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***“Social Integration, Discrimination and the Acceptance of
Lesbian Parenting in the Netherlands: An in-depth
study”***

Master Thesis

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Introduction

Homosexuality and same-sex marriages remain controversial issues in many contemporary societies. Despite the controversy, there is some support across the world, with some of the most ardent voices coming from Europe, for the recognition of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender) parenting and the right of same sex couples to be able to freely create families. One might expect that liberal states, like the Netherlands, would approve of “pink” families and lesbian parenthood. After all it was the Netherlands that legalized same sex marriages in 2001 providing homosexual couples and families the same legal and civil rights as heterosexual families.

The Netherlands is usually considered, when it is compared to other countries, as one of the leaders in supporting policies and legislation concerning gay rights and same-sex equality. Yet Dutch society has not always been so tolerant towards homosexuality. The shift in people’s attitudes started to happen after a period of sexual liberation during the 1970’s. Until the late 1960s, the majority of the Dutch population was opposed to homosexuality. At the time, lesbians were often characterized as “masculine, aggressive and confused about their gender” (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). One could argue that lesbians are still stereotyped and perceived this way by the vast majority of Dutch society.

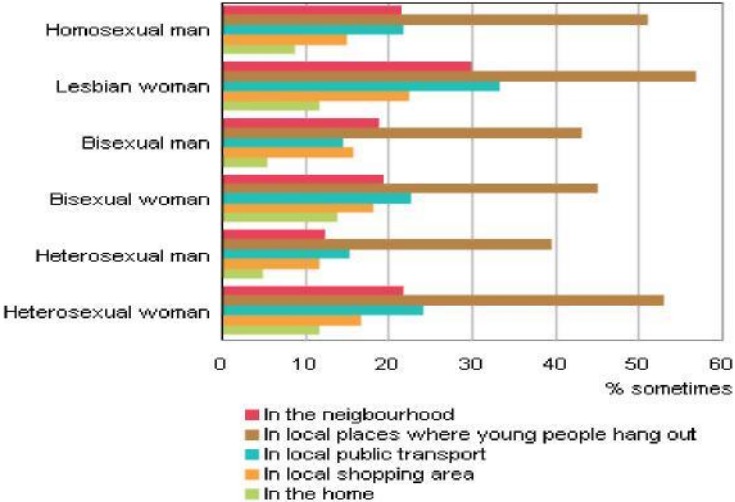
The city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands is recognized worldwide as a flagship of sexual liberation. The city also became a pioneer in same-sex rights and freedom. The first same-sex marriages were performed in the city on April 1, 2001. Same-sex sexual activity has been legal since 1811, and homosexual relationships have been recognized since 1998.

The government of the Netherlands has criminalized all discrimination against gay people and has passed laws concerning gender and identity expression. I will focus on the Netherlands in this study, as a country that supports a gay-friendly ethos, in order to examine whether this characterization is applicable to same-sex parenting. Have people in the Netherlands really abandoned their acceptance of the stereotypical norm of a heterosexual family as the ideal environment for raising a child and learned to accept LGBT parenting as an integral part of Dutch society? While homosexuality and heterosexuality may be equal in the eyes of the law, legal equality does not yet mean social equality (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011).

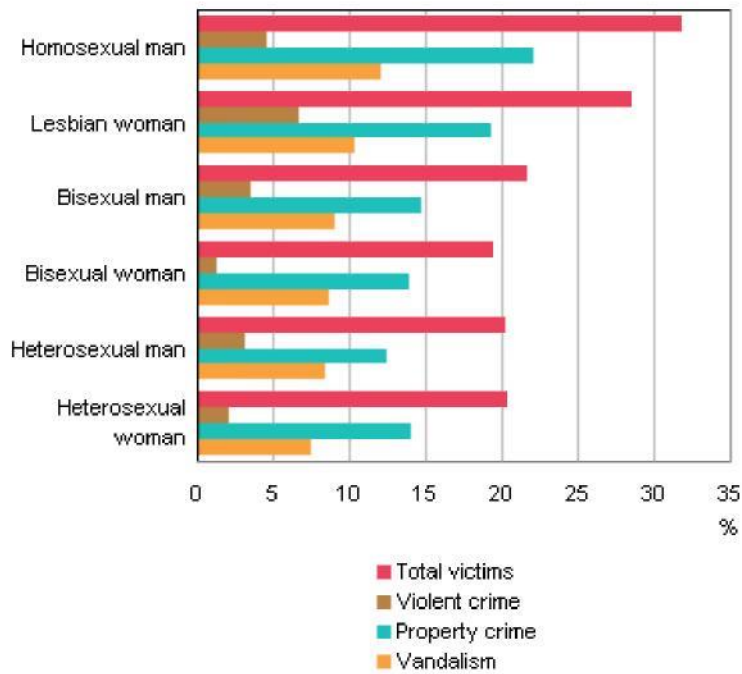
On June 25, 2013, the Central Bureau of Statistics (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek) published a study that raises serious concerns about the acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands, much less the issues surrounding same-sex parenting. According to data from 2012, despite the so-called widespread acceptance, homosexual men and lesbians feel especially unsafe in the Netherlands and they are more likely to become victims of crime and be disrespected. The report reveals the difficulties experienced by homosexuals living in the Netherlands. Most important,

it contradicts the popular assumption that the country offers an open, welcoming and friendly environment for its homosexual citizens. Despite its status as a paradigm of tolerance in Europe, the Netherlands has a long way to go before true equality is reached between hetero- and homo-sexual individuals.

Not feeling safe, 2012

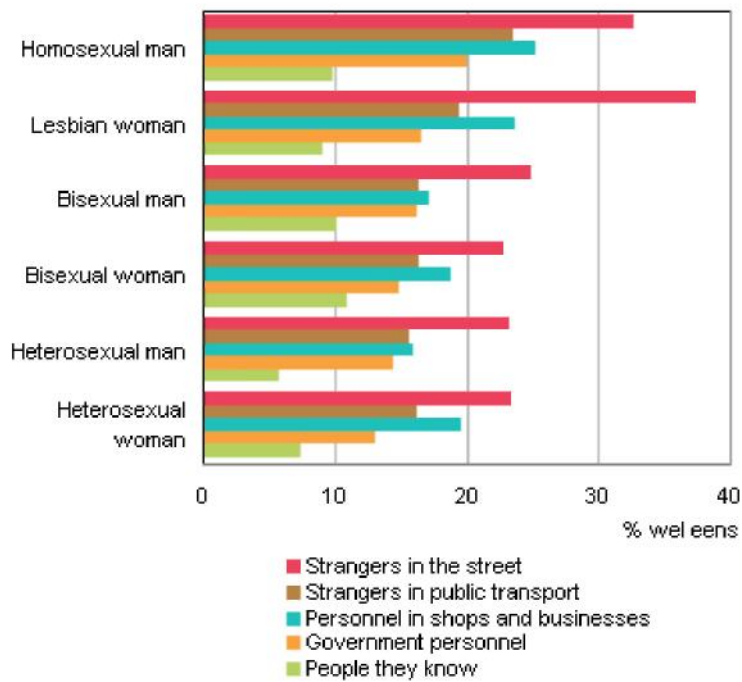


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Disrespectful behaviour, 2012



Source: CBS

The Dutch policy framework is unclear for so-called “pink” parenting. It may be assumed that since homosexual marriage has been legalized for years now and the Dutch state has recognized official partnerships, of same-sex families, that couples have “de facto” the same rights as traditional heterosexual families. But is this the case?

For instance, until only recently, the partner of lesbian couples who was not the birth mother was forced by law to adopt the child in order to have a legal connection with the child. Although the adoption procedure is often costly and time consuming, it is also essential for both legal and emotional reasons, including the important feeling that all family members are part of the same family. Practical reasons also influence people’s decision to adopt their partner’s child. This is also done to ensure that the non-biological mother will have statutory legal rights over the child in case of divorce or the death of her partner. It is also done in order to give her last name to the child, or to give the child the opportunity to claim her inheritance rights.

After October 2012, the Dutch Justice Ministry started to recognize three or more parents for a child, this represents the actual recognition of non-biological parents overlooking the notion of blood relationships in families. Most of the time, lesbian families include more than two parents (except, of course, when the homosexual couple chose to have an unknown donor). That makes the recognition of structural diversity even more essential from a Dutch policy framework. Several obstacles currently exist that do not allow same-sex couples to freely formulate a family, either legally or socially. These obstacles include the current social structure and politician’s lack of political will to address these issues, as well as church and religious organizations. Even the scientific community in the Netherlands has concerns about the capabilities of homosexual parents, and the further sexual, physical and social development of their children (Patterson, 1995).

Most people presume homosexual men and lesbians cannot establish lasting relationships or they do not have the will or the capability to have children because of their sexual identity (Weston, 1991). It is not unlikely that lesbian and gay families experience discrimination in the social context they live in (Hicks, 2006). Surely it is not enough to only look at the policy framework in order to determine whether a society has actually integrated lesbian and gay families. According to Adamczyk and Pitt, there is no strong connection between a nation’s (non)discriminatory policies toward homosexuality and individual perspectives in that nation concerning homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). For example, on April 23, 2013, France was one of the countries that voted in favour of marriage equality, even though only a small minority supports the legislation in France. A similar question could be posed for the Dutch case as well. Has social acceptance of homosexuality followed the passage of legislation? The Dutch media often broadcast attacks and incidents of discrimination towards homosexual men and lesbians. These are often attributed to a small group of minority youth, often from immigrant Muslims communities (Dutch-Moroccans). In

the name of preventing homophobia, these reports often just contribute to high rates of Islamophobia in the Netherlands (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). According to Hekma and Duyvendak (2011), the acceptance of homosexual families applies to laws rather than reality; heteronormality and straight norms combined with sexism (especially when it comes to women's sexual autonomy) are still the dominant perceptions in the context of Dutch society.

All the authors of the literature discussed in this study agree on one thing. They note that while heterosexual forms of parenting have been investigated in detail, there is very little research about lesbian and gay parenting. Existing theory is not explicit when it comes to the societal character of these types of families (Allen & Demo, 1995). While different forms of heterosexual parenting have been investigated thoroughly, scientific research has for the most part ignored “pink” families. Most of the studies that do exist focus on the psychological aspects of the matter. In these studies, the paradigm adopted includes an examination of the mental capabilities of the intended parents about their parenting abilities. Little research has been done that considers the social aspects of the issue, including the habitual life of the families (Laird, 1993; Allen & Demo, 1995). Family practitioners most often tend to analyze gay and lesbian parents since they seem to hold a sort of as they hold a “master status”. All too often their sexual orientation seems to cloud society’s perception of them to function as parents, partners or extended kin (Allen & Demo, 1995).

