Finnish Children's Descriptions of Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents

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Abstract

Comparisons of children's perceptions of lesbian mothers to children's perceptions of heterosexual parents are limited. To investigate whether children's descriptions of their parents vary by family type (lesbian versus heterosexual) and biological relatedness, we interviewed 29 Finnish children raised by lesbian mothers or heterosexual parents. Parents also completed surveys about division of childcare responsibilities and on six parenting dimensions. We found no systematic differences between the parent types. A clustering of parents based on the descriptions indicated neither family type, parent gender, or biological relatedness systematically explained the variation in children's descriptions of parents. Implications of our findings are discussed.

Keywords: children, same-sex parenting, gender, biological relatedness

Children's Descriptions of Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents

Children's view of their parents can affect children's development. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), children's mental representation of significant others in their internal working model can be a mediator between actual parenting practices and child outcomes (Bugental & Johnston, 2000). Despite empirical evidence on the discrepancy between the children's view on their parents and parents' self-perception (Bögels & Melick, 2004; Gaylord, Kitzmann, & Coleman, 2003; Tein, Roosa & Michaels, 1994), research has largely focused on parental report of their own parenting roles, leaving gaps in our understanding of how children perceive and describe their parents (e.g., Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Fincham, Beach, Arias, & Brody, 1998).

Children's view of their parents is filtered by social categories such as gender. Infants prefer adult faces of the same gender as their primary caregiver at three to four months (Quinn, Yahr, Kuhn, Slater, & Pascalis, 2002), distinguish female and male faces by seven months (Cornell, 1974; Fagan, 1976), and match female voices to female faces by nine months (Poulin-Dubois, Serbin, Kenyon, & Derbyshire, 1994). Children also notice personality traits in others that are congruent with their gender schemas (Bem, 1981), which stem from their parents' and other individuals' gender-typed behavior. Children growing up in a gender-typed context are thus more likely to pay selective attention to different traits in men and women, including their own parents, and to describe them accordingly. In the current study, we explored possible differences in how children describe their parents in families headed by two females (i.e., lesbian parents) and families headed by one female and one male (i.e., heterosexual parents).

Parent Gender, Parental Characteristics, and Parent-Child Interactions

Children's gender schemas are—at least partly—influenced by their parents' behaviors: Gendered division of household responsibilities and parent-child interactions

allow children to make first-hand observations of male and female roles (Croft, Schmader, Block, & Baron, 2014). In heterosexual couples, mothers tend to spend more time with their children and have greater overall parental responsibility than fathers (Craig, 2006; Raley, Bianchi & Wang, 2012). Mothers provide more physical care than fathers and engage more in interactive forms of care, such as reading or talking, although interactive forms of care constitute a greater proportion the time fathers spend with their children (Craig, 2006). Such differences in parental involvement are consistent across cultures and vary only slightly by division of financial responsibilities or ideology (Craig & Mullan, 2011). Reviewing studies on differences between mothers and fathers in different family constellations, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) found that mothers have better parenting awareness skills and develop closer relationships with their children than fathers, regardless of their biological relatedness to the children.

Evidence on father-mother differences does not necessarily mean that parental practices are intrinsically gendered; rather, Tasker (2010) argued that research has disproportionally focused on differences between mothers and fathers and overlooked their similarities. Fagan, Day, Lamb, and Cabrera (2014) also note that there is insufficient evidence to support the notion of essential differences between mothers and fathers in terms of parenting, and that fathers' and the mothers' roles have become increasingly similar. Indeed, mothers and fathers report equal preparedness to invest in their children (Antfolk, Karlsson, Söderlund, & Szala, 2017) and single parents often take over parenting tasks typically performed by the other gender (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Cross-cultural evidence further suggests that mothers are warmer and more accepting in some cultures whereas fathers are warmer in others (Putnick et al., 2012). Taken together, findings of these studies suggest that gendered parental roles are at least partly learned and not fully intrinsic.

The increasing acceptance of same-sex parents around the world provides new opportunities to study how parental gender and sexuality influence family life and child development. A growing body of research has investigated parenting practices of same-sex fathers and mothers, as well as the well-being of the children growing up with same-sex parents (Allen & Burrell, 1996, 2002; Cowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008; Fedewa, Black, & Ahn, 2015). Compared to heterosexual parents, lesbian mothers have, for example, been found to engage in more imaginative play with the child and use less corporal punishment (Golombok et al., 2003). Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, and Golombok (1997) also found that lesbian households have a more even division of parenting and work responsibilities. These different arrangements of childcare labor might provide alternative models of parental and gender roles for the children growing up in such households.

Same-sex households also allow us to examine the interactions between parental gender and biological relatedness in parental characteristics and parent-child activities¹. Lesbian-mother households often have one biological mother and one non-biological mother (Lofquist, 2011). Because parents in general invest more in their biological children than nonrelated children (Antfolk et al. 2017) and the absence of a biological link between a mother and child has been indicated to have adverse effects on the parent-child relationship in families formed through reproductive donation (Golombok, Ilioi, Blake, Roman, & Jadvá, 2017), comparisons between biological and non-biological mothers in lesbian families are of interest. Differences in parental involvement have indeed been found, in that the biological mothers in lesbian households tend to shoulder greater caretaking responsibilities compared to non-biological mothers (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998). Nevertheless, non-biological mothers in lesbian families spend more time with their children than fathers in heterosexual families (Brewaeys et al., 1997). Compared to heterosexual

¹ This possibility would also be provided by children in families headed by gay fathers. Unfortunately, our attempts to also recruit such families were unsuccessful.

parents, same-sex parents view the relationship with their children more positively, although the children's perception of the quality of parent-child relationship does not differ by family type (Crowl et al., 2008). In interviews with non-biological lesbian parents, around one-third of participants described their parenting identity as being a mother, and another third described themselves as a father rather than a mother. The final third expressed that their parenting was best described as a mix of mother and father (Padavic & Butterfield, 2011). These findings indicate that the role of the non-biological mother in lesbian families might differ from the roles of biological mothers and fathers, and consequently children might view them differently.

