conception was a source of unclarity for peers. Ben, for instance, described that peers asked him questions such as '*But, how come you were born?*', since there was no father. Again, such questions made the family structure look different from 'how it should be'. Nonetheless, he dealt with this by explaining how his family was formed.

In Timothy's case, simply looking at his social environment made him aware that his family structure was different.

> I used to think that, uhm, it wasn't normal to have a dad and a mummy (…) so I thought that gays and lesbians were normal, not the hetero's.
> Int: When did that change? When did you stop thinking that?
> Timothy: Well, once I got older, I started thinking about it, because everyone I knew had a mummy and a dad. So I wondered whether I was really normal. But I am normal, a normal boy, who also comes from a mummy and a dad.

The confrontation with the heterosexual social context made him change his idea about what a family was supposed to look like: suddenly his family structure was not normal anymore. He then seemed to find 'normality' in the way he was conceived. He transformed his family structure in a certain way to a heterosexual one by focusing on his biological mother and donor, and called the latter 'daddy'. By labeling the donor as a daddy, his family structure was like everyone else's. Whether he actually saw the donor as a daddy did not matter at this point. Labeling the donor as daddy was more convenient because it made his family look more normal.

All children mentioned that at some point their social environment confronted them with their two-mother-household. Nevertheless, this did not make them question their two mothers as parents. On the contrary, the exercise with the apple tree at the start of the interview made it clear that both mothers were firmly mentioned together and put in the tree together. No distinction was made between the mothers, they were presented as equal and without considering biological or social relationships.

The meaning and role of the biological mother

When they were asked to define 'biological mother', all children mentioned two characteristics: caring for the child and a biological/causal link. With the biological/causal link we mean that children referred to the idea that 'I came out of her belly' or 'she made me'. It was not always clear whether the children talked about a biological (gestational) link, a genetic link or some kind of causal link. Some children addressed both characteristics, other children mentioned only one. Four children described the caring element in the sense that the biological mother was someone who takes care of you, prepares food, buys clothes and watches over you. In this regard, Kenny defined the biological mother as '*a personal babysitter.*' Ben addressed the element of care and what can probably be seen as a causal link between him and this mother:

> *Yes, uhm, a mummy means that, uhm, actually she should take care of you, because you can't exist without parents, and without a mummy. […] But, uhm, yeah, the mummy takes care of you, makes your meal, changes your diapers when you're little, … she made you really, it is important, a mummy.*

Three children defined the biological mother in terms of the presence of a biological link. Timothy did this in a descriptive way by saying '*So actually, your mummy made you.* 'The two other children described this in a normative way. The link was considered unique, since they did not share this with their other mother. This made her special. According to Walter, for instance, it gave the mother the status of 'real mother'. He described his biological mother as '*my real mummy, the one who gave birth to me.*' By defining the biological mother in this particular way, a difference between the two mothers was created: when there is a 'real mother', then there must also be someone that is not real, or less real. This description was in contrast to his initial parental concept. In the exercise with the apple tree, he had presented the parents as equal. Also for Kenny, both parental concepts were not so clear. On the one hand, the biological mother was characterized by 'care', which also the case for the non-biological mother – suggesting similarity – and on the other hand, the biological mother was someone special because of the biological link, which suggested a distinction.

The meaning and role of the non-biological mother

The biological mother as a reference. While the concept of the biological mother was defined in itself, the concept of the non-biological mother was defined by all children through a comparison with another parental concept. Three children explained the role and meaning of the non-biological mother by comparing her to the biological mother. For Tom and Timothy, the non-biological mother was similar to the biological mother because she also took care of the children.

> *Tom: Uhm, yeah, that's a bit the same [as a biological mother]…but yes. A different name, and she usually does different things, like other work. And yeah, she also takes care of us all the time.*

Walter, too, defined non-biological motherhood in reference to a biological mother. However, he defined a non-biological mother through the difference with a biological mother, namely the biological link. The non-biological mother was defined as the wife of his mother, and as someone who had adopted him and had promised to take care of him. The non-biological mother was seen as someone who equally provided care, but who had a different 'status'. The status of real mother was reserved for the person with a biological link (see previous theme). Again, this contrasted with his initial presentation during the exercise with the apple tree where both parents were described as equal.

> *Walter: and mom, that's actually the wife of mummy. And yes… she, uhm, promised by law or something that she would take care of me too. […] But she's, uhm, actually not my real mummy, but yeah.*

The father as a reference. Four children used the father figure as a reference to explain the concept of the non-biological mother. They justified the comparison by pointing out similar traits between both actors, which were often common characteristics of what fathers are and do in their opinion. Kenny, for instance, explained that he sometimes labeled his non-biological mother with 'daddy' because '*she's also really funny, making jokes all the time. Like most dads.*' He added that he did not say this out loud, which could indicate that he did not want his parents to hear it because he expected it to be hurtful or inappropriate. Ben also mentioned humour as a basis for comparison between the non-biological mother and a father. Apart from that, he considered his non-biological mother as someone like a daddy on the grounds of caretaking.