Patterson (1995) argues that the “phenomenon of large numbers of openly lesbian and gay parents raising children, represents a sociocultural innovation that is unique to the current historical era” (p. 263). This paper investigates the situation of lesbian mothers in the Netherlands to determine whether social integration exists or if they and their family still face discrimination like in other countries of Europe (as for example in Russia or Lithuania, even France). In order to determine their current situation a number of interviews of lesbian families were conducted for this study. Accepting and socially integrating “pink families” presupposes a change in society, including its social structures and people's attitudes and perceptions. A society has to leave behind the heteropatriarchal perceptions of family (structure) in order to be more accepting of different types of family structures, including same-sex parents, and sometimes possibly even a third or fourth parent.

The aim of this study is to provide a sociological analysis of lesbian parenting. Few researchers have attempted such a study instead most researches seem to only be interested in examining in the psychological outcomes of those families (Allen & Demo, 1995). The interdisciplinary character of the study is more than apparent, since in addition to analyzing the policy framework as an introductory point, it continues with an examination of the sociocultural aspects of lesbian parenting while taking in account the theoretical approaches that are used in the study. This research study is based on the analyses of six interviews of lesbian parents in the

Netherlands. It adopts a micro-individual level of analysis, examining the perceptions of social integration of “pink parenting” for ten lesbian mothers in total, in order to conduct a more in depth examination of to what extent lesbian parenting is socially accepted in the Netherlands.

Theoretical exploration: Lesbian families, from the domination of heterosexism towards a new type of family

“Lesbian and gay partnerships and some parent-child relationships do not have the same civil rights or legal status, such as heterosexual marriages, or even the legal status that is offered to heterosexual couples and parents” (Bersoff & Ogden, 1991).

The traditional societal beliefs about homosexuality perceive that homosexuality and family are mutually exclusive terms. One could say that for most people the idea is difficult to conceive of a family having two same-sex parents. In some cases, lesbian families can even have three or more parents if the lesbian mothers have chosen their donor to be an active member and have an active fatherly role in the family. The idea of same-sex families, more than other concepts, challenges the fundamental patriarchal notions of the family and gender relationships, since same-sex families are made up of two persons of the same gender who perhaps more importantly act as a 'normal' heterosexual family (Laird, 1993, p. 295). The findings in this paper will show that quite often same-sex families have more than two parental figures, since it is quite likely that the donor will also actively participate in the family, posing further challenge to the traditional idea of the “nuclear” family. In her work ‘Lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and their children’, Patterson (1995) also discusses this diversity and the many possibilities in the structure of lesbian families, focusing mostly in the psychological justification of those families.

The ‘general’ social knowledge about lesbian families and perceptions of homosexuality

The domination of heterosexism, the belief that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and should be an enforceable norm, leads to more prejudicial social attitudes towards lesbian (and gay) families. Heterosexism conceptualizes the human experience in strictly heterosexual terms, while it leaves aside research, and ignores any alternative (sexually oriented) form of family, reflecting at the same time the cultural ignorance of a society (Allen & Demo, 1995; Butler, 2002). Heterosexual activity is seen as a genetically, historically and traditionally established relationship on which the survival of human kind depends. For the opponents of “pink” parenting, it is

inconceivable to cut off the human “crop” by socially accepting or legalizing homosexuality (Harris, 1997).

Biculturalism, often defined as the paradox of being between two cultures (Brown, 1989), can also serve as a means of resistance, creative adaptation and potential resilience in the context of minority group oppression and stigma (Brown, 1989; Laird, 1993). Biculturalism can work as a fertile ground in which homosexuals as a minority group can be adopted in a wider social context. A society based on the recognition of diversity and pluralism with respect for individual choices, for the dignity and autonomy of each individual, a country which the Netherlands claims to be, is expected to be more accepting of lesbian parenting. Furthermore, the acceptance of biculturalism offers more flexibility to society members and ultimately could lead to the elimination of the oppression towards and the stigma of homosexual men and lesbians (Brown, 1989; Laird, 1993).

The recognition of same-sex marriage has contributed to the acceptance of lesbians in Dutch society and has made it easier for the possible acceptance of lesbian families in the future. Bourdieu’s theory about symbolic power looks at the symbolic sense of inclusion through symbolic affirmation and legal inclusion; symbolic power, in an indirect, but very specific and essential way, can intensify social inequality since it comes from the socio-economic status of the individual or the group (Yvette, 2011)¹. Indeed, only those with recognized social, economic and cultural capital can achieve legitimacy in society and the attainment of “symbolic capital.” The legal recognition of same-sex families is one step towards acknowledging the social establishment of “pink families” (Yvette, 2011). After all, societies create and promote commonly accepted roles and stereotypes, regarding what is acceptable or desired (Moschonas, 1998).

Cultural sociologists suggest that economic development and political stability have an important part in the development of public opinion towards non-normative social groups and behaviors, like homosexuality and more specifically in our case lesbian families (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Moreover, based on their research findings derived from the World Value Survey, Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) argue that politically unstable and undeveloped social contexts, which continually emphasize survival rather than self-expression, are less accepting of homosexual kinships (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). On the other hand, in nations like the Netherlands, where economic and political stability have led to more acceptance of non-normative ideas and social groups, a shift has been observed from an emphasis on survival to self-expression. Consequently, many citizens, more women rather than men, have become accepting of homosexuality and therefore more accepting of “pink families.” It appears that the increased emphasis placed on self-expression, has led to more accepting attitudes towards gender and same-sex equality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Within the context of the Dutch neoliberal state, the desire of homosexual individuals and couples for a “normal” and “ordinary” family becomes a powerful weapon against prior discriminations towards

homosexuality (Yvette, 2011). Yet, despite the above mentioned, relevant research shows that in the Netherlands communal judgments still maintain that the ideal child-rearing atmosphere is the traditional heterosexual headed family in contrast to lesbian families, due to the heterosexist bias (Bos & van Balen, 2004).

Social acceptance of lesbian families can be related to cross-cultural differences in attitudes and behaviors towards sexuality. Different perceptions of sexuality and femininity can result in a masculine or feminine society. After studying the differences between planned lesbian families in the Netherlands and the US, Bos (et al., 2008) notes that in more masculine societies there is a greater emotional and social role variation between the genders and more moralistic attitudes about sexuality, while in more feminine societies, which is more like the Dutch, there is less emotional and social role differentiation between the genders, resulting in more permissive attitudes towards sexuality. To state that more clearly, the more feminine a society is (like the Netherlands), the higher ratio of acceptance for lesbian families is observed.

There seems to be a correlation between the importance of religion and its influence in society and the societies acceptance of homosexual attitudes; that means that the more accepting to cultural differences a society is (as the Dutch society claims to be), the more open-minded it appears to be towards homosexual relationships (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Butler, 2008). In other words, because the influence of religion on the majority of Dutch society is decreasing this corresponds to a higher acceptance of lesbian (and gay) families. In their study Adamczyk and Pitt point out that religion is an important factor that can influence the acceptance of homosexuality. Many religions characterize homosexual behaviors as “unnatural”, “ungodly” and “impure”. Therefore, individuals who follow their religion closely are more likely to disapprove of homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Yip, 2005). They add to this argument that Muslims tend to hold more conservative social values when compared to other religious groups, such as Catholics or Protestants, and they are even more conservative when it comes to sexual morality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009).

Based on their findings, Adamczyk and Pitt conclude that both the social and cultural context play an important determinative role concerning the acceptance and integration of gay relations and families. When deciding whether or not to disclose their identities, lesbian mothers weigh the benefits of being open against the potential risks of their disclosure to them or their children. They feel more or less comfortable with different levels of disclosure depending on their situation and the social groups they are in contact with. Therefore, it can be assumed that when talking to a stranger about their family status that the conversation may extend beyond the individual level to family relationships, in this way the level of disclosure becomes more complex and intensifies due in part to the attempt to avoid discrimination especially towards the children of the lesbian family (Tasker & Paterson, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to study the perceptions of social acceptance and the discrimination of lesbian families. For this study, family theory will be used since it can assist us by offering important insights and helping us better understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals from lesbian and gay families. The aim of this study is to better understand how they experience different situations. Family theory helps to conceptualize the multiple contexts of lesbian and gay family relations. It is divided into three subsets; family ecology theory, feminist theory and the life course perspective. Family ecology theory draws attention to the “power-less” social groups such as gay and lesbian parents. Some proponents of family ecology theory hold that “knowledge can be used to transform oppressive social structures in order to bring about greater justice and freedom for all family members and for a diversity of families” (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 428). The transformation of traditional social structures is needed for families to be truly free and diverse.

Lesbian families explained by Marxists-feminists and post-structuralism

The feminist movement is related to same-sex/parenting equality when it comes to the interaction of gender and other social attributes such as sexual orientation. Motherhood as a social role does not just include child-rearing, but also the consequences of being a spouse in a shared household. Through motherhood, the feminist critique pulls lesbians into central position in the gender system (Lewin, 1993). Males managed to dominate most of the societies by patriarchy and by promoting the male bread-winner model as dominant. Males are responsible for earning an income to provide for their families; females are responsible because of their “nature” for raising the children and taking care of their households. Lesbian families directly challenge these traditional ideas about gender, parenting and intimacy, acting simultaneously as a threat and as a revolutionary force for re-evaluating our basic understanding of family and motherhood.

Feminist theory is influenced by Marxist thought (Phelan, 2000). It examines the relationship between capitalism and sexuality, viewing gender as a social construction, which is formulated differently in different cultures and with different kinds of gender identities and relations (Fernbach, 1981). Feminist theory points out that the definition of “gender” based on the biological differences of the two sexes has created the means for both suppression and inequality for both sexes. The formulation, operation and constitution of “homosexuality” has been forced to seek its place within and between these concrete social forms and narrow gender categories. The heterosexist suppression of homosexuality has even been profitable to capitalism; in that context, by resisting and opposes to heterosexism and homophobia, lesbians and homosexual men, have contributed to the general sexual emancipation by pursuing general social transformation (Fernbach, 1981).

