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Authors

Gartrell, Nanette
Bos, Henny
Peysner, Heidi
et al.

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NANETTE GARTRELL *University of California, San Francisco*

HENNY BOS *University of Amsterdam**

HEIDI PEYSER, AMALIA DECK, AND CARLA RODAS**

Family Characteristics, Custody Arrangements, and Adolescent Psychological Well-being After Lesbian Mothers Break Up

As part of the largest, longest running prospective American study of same-sex parent families, the present investigation examined relationship dissolution in planned lesbian families. Data were collected from 40 separated couples and their 17-year-old adolescent offspring—19 girls and 21 boys. Nearly all breakups occurred before the former couples could have obtained the legal equivalent of same-sex marriage in their state of residence. A majority of the mothers rated the communication with their ex-partners as cordial. Seventy-one percent of separated mothers were sharing custody, and they were more likely to do so if the comother had legally adopted the index offspring. There were no differences in adolescent psychological well-being associated with coparent adoption or shared custody. The percentage of adolescents who reported closeness to both mothers was

significantly higher in families with coparent adoption.

In same-sex parent families, inequities in the parents' legal jurisdiction over their children can complicate the custody arrangements if the parents break up (Allen, 2007; Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2006; Goldberg, 2010). Relationship dissolution rarely brings out the best in anyone, particularly when child custody is involved. If one parent has legal guardianship of the children and the other has not legally adopted them (via coparent or second-parent adoption in jurisdictions where this is allowed), the nonlegal coparent may be at risk of losing access to the children after the parents separate (Gartrell et al., 2006; Goldberg, 2010). The consequences for those involved can be devastating (Allen, 2007).

Despite the increased visibility and legalization of same-sex relationships, empirical research on breakups in same-sex-parented households is limited (Oswald & Clausell, 2006). Analyses based on the 2008 American Community Survey and the 2000 U.S. Census revealed that there are an estimated 564,743 same-sex couples in the United States, and that among these, roughly 30% of lesbian couples and 17% of gay couples are rearing children (Badgett, 2009; Gates, 2009; Gates &

Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 3570 Clay Street, San Francisco, CA 94118 (ngartrell@nllfs.org).

*Graduate School of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences, Research Institute of Child Development and Education, Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**3570 Clay Street, San Francisco, CA 94118.

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Badgett, 2007). Whereas marriage has traditionally marked the starting point of heterosexual family formation and divorce its end point, in lesbian- and gay-parent households that were constituted before the couples could enter into domestic partnerships, civil unions, or marriage, the beginnings and endings of relationships have been defined differently from couple to couple (Goldberg, 2010). For some, anniversaries have been celebrated on the day of their first sexual encounter; for others, it may be the day the couple held a commitment ceremony or began living together (Oswald & Clausell, 2006). As the legal landscape has evolved, many couples have expanded their celebrations to commemorate their domestic partnership, civil union, or marriage (Badgett, 2009). The defining points of relationship termination for same-sex parents can be equally varied, ranging from the time when sexual intimacies cease to the day the parents take up separate residences. This lack of an institutional construct by which same-sex family formation, progression, or dissolution can be measured compounds the difficulty of reporting on families in which the parents have broken up (Goldberg, 2010; Oswald & Clausell, 2006).

Numerous studies have explored the challenges of rearing children in a culture that is not fully accepting of lesbian and gay families (Bergman, Rubio, Green, & Padron, 2010; Gartrell et al., 1999, 2000, 2006; Goldberg, 2010; Golombok et al., 2003; Julien, Jouvin, Jodoin, l'Archeveque, & Chartrand, 2008; Oswald & Clausell, 2006; Short, 2007; Tasker, 2005). The adverse effects of homophobic discrimination may be mitigated for some same-sex couples through various psychological and social factors such as parental role competency, stronger family ties, and social network expansion (Bartlett, 2004; Julien et al., 2008). For other lesbian or gay families, multiple minority stresses, such as discrimination based on race or ethnicity or disadvantage because of poverty, serve to counteract these benefits (Julien et al., 2008).