Children's Perceptions of Their Parents: Heterosexual and Lesbian Households

In line with the gender division of household roles and activities in heterosexual families, children of heterosexual families often describe their fathers and their mothers in different ways. Children typically describe mothers as more affectionate and closer than fathers (e.g., Starrels, 1994). Children also attribute more negative behaviors (e.g., privilege removal, commands, and ignoring) to mothers compared to fathers (e.g., Hazzard et al., 1983). Adult children recall their mothers to have been more involved than their fathers in terms of expressive and instrumental care (Antfolk & Sjölund, 2018), but their fathers to be the ones earning income (Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008). Interestingly, Milkie and colleagues (1997) noted that children evaluate their mothers' as more involved than average mothers, but compare their fathers with other less involved fathers. Hence, children do not compare fathers and mothers to each other but against other parents, thus using different standards for each parent. In this study, mothers were more often described in instrumental and emotional terms than fathers, whereas fathers were valued for recreational activities. Mothers were also more often described as allowing the child to do something or providing something, whereas activities with fathers were described as being engaged in mutually. These observations are in

line with heterosexual parents' own reports about parenting roles. Brannen, Heptinstall, and Bhopal (2000) studied children's views of their parents through a combination of a questionnaire and interviews. In their responses to questionnaire items, children in different family constellations (i.e., single-mother families and two-parent heterosexual families) expressed egalitarian views of how household tasks should be divided between mothers and fathers. When interviewed about parents, children indicated that both parents were equally important, but described mothers as more present and as offering more instrumental forms of care, and described fathers more in terms of special qualities, skills and activities.

Children's descriptions of their parents might not always be an accurate report of the parents' behaviors. In Nixon, Greene, and Hogan's (2006) interview study, younger children had gender-stereotypical views of their parents (mothers as primary caretakers and fathers as breadwinners and playmates), whereas older children saw parental roles as more interchangeable and less gendered. Halpenny, Nixon, and Watson (2010) also interviewed children about parenting norms and their own experiences. In this study, older children also described parenting roles as context dependent. The shift in children's descriptions towards greater flexibility might reflect the course of normative gender development with children become less rigid after five years of age (Ruble, 2007; Signorella, Bigler, & Liben, 1993).

Children's views of parents in planned lesbian families have been explored in interview studies. Raes and colleagues (2015) found that children described both mothers as equal in terms of parenting. Children used both the concepts "mother" and "father" when referring to the non-biological mother. Some children described non-biological mothers as similar to biological mothers in that they also take care of them, whereas others expressed the non-biological mother was similar to a father due to certain characteristics, such as being funny. In a Swedish sample, Malmquist and colleagues (2014) found that children described lesbian mothers as providing physical and emotional care. Some children also defined

mothers as “girls” and as someone who gives birth. Unlike children in heterosexual families, they described fathers as being similar to mothers.

A few studies have compared children’s perceptions of mothers in heterosexual households and lesbian-mother households and found no differences in maternal acceptance (Golombok et al. 2003). However, children in fatherless families (i.e., lesbian or single mother households) perceived their mothers to interact more with them and to be more available and dependable than children in father-present households, although no differences in maternal warmth were observed between the mothers in different family types (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Brewaeys and colleagues (1997) analyzed children’s positive and negative feelings towards family members using the Family Relations Test. Children with lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents showed similar amounts of positive feelings towards their biological mothers. Children expressed more positive feelings towards biological mothers than both biological fathers and non-biological mothers. No differences were found between children’s positive feelings towards biological fathers and non-biological mothers. In a follow-up study with the same sample, Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2003) interviewed children and parents about parental involvement in child activities, parent-child communication, affection, disputes and parental autonomy. Although most heterosexual parents reported mothers to be more involved in child activities, children did not describe any differences between parent types on any interview topic. In sum, these findings suggest that children’s perceptions of lesbian mothers are similar to perceptions of mothers in heterosexual households, but that the role of the non-biological mothers might not fit either the category “mother” or “father”.

Although the aforementioned studies provide important evidence of children’s perceptions, the majority did not directly compare descriptions of all parent types. In the studies conducted by Brewaeys (1997) and Vanfraussen (2003) and their colleagues, such

comparisons were included regarding positive emotions associated with parents and perceived parental investment, but children were not interviewed about their perceptions of their parents in a broader sense. Moreover, most of the reviewed studies used close-ended questions or focus groups to collect data. Close-ended questions might limit the scope and richness of children's responses, and the inclusion of open-ended interviews provided additional information about differences between parents (Brannen, Heptinstal, & Bhopal, 2000). Using focus groups, on the other hand, might lead to child participants influencing each other during the discussions and produce less valid accounts. For instance, in Halpenny et al.'s (2010) focus group study, children endorsed an egalitarian view of parenting although their own experiences reflected more gendered parenting roles. To our best knowledge, no study has compared children's perceptions of lesbian and heterosexual parents using individual, open-ended interviews that cover both parental traits and parenting behavior, which may provide richer, more reliable insights to children's actual views of their parents.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to investigate children's descriptions of their lesbian mothers and compare these to the descriptions by children of heterosexual parents. We were also interested in exploring whether perceptions differed by parents' gender and their biological relatedness to the child. By asking children to compare their parents during individual interviews, we aimed to minimize effects of social influence from peers and social comparison (i.e., comparing their own parents with other parents), which may have influenced results of previous studies. Children's responses were analyzed using content analysis to identify themes in the descriptions, and cluster analysis to investigate whether responses differed by family type, parent gender, or biological relatedness.