Based on this perspective, Fernbach (1981) then examines some of the liberal states and their approach to homosexuality. In such liberal societies, Fernbach argues gays and lesbians are often forced to adopt “proper” male and female identities in order not to be different from the typical and traditional sexual patterns. In this way, they make themselves acceptable from their social context as people and as parents (Fernbach, 1981). Repression and the fear of exclusion often forces lesbians to endorse a feminine identity (Phelan, 2000). “Male” and “female”, “men” and “women” are terms used to supposedly identify biological sex differences between men and women. However, these terms are often used as suppressive labels, labels that try to continue the unequal hierarchically relation and the division between the social identities of those assigned to the dominant, masculine position and those that belong to the subordinate, feminine position (Fernbach, 1981).

Homosexuals are oppressed by the societal refusal and incapability to be accepted, unless they have “proper” female and male identities (Fernbach, 1981). In their study, Cohen et al. (2009) found that the extent to which lesbians conformed to traditional women roles influenced the ratio of their acceptance by straight men. In addition, Lehavot and Lambert (2007) found in their study, that gender-non conforming lesbians experienced discrimination to a greater degree, independent from the societal acceptance and tolerance towards homosexuals; they are evaluated more negatively than lesbians with conforming (physical and behavioural) identities. The heteronormative discourse is often adopted by lesbian families who are shunning the unfeminine, “butch” behavior and identities, behaving instead as heterosexual people since they are afraid to show “lesbian” signs for fear of criticism and social rejection (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). Internalized homophobia is defined as the negative attitudes towards one’s own, but also others homosexuality and it is seen as the homosexual opposite of self-esteem (Bos & van Balen F., 2004) Heteronormativity becomes homonormativity, and even if invisibility is a strategy adopted in order to avoid risk, this hardly seems to demonstrate sexual emancipation (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). The specificities of lesbian women, as distinct from their gender, often results in sexism and homophobia since the paradigms of social anxiety attributed to this distinction ultimately originate from heteronormative patterns (Phelan, 2000).

Marxism recognizes lesbian and homosexual men as rebels against the gender system and contributors in the struggle to eradicate the gender system and its gender differences in order to create a post-gender society. Such a society would enable all citizens to combine their positive attributes despite their gender. In this way, males like females are able to be sensitive and caring and women can be considered providers. Both sexes are viewed as independent and technically competent (Fernbach, 1981). A lesbian who becomes a mother puts into question the association between homosexuality and unnaturalness and the exclusion of lesbian identity from femininity. By finding a way to become mothers, lesbians in that sense show their resistance to the culturally

dominant gender roles and more specifically to the limited construction of sexual orientation (Lewin, 1993).

Males, especially adolescent males, show a smaller ratio of acceptance towards homosexuality than females. Studies have shown that there is a correlation between sexual prejudice and the traditional male role attitudes or sex-role stereotyping. The social groups that hold more traditional perspectives about the role men and endorse the distinction between traditional masculine and feminine behaviors and occupational stereotypes tend to have more negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Collier et al., 2012).

According to both feminist and post-structuralistic queer theory, what we acknowledge as fact in terms of gender relations is prejudicial. Universal knowledge is biased since it does not include the life experiences of those who are not members of the dominant group. This kind of knowledge is heteropatriarchal and is a social product of those who hold the most power positions (Berkowitz, 2007). The symbolic interaction, coming from social and interpretive processes, claims human being's capacity for thought. Their beliefs are shaped and refined by social interaction, which in turn is influenced by an individual's ability to learn and manipulate symbols" (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Styker, 1980; Berkowitz, 2007).

The assumption that parenting is heterosexual originates from the ideological foundation of the heterosexual nuclear family and can lead to discrimination against non-traditional lesbian families (Berkowitz, 2007). It is considered "natural" for straight people to be able to have a family, but not for homosexuals. In this way, lesbians are destined to live a life of solitude and experience future loneliness because society has excluded them as capable mothers. Since kinship is tied to procreation, in the majority opinion, lesbians cannot be sexually productive and are set apart from the rest of humanity because they chose to not to accept heteronormativity (Weston, 1991). Lesbianism, the love between two women, two people that are considered to be alike, is decisively distinct from heterosexuality in its transitive structural character. Phelan (2000) argues that societies would have the polymorphous freedom of sexual expression without the guilt and the renunciation demanded by capitalism. For Goffman (1963), stigmatization is the result of negative societal attitudes towards those who are different from culturally agreed-upon norms.

The most influential of the post-structuralists was Foucault. Foucault was concerned with examining existing social structures. He documented the continuing existence capitalism by looking at its attempts to move "from punishment to discipline", and replacing the "supplementation of sovereignty with normalising power", by stressing the creation and the use of sexuality as a mechanism for discipline (Phelan, 2000). In this way, those who hold political and economic power manage through sexuality, to control and regulate the population for capitalistic production and consumption, creating new relationships and forms of meaning. In the same way, parenthood has

been characterized as strictly heterosexual (Phelan, 2000). In the 'History of Sexuality', Foucault (1980) introduced the idea of "repressive hypothesis". He claimed that sexuality in contemporary society was treated as a taboo subject just as it used to be in the repressive Victorian society. Silence and censorship are the law, while human sexuality is produced through discourse and not censorship.

The social identities of gay and lesbian parents are influenced by the ways in which this kind of knowledge is organised inside the society. Whether it is through silence, censorship or disclosure of their homosexual identities, lesbian couples attempt to manage and function with their families; the result of this is that lesbian motherhood and families are not fully integrated in Dutch society. Heterosexuality needs homosexuality in order to be defined, both terms are mutually dependent and yet antagonistic. It is not uncommon, Weston (1991) points out for a person or social group to need someone on the outside, "the other" who will invade, endanger and threaten. In this way, by positioning gay and lesbian families somewhere beyond "the family", unable to have relations of kinship, responsibility or affection, Weston shows how they are portrayed as a danger to both heterosexual families and the society at large (Weston, 1991).

Concluding the theoretical exploration; lesbian mothers and families not as different from heterosexual families

The above mentioned theoretical concepts explain the reasons why "pink" parenting remains, in most societies, an incompatible family model despite the passage of same-sex equality legislation. In order to know why this is the case, we first have to understand how society perceives gender, sexuality and family roles before we can understand and explain why it is difficult for gay and lesbian families to become totally integrated in society, even when that society is a supposed liberal society. It is important to recognize the complexity of the situation and the ways in which social surroundings can discriminate and put pressure on these types of families. The aim of this research paper is to find out what lesbian mothers themselves think about the facts above mentioned facts. Moreover, by conducting a micro-qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted for this research, we will also examine what extent Dutch society has accepted and integrated lesbian families and whether the theories concerning the social discrimination of homosexual families are applicable to this case.

In 'Families We Choose', Weston discusses the complexity of gay and lesbian families. She calls them "chosen families" organised by love, choice and creation that can incorporate friends, lovers or children in any combination which is "uncommon" the heterosexual majority (Weston, 1991; Yanagisako & Delaney, 1995). They differ dramatically from "straight", "biological", "blood" or even nuclear neo-local families, where biological bonds have a social significance and blood ties

represent the only authentic, legitimate form of kinship to the majority (Weston, 1991). Some have noted that this biogenetic connection seems to be a cultural creation of the Western world in order to demarcate a certain type of social ties to signify and create the need for belonging (Yanagisako & Delaney, 1995). In that sense all kinship types can be characterised as fictive. Gay and lesbian families are highly planned, wanted and chosen as their creation demands a lot of time, personal and financial effort. In the same way that social symbols change with the passage of time, Weston (1991) points out the perception of family relatedness can also change. Other understandings are possible that adhere to symbols like love, based on the variable definitions of the context that invoke racial or cultural identities (Weston, 1991).

Lesbian “de novo”, families are sometimes characterised as “post-modern family pioneers”. These families are challenging the purely heterosexual and heteronormative social perspectives and (re)constructing the ideas of family and kinship by creating new narrative forms which transform the social perceptions of partnership and family life. Heterosexuality is no longer considered as necessity or the basis of motherhood (Bos et al., 2008; Svab, 2007). Not only do they challenge and change the conventional family organisation, structures and definitions of femininity, but they also change the norms of queer cultural forms by their existence, normalizing their family constructions and adopting family practices that belong to traditional heterosexual families; basically by being “normal” families, differing only in the sense of having two mothers (Svab, 2007). However, this does not mean that lesbians should aim for the institution of motherhood, since it is deeply flawed as part of the purely patriarchal ideal and tends to put lesbian families into a secondary category (Svab, 2007). For lesbians it is important that they are identified as “ordinary” mothers, since they strive to fulfill their children’s needs in the same or even higher ratio as heterosexual families in comparable social and economic circumstances (Malone & Clearly, 2002).

However, in contrast with “ordinary” heterosexual parents, studies reveal that lesbian parents appear overall to have a stronger desire to formulate a family. Studies indicate that the social mothers (non-biological) spend more time on childcare, family activities, parent-child interaction and have an egalitarian (equal division) of family household tasks which results in higher family and partner satisfaction in lesbian families (Bos et al., 2007). Females more than males are often considered to have more efficient parenting skills and mothers are assumed to be more occupied and capable in parenting than fathers (Bos et al., 2007). Grandparents of lesbian families also seem to have regular contact with them, as the parental sexual orientation does not affect the frequency of contact with the grandparents; even grandparents of social, non-biological mothers acknowledge the children of their daughters as if they were their biological grandchildren (Tasker & Paterson, 2007). Lesbian parents also tend to be co-independent. Lesbians tend to be more financially independent and seem to concentrate less on traditional child-rearing goals than some straight parents, but they still have to

deal with the same daily problems as heterosexual families (Bos et al., 2007). In many ways, society's disapproval of homosexual parenting actually creates more pressure for lesbian parents. Lesbian mothers constantly have to defend themselves and prove to society that they are good mothers (Bos et al., 2007).

In his article on "New ways of Parenting", Svab (2007) describes some planned lesbian families. Lesbian families have to make the decision whether they are going to have an unknown or a known donor and what role he will play in any future parenting. In many instances, this decision shows the importance all people place on the biological aspects of parenthood and the connection of the child to its parents. But this decision also concerns what involvement the donor will have in parenting. Svab mentions that lesbian couples quite often decide to co-parent with a gay individual or couple for sperm donors, formulating a new multi-parent type of family (Svab, 2007). However, this decision may have something to do with larger societal pressures about the importance of fathers as "role-models" for child's development and therefore a necessary requirement for all children and families. Personal advantages may also affect this decision, such as having free time to enjoy and focus on their relationship with their partner when their children are at the father's place, but this seems a little questionable if lesbian couples choose a known donor with this motive in mind (Svab, 2007). The non-biological co-mother can choose through marriage and adoption to become the legal parent of a child born by the biological mother (Bos et al., 2008).