In addition to coping with homophobic discrimination, same-sex couples very often contend with assumptions that only one parent is the "real" mother or father (Bos & Van Balen, 2008; Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000, 2006; Oswald & Clausell, 2006). Even though lesbian and gay couples typically share childrearing responsibilities (Bergman et al., 2010; Dunne, 1998; Gartrell et al., 1999, 2000, 2006; Goldberg, 2010), outsiders may not acknowledge

that the couple is a coparenting unit. This unequal treatment can lead to feelings of resentment within the couple (Gartrell et al., 1999, 2000, 2006; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007). Because second-parent adoption is not available in all jurisdictions within the United States, same-sex coparents have sought other measures to protect their families from influences that relegate the nonlegal coparents to second-class status (Allen, 2007). These include wills, powers of attorney for health care, coparenting agreements, educational funds, joint home ownership, and joint savings accounts (Bergman et al., 2010; Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000, 2006). Yet, such carefully constructed arrangements may only minimally diminish the feelings of invisibility, vulnerability, and marginality with which nonlegal coparents contend (Allen, 2007; Gartrell et al., 2006; Goldberg, 2010; Oswald & Clausell, 2006).

In an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Turteltaub (2002) examined relationship dissolution in planned lesbian families, that is, those in which the mothers identified as lesbian before they had children (Goldberg, 2010). Turteltaub interviewed five former lesbian mother couples (mean age 45 years) and their seven children (mean age 13 years) who had been conceived through donor insemination (DI). The mothers had been together for a mean of 8 years and separated for a mean of 9 years. In each former couple, only the biological mother was a legal parent. Principal reasons for breaking up included disagreements about parenting and finances. Legal obstacles to becoming equal coparents and lack of extended family support were cited as additional sources of relational distress. Three birth mothers had sole custody. The nonlegal comothers indicated that concerns about losing access to their children may have increased their willingness to cooperate with the birth mother after the breakup. The families relied on psychotherapists and attorneys in setting up custody arrangements. The children reported difficulties in adjusting to the family reorganization and their mothers' repartnering. In conversations with outsiders about the breakup, the children felt obligated to defend their mothers' sexual orientation and parenting skills (Turteltaub, 2002).

The current report on relationship dissolution in lesbian-mother families is based on data gathered in the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS). The NLLFS was

initiated in 1986 to provide prospective data on a cohort of 84 lesbian families from the time the index children were conceived through DI until they reach adulthood. In addition to reporting on the psychological development of the children, the NLLFS has been documenting the mothers' relationship experiences over a quarter century. In the first NLLFS interview (T1), conducted with inseminating or pregnant prospective mothers, shared values and communication skills topped the list of relationship strengths reported by the participating couples (Gartrell et al., 1996). At T2, when the 85 index NLLFS children (including one set of twins) were 2 years old, parenting, domestic, and income-earning responsibilities were shared in most two-mother households. The couples had less time and energy for their relationship and typically had been sexually inactive for many months after the child's birth. Some comothers expressed feelings of exclusion from the mother-infant bonding that occurred during breastfeeding. To cope with these challenges, the mothers sought counseling and peer support. Between the time of the index child's birth and T2, eight couples had separated (Gartrell et al., 1999).

At T3, when the index children were 5 years old, 50 of the original couples were still together (hereafter referred to as continuous couples); most shared childrearing philosophies and parenting responsibilities and considered the child equally bonded to both mothers. Although coparent adoption was not available in all jurisdictions inhabited by NLLFS families, a majority of comothers in continuous couples had adopted their children by T3, thereby legitimizing their coparenting role. Fifteen couples separated between T2 and T3. The couples that had separated by T3 had been together a significantly shorter time before the index child's birth than the continuous couples. Couples that at T2 acknowledged competitiveness around bonding were no more likely to have broken up by T3 than those that did not report this type of conflict (Gartrell et al., 2000).