The meaning and role of the donor: a complex issue

Five children were aware of the man 'behind the seeds'. The other child, Travis, did not include the

donor in his conception story. Consequently, no questions about the donor concept were asked in this interview. Only Walter mentioned the donor spontaneously from the beginning, during the exercise with the apple tree. All other children were offered an apple for the donor later on in the interview after they had mentioned him during their explanation of the conception story.

For the five children who were aware of the involvement of a donor, the donor concept appeared to be complex. Offering an apple for the donor created a possibility to talk about who the donor was and what his position in the family structure was. The place of this apple differed among the children: some children placed the apple next to the apple of the parents, other children made a clear distinction between the top of the tree (where well-known family members were placed) and the trunk (where the donor was placed). However, they had one thing in common in their explanation: they all made a comparison with daddies. Most of the children also used the term 'daddy' to refer to the donor. Nonetheless, it was clear that the children were searching for the right terminology. One child talked about '*that mister*', indicating a distant relationship in combination with a polite way of putting it. All other children used the term 'daddy', but showed discomfort in using this specific term. Tom, for instance, initially named the donor 'daddy', but immediately corrected himself and explained that the donor was not a *real* daddy. The donor was differentiated from those men who met the conditions to receive the label of daddy in society.

> Int: Do you know where, from whom the seed came, where it came from?
> Tom: Yes, from my daddy. I mean, not my real dad. Somebody gives his little seed to the doctor. And then, uhm, yes, that's with a syringe. I think. And that's a bit the same then.

Two elements were indicated by the children which explained their difficulties with the terminology, and by extension, the position of the donor in the family structure. On the one hand, donors and daddies have a kind of causal or biological relationship with the child in common. On the other hand, donors do not have a social relationship with the child while fathers have. For most children, the combination of these two elements made it difficult not only to label the donor, but also to understand the donor concept and to point out where in the family structure the donor should be positioned. This became particularly clear when the children were asked to place an apple for the donor.

> Tom: Hm, he belongs a bit out of the tree.

> Int: […] Okay, so the mister should be more here, next to the sheet of the paper. And why is that?
> Tom: Well, I don't know him. It is a kind of family, I guess, but yeah, I never see him, I don't know him.
> Int: So, what do you mean when you say 'a kind of family'?
> Tom: Well, it's a kind of, uhm, well, we don't know him, but he is a small part. Without him, my sister and I wouldn't be here.

On the one hand, the donor was thought of as some sort of family member, but on the other hand, the lack of a social relationship excluded him from the family structure. However, not including him at all was impossible, because without the donor, Tom would not exist. This idea of the donor as a progenitor was also mentioned by Ben. For him, the donor was not the same as a daddy because he was unknown. Nonetheless, the donor deserved a special place in the apple tree.

> Ben: Yeah, the ground is hard and colder. The mister really doesn't belong there. And in the crest it's nice and warm. And to me, life has the same meaning, that's life, from, our trunk. And, he could also have a place near the roots, […] it is because of the roots that the tree can live and, it is because of him that I live, and my sister too, and our family.

Timothy too placed the donor in the trunk of the tree. Both children created the same metaphor to show that the donor was a necessary condition for them and their family to exist, but that this did not make him a member of the family.

For Timothy and Kenny, the social relationship predominated in attributing a role to the donor and therefore, he was not considered part of the family. For both children, if there were to be asocial relationship with the donor, that would change his status. They explained that, if the donor were known and present in their lives, he would be a daddy. The combination of the two elements would make the donor a father. For Kenny, the donor would then be positioned next to his biological and non-biological mother. He said that if the donor were present, then '*that would be a daddy. Then I would have a mummy, daddy and mom.*' Timothy added an extra condition. He said: '*If my mom wasn't here, then of course I would call him daddy. But now I would just name him by his first name.*'

For Walter, the lack of a social relationship did not matter. For him, although the donor lived in another country and was not known, he was his daddy. First of all, he introduced him spontaneously in the interview as his daddy. While he was explaining having a biological and non-biological mother, he added '*And, then there's my daddy. But I don't know his name. Because we never knew him, he lives in Denmark.*' When Walter was asked to

place the apple for the donor, he put it next to the apples for his mothers. He explained this action simply by saying that the donor was his father. Two reasons for this comparison could be found. First, it appeared that for Walter, the fact that the donor had a biological relationship with him, was reason enough to consider the donor as a daddy. A second explanation can be found in the birth story that his mothers had told him. For his mothers, it was a conscious choice to introduce (and label) the donor as a daddy. It is likely that this contributed to Walter's reasoning and word use.