Research design

Research question(s) based on theoretical approach

After considering the theoretical approach presented in the previous chapter, the main research question examined in this thesis is as follows: What are the perceptions of social acceptance and discrimination (dependent variables) in lesbian families in the liberal social context of the Netherlands (independent variable)?

Moreover, have the relevant policies about LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) rights in the Netherlands, such as same-sex marriage which was legalized on April 1, 2001, in fact contributed to the social acceptance of lesbian families decreasing discrimination towards this societal group? Or are they perceived by Dutch society just as law formations that do not directly influence attitudes towards gay rights, thereby remaining non-integrated in Dutch society and facing discrimination from the state and society (Sub-questions 1)?

The above sub-questions lead us to investigate whether the bias toward heterosexism in the Dutch society still exists considering parenthood. More specifically, do lesbian families face

discrimination/unequal treatment, and if yes, to what extent, by which social groups, and according to which beliefs driven by which causes to their beliefs (ex: religion, heterosexism, socio-economic status) (Sub-question 2)?

Considering family theory, which focuses on the perspectives of individuals, we examine what are the levels of disclosure and normalization of the habitus of lesbian parents (indicators that effect our dependent variables) (Sub-question 3), how do lesbian mothers feel about the way they are perceived as lesbian mothers in Dutch society (Sub-question 4); do they think that they are accepted as capable mothers with equal parental skills as heterosexual mothers despite the social belief that homosexuality and parenthood are mutually exclusive terms (Sub-question 5)? Additionally, are lesbians more accepted in the Dutch society when they formulate a family and normalize their lives (Sub-question 6)? What are the reactions and the attitudes of their social environment on the one hand, and of strangers on the other hand, towards them; do the interviewees perceive a difference in attitudes and reactions between those two groups (Sub-question 7)? The above mentioned sub-questions will focus our research easier as they are derived from our theoretical framework.

The empirical fact, that is supported by research (CBS), is that even the Netherlands, which is thought to be a liberal welfare state, in essence has not managed to decrease the percentages of discrimination towards gay and lesbian families as it is alleged; Dutch society has not reached the goal of accepting diversity and in consequence has not dramatically managed to achieve true equality or to make easier the reality and the everyday life of “pink” families.

The interview as the research method:

Perceptions of social integration and discrimination, a pure qualitative variable, are impossible to measure and examine in depth by any other research method except from interviews. Five lesbian couples with children and a single lesbian mother, were interviewed based on a goal focused, flexible, semi-structured guide, in different cities of the Netherlands; Rotterdam, Den Hague, Schiedam and Oud-Beijerland, within the time period of fifteen days, from the 22th of May 2013 until the 5th of June 2013. Interviewing the parents is the most relevant method for this inquiry which concerns the core research question (“What are the perceptions of social acceptance and discrimination in lesbian families in the Netherlands?”), and the sub-research questions.

Interviews, especially when they are done partially or not structured, are the only method that provides to the participants the opportunity to express analytically and on their own words since they usually do not bias the interviewees to give a fixed answer. During the interviews, I applied the funnel method, in which the interviewer constructs his questionnaire by beginning with general questions to put the respondent at ease, and then “funnels down” to more specific questions”

(Bailey, 1994: 513). During the “narrowing”, filter questions can be asked (Bailey, 1994: 135). I followed that method in order to introduce the interviewees to the research question evenly and most importantly to give a flow to the interview in order to avoid biased answers.

A semi-structured questionnaire (see Annex II) indeed helped me as an interviewer to remain in control of the whole process. It assisted with keeping the focus on the matter by directing the interview to the perceptions of the families, providing simultaneously the opportunity of making the interview seem more like a conversation, making the interviewees feeling more comfortable with the process and as a result likely to give more sincere and unbiased answers.

Interview guidelines and Operationalization of the Concepts:

While I was organizing the interview and throughout it, I focused on some of the most important aspects: adequate flow of the questions, relevance to the inquiry and clarity, short questions so the interviewee to be able to answer, no use of leading questions, keeping record of information such as age, status, etc., familiar attitude to the interviewee so that she would be willing to answer, relevance to the interviewees’ language, choosing quiet and familiar places for interviewing so that the interviewee feels comfortable (Bryman, 2012: 473; Babbie, 2011: 387-397).

In order to examine whether the small sample of lesbian parents is integrated or has experienced discrimination in the Dutch society, I divided my questionnaire into thirteen sequential categories that took the form of straightforward questions which consisted of sub-questions that would provide the opportunity of clarifications. The interview questionnaire was structured as follows:

My starting question was a general one, concerning whether the participants feel free being outdoors holding hands and showing affection to their partner and their children. That question was supported by the findings of a research and introduced the interviewees effortlessly into the researched issue. As it is mentioned in the theoretical framework, when deciding whether or not to disclose their identities, lesbian mothers weigh the benefits of being open against the jeopardy to their own and their children’s safety which might result from the disclosure. They can be more or less comfortable with different levels of disclosure regarding the situation and the social group that they are referring to. Therefore, it can be naturally assumed that when talking to a stranger about family status and the conversation goes from the individual level to family relationships, the level of disclosure becomes more complex and intensified, due to the effort of avoiding discrimination especially towards the children of the lesbian family (Tasker & Paterson, 2007).

After the introductory question, the rest of the questions had to do with specific topics and they came from the theoretical framework, research questions and hypotheses (see Annex II). The second question came as a continuation of the first question and it arose from Marxist notions about

lesbian disclosure, which claims that repression and the fear of exclusion often forces lesbians to endorse a feminine identity (Phelan, 2000). I asked the lesbian parents how they perceive their own family and introduce their families to strangers, whether they make explicit the “differentiation” of their families and what are the usual reactions. This question explores the general societal attitude towards lesbian families and detects the possible disclosing frictions and potential fear of discrimination from the perspective of the participants.

Afterwards, I examined specific domains of the interviewees’ social environment in order to detect possible discriminatory attitudes and to identify whether there are any social groups which accept lesbian parenting to a lesser extent. Therefore, the third and the fourth questions focused on how the working and family/friendly environment reacted to the decision of the participants to have family and children, whether their relations have changed due to this fact and what is their current response.

My next step again was to make two more questions about the general social attitudes towards lesbian families in order to explore to what level the Netherlands accepts lesbian families. Specifically, the fifth question asked whether the participants experience different treatments compared to heterosexual families, whether they believe that social attitudes would be different if they had a heterosexual family, and what is the attitude of governmental services towards them. The sixth, seven and eight questions were an indirect effort to detect unequal and discriminatory behaviours by asking about possible difficulties, obstacles or strange reactions in daily life. Moreover, lesbian parents were asked about the attitude and the reaction those who are in their children’s school environment (teachers, peers, other children’s parents) and based on their answers I asked them whether they knew if their children were being harassed at school.

Considering a possible denial or perhaps in light of an over willingness to prove my basic hypothesis right, I went ahead and asked the interviewees directly whether, and on which occasions, they have been discriminated against, revealing to them the main goal of my inquiry. Next, I focused again on a specific aspect; namely, religion. I asked them whether they are religious, if lesbian motherhood has hindered or stopped them from going to church, whether their religious community reacted strongly to their homosexual family, and in case their family members were religious, what was their response towards them having a lesbian family. But since all of the participants were non-religious, subsequently only specific parts of the question were asked and others were eliminated.

The last part of the interview refocused on social attitudes towards lesbian families. For instance, the eleventh question asked the interviewees whether they perceive a difference in attitudes now that they have a family compared to the time that when they were single lesbians. The goal of that question was to detect whether lesbians are more accepted in Dutch society as singles or as

mothers who have adapted to the demands of normalization, or to verify the notion that lesbian families are considered as a threat to heteronormative social order.

By the last question I wanted to test the notion that lesbians as women and in virtue of their gender are considered to be more efficient as parents, so they get to be more acceptable as parents than gay men. Thus, I asked the participants if they perceive a difference in people's attitudes towards lesbian and gay families, and which of them is more acceptable according to their experiences.

Regarding the flow of the interview, I added additional questions based on the answers of the participants, giving them the ability to develop further their thoughts and simultaneously taking the opportunity to examine more aspects of their perception. The essence of semi-structured interview is to provide pre-set questions, but the order of them is based upon the interviewer's viewpoint of what seems most appropriate (Robson, 2002). The wording of the questions was changed and explanations were given when it was demanded from the interviewees, for better understanding of the questions in order to obtain sufficient answers (Robson, 2002). As questions are not always understood in the same way by all the people, explanations were needed to make the questions easier to understand by the interviewees in order to compare the differences in the given answers (Kyriazis, 1999). As English was the second language for both the interviewees and the interviewer, often the clarifications and the explanations of the questions in English were essential for the cross-cultural understanding between the two parts and the orderly continuation of the interviews.

Particular questions which seemed inappropriate were ignored and sometimes additional ones were included. Indeed, different family characteristics of my target population changed in some cases the use of the interview questions. Sometimes instead of adding questions, some questions were ignored as it was no use asking them. For example, question no 10, about religious beliefs, never had an answer that stated that the interviewee was religious, so only the sub-questions b. and c. from the whole question had possible answers and it made sense to ask them.

The concept of lesbian parenting as it has been discussed in the selected literature assisted me to develop the various dimensions of the ideas which are the focus of my study. Considering the core research question, I will measure social acceptance and discrimination towards lesbian families in the Netherlands. The basic indicators are the two dependent variables: social acceptance and discrimination, and they are going to be measured by our main research method; namely, the semi-structured interview.

Indicators effecting discriminatory attitudes and the level of social integration of lesbian families are 1. the general situation in the Netherlands for lesbian families, 2. the adoption of a feminine identity, and the disclosure of their lesbian identities, 3. the level to which they have adapted to the heteronormative way of life and whether they indeed differ from heterosexual

families in their function. All of the indicators are complex and arguably they cannot be easily measured. They are going to be examined and revealed by the context of the answers of the participants and if the above questions are not sufficient enough to provide clear answers, additional questions will be restated clearly to the interviewees, so the answers to them can be found out.