Based on previous findings, we expected that:

For heterosexual parents, mothers will be described as spending more time with children and disciplining children more than fathers, whereas fathers will be described as engaging more in mutual activities as well as working more than mothers.

In lesbian families, biological mothers will be described as engaging more in caretaking tasks than non-biological mothers. Non-biological mothers will be described similarly compared to biological fathers.

Cultural Context of the Current Study

Previous studies on child perspectives on parenting have been conducted in English-speaking populations (Brannen et al., 2000; Halpenny et al. 2010; Milkie et al. 1997; Nixon et al. 2006), Belgium (Brewaeys et al., 1997, Raes et al., 2015 and Vanfraussen et al., 2003) and Sweden (Malmquist et al. (2014). Compared to other samples, the Swedish children perceived fathers and mothers to be more similar, which suggests children's perceptions might be influenced by their cultural context. The current study was conducted in Finland, a Nordic country known for its relatively high gender equality (European commission, 2016). Even in Finland, however, women spend more time than men doing household chores and taking care of children (Official Statistics of Finland, 2014). Finland also takes a slightly more conservative stand on same-sex families compared to its Nordic neighbors: The Finnish Marriage Act became gender neutral only in March 2017 (Law on Amendment to the Marriage Act, 2016), and less than 1% of children live in same-sex headed families, although the proportion is growing (Official Statistics of Finland, 2015).

Methods

Participants

The final sample ($N = 29$) consisted of 19 children with different-sex parents (female-male) and 10 children with female same-sex parents (female-female) (see Tables 3 and 4 for descriptive statistics of the sample). All participating children were the oldest child in the

present relationship. The child participants were between 4–12 years old at the time of the interview. Thus, children at varying stages of gender development and different degree of exposure to cultural stereotypes of parenting and gender were included. We did not include younger children as the task proved to be too difficult for children under four years old in the pilot study.

Participating children were recruited through convenience sampling by contacting support and interest groups and by using snowball sampling. The aim was to include children with two mothers or two fathers, as well as children with different-sex parents. To allow us to separate effects of gender and biological relatedness, we initially aimed to include children with two biological parents as well as children with a biological mother and non-biological father and *vice versa*. Despite utilizing various forms of advertising (e.g., local newspaper, parenting forums and special interest groups), as well as prolonging the time schedule for participation, no different-sex families with only one biologically related parent signed up for the study. Since only one family with co-parenting fathers participated, this family was excluded from analyses.

Our final sample consisted of 16 girls and 13 boys. The mean age was 5.86 years ($SD = 2.00$). Girls, $M = 6.44$, $SD = 2.25$, were slightly older than boys, $M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.41$, but this age difference was not statistically significant, $t(25.51) = 1.88$, $p = .072$.

Frequencies, means and standard deviations for all relevant demographic variables can be found in Tables A and B in the Appendix. No statistically significant differences were found between female-female and different-sex families with respect to child gender, $\chi^2(1, 29) = 1.36$, $p = .244$, child age, $t(27) = .85$, $p = .401$, number of children in the family, $t(27) = 1.11$, $p = .277$, the parents' relationship status, $\chi^2(1, 29) = 1.31$, $p = .288$, duration of the parents' relationship, $t(27) = .591$, $p = .559$, parent age, $t(55) = 1.53$, $p = .131$, parent education, $\chi^2(4, 58) = 5.26$, $p = .261$, or parent income, $\chi^2(10, 58) = 16.66$, $p = .082$. For the

four parent types, there was no statistically significant difference with respect to age, $F(3,53) = 1.40, p = .253$, or income, $\chi^2(30, 58) = 39.52, p = .114$. The difference in level of education was, however, statistically significant, $\chi^2(12, 58) = 21.02, p = .050$. Biological mothers in different sex families were more likely than others to have completed a university degree.

Ethical Permission

This study received ethical permission from the Board for Research Ethics at (university name removed during review). Parental consent and child assent were obtained prior to the interview with child participants.

Materials

Parent survey. To compare children's and parents' descriptions of division of household roles, we collected information about parenting and demographic variables through an online parent survey. Both parents reported their own age, their biological relatedness to the child, annual income, degree of education, relationship status, and duration of the current relationship. Parents also reported which parent (*me* or *my partner*) had more responsibility for childcare, if not distributed equally. Parents also reported in percentages how much time each parent was involved in taking care of the child during the child's first six months. Time spent with the child was reported separately for a regular weekday and a day off using a drop-down menu ranging from 0–24 hours. Parents reported how often they engaged in the following activities together with their child: playing, doing homework, washing up, reading, watching TV, talking, doing sports, picking up from hobbies, picking up from school, putting to bed, doing household chores together, going to the grocery store, going to the movies or the theatre, and playing games. These activities were selected to cover a wide range of everyday scenarios and all activities were assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very seldom or never*) to 5 (*very often*). We combined some activities (using averages) to correspond with the activities children reported. Playing and playing games were

combined to *playing*, doing sports, going to the grocery store, and going to the movies or the theatre were combined to *activities outside the home* and picking up from hobbies and picking up from school were combined to *transportation*.