Discussion

Defining family-specific concepts through hetero-normative references

As part of a heterosexual society, these children had been confronted with the exceptionality of their particular family structure. Especially peers tend to ask questions about the two mothers and the conception method (Vanfraussen et al., 2002). The children were urged to think about the meaning and role of the three actors who were involved in the creation of their family, and particularly about who the non-biological mother and donor was, and how these actors related to other family members. The first striking element in the definition of these two concepts was that all children referred to the hetero-normative mother and father concept. One interpretation is that the children looked at society (particularly at their peers) and found no immediate model for their non-biological mother or donor. In contrast to the concepts typical for their family structure, the concepts 'mummy' and 'daddy' were clear: everywhere they looked, they found examples of mothers and fathers. To explain their own family concepts, they fell back on these two more familiar concepts. The non-biological mother was defined by referring to either what is known as a 'mother' in society, or by referring to the father concept. Malmquist et al. (2014) found that children from lesbian families defined fathers as similar to mothers. One of the explanations the authors gave to these particular descriptions was that such children's images of daddies were vague. Therefore, they used "a more familiar maternity discourse" (p. 130) in order to define a 'daddy'. This could also be the case for the non-biological mother: the more familiar mother-father discourse was used to define their non-biological mother.

In a similar way to the non-biological mother concept, the donor was defined through a comparison with the more familiar concept of 'daddy'. For defining, naming and positioning the donor in the family structure, the father concept appeared to be the closest concept to make a comparison with. The donor namely gave seeds to one of the mothers, and the child himself was the result. In this regard, a donor is very similar to a father. However, in this comparison, difficulties arise. The lack of a social relationship is a major difference with the father concept, a difference that is not present in the definition for the non-biological mother. The findings show that the children have difficulties with defining the concept exactly because of this opposition between 'progenitor' and 'unknown'. This difficulty is also reflected in the search for a correct label for the donor: the term 'daddy' was frequently used, but most children were clearly uncomfortable using this word because it did not cover the subject. Some of them alternated this term with 'that mister' or 'that man'. Also Malmquist et al. (2014) found a complex balance between the use of the word 'daddy' and other names such as 'seed daddy' or 'that man'. The authors concluded that the labeling by the parents probably has a huge influence on the image the children create of the donor. However, most children's parents in our study did not label the donor as 'daddy'. They used terms such as 'that friendly man', or 'the man who gave seeds'. The children themselves labelled the donor as 'daddy', which indicates again that 'daddy' for them seems the best available term to describe what a donor is.

Another striking element in the definition of the donor was mentioned by two children. The donor was differentiated from a father because of the current lack of a social relationship. However, if the donor were to be known or present, his status would change from 'unknown man' to 'daddy'. This confirms the fear of lesbian parents about using a known or identifiable donor. The parents' fear is that a known donor would become the second parent, and that the non-biological mother would come only third in line (Nordqvist, 2012). Two children mentioned that the position of the donor would change when he would be known. This finding indicates that there might be some ground for this fear.

Equality and difference between the two mothers

Most children saw both mothers as equal parents, without considering the difference in biological ties. They all made this initially clear by mentioning both parents together during the exercise with the apple tree. Some children confirmed this equality during their descriptions of the non-biological mother by describing her role in terms of what a biological mother was. In emphasizing similar

characteristics and activities, equality was installed. Also the definitions of the non-biological mother in terms of a daddy can be indicative of considering the two parents as equal. A father is generally seen as a parent equal to a mother. Another explanation could be that children from lesbian families do not gender differentiate between parents (Malmquist et al., 2014). The distinction between a father, a biological mother and a non-biological mother might not be as strict in their experience. In this regard, it should be kept in mind that all findings are the result of specific questions that were asked during the interview. The distinctions between the mothers might be artificial, because they were asked about the concepts separately and in a specific order. The concept of a biological mother was discussed first, and the concept of the non-biological mother was explored afterwards. Nonetheless, by focusing on the concepts separately, valuable information was shared that would not have been discussed without this specific focus. These findings show that, aside of similarities (which were presented as self-evident), differences between the mothers were also mentioned. Two children mentioned their mothers together in the exercise with the apple tree, and presented them as 'my parents'. During the discussion of the individual concepts, however, distinctions arose. For Kenny, equality and difference in parenting status went hand in hand. The parents were equal, although the biological link made the mother special. Walter made a clear distinction during his discussion of the individual concepts. He described the mother with a biological link as the *real* mother, and the non-biological mother as the mother's wife who promised to take care of him. The biological link was therefore seen as an unconditional right to parenthood, and as intrinsically more valuable than adoption. His story might be interpreted as contradictory and confusing. However, it is not uncommon for children to say one thing at a certain point and something else at a later moment. People's reasoning about blood ties is complex and rarely follow watertight logical reasoning (Bestard, 2009). In this regard, it is perfectly possible that Walter and Kenny believe that their parents are equal as well as different, and that the biological link is simultaneously special and irrelevant.

Limitations and clinical implications

Similar to the remark about the structure and sequence of the questions about the mothers, it should be noted that the information gained about the donor in relation to the exercise with the apple tree resulted from offering an apple for the donor.

The findings are also based on the opinions of boys only. Gender differences may translate into differences in understanding kinships roles with girls generally having a more sophisticated view on relationships (Borduin et al., 1990). Lastly, although rich information was found in these data, we should keep in mind that this study involved six children.

Considering the clinical implications, this study shows that children in this specific family context might find it difficult to define their donor and to situate him in or outside their family structure. Confusion may arise about the difference between the donor and a father, and explaining or comparing the donor in terms of a daddy adds to this difficulty. It might be relevant for counsellors to adopt this insight in their counselling session with the parents about disclosure to the child.

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