In addition, I am going to measure specific indicators in order to examine the main issue, and these include: the attitudes and reactions of 4. their work environment, 5. their family and friends, 6. the religious people from their social circle. Moreover, the participants will be asked whether their family status can be an obstacle to them in terms unequal treatment for them and their children, in order to measure that indicator as well. Therefore, I am going to focus on the private-micro dimension of the lives of lesbian families in order to examine to what level they are integrated in Dutch society and whether they experience discrimination. Moreover, I will investigate whether they are seen as equals to heterosexual families by Dutch government, examining whether Dutch government provides them with the same legal and civil rights as it does to the heterosexual couples.

In summary, to answer our main research question, “What are the perceptions of social acceptance and discrimination in lesbian families in the liberal social context of the Netherlands?”, and the research sub-questions, the results of the study are categorized as follows:

1. The general situation of lesbian families in the Netherlands.
2. Disclosure or visibility for lesbian families?
3. Normalization of the habitus of lesbian families: more accepted than before having children. Additionally, is there a true difference between lesbian and heterosexual families?

After these three general observatory categories, we will focus on four more classifications considering attitudes and reactions from:

4. Family and friends.
5. Working environment.
6. School and peers of the participants' children.
7. Religious people.

Participants:

I chose to carry out a qualitative, in-depth analysis by interviewing in person a random sample of families in the country examined that were retrieved by a sort of “snowball effect”. The first step, in order to find participants was to contact all LGBT organisations that I could find in the country, such as COC Netherlands and Meer dan Gewenst. In addition, the informative flyer for my research (see Annex I) was forwarded with my request to the organizations. It was also distributed

in gay-friendly businesses (bookstores, cafés and bars) in Amsterdam and Utrecht in order to “attract” participants, providing basic, but not detailed information. Unfortunately, none of these methods result in obtaining participants for the study. Most of the LGBT organisations could not assist me either claiming that their members were unavailable to participate or that they needed to protect their members privacy (even though it was clearly stated that no personal information would be published). Distributing my flyer in gay friendly environments also did not get a response. The next step was to forward my request via social contacts; to friends, and employees at Utrecht University, Amsterdam University and other institutions. Fortunately, this strategy was more successful and I was able to make contact with six lesbian families that were willing to participate in the inquiry after a third party had contact them and informed them about the research. The number of the participants may be characterized as small in order to get generalizable results, but in fact all the means of finding participants were used, and the “snowball” method could only result in this limited number of participants. Moreover, as it has been mentioned previously, the purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to conduct an in-depth examination of the issue from the perspective of lesbian families.

According to Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau of Den Haag, in 2009 there were 55.000 LGBT couples, of which 30.000 were gay and 25.000 were lesbian couples. 10 percent of the total number, nearly 6.000 couples had children, 3 percent (800) were male couples who had children, while 20 percent (5000) were female couples who had children. The above mentioned fact can be explained by the facts that lesbian (and gay) families are usually highly planned, intentional, and commonly formed by alternative fertilization methods, such as donor insemination (Weston, 1991). Based on the data presented above, we can conclude that lesbian families with children are far fewer than heterosexual families in the Netherlands. The small ratio of lesbian families in Dutch society is another reason why we were able to locate only six families willing to participate to the inquiry.

The next step was to get in touch with the future participants and to make appointments with preferably both of the partners when it came to lesbian couples; that goal was achieved with the exception of the last interview, where one parent could only be present only for the last few minutes of the interview due to her other professional obligations, a fact that I could not control and that I heard only a few hours before the interview. Due to the small amount of participants and time constraints, I had to make the interview only with the one partner. Even if they were lesbian couples that share a common everyday life, it was essential to interview both partners, since each member may have different perceptions about their social acceptance and discrimination, a fact that creates various answers and more valid results.

Characteristics of participants

Participant s (code- names)	Y (social mother) & J (biological mother)	R (social mother) & O (biological mother)	T (biological single mother)	M (social mother) & E (biological mother of both children)	A & L (both biological and social mothers, delivered one child each)	K (social mother)
Age	28 & 31	27 & 33	39	44 & 41	37 & 39	46
Number of children	1	1	1	2	2	1
Gender of children	Male	Male	Male	Males	Males	Female
Age of children	2 years old	2 years old	2 years old	3 years & four months	6 & 3 years	1,5 years old
Occupation	Accountant & employee in an multinational firm	Academic employee & country director in a company	Operational manager at the Municipality	Manager & medical doctor	Nurse & floor manager	Senior executive in a company

Education level	Both academic	Both academic	Academic	Both academic	Higher education	Academic
Residence	Oud-Beijerland	Rotterdam	Schiedam	Rotterdam	Den Hague	Schiedam
Method of fertilization	In vitro fertilization	In vitro fertilization	In vitro fertilization	In vitro fertilization	In vitro fertilization	In vitro fertilization
Father	Unknown	Unknown	Known	Known	Known	Unknown
Is the donor an active family member?	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
Sexual orientation of the father-donor	-	-	Unknown	Gay	Gay	-

After scheduling an appointment for the interview, I visited all families at their residence upon their request, except from one. This interview was with the single mother and she requested that her interview take place in her working environment. Conducting the interviews in their home also benefited me in interpreting data. I was able to observe some facts. For instance, 1) their residence showed that the couple belonged to middle, but mostly to a higher social and economic status; 2) I also noticed that they did not differ from any other “normal” couple in their behaviour or how they functioned. Nobody else was around during the interview except for the lesbian mothers who were being interviewed so that their perspectives and attitudes would not be influenced or changed during the interview by consideration for a third party. In two cases their younger children were present, that caused at some point some noise and detouring during the interview, but not to a great extent.

It is noteworthy to point out that during the interview the couples often were interacting with each other. This had both a positive and a more negative effect. The positive effect was that they often were assisting me in my role as an interviewer fuelling elaborative answers from their partners, but this was also a drawback in some instances because they seem to be influencing some of their answers to my questions. Another drawback for the personal interview was that they sometimes required more time to complete and were more expensive than perhaps other methods of survey might have been since I decided to travel to their different places of residence for the convenience of the interviewees.

Four lesbian couples with children, a lesbian wife with a child where her wife could not attend the interview and a single lesbian mother participated in this inquiry. This results in ten total participants who took part in this study. The demographic data of the participants are as follows: they are all well-educated women, holding middle to high positions in the labor market which puts them in a good socio-economic position. That fact makes them less vulnerable to discrimination provided that we link stronger social acceptance with their socio-economic status rather than their sexual orientation. Plus, all of them are lesbians living in urban areas, a fact that makes them more invisible to the public eye than gay men.

The interviewees were aged from 27 to 46 years old, a fact that causes variation in the age categorization. Their families consisted of one (in the most cases) to two children as a maximum of a very young age; from infants to six year old children, who were all boys with the exemption of one daughter. All of the families were created by a donor through in vitro fertilization. Half of the donors were known to the lesbian families, in which case they were active family members, and mostly of a homosexual orientation.

The only limitation used for the target population of lesbian families was that they had to also have children since this inquiry is concerned with discrimination and social acceptance towards lesbian parents, not toward homosexuality in general. The way of measurement is simple, but time consuming.

The answers the participants gave were repeatedly read in order to find common phrases that will answer our research questions. The analytic strategy and tools that were used will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Analytic tools, coding and the methods used to obtain the Results

In all of its stages, the qualitative method of the interview is based on necessary assumptions in order to establish reliable results (Kyriazis, 1999). The personal data of the participating families was respected and protected. Therefore, their real names in the results section are replaced with initials or given “fake” nicknames. After transcribing the interviews word by word and interpreting the audio interviews which lasted anywhere from forty five minutes to one hour and twenty-six minutes long, some answers were converted into variables in order to analyse and draw results from similar answers to particular questions (Kyriazis, 1999).

The data was analysed as follows. First, the audio tapes of the interviews were written down word by word in order to have tangible data. Afterwards, I quickly browsed through all of my transcripts as a whole and made notes about my first impressions and results. The transcripts of the interviews were then read one by one and line by line, carefully and repeatedly, in order to find possible answers to my research questions. This was also done, based again on the research questions, for my categorical themes since they will be presented later on, in the results section (first level of coding). A part of this process was to identify common units of meaning (words, sentences) of the six interviews in order to identify similar or common answers. I tried to remain as close as possible to the text while interpreting and categorizing my data, by using the words of the person interviewed and not so much the theoretical concepts already discussed. In this way, I tried to be empirical and facts oriented in this study.

The second level of coding was to label relevant words, phrases, sentences or sections that were repeatedly expressed by different respondents in several places. Many of these responses caught my interest or seemed to be relevant to the theories and concepts presented earlier. I then associated the answers provided by the interviewees to the theory so that they can be expressed and presented as results. The third level of coding was purely analysing the data interpreted so far: to construct a model of understanding by looking for coherence, differences, and hierarchical structures in the transcripts of the interviews while considering our research questions. In the coding process, I constantly went back to the empirical data (codes) from the previous step, the text, at every step. I did not hesitate to code, recode, reread or drop out initial codes if necessary. I kept the codes that were the most important and grouped them into final categories that could be used to answer my research questions.

Taking into account my research questions, I identified and labeled the themes of my research on which I would later base the categorisation of my results. During this focused coding, I created and labeled my result categories in order to prove their relevance and their connection. In addition to the

preset categories, new categories emerged from the data; these two approaches were combined, starting with some preset categories and then adding others as they became apparent. At the same time, I tried to create a hierarchy among them considering their importance. The interviews were analyzed with respect to the similarities of the answers and based on these final conclusions were drawn. This does not mean that variations in the answers were ignored these also play a crucial part in our analysis. In this context, I was always comparing verbatim with the notes I took while I interviewed the participants to test the reliability of their answers. I always kept in mind that words and rhetorical structures have a meaning, a connotation which provides understanding to the text since there are two dimensions: the vertical one (which connects the different interviews) and an horizontal one (each interview and each subject that includes its own coherence and structure of meanings).

Results

In this chapter, I present and discuss the results of the interviewees' answers, which I interpreted according to the steps that were discussed in the methodology section. The first three categories will explore the mezzo level of analysis and the rest will focus on the micro units.