We used Skinner, Johnson, and Snyder's (2005) 30-item adaptation of the Parents as Social Context Questionnaire (Skinner, Wellborn & Regan, 1986) to assess the following dimensions of parenting: warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support and coercion. The statements were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 4 (*very true*). In a psychometric evaluation by Egeli, Rogers, Rinaldi, and Cui, (2015) evidence for reliability and validity of the questionnaire have been indicated. The Cronbach's alpha in the current sample is ranged from .54 to .70.

Child interview. Data were collected by the first author through a structured interview. Most interviews took place in a lab ($n = 24$) but some children were interviewed in their homes ($n = 5$). We also collected data not pertaining to the current study using other methods. The order of the tasks was counterbalanced across family type and child gender. We presented the interview to the child as consisting of a few questions about the child's parents. During the interview, the parents were referred to with their name or the nickname the child used for them which was provided by the parents before the interview. The interview ranged from 1.50 to 11.02 minutes in duration ($M = 3.29$ min, $SD = 1.78$).

The interview consisted of five questions. The child was first asked "What is [parent name] like, in your opinion?" followed by "What kinds of things do you usually do with [parent name]?". After this, the same two questions followed regarding the other parent. The order of presentation of the parents was counterbalanced across gender and biological relatedness within all groups of children (i.e., girls and boys in different family types). The last question was worded "Do you think [parent name 1] and [parent name 2] are different in

any way?”. After each question, we asked the child if they came to think of anything else in addition to what they had just mentioned.

Procedure

Parents were asked to fill in the online survey before the interview with the child. At arrival, parents received a description of the study and gave informed consent for their child to participate. All parents gave permission to tape record the interview with the child. The parents waited in a separate room during the session. The test leader followed a structured protocol, starting with letting the child draw something if they wanted to, and engaging the child in some rapport building conversation until the child was perceived to be comfortable. Before the interview, children were reminded that they could choose not to answer, and school aged children were informed about the confidential nature of the interview. The test leader explained that the tape recording would help the test leader remember the discussion. After the session, we offered the parents and the child a chance to discuss any questions they might have regarding the study. Parents received a more detailed verbal and text-based description of the tasks and the purpose of the study. We asked parents not to inquire about their child’s responses but encouraged them to listen to the child if the child wanted to say something about their participation. To direct any concern regarding family issues or the psychological wellbeing of their child to healthcare professionals, parents also received information about local family advising services.

Analytic Strategy

Content analysis. Children’s interviews were coded to explore themes about their perception of parents. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. References to parents were made using pseudonyms to keep the gender of the parent unrecognizable. The content analysis consisted of two stages. Firstly, a list of categories that best reflected the content of the statements was generated. The first author

read the transcriptions and identified any descriptions of the parents or the relationship between the child and the parent. In total 291 statements were identified which were then organized into broader categories based on similarity of content. Statements were grouped into 25 categories under six higher order domains. In each of the six domains, a category named *other* was added to include also statements not fitting in any of the categories.

Categories are presented in Table 1.

The reliability estimates for the categorization were then calculated based on the methodological guidelines for content analysis by Neuendorf (2011). Two research assistants were familiarized to a visual representation of the categories, a codebook (see Appendix A for Codebook) and a coding form (see Appendix B for Coding Form). The research assistants were blind to the gender of the parents and the parent types. The training consisted of separately coding an interview followed by a group discussion between the coders and the first author. After this, the coders separately coded a subsample of four interviews (Cohen's $\kappa = .70$). The coding instructions were again clarified and disagreements were resolved through discussion. This subsample was coded again some weeks after the discussion (Cohen's $\kappa = .95$). A second subsample, consisting of eight interviews evaluated as particularly difficult by the first author, was then coded separately by the assistants (Cohen's $\kappa = .81$). After this, all remaining interviews ($n = 17$) were coded. The final agreement was in the range of excellent agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .79$) according to the guidelines of Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, and Sinha (1999). Following the same guidelines, categories that did not reach a fair agreement beyond chance (Cohen's $\kappa = .40$) were excluded from the analyses ($n = 3$).

Interrater reliabilities are presented in Table 1.