The fourth set of interviews took place when the NLLFS children were 10 years old (T4; Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; Gartrell et al., 2006). The mothers described themselves as leading child-focused lives, sometimes to the point of neglecting their own relationships. For the continuously coupled mothers, relationship satisfaction was associated with egalitarian commitment, sexual compatibility,

and communication skills. Among those who had separated, reasons cited for their breakups included growing apart, infrequent sexual intimacy, incompatibility, infidelity, and different parenting styles. A majority of separated mothers said that having a child delayed the dissolution of their relationship. The impact of the separation on the index children corresponded to their age and awareness and the degree of conflict between their mothers. Mothers who described their breakup as "amicable" found their children coped better than expected. Comothers who had legally adopted their children were more likely to share custody after breaking up. No significant difference was found in separation rates or relationship duration when the NLLFS mothers were compared with their own heterosexual sisters who were also mothers (Gartrell et al., 2006).

THE PRESENT STUDY

The current study aimed to report on the psychological well-being of 17-year-old NLLFS children in separated-mother families. Our first goal was to assess whether the psychological well-being of adolescents whose comothers legally adopted them differed from those whose comothers did not; likewise, we assessed whether there were differences in psychological well-being between those whose mothers were and were not sharing custody. In the heterosexual divorce literature, family characteristics associated with the psychological well-being of offspring include such factors as the length of time since the parents broke up, offspring life satisfaction, the quality of the relationship between the offspring and their parents, the parents' partnership status after breakup, and the quality of the relationship between the separated parents (Fine & Harvey, 2006; Golombok, 2000; Hakvoort, Bos, van Balen, & Hermanns, 2011a, 2011b). Because these associations have not been examined in conjunction with relationship dissolution in lesbian-parent families, the second aim of our study was to compare the above mentioned characteristics in separated lesbian-mother families with and without coparent adoption and in those that do and do not share custody. Finally, we explored the associations between these family characteristics and adolescent psychological well-being in separated lesbian-mother families with and without coparent adoption and with and without shared custody.

METHOD

Participants

The data came from birth mothers, comothers, and their 17-year-old adolescent offspring who participated in the fifth phase (T5) of the NLLFS. Data collection for T1 began in 1986. Prospective lesbian mothers who were inseminating or pregnant through DI were recruited via announcements that were distributed at lesbian events, in women's bookstores, and in lesbian newspapers throughout the metropolitan areas of Boston, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. One hundred fifty-four lesbian women in 84 families (70 birth mothers, 70 comothers, and 14 single mothers) enrolled in the study before it was closed to new participants in 1992 (Gartrell et al., 1996). The participants originally resided within 200 miles of the above mentioned cities, but many families have since relocated to other regions of the United States. The study is ongoing, with 78 families (93%) still participating.

At the time of the index offspring's birth, 73 families consisted of a birth mother and a comother. By T5, 40 of the original couples were no longer together. The Hollingshead Index of Social Status for the 40 separated-mother families was 48.80 ($SD = 11.08$); it was not significantly different from the Index for the 37 continuous-couple NLLFS families. The 40 adolescent offspring whose mothers had separated consisted of 19 (47.5%) girls and 21 (52.5%) boys.

The NLLFS separated mothers are predominantly White, middle class, and Jewish or Christian (Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999; Gartrell & Bos, 2010). At T5, their mean age was 51.54 years ($SD = 3.96$). The adolescent offspring in the separated-mother families (T5 mean age 17.43 years, $SD = 0.59$) are of the following racial or ethnic backgrounds: 87.5% ($n = 35$) White/Caucasian, 5.0% ($n = 2$) Latina/o, 2.5% ($n = 1$) African American, and 5.0% ($n = 2$) Middle Eastern. Additional information about the demographics of the NLLFS families has been provided in previous reports (Bos & Gartrell, 2010; Gartrell & Bos, 2010; Gartrell, Bos, & Goldberg, 2010).