1. The general situation of lesbian families in the Netherlands.

All the respondents at first concurred that they do not feel discriminated in Dutch society. A, for example states that in general lesbian families are accepted, as our theory suggests due to the multicultural and feminine context of the country (Brown, 1989; Laird, 1993). 'Most of the people they say it's okay, they don't have a problem with it [...] I don't feel discriminated at all'. Y. adds to that, 'I think in the Netherlands it's nice. It's very accepted.' Especially in the mezzo level of their cities or the micro unit of their neighborhoods where people get to know them personally, four interviewees stated that they feel safer and more accepted. J. for instance claims: 'And lot of people in this village [...] that we know each other from everyday life, it's also really common, they know and they are familiar with us.'

Additionally, some participants provide on their own an explanation of why they are not facing discrimination, in relation to their socio-economic status (Moschonas, 1998). E: "Normally no, we don't get any reactions. Nobody ever told us or spoke to us or yelled to us [...] I think because we are open about it, and talk about it and joke about it, everybody reacts positively. And maybe because we have both been in the university, most of the friends are of a higher economic status. [...] Working both, no problems at all. Maybe, I don't know if the social system works like that, but maybe that is the root why

people are more accepting.” M. agrees with that point: “we are white, high educated, financially wealthy.”

The feeling of not being discriminated does not ipso facto mean that lesbian families are accepted nor integrated in the social context. As A. claims “They (people) won't look. That's okay but it doesn't give me a nice feeling that is something.” She continues raising this essay's main point “I didn't know what to expect. I don't feel discriminated, but the first question was about holding hands, and there you have already a point.” J, as another three participants, refers to the insecurity, that the experienced acceptance is not sincere: “it's accepted but maybe if we turn around, they would say something.”

A striking point is that the first response towards the family status is often condescension and surprise. The majority of the participants stated that “oh, that is okay” is the neutral phrase they usually get as a response, which is usually an uncomfortable effort from the other part to prove their tolerance and underlie a liberal perception of parenthood. K. Emphasizes “I think they are a little bit scared [...] I don't know if they mean it, but it is always the same term “oh, it's okay!” Always the same sentences, always.” Moreover, all of the respondents perceived the quantity of questions they received as a mark of curiosity about their status and a reminder of their difference, which goes beyond heteronormative norms:

“I think people are more curious to know about our relationship, about how we got the child and everything, rather than they would be for a heterosexual, straight couple. [...] People in general have more questions for us than they would have for somebody else and their boyfriend [...] it is just the only thing that makes me feel different. It feels like a reminder. Okay, you are asking me these questions because you feel the difference, awkward” (O., personal communication, May 22, 2013).

Despite that, there is usually a positive reaction towards the family structure of those who include the donor as an active member in their family (“I think we are treated differently, mostly in a positive way, I think a lot of people talk about us like “they have an interesting situation, they are organised in a good way”. [...] every month the children are going to their father's, people often react (positively) to that too (M, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

Generally public still perceives lesbian families as “different”, frequently due to the absence of a father figure. “Many people think it is different; it is different in a way.” (R., personal communication, May 22, 2013), O. complements, “I think other people see us as different, not everyone, not our friends, I mean people we don't know us well [...] I can imagine that some people, some men think like that “how can he grow up without a dad in his life?” Also as M. and K. observe that older age groups are less

accepting of lesbian motherhood as they are less familiar with it: “I don't think it's familiar to them, for older people [...] for young people it is always okay, it is good. Older people say that it's okay, but I don't know what they have in their minds [...] they are more accepting when you are normal.” Three of the interviewees (R, O, K) prove the point made in the introduction of the paper; the acceptance of homosexuality and lesbian families is a relatively recent achievement. “It has already been normal for years in the Netherlands and more people are getting used to it.” “People who are now in their forties, it was already normal for them to see gay people having kids, but for people who are in their fifties or sixties, it was not normal.” (O., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

- Legal obstacles:

Answering our first sub-research question, we detect from our findings that lesbian families are not equal with heterosexual families when it comes to the law and legal rights. O. mentions: “There are still some laws in the Netherlands that are not the same for gays as they are for straight couples, they have to do with children.” Moreover, according to the interviewees' answers, lesbian mothers face inequality and discrimination by the Dutch legal system. Six of the participants point out the confusion and the inconvenience of the many legal procedures and filling of forms, as there are no alternative easy options for same-sex parents. As M states: “people really want to help us get through the system. They don't react in a negative way [...] they pay their sympathy. [...] The problem is with the system rather than with the civil services.”

“So, normally in a married couple, the new-born child is automatically of both of the parents [...] We meet more (problems with) procedures, and we don't really meet social problems I think [...] they say that marriage between same-sex people is the same but it is not because she has to adopt him and that costs [...] that's the only part I think that we are discriminated. [...] We are married and we have children, so we don't have to do this adoption procedure, that's quite stupid. When we are equal as a lesbian couple as men and women couples [...] it's strange that we are not completely the same. In the Netherlands I would expect that [...] If you allow marriage, if you say that is okay to have same-sex marriage, that we agree, it's okay, it's accepted. And then in practice it's not exactly the same.” (E, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

- Discriminatory incidents

Despite the general perception of social acceptance we detect discriminatory a number of incidents from the participants' answers. In accordance to our theory, males and religious minorities appear to be less tolerant towards lesbian families (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Yip, 2005). E. validates this

argument: “you are aware [...] especially the boys, the Moroccan boys. [...] they are shouting or whistling or looking or yelling. [...] Only the boys, not the girls.”

“We had one bad experience [...] it was a masculine doctor (where we went for insemination), I think he didn't like it. He said that first we had to go a psychologist the three of us [...] he was a little bit old, and he had a student with him, when I saw the boy I think it was more an attitude thing.” (Y., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

There are also uncomfortable feelings, fear and questioning about potential discrimination even when two participants were involved in “manly” activities such as football. As L. stated his fears: “we think, okay, how are they going to react? Because in football there are men that are “macho”. [...] That makes me a little bit nervous. [...] I don't know whether I should tell them (disclose our identity) [...] that may become a topic of discussion when our son goes to play in a football team, if we are going to tell it”.

2. Invisibility and disclosure of lesbian families.

The fact that lesbian families do not face discrimination can be to a large extent attributed to the invisibility of their lesbian identity. All of the interviewees agree that do not come across as lesbian mothers. Therefore they cannot be discriminated because of that. As R. says: “They could think that one is the mother and the other is a friend or a sister, people outside just they don't realize [...] when we are downtown people don't see that we are a couple. And sometimes even if we say it, people don't believe it.” M. admits that “with the children we are less visible than without the children to be honest.” And E. adds: “when we are together they think that we are a couple or something. I don't think they even realize, the strangers.”

Moreover, all the participants avoid showing affection in public, choosing to hide their affection instead of expressing them openly, as R. states “we are aware [...] there are places that we do not hold hands”. In contrast with heterosexual families, lesbian families feel insecure about showing affection in public as M. puts it “I think, yeah I would behave differently if I would be walking with a man.” The participants are more wary of groups of young men or men, particularly Muslims. They perceive that they are less accepting of their differences and have developed Islamophobia to a certain extent (Adamczyk, Pitt, 2009; Bos, van Balen, Gartrell, & Peyser, 2008; Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011; Yip, 2005). According to E., “we had some young boys shouting at us.” For example, Y. adds: “it depends on where we are [...] if we are in a big city and there are lot of different cultures, so you have the Islam (Muslims), then we are holding back.” Large urban multicultural cities such as Amsterdam or Rotterdam with higher crime rates, make participants feel even more insecure and self-aware. R. among

others states “when you are walking in a big city at night and you see a group of guys you know then it’s better not to hold hands just to be sure [...] it depends on the situation. We don’t say to every stranger that we meet “Hi, I’m in a lesbian family”. In addition, K states about disclosing her identity: “I always talked about it in a more general way, and I think I just waited for the question and then I told them [...] it is more the intimidation, the sexual intimidation that comes not discrimination [...] harassment, kind of, raising the point of sexual intimidation coming from a heterosexist society.

Lesbian couples seem to be occupied to a great extent with the reactions, thoughts or comments from strangers when they are outdoors. To come to L’s words, “I don’t want to feel uncomfortable, when the others feel awkward about it, and then I avoid the situation. When it’s not important, I don’t say it” . That results in concealing their identities and family status. In a way, by acting neutrally, they hide their lesbian identity in order to avoid uncomfortable situations, such as where people comment on their lives or start asking questions about their family status. They do this so that they are not made to feel uncomfortable and to protect themselves and their families from negative attitudes.

“There are moments that we choose not to interact much with each other. Because you have an awkward situation [...] I am a little bit aware [...] I don’t want if something happens there and to make trouble [...] then I am afraid that we are going to get picked on. [...] Maybe we are an easy target if something happens [...] so I am a bit cautious [...] if we get divorce and I marry a man, I would walk holding hands with him. That’s easier. [...] I think it’s not obvious that we are married, that we are a couple, for most of the people, because we hide it. We don’t show it. [...] I am a little bit worried about what other people think of us. So I don’t feel completely free.” (A., personal communication, June 3, 2013)

There is also the case of disclosing their identity when it comes to interaction with governmental services as T confesses: “at the Consultant Office (Consultatie Bureau), they did not know that I was gay because I did not tell them, because I think that if I would tell them, they would think “oh, perhaps you need more attention”, with all good intentions of course. No, I didn’t tell I am a lesbian mother.”

3. Normalization of the habitus of lesbian families: are they more accepted than before having children. Additionally, is there a true difference between lesbian and heterosexual families?

As it was stated in the previous section, the participants, even unwittingly, hide their lesbian identity and their family status, which prevents the experience of discrimination. Moreover, lesbian families

succeed in being accepted in the social environment where they live, as they have a normalized way of life, in accordance with the demands of heteronormal values and perceptions.

“I think when we act normal, then it's okay. I think a little bit more than would be expected of a straight couple. So I think, for most of the people, if you act normal then it's okay. If you are really open like most of gay men, like loud and proud and I think that then you get more negative reactions. I act different because I know that thing. Act normal, then it's okay. We are a bit normal, and we act a little bit like that.” (L., personal communication, June 3, 2013)

As Y explains “we are together for ten years, so for us (and everybody else) it is really normal.” J continues pointing out that their acceptance from society comes as a result of a normalized way of living: “we have a normal social life. We talk with everybody. They talk with us about small, different things, they like him (their son) [...] many people have some similarity with us to talk about or to make contact. And before then there were people who didn't dare.” As we observe, children is an indicator that eliminates discrimination and causes acceptance from society, as A realizes: “I think we just try to be as normal as possible. [...] maybe now they take our relationship more seriously.” M adds to the above line of thought: “I think people kind of like the idea that I have settle down.[...] We are less discriminated with the children.”