Table 3
Overview of Categories by Domains

Category	%	κ	Description	Example statements
<u>Parent positive traits</u>				
Kind	32.8	.86	Kind, good or helpful.	"Well, kind and doesn't try to do anything bad to me."
Nice	13.8	.47	Nice or likeable.	"Helps really well in everything." "Nice."
Funny	24.1	.95	Funny, goofy, silly or making jokes.	"That's what my dad is like, mostly nice." "Hilarious."
Calm	5.2	1.00	Calm, patient or not getting angry.	"Mom always goofs around." "Calm."
Other positive trait	19.0	.68	Other trait descriptions of positive qualities or affects.	"Mom has lots of patience." "He for sure likes us, you know." "He is bold."
<u>Parent negative traits</u>				
Angry	17.2	.79	Angry, irritated or impatient.	"Sounds irritated [...] sometimes." "Well, dad gets angry really easily."
Other negative trait	5.2	1.00	Other trait descriptions of negative qualities or affects.	"Then mom has gotten sad." "She is...lazy, for instance."
<u>Parent behaviors excluding child</u>				
Absent	13.8	.71	Any references to the parent being away from home for work, travel or other cause.	"She is always at work." "He often goes traveling."
Household chores	15.6	.93	Cooking, cleaning or doing other tasks without the child.	"He usually cooks dinner for us." "Usually...she goes to the grocery store."
Habits and activities	10.3	.64	Habits and activities parent does without the child.	"Mom is more [...] on the computer." "He also likes to wake up early."
Other behavior excluding child*	6.9	.31	Other behavior the parent does without the child.	"Sometimes he argues with mom." "Dad was helping his sister move."
<u>Parenting behaviors</u>				
Putting to bed	1.7	1.00	All behaviors related to putting the child to sleep, such as tucking in the child and brushing teeth.	"Then put us to bed."
Transportation	8.6	.88	Picking up or taking the child from/ to school/ kindergarten/ hobbies.	"Takes us to school in the morning." "He picks us up at daycare sometimes."
Directive parenting	15.6	.57	Parent tells child how to behave and what to do, sets limits or disciplines the child.	"Sometimes she says I have to clean my room." "She tells me how I should be at parties [...]."
Gifts	5.2	1.00	Parent gives gifts or buys the child things.	"He buys presents [...] more often than mom." "He always buys me my favorite movies"

Other parenting behavior	5.2	.79	Other descriptions of parent providing the child with something.	“Mom doesn’t work because she has to take care of us.” “She just has to wake me up.”
<u>Mutual activities</u>				
Homework	5.2	.49	Helping out with homework or other related tasks.	“I do speech therapy tasks.” “Things like homework.”
Household chores	10.3	.78	Parent and child do household chores, such as cooking dinner, cleaning, or other tasks, together.	“I clean with her.” “Eh..I collect trees.”
Tasks outside home	8.6	.82	Parent and child go to the grocery store or do other related task outside the home together.	“We always go to the store.” “We went to buy things for school.”
Playing	51.7	.90	Parent and child play together.	“Sometimes I play Harry Potter.” “Usually I build with some small Legos.”
Drawing	13.8	.93	Parent and child draw, paint or do crafting together.	“Dad usually guesses what I’m drawing.” “Or do crafting and so on.”
Reading	5.2	1.00	Parent and child read together or parent reads to the child.	“Sometimes mom reads a book to me.” “We usually read books.”
Watching TV	13.8	1.00	Parent and child watch TV or movies together at home.	“I watch TV.” “We watch my My Little Pony DVD.”
Activities outside the home	31.0	.92	Parent and child do activities, such as doing sports or going to the movies, outside the home together.	“We go to McDonalds for lunch.” “We even go out for a run in the nearby forest.”
Other mutual activities	31.0	.59	Explicit statement indicating that one parent generally spends more time with the child than the other does, or examples of other mutual activities.	“Mommy is um..a bit more with me.” “With her you always get to do fun stuff.”
<u>Parent facts</u>				
Parent physical attributes	31.0	.92	Descriptions of physical attributes, such as appearance or voice.	“Mommy has brown hair.” “Mom has a different voice than dad.”
Parent interests	20.7	.83	Descriptions of preferences of the parent, such as favorite food.	“Well..the kind that likes drawings!” “Mom likes other dishes.”
Giving birth	3.4	1.00	References to that the parent has given birth to the child.	“Well, the kind of mom who has given birth to me.” “Um.. She has given birth to me[...].”
Gender	10.3	.91	References to the gender of the parent.	“Dad is a boy and mom is a girl” “Two women have gone married and had two kids.”
Other parent facts*	5.2	.25	Information about the parent that is not related to parenting and does not fit the trait categories.	“When one makes food she always experiments.” “He is gifted in music.”
<u>Other</u>				
Relationship*	10.3	.22	Descriptions of the parent or the relationship to the parent that does not fit the trait descriptions.	“Well, sometimes she growls at me.” “More careful.”

Note. % = percentage of parents described with category in the entire sample ($N=58$), κ = Cohen’s κ interrater reliability of coding for each category. Categories marked with * were removed from analyses due to poor interrater reliability. The example statements are translations from Finnish or Swedish, [...] indicates the original statement has been shortened. Domains are centered and underlined.

The *relationship* category included all statements that described the parent or the parent-child relationship, but did not fit the other categories. After the coding process, this category included 27 statements, which the first author analyzed further for patterns. The following themes were identified: Hugging ($n = 2$), helping ($n = 6$), mutual interests between child and parent ($n = 3$), descriptions of directed emotional responses in parent ($n = 2$) and fondness between child and parent ($n = 3$). Because these statements did not seem form any new meaningful categories, but instead were similar to some of the existing ones, the first author re-coded these statements into existing categories. Hugging and mutual interests were re-coded as *other mutual activities*, because both referred to activities engaged in together. Helping was re-coded as the trait category *kind*, due to similarity with the trait description of helpfulness. In the directed emotional response theme, the parent's reaction was dependent on the behavior of the child (e.g. "very calm towards the one that gets hurt and angry with the one that hurts someone") and was coded as *directive parenting*. Fondness between child and parent was coded as *other positive trait*, as it was associated with a shared positive affect. Two children expressed that one parent was almost like the one described earlier in the interview. Due to uncertainty of which descriptions the children were referring to, these two statements were removed from the final scoring. Finally, six descriptions, that did not fit any of the existing categories, remained in the *relationship* category (for examples, see Table 1).