Procedure

Approval for the NLLFS was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the California

Pacific Medical Center. At each phase of this longitudinal study, informed consent was obtained from the mothers before they were interviewed and given questionnaires to complete. At T5, each mother provided consent for her own participation as well as for her 17-year-old offspring. The index adolescent offspring was then contacted, and she or he provided assent before completing a password-protected online questionnaire.

Measures

Adolescent psychological well-being. Adolescent psychological well-being was based on Child Behavior Checklists completed by the mothers (CBCL/6-18; Achenbach, 1991; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001; Gartrell & Bos, 2010) and and State-Trait Personality Inventories (STPI) completed by the 17-year-old adolescents (Spielberger, 1995).

The CBCL includes 113 problem behavior items. Each item is scored (0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat true*, and 2 = *very true*) about the adolescent on whom the report is based. The parent's raw scores are then tabulated so that the adolescent's problem behavior can be rated on the three broadband scales of the CBCL: internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behavior (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The internalizing problem behavior broadband scale includes 32 items and composites three syndrome scales—*anxious/depressed*, *withdrawn*, and *somatic complaints*. The externalizing problem behavior broadband scale consists of 35 items and is a composition of two syndrome scales, *rule-breaking behavior* and *aggressive behavior*. The sum of the raw scores on all items of the CBCL produces a total behavioral problem score. The α s in the present study for the internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior scales were .94, .93, and .96, respectively.

Psychological health problems were measured with the mean score for three STPI subscales (*trait anxiety*, *trait anger*, and *trait depression*). Each subscale consists of 10 items; examples are: "I feel nervous and restless" (*trait anxiety*), "I am quick tempered" (*trait anger*), and "I feel gloomy" (*trait depression*). Answers range from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much so*). For adolescents in NLLFS separated-mother families, Cronbach's α for the three combined STPI subscales was .82.

Family characteristics.

Length of time since the mothers broke up. The mothers were asked to specify the index offspring's age at the time that the mothers separated. On the basis of this information, we calculated the number of years the mothers had been separated by the time of the T5 data gathering, when the index offspring were 17 years old.

Adolescent self-reports on life satisfaction. Information about the index adolescents' satisfaction with life was gathered through three items of the Youth Quality of Life Scale—Research Version (YQOL-R; Patrick, Edwards, & Topolski, 2002): "I enjoy life," "I am satisfied with the way my life is now," and "I feel my life is worthwhile" (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *completely*). The mean score for these three items was calculated and used for further analyses. Cronbach's α for these three YQOL-R items in the present study was .81.

Quality of the relationship between the adolescents and their mothers. The index adolescent was asked to give an indication of the percentage of time spent with the comother. The adolescent was also asked to specify if he or she felt closer to one mother than the other or both equally (1 = *closer to birth mother*, 2 = *close to birth mother and comother*, 3 = *closer to comother*). On the basis of the response to this question, we calculated a dummy variable for closeness to mothers (0 = *closer to one mother more than the other*, 1 = *close to birth mother and comother*).

Mothers' partnership status after breakup. Each separated mother was queried about her current relationship status (single or repartnered) and the number of romantic relationships she had since breaking up with the comother.

Quality of the relationship between the separated mothers. The quality of the separated mothers' relationship was measured from the perspective of each mother and also from the perspective of the adolescent. On a 10-point Likert scale, each mother was asked to rate the effectiveness of her current communication with her ex-partner (i.e., the index offspring's comother), ranging from 1 (*very poorly*) to 10 (*completely amicable*). The adolescent was also asked to describe the quality

of her or his separated mothers' relationship (1 = *poor*, 4 = *great*).