The majority of the participants perceive their families as normalized and not different from heterosexual families, as O explains: “we say that we are a gay family but sometimes we are more traditional in a way, than a straight couple would be, you know. So the only difference is that we are two women but other than that we do exactly what it was expected from a normal family. [...] For us it is normal, but we understand that some people find it different.” R adds to that “There is no daddy [...] it is (different from) the most “common” in the Netherlands (heterosexual families). On the other hand, I also think that we are not different [...] in terms of the things that we do, we are just a family like any other family.”

Indeed lesbian families do not differ from the heterosexual ones in their function; in fact they have the same habitus and the same problems as straight families do. When people in their social context realize that they are not as different from other people, they manage to get accepted. As L mentions: “we are very proud of our family [...] we show them that we are a normal, very proud, family. And lots of people see that [...] with children we get more positive reactions [...] people if they know us a bit better think that we are not different, just a happy family, with children, with the same problems on us.” The participants believed that other people just need to get to know them in order to accept them and observe that they not so different from any other family. E adds to that: “we just have it well-organized, it is not different being with a woman; [...] that makes no difference in dippers or other problems [...] we are more normal with the children. Then we are a family.”

The interviewees' families are normalized and are prosperous without having or causing problems. This is definitely a factor that contributes in their social acceptance. Four interviewees realize that, and question how attitudes towards them would be if they were "problematic".

"They see that we are doing well, we have a job, we have a house, we have a car, we don't do drugs, and we are normal people. And then they see [...] that he is (their child) doing well, he is a nice little guy. [...] Now they talk about things, they could start a conversation with us. I think people have to see how you are doing. I think if our boy didn't do well, so he was trouble they would say "oh they are lesbians, there is no father to take care and be strong, that's the reason he is making trouble." But because he is a nice boy we don't know, but I think people would judge easier, they would put it to the fact that we are two mothers." (Y., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

In addition with normalization, participants realize that the development of a feminine identity contributes to social acceptance. For instance, Y declares: "I think also because we are like "real" woman [...] people imagine a person in their head, if they think about a lesbian woman, with short hair, moving like a man, and then they see us, that we are really feminine woman, so they reacting like "oh nice! How is it?" [...] So they are reacting very good most of the times."

- Are lesbian families more accepted than gay families?

The development of a feminine identity, combined with normalization, as well as the general perception of female parenthood as more efficient than male parenthood, briefly explains why lesbian mothers are more accepted than gay fathers. Gay men also have a more difficult time being accepted because of the association between gay men and pedophilia. All of the interviewees agree that compared to a gay family, they are accepted more easily by Dutch society. For example, as R states "It is easier for two women, and it is even easier for two women that are relatively feminine." T continues stating "I also think that lesbians are more accepted than male gay persons. [...] Also because the lesbian thing is always a "fantasy like thing". E., wanted to focus on the non-acceptance of homosexual men as fathers: "men and children, it's stranger, it's less accepted. [...] Maybe people think about sexual abuse."

4. Family and friends

Moving on to our micro level of analysis and focusing on the attitudes of the family and the friends of our sample population, we observed that they were accepting of the participants "difference". As A indicates, "my parents are very proud." Even though in some cases when the interviewees first disclosed their identity and their willingness to form a family, especially relatives but some friends

expressed surprised had reservations or expressed a negative attitude. Despite these concerns, nowadays, all of the participants state that they and their offspring are supported and loved by family and friends. As Y states: “they also support us with the raising of the child”. That is evidence of strong and traditional bonds among the families.

“We are now in the same situation with the children, so most of our friends like it even more than before. With the family, the parents they had to adjust a little bit. [...] maybe we are more “normal”. With the friends we talk about the children now. [...] So we are more the same”. (E, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

In some cases, their parents did not consider the formulation of a family as a possible scenario for their children. As E. admits: “They hadn’t considered it as a possibility. They are quite old so that wasn’t in their mind. They were totally surprised like “huh?” [...] her mother was a bit worried because of our lifestyle. [...] (Mine) She had to get used to the fact that biologically the children had nothing to do with our family, but they have my last name.”

Indeed, initially the relatives of the social mother were worried and confused as they would not share blood bonds with their descendants, but the birth of the children always seem to change this skepticism.

“Because my wife was pregnant, I think in the beginning that my dad thought that he would not feel as much as a grandpa as he would feel if I would have been pregnant.[...] Once our son was born, they see that I treat him as he is my son, I mean he is my son, and now I mean like you said they adore him so much.” (R., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

5. Working environment

The participants belong to the medium or higher social strata. Therefore, they were mostly highly skilled and held well-paid positions in the job market. Sometimes they chose not to immediately disclose their identity to their colleagues, but most of them worked in open-minded environments in order not to face discrimination. Overall, none of them had felt discriminated against. They could not recall a discriminatory incident nor had they experienced different treatment in their work. Most of them felt accepted at their work. Their colleagues respond in a rather neutral, positive, or surprised way.

“I told them at the beginning. And they were very supportive about it. I think they act very normal. [...] I don't think they treat me differently, not at all.” (A., personal communication, June 3rd, 2013)

Many of the interviewees that were employed in larger sectors revealed that they often have insecurity that they are not fully integrated there. As J confesses: “maybe the colleagues, because there is little more distance, they don't know everything about you [...] maybe when they learned I would have a child, then it was easier for them to have a subject to talk about.” Other participants also noticed a difference in the attitudes of their co-workers. As M states: “I work a lot with men, and they look at me differently now they know I am married with a woman rather than when they didn't know about it.”

“If you are a straight couple then everybody says “okay!” No further questions. I mean, of course, they can ask simple questions. But when a lesbian couple gets pregnant, everyone wants to know who is the donor, or “do you know the donor?”, “how did you do it?”, where, when, everybody wants to know how you got pregnant and they want to know all the details.[...] I do find it a bit awkward [...] it feels a little bit inappropriate.” (O., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

Many of the participants talked about the number of questions they receive out of curiosity in comparison to heterosexual couples in part due to their feminine and normalized identity. For them, these types of questions serve as a reminder of their difference causing uncomfortable feelings and situations.

6. School and peers of the participants' children

Most of the participants had very young children (the average age was 2), so neither them nor their classmates have realized their family difference up to this point. Therefore, none of the participants reported that their children had experienced any harassment or bullying in school. Instead, A. states: “it's just normal, and we are normal about it, and the teachers are normal about it, so that's not a problem for us, or for him. [...] But I am a little bit aware for my son.” Additionally, they do not get to meet the other parents, so they can avoid any potential discrimination.

The interviewees found that teachers' attitudes were mostly professional. The teachers try to integrate all the children in the classroom and in that sense they do not discriminate. Even though at times they may betray their “awkwardness” due to their lack of experience with same-sex parents.

“I think some of the professionals at day care, they don't see us as a problem, but they are not used to dealing with it. So they are kind awkward with the situation. [...] they look at you a little bit longer; they don't know what to say. [...] they don't know how familiar I am with the children. Like I am the man, maybe not doing a lot with the children, whether I also change diapers, etc. [...] I think maybe he gets a little bit more attention [...] he is put into a specific place.” (M., personal communication, May 30, 2013)

All of the participants in this study shared the common concern about their children's well-being particularly in their school environment. Many declared that they would put in extra effort to insure that their children are educated in a safe and equal environment.

“I don't know how it will be in the future, we think about when our son goes to school. It's all quite easy right now [...] but the school should not be very religious because then we are afraid that people won't understand our situation, or they will tease him because all the other kids have straight families”. (O., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

“When he'd go to school, in Rotterdam he can be the clown of the class, because of religion, and there he could have a difficult youth. [...] We are going to choose the public school [...] just to be sure that there is not someone very religious that will say bad things. (J., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

“We really wanted a public school for our children, not a Catholic or a Christian school.” (A., personal communication, June 3rd, 2013)

7. Religious people

The last answers of the previous section reveal to what extent the participants in this study were concerned about the attitudes of religious people. Their concern is not without reason since religions have historically been intolerant toward homosexuals and homosexuality. As we already discussed in the theoretical exploration, almost all religions perceive homosexual behaviors as “unnatural”, “ungodly” and “impure. Therefore, individuals to whom religion is important are more likely to be disapproving of homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Yip, 2005). Y revealed that: “the only bad reaction I had was from people that were religious”. O adds to that some religious people even respond, “they are like, “okay, this is who you are and we respect that and it's fine”, but “they wouldn't do it for themselves.” Christians and especially Muslims are perceived to hold more conservative values in comparison with other religious groups. Religious people appear to respect the interviewees as persons, but they reject their lifestyle and consider their choice abnormal.

“They think it is not normal, and it is not good. And Christians, they are not like “I'm going to kill you”, but they say to us it's a choice, you can choose something else. [...] And our neighbor, she is Christian, she also said “for my children I hope they would be normal” [...] when I talk to her she tells me “for me it's not okay. I accept you, but it is not okay.” (Y., personal communication, May 22, 2013)

“If I start a discussion with those people, it easily becomes, like, it's not normal, not acceptable, but they don't mean it personally. It's just, in general, because of their religion. They still accept me as a person, but from their religious point of view, in their circle, they wouldn't accept if for their daughter.” (M., personal communication, May 30, 2013)

Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, the lesbian families' answer our core research question is that they as families do not feel discriminated against in the Netherlands, and that they do believe they are more easily accepted and intergrated because of their feminine and normalized identity, in combination with the fact that they had children, so they got to be even more normalized and less dangerous to heteronormativity. The Dutch social context is perceived as feminine, bicultural, attributing little to religious importance, and showing simultaneously minimal emotional and social role differentiation between the genders. As a result they tend to Dutch share more permissive attitudes about sexuality. In this way, Dutch society in general seems to be more accepting of difference in family composition (Bos, van Balen, Gartrell, and Peyser, 2008). This also seems to be the case for the lesbian families we interviewed for this study. However, this does not mean that they feel totally integrated in Dutch society. The participants revealed that they are more conscious when they are outdoors and they avoid showing affection in public. They do always openly disclose their identity as a lesbian or their marital status. This is because they do not always feel comfortable or accepted. They also revealed that they are more cautious around specific national, social or religious groups. Moreover, they make an effort not to be in situations where they may face discrimination. The interviewees revealed that they try to be as normalized as they can be including adapting to the more traditional family functions, in order to be more accepted in Dutch society. Normalization does not make them a threat to the dominant heteropatriarchal notions, in accordance to Marxist and post-structuralist theory. Our highly planned lesbian families realize that they still are not considered “normal” by the vast majority in Dutch society. This shows that our theoretical assumption was correct that symbolic bias and heterosexism rejects alternative (sexually oriented) forms of family, biasing attitudes towards lesbian families, while simultaneously reflecting the cultural ignorance of a society (Allen & Demo, 1995; Butler, 2002).