Statistical analyses. The categories obtained from the content analysis of child interviews and parental responses on the survey were analyzed quantitatively using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows (Version 24.0; IBM Corp., 2016). T-tests, analyses of variance, and Chi-square tests were used to investigate whether frequencies of categories varied by family type, parent gender, or biological relatedness. Values 1 and 0 were used to indicate if a category was used (1) or not (0). Because expected values below 5 in more than 20% of cells decreases the reliability of Chi-square tests (Yates, 1934), we replaced the values with 2 and 1 in Chi-square analyses. Values for the

categories within each domain were computed by summing the number of statements. These values were then used for analyses of variance between the parent and family types.

K-means cluster analyses were used to group parents with similar descriptions into clusters. Due to the high prevalence of zero values in our data, clustering at the category-level was not possible. The clustering was therefore based on the six higher order domains. Cluster analyses were first conducted with a two-cluster solution, followed by a three- and four-cluster solution. This allowed an investigation of whether parents were described differently depending on gender (mothers and fathers); biological relatedness (related and not related), gender, and biological relatedness (biological mothers, non-biological mothers and biological fathers); and finally on gender, biological relatedness, and family type (biological mothers in female-male families, biological mothers in female-female families, non-biological mothers and biological fathers). See table 2 for predicted clustering. We finally conducted Chi-square tests of the distributions between parent gender, degree of biological relatedness, and family type in the clusters.

Table 2

Hypothetical Cluster Memberships of Parent Types in Various Clustering Solutions

Parent variables	Cluster solution	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Parent gender	2 clusters	BMFF, BMFM, NBM	BF		
Biological relatedness	2 clusters	BMFF, BMFM, BF	NBM		
Family type	2 clusters	BMFM, BF	BMFF, NBM		
Parent gender + Biological relatedness	3 clusters	BMFF, BMFM	NBM	BF	
Parent gender + Biological relatedness + Family type	4 clusters	BMFF	BMFM	NBM	BF

Note. BMFF = Biological mother in female-female family, BMFM = Biological mother in female-male family, NBM = Non-biological mother, BF = Biological father.

Results

Parent Survey: Parenting Variables by Parent Type

Childcare responsibility. Responsibility for childcare was unevenly distributed between parent types, $\chi^2(6, 58) = 28.86, p < .001$. Biological mothers in the heterosexual couples were reportedly more likely to have main responsibility for childcare ($n = 12$) compared to biological fathers ($n = 1$), biological ($n = 2$) and non-biological mothers ($n = 2$) in lesbian couples ($n = 2$). In the lesbian couples, a majority of biological mothers ($n = 7$) and non-biological mothers ($n = 7$) reported an even distribution of responsibility. In lesbian couples, the mode percentage of reported caretaking during the first 6 months was 60% for biological mothers ($n = 10$) and 40% for non-biological mothers ($n = 10$). In heterosexual couples, the modes were 70% for biological mothers ($n = 14$) and 30% for biological fathers ($n = 11$). The difference between parent types in how much time they currently spent with their children was not statistically significant, $F(3, 53) = .08, p = .971$ for weekdays and $F(3, 53) = .80, p = .502$ for days off.

Mutual activities. There were no statistically significant differences between parent types in how often they engaged in doing homework, $F(3, 42) = .64, p = .595$, reading, $F(3, 53) = .55, p = .650$, watching TV, $F(3, 53) = .24, p = .865$, talking, $F(3, 53) = 1.02, p = .392$, doing household chores, $F(3, 53) = .96, p = .418$, playing, $F(3, 53) = 2.28, p = .090$, or doing activities outside the home, $F(3, 53) = 2.73, p = .053$, with their child. Parent types did not differ in how often they helped their child wash up, $F(3, 52) = 2.51, p = .068$, put their child to bed, $F(3, 53) = 1.24, p = .305$, or offered transportation, $F(3, 52) = 1.04, p = .382$.

Parenting dimensions. No statistically significant differences were found between parent types with respect to rejection, $F(3, 50) = 1.77, p = .165$, structure, $F(3, 52) = 2.43, p = .521$, chaos, $F(3, 51) = 2.26, p = .093$, autonomy support, $F(3, 52) = 0.53, p = .661$, or coercion, $F(3, 52) = 0.18, p = .908$. Parent types differed significantly on warmth, $F(3, 51) = 2.82, p = .048$. Biological mothers in lesbian couples had the highest values on warmth, $M = 21.13, SD = 1.13$, and biological

fathers in heterosexual couples the lowest, $M = 19.32$, $SD = 1.92$. A Tukey HSD post-hoc test showed that this difference was not statistically significant ($p = .098$).

Child Interviews: Frequencies of Statements within Categories

The frequencies of statements within categories is provided in Figure 1. The *playing* category was most frequently mentioned, whereas the category *putting to bed* was mentioned least. Of the higher order domains, *mutual activities* and *positive traits* were most frequent, whereas the categories *other* and *negative traits* were least frequently mentioned.

Frequencies of categories within the different parent types are presented in Table 3. Descriptions of lesbian parents included more mentions of the parent being *funny*, *doing homework* with the child, and having *given birth* to the child compared to heterosexual parents. Compared to other parent types, biological fathers were more likely to be described as engaging in *activities outside the home*, and biological mothers in lesbian couples were more likely to be described as having *given birth* to the child. No other differences between parent types were statistically significant.

Figure 1. Flow chart used to facilitate decision making during the coding process. N = total number of observed statements, n = frequency of given category in children's descriptions in the entire sample. Color framed boxes represent domains and color filled boxes represent categories.