Analyses

Mann-Whitney *U* tests were conducted to compare adolescent psychological well-being (internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behavior, and psychological health problems) in (a) the group whose comothers had legally adopted them and the group whose comothers had not and (b) the group whose mothers shared custody and the group whose mothers did not. To examine whether these groups (coparent adoption vs. no coparent adoption and shared custody vs. no shared custody) differed in (a) the length of time since the mothers broke up, (b) adolescent life satisfaction, (c) the quality of the relationship between the adolescents and their mothers, (d) the mothers' partnership status after breakup, and (e) the quality of the relationship between the separated mothers, two analyses were done: Mann-Whitney *U* tests for ordinal variables and chi-square analyses for categorical variables. Finally, Pearson *r* correlations were conducted between the above mentioned characteristics and the psychological well-being variables for the total group of NLLFS adolescents whose mothers separated. Subsequently, to test whether there were differences in the correlations between the groups with and without coparent adoption, Fisher *z*-transformations were used. Fisher *z*s were also used to analyze whether the above mentioned correlations differed for the groups with and without shared custody.

RESULTS

Descriptives

Table 1 shows the family descriptives concerning the breakup (e.g., how long the couples were together before they separated). Eighty percent of the couples ($n = 32$) had separated before civil unions were legalized in Vermont in July 2000 (Badgett, 2009). Descriptives concerning the adolescents (e.g., the percentage of time spent with the comother and closeness to both mothers) and the mothers (e.g., communication between the ex-partners) are also included in Table 1.

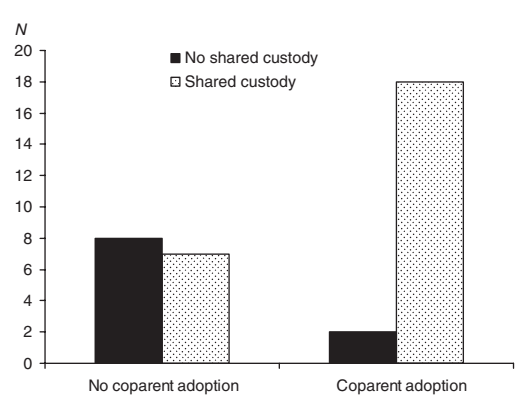
In 25 separated-mother families, custody was shared, and in 10, the birth mother was the primary custodial parent. In 72% of families with shared custody, the comothers had

Table 1. Family Descriptives (N = 40)

	% (n) or M (SD)
Breakup descriptives	
Mothers' relationship duration at breakup (in years)	12.00 (5.88)
Child age at breakup ^a	6.97 (4.42)
Breakups that occurred before July 2000 (% , n) ^b	80.00 (32.00)
Families with coparent adoption (% , n) ^c	59.00 (23.00)
Families sharing custody (% , n)	71.40 (25.00)
Adolescent descriptives	
Life satisfaction (YQOL-R) ^d	7.96 (0.63)
Percentage of time with comother ^e	37.72 (22.65)
Closeness to both mothers (% , n)	39.50 (15.00)
Rating the quality of their separated mothers' relationship ^f	2.53 (0.88)
Mother descriptives	
Birth mothers repartnered (% , n)	62.20 (23.00)
Comothers repartnered (% , n)	70.00 (21.00)
Birth mothers: number of romantic partners after breakup	2.39 (1.40)
Comothers: number of romantic partners after breakup	1.43 (1.26)
Communication with comother according to birth mother	6.36 (3.01)
Communication with birth mother according to comother ^g	6.88 (2.90)

^aOf the separations, 91.4% occurred by the time the index offspring were 13 years old. ^bOf the couples who separated after civil unions were legalized in Vermont (July 2000), all those living in California had separated before 2005, when California domestic partnerships were upgraded to the status of legal marriage; all but one couple living in Massachusetts had separated by 2004, the year that same-sex marriage became available in that state; and one couple living in Vermont separated the year after civil unions were legalized (Badgett, 2009; Gates, Badgett, & Ho, 2008; Rothblum, Balsam, & Solomon, 2008; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004). But marriage, civil union, or domestic partnership is neither necessary nor sufficient to confer the legal status of parent on the nonbiological same-sex parent for all purposes. That status depends on the parentage law of the jurisdiction in which the family resides (Polikoff, 2009). ^cIn the families without coparent adoption, seven former couples could have entered into coparent adoption but chose not to, three former couples lived in jurisdictions that did not allow coparent adoption, and seven former couples did not specify whether they could have entered into coparent adoption before they separated. ^dMinimum score = 3.67, maximum score = 10.00. ^eMinimum score = 0%, maximum score = 95%. ^fMinimum score = 1.00, maximum score = 4.00. ^gBirth mothers versus comothers: Wilcoxon $z = -.19, p = .85$.