Most of the participants felt accepted and supported by their relatives and in their working environment. Their children also were supported in their schools. In general they admitted that they are more accepted from people that know them and their way of living rather than from strangers. Lesbian families hide their identities most of the time by not mentioning their family status when meeting a stranger, simultaneously avoiding awkward situations, the persistently curious questions and any possible discrimination. They especially feel insecure around Muslims or groups of boys or men. From their perspective, these groups appear to be less accepting and more “dangerous.” In this way, they

exhibit Islamophobia to a certain level (Adamczyk, Pitt, 2009; Bos, van Balen, Gartrell, & Peyser, 2008; Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011; Yip, 2005). The couples interviewed feel more “free” in their micro and mezzo units. Their own neighborhoods, for example, which is natural and can be generalized for the rest of the Dutch population. However, although the policy and legal framework was established to secure homosexuals certain basic rights, this has not result in equal treatment for homosexual families. The differences in how heterosexual and homosexual families are accepted leads to feeling of inequality and general dissatisfaction. The participants revealed that often times the policies are vague and that this can lead to confusing situations instead of being helpful. Most of the participants complained about the unclear policy framework and felt discriminated by it, claiming that in comparison with heterosexual couples they are of secondary importance for the legal system. Therefore, we can conclude that the policy framework has not played a large role in the social integration of lesbian families in the Netherlands.

In the broader social context, the interviewees felt less accepted and more likely to face discrimination by men and religious people since they recognize that their sexual preferences are not accepted by them. As Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) state, apparently for many religious people homosexual behaviors are considered “unnatural”, “ungodly” and “impure”. Based on the answers the participants gave, they found that heterosexual men tended to react more negatively towards their homosexuality and to their family variation than women tended too. This may be due to a correlation between sexual prejudice and traditional male role attitudes or sex-role stereotyping (Cohen et al., 2009).

Moreover, the participants in the study felt that the more “normalized” and feminine lesbian individuals are and couples look, the more they are likely to feel accepted. They found that people were not as threatened by their homosexual identity and they recognized that they were not as different from other “normal” families. Fernbach’s idea that lesbians are being forced to adopt a “proper” female identity was being seen by the participants as a way for them to gain acceptance in their social context as parents and this was shown to be valid with our results (Fernbach, 1981). The fact that they also have children, obligations and a casual parental routine is a variable that actually prevents discrimination. Lastly, according to the responses of the participants, lesbian couples experience far less discrimination than gay couples do, since people tend to be more accepting and tolerant of the idea of a lesbian mother, rather than a gay father. There is often an incorrect association made between gay parenting and pedophilia, resulting in negative attitudes toward the “feminine” identity of gay fathers.

This study had several limitations. First, our sample group was small without large differentiations in its socio-demographic characteristics. All of the participants were wealthy, highly educated women who belonged to the middle or higher socio-economic strata. Maybe an inquiry with a set of participants from all the socio-economic classes of Dutch society would yield different results.

Moreover, the qualitative character of the inquiry prevented us from drawing generalized results. The reliability criterion concerns “the extent to which the measure produces the same results when used repeatedly to measure the same thing” (Rossi et al, 2004: 218). Moreover the language in which the interviews were conducted was secondary for both the interviewees and the interviewer; that in many cases caused misunderstandings and the need for further explanations. The reliability of this inquiry can be considered as medium to high. Although we cannot be absolutely sure that we are going to have the same or different results if we ask the same questions again, we can assume so, at least for the same socio-economic groups, since the questions concerned a longer term process which was the interviewees’ feelings of acceptance or discrimination in Dutch society. Concerning validity, the category system that was developed remained true to the purpose of the inquiry. The given answers were provided for analysis as they were originally stated and only grammatical or syntactic mistakes were corrected. The method selected helped to contribute to an in-depth analysis of the problem. The validity of the results is judged as medium as they were not returned to the interviewees for verification nor did supplementary measures take place. Nevertheless, clear discriminatory experiences and social acceptance trends were indeed measured and examined fulfilling the validity criterion.

Many recommendations for future research can be made from this initial inquiry; a study that includes a larger sample could be taken of same-sex families and Dutch citizens as well. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods could be adopted in order to produce more generalized results about the social integration of lesbian families in Dutch society. Homosexual parenting is a complex issue with multisided unexplored aspects. For the most part, lesbian motherhood has only been examined for its psychological components. Only a few published surveys exist that are concerned with the social character of lesbian motherhood, especially in Europe. Educational seminars about same-sex parenting would be useful in order for the public to be informed and most importantly to become more familiar with this type of parenthood. Thus, the public will become more tolerant and understanding of lesbian motherhood.

Although this is a small inquiry, with a smaller sample, at this point we can definitely make one strong recommendation for future policy. The vague policy framework surrounding the status of lesbian parenting needs to be clearer and attempts need to be made in practice to recognize the equal status of homosexual and heterosexual families. This should contribute to less financial and emotional damage for the minority of “pink families”. For instance the non-existing official forms for homosexual couples often cause confusion both public servants and citizens. Needless to say, Dutch society is still built on the heterosexist assumption that parenthood is by definition heterosexual, which from my perspective contributes to a discriminatory environment based on social inequality.

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Annexes

I. Interview Invitation

Do you feel like you, your partner or your children have experienced discrimination?

Would like to share your experiences/opinion?

I am conducting research on lesbian parenting in the Netherlands in order to ascertain whether they have experienced discrimination. For my study, I would like to make contact with 10 lesbian families in the Netherlands. I would kindly like to invite you and your family to participate in my research I am writing to ask whether I could interview you and your partner about your perceptions of discrimination

and social acceptance in the Netherlands. The interview will last approximately 30- 60 minutes. The interview will contain a series of questions about your perceptions of discrimination towards lesbian families and how your family life is affected by the social environment you live in.

(For example: Do you think you are treated differently because of your sexual preference and/or your family status? Do you think that people's attitudes towards you and your child would be different if you had a heterosexual relation?).

I am an international Masters student in the program Social Policy and Social Interventions at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. I am currently participating as an intern in the research project "Governing 'new social risks" under the supervision of dr. Marit Hopman.

The interviews will be conducted in English since I am an international student.

Obviously, your name(s) and all personal data will not be published and your family's privacy will be respected.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me via e-mail or telephone (see below).

I hope to hear from you soon.

With kind regards,
Athina Mara

II. Interview questions

1. According to recent research, many gay couples in the Netherlands avoid holding hands and expressing their affection in public. Does this apply to you and your family? Do you feel constrained when you are outdoors in public places?

- a. Is there a specific social group you fear most because of their negative response when you are outdoors?

2. How would you introduce your family to a stranger? Would you like to introduce your family with by using the standard patriarchal terms, such as "this is my wife", like other "normal" families? Do you consider your family a "normal" family one, like most people have it in their minds as a heterosexual stereotype (one mother, one father and their children)?

- b. Do you make it explicit to strangers that you have a homosexual family in the first place?

- c. If yes, what is their usual reaction? If you do not do this then why don't you do this? Do you think you are perceived like any other family or are you concerned or afraid that others will not be accepting (have a negative response) to this fact?
3. Does your working environment know about your family (status)?
- a. If yes, what do they think? What was their first reaction when you told them? What is their attitude nowadays? If you did not tell them, why didn't you tell them? Do you fear it will affect your career or your relations with your colleagues?
 - b. How did they respond when you told them you were having a baby?
4. Do you think you face more problems because of your family status?
- a. Have your relations with your family members, friends, colleagues been affected because of your decision to have a baby/family?
 - b. How did they respond when you told them you were planning on having a baby/family? Did they support your decision by all means (psychological, financial, and practical like for instance help with babysitting)? Did they express second thoughts about your decision? What is their attitude nowadays?
5. Do you think you are treated differently because of your sexual preference and your family status?
- a. Do you consider that people's attitudes would be different if you had a heterosexual family?
 - b. When it comes to your interaction with social and governmental services, what is the attitude of the (social) workers towards you and your family?
6. Does having a (gay/lesbian) family bring you difficulties or obstacles in your everyday life?
- a. Do you observe strange reactions when you are outdoors with your family? For example, do people stare at you or make negative comments?
 - b. For example, do you feel that day-care center professionals or teachers treat you differently? Or do you experience any awkwardness in communicating with the other parents at the day care center/school?
 - c. What were your children's teachers' reactions to the fact they have two moms/dads? Do you think he/she has a different approach to your kid because of his/her family?
7. What do you think your children think of their family? Does he/she perceive any difference?
- a. Does he/she experience any difference with their peers? If yes, then what is the cause?
 - b. Do you notice any difficulties or awkwardness in the relationships with other children or their parents?

8. Have you noticed your children being teased or harassed in school because of your family's "difference"?

9. Have you ever felt you were being discriminated against? If yes, on what occasions?

10. Are you religious? If you are religious, have you ever felt that being a gay father/ lesbian mother has affected your religious beliefs? Has your homosexuality restricted your being able to freely go to church?

a. How did your religious community react when they learned about your family? What is its attitude towards you and your family?

b. If you are not religious, has it always been like that or did you leave the church and abandon your religion because of negative attitudes towards your homosexuality?

c. Are your family members religious? What was their response towards you having a homosexual family?

11. How have peoples' attitudes changed towards you since you created your family? How are peoples' attitudes different than when you were an openly single homosexual now that you are a lesbian mother/gay father?

a. Do you feel that given your current status you are treated differently or are you facing more discrimination? If yes, on what occasions and by whom? What has changed?

b. If not, do you think you were discriminated against more as a single lesbian/gay? If yes, on what occasions and by whom? What has changed now that you have a family?

c. Did the birth of your child make things better or worst regarding peoples' attitudes towards you and your partner?

d. Do you think people see your family as any different from other families? If not, on what occasions? If yes, when do you spot the differences?

12. Based on your experiences, do you think that being a lesbian couple and family influences peoples' attitudes more than being a gay couple or family?

a. What is your opinion? Do you think people are more accepting towards lesbian families rather than gay families or couples?

III. Code tree of the data analysis