Table 3

Cross Tables and Chi-square tests for each Category and Parent and Family Types.

Category	<u>Female-female</u>		<u>Female-male</u>		<u>All Parent types</u>			<u>Family types</u>		
	BM	NBM	BM	BF	χ^2	<i>p</i>	Exact	χ^2	<i>p</i>	Exact
Kind	1	3	6	9	4.24	.237	.269	2.26	.133	.155
Nice	1	3	2	2	2.67	.445	.534	.99	.320	.428
Funny*	5	3	2	4	5.86	.119	.118	4.19	.041	.056
Calm	1	1	1	0	1.99	.575	.555	1.45	.228	.271
Other positive traits*	3	3	0	5	6.70	.082	.034	2.42	.120	.163
Angry	1	0	3	6	5.22	.157	.194	3.21	.073	.141
Other negative traits	1	1	1	0	1.99	.575	.555	1.45	.228	.271
Absent	2	0	2	4	2.94	.401	.482	.37	.543	.701
Household chores without child	2	1	4	2	1.19	.755	.787	.01	.937	>.99
Habits and activities	1	1	1	3	1.14	.768	.928	.00	.950	>.99
Putting to bed	0	0	1	0	2.09	.554	>.99	.54	.464	>.99
Transportation	0	1	2	2	1.14	.767	.858	.51	.476	.650
Directive parenting	1	3	3	2	2.19	.533	.675	.47	.494	.704
Gifts	0	0	1	2	2.20	.532	.766	1.67	.197	.544
Other parenting	1	0	1	1	1.02	.796	>.99	.00	.996	>.99
Homework*	1	2	0	0	7.03	.071	.037	6.01	.014	.037
Household chores with child	1	2	2	1	1.54	.674	.673	.71	.398	.405
Tasks outside home	0	0	4	1	5.89	.117	.190	2.88	.090	.153
Playing	5	6	8	11	1.28	.734	.735	.13	.717	.787
Drawing	2	0	1	5	5.59	.133	.158	.37	.543	.701
Reading	0	0	3	0	6.49	.090	.211	1.67	.197	.544
Watching TV	0	3	3	2	4.04	.257	.297	.04	.847	>.99
Activities outside the home*	3	0	5	10	8.84	.031	.024	3.67	.056	.076
Other mutual activities	4	3	6	5	.58	.901	.939	.22	.636	.767
Parent physical attributes	3	3	6	6	.02	.999	>.99	.02	.902	>.99
Parent interests	2	2	6	2	2.58	.462	.455	.01	.925	>.99
Giving birth*	2	0	0	0	9.94	.019	.054	3.94	.047	.115
Gender	1	1	2	2	.00	.999	>.99	.00	.950	>.99

Note. BM = Biological mother, NBM = Non-biological mother, BF = Biological father. $df = 3$ for parent type (comparing the four parent types), and $df = 1$ for family type (comparing female-female with female-male families). * $p < .05$. Asymptotic two-sided P-values and two-sided Fisher's exact tests are to be interpreted with caution, because more than 20% of cells had expected values below 5

Domains by Family Type and Parent Type

No differences were found between the family types on any of the parenting domains.

A comparison between the four parent types also revealed no significant differences for domain values. Biological mothers in heterosexual couples, who were less likely to be described with *positive traits* ($M = .58$, $SD = .69$), compared to and biological fathers ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 1.08$), and biological ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 1.10$), non-biological mothers, $M = 1.30$,

$SD = 1.42$ in lesbian couples. This difference was, however, not statistically significant, $F(3,54) = 1.31, p = .280$.

Cluster Analysis

Two-cluster solution. Means for cluster one ($n = 33$) and cluster two ($n = 25$) on each dimension are presented in Figure 2. Parents in cluster two were described with more statements from the *mutual activities*, *parenting behavior*, and *parent facts* domain compared to parents in cluster one. Belonging to each of the two clusters were not explained family type, $\chi^2(1, 58) = 0.12, p = .729$, parent gender, $\chi^2(1, 58) = 0.21, p = .647$, or biological relatedness, $\chi^2(1, 58) = 0.47, p = .828$.

Three-cluster solution. Means for clusters one ($n = 21$), two ($n = 23$), and three ($n = 14$) on each dimension are presented in Figure 2. In this solution, clusters one and two were similar to the clusters in the previously presented two-cluster solution. Parents in cluster three were frequently described with statements from the *positive traits* domain. Biological mothers, non-biological mothers, and biological fathers were equally likely to be members of any cluster, $\chi^2(4, 58) = 7.04, p = .134$. This suggests that the combination of gender and biological relatedness did not explain the clustering.

Four-cluster solution. Means for clusters one ($n = 21$), two ($n = 16$), three ($n = 18$) and four ($n = 3$) on each dimension are presented in Figure 2. Clusters one, two and three were similar to the clusters in the three-cluster solution. Cluster four included parents who were relatively frequently described with statements from the *excluding child behavior* domain. These parents simultaneously received high values on *positive traits* and *mutual activities*. None of the four parent types were over- or underrepresented in any of the clusters, $\chi^2(9, 58) = 6.85, p = .653$. This suggests that combination of gender, biological relatedness, and family type combined did not explain the clustering.

Figure 2. Cluster means for domains in the two-, three- and four-cluster solutions. Values closer to the center represent less frequent statements within the domain and values closer to the periphery represent higher frequency (scale 0–3).

Discussion

In this study, we compared children's descriptions of their parents from families headed by lesbian and heterosexual couples to see whether descriptions vary by the gender or biological relatedness of the parent. No systematic differences were found between family type according to children's description.

Children's Descriptions of Parents

Children's descriptions of their parents were categorized in six higher-order domains: *positive traits*, *negative traits*, *excluding child behavior*, *parenting behavior*, *mutual activities* and *parent facts*, each consisting several sub-categories. Our expectations notwithstanding, few children described caregiving and other forms of parenting such as disciplining, apart from mentioning that their parents got angry when they did something wrong.

We found no systematic differences between family type (lesbian couples vs. heterosexual couples), parent gender (mothers vs. fathers), or relationship type (biological vs. non-biological) in children's descriptions of their parents. This speaks against any large differences between family and parent types. No statistically significant differences were

found across parent and family type for parental involvement or caregiving behaviors, although we expected children to describe biological mothers as engaging more in caretaking tasks than fathers (in families headed by heterosexual couples) and non-biological mothers (in families headed by lesbian couples). Children's descriptions were in accordance with parents' own reports of parenting behaviors, regarding which no differences between the parent types were observed.

Lesbian parents were more likely to be described as funny, doing homework with the child, and having given birth to the child than heterosexual parents. Comparing fathers and mothers in heterosexual families, fathers were more likely than heterosexual and lesbian mothers to be described as engaging in *activities* outside the home, which partially fits our prediction that fathers would be described as engaging in mutual activities more often than mothers (Brannen et al., 2000; Milkie et al., 1997; Nixon et al. 2006). Comparing mothers with and without biological relatedness to the child, biological mothers in lesbian couples were more likely to be described as having given birth to the child. Biological mothers in heterosexual couples were less frequently described as having positive traits compared to the other parent types, contrary to findings from previous research (Brewaeys et al. 1997). The cluster analysis revealed no differences in children's descriptions of their parents based on family-type, parent gender, or relatedness. This finding corroborates the results from Vanfraussen and colleagues (2003) study, where no systematic differences between children's' descriptions of parent types were observed.

Parents' Perspectives on Parenting

The parents' description of their own parenting was largely congruent with their children's reports, with only minor differences. Parent types differed significantly on division of childcare responsibility but not on other forms of childcare responsibility, mutual activities, or parenting dimensions. With respect to parents' perspective on parenting, we only found a

difference on the dimension of warmth. Biological fathers reported the lowest amount of warmth, suggesting a possible effect of gender. This difference was, however, small and not statistically significant when compared to the other parent types pairwise. The difference in warmth was not reflected in children's descriptions, as fathers were not less positively described than other parent types. In accordance with previous findings (Brewaeys et al., 1997), lesbian parents reported a more even distribution of childcare responsibility compared to heterosexual parents. Although parents in heterosexual households reported mothers to have more responsibility for childcare, children did not describe such a difference.

Vanfraussen and colleagues (2003) observed a similar discrepancy between the descriptions of children and heterosexual parents' reports. The discrepancy could be due to the fact that parents did not report any differences in how often they engage in various activities with their child. This contradicts previous findings suggesting that mothers spend most of their time with the child doing caretaking tasks, whereas fathers engage more in mutual activities (Craig, 2006). Because we found few differences between parent types, this corroborates Fagan and colleagues' (2014) conclusion that parenting roles of mothers and fathers are predominantly similar.

Limitations

Our small sample size, which was due to the difficulty in recruiting non-conventional families, severely limit the statistical power to detect differences. Analyses of statement categories need to be interpreted with caution as minimum cell values could not always be reached (Yates, 1934). The small samples size also kept us from investigating variation by children's gender and age, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of parent-child interactions. Despite our effort to minimize social influence on children, children's answers might have been influenced by social desirability. Many children emphasized similarities over differences between the parents, possibly due to a desire to be fair.

Conclusions and Future Directions

This study found no support for children having different perception of their parents depending on family type. Contrary to some earlier findings, perceptions were also similar across parent types, suggesting that perceptions might be shaped primarily by parents' actual behavior and not by social categories such as gender and relatedness. Future research should be conducted in larger samples and including more family types, such as families headed by gay fathers and step-parents. The use of cross-national samples would offer a broader understanding of the importance of cultural context on children's perceptions of parenting.

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Appendix

Table A

Descriptive Statistics of Participating Families

Variable	Female-female parents			Female-male parents		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Child gender						
Girl	7			9		
Boy	3			10		
Child age		6.30	1.49		5.63	2.22
Number of children		1.80	.63		2.11	.74
Parent age		39.20	6.28		36.84	5.12
Relationship status						
Married	10			17		
Living together	0			2		
Duration of relationship		12.50	2.92		11.84	2.81

Note. Child age and duration of relationship reported in years.

Table B

Parents' Educational Level and Income by Parent Type and Family Type

Variable	Female-female parents						Female-male parents					
	Biological mother		Non-biological mother		Family type average		Biological mother		Biological father		Family type average	
	Mode	<i>n</i>	Mode	<i>n</i>	Mode	<i>n</i>	Mode	<i>n</i>	Mode	<i>n</i>	Mode	<i>n</i>
Education	Polytechnic	6	High school, Polytechnic	3	Polytechnic	9	University	12	University	9	University	21
Annual income	30000-39999 €	3	25000-29999 €, 30000-39999 €, 40000-49999 €	3	30000-39999 €	6	20000-24999 €	5	50000-59999 €	5	50000-59999 €	8

Note: Polytechnic refers to a degree from a university of applied sciences, which is a higher level vocational education in Finland.