FIGURE 1. SHARING CUSTODY VERSUS NOT SHARING CUSTODY IN SEPARATED-MOTHER FAMILIES WITH AND WITHOUT COPARENT ADOPTION.



Note: Not sharing custody = birth mother-primary custody.

legally adopted the index offspring. As shown in Figure 1, custody was more likely to be shared if the comother had adopted the index offspring, $\chi^2(2, N = 35) = 7.89, p = .005$.

Coparent Adoption, Shared Custody, and Adolescent Psychological Well-being

As shown in Table 2, no significant differences were found in internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behavior—measured by behavioral checklists completed by the mothers—or in psychological health—on the basis of adolescent self-reports—between NLLFS offspring (a) whose comothers had legally adopted them and offspring whose comothers had not or (b) whose mothers share custody and offspring whose mothers do not.

Coparent Adoption, Shared Custody, Family Characteristics, and Adolescent Psychological Well-being

On average, the mothers separated 8.53 years before T5 in families with coparent adoption and 12.63 years before T5 in families without—a significant difference (see Table 3). The percentage of adolescents who reported closeness to both mothers was significantly higher in families with coparent adoption. Adolescents whose comothers had legally adopted them spent significantly more time with their comothers, but

Table 2. *Adolescent Psychological Well-being Separately for Families With and Without Coparent Adoption and With and Without Shared Custody*

Adolescent Psychological Well-being	Coparent Adoption				Shared Custody			
	No (<i>n</i> = 16)	Yes (<i>n</i> = 21)	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> or χ^2	<i>p</i>	No (<i>n</i> = 10)	Yes (<i>n</i> = 25)	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> or χ^2	<i>p</i>
Internalizing problem behavior (CBCL)			149.50	.321			123.00	.941
<i>M</i>	5.00	6.22			4.60	4.76		
<i>SD</i>	6.11	5.96			4.95	5.16		
Externalizing problem behavior (CBCL)			152.50	.363			121.50	.897
<i>M</i>	3.69	5.13			3.00	3.68		
<i>SD</i>	4.91	7.11			3.50	5.94		
Total problem behavior (CBCL)			143.00	.246			118.00	.798
<i>M</i>	14.50	18.35			14.20	13.56		
<i>SD</i>	16.62	18.14			13.46	15.18		
Psychological health problems (STPI) ^a			154.00	.525			69.50	.093
<i>M</i>	1.95	1.88			2.08	1.83		
<i>SD</i>	0.42	0.48			0.40	0.45		

^aBased on the mean scores of three STPI subscales (trait anxiety, trait anger, and trait depression).

scored the quality of the relationship between their separated mothers significantly lower than adolescents whose comothers had not legally adopted them. On the other studied variables, no significant differences were found between the groups with and without coparent adoption or between the groups with and without shared custody (see Table 3).

Regarding the associations between adolescent psychological well-being and (a) the length of time since the mothers broke up, (b) adolescent self-reports on life satisfaction, (c) the quality of the relationship between the adolescents and their mothers, (d) the mothers' partnership status after breakup, and (e) the quality of the relationship between the separated mothers—in families with and without coparent adoption or shared custody—significant correlations were found between life satisfaction and internalizing and total problem behavior (see Table 4). Adolescents who scored high on life satisfaction had lower ratings on the internalizing and total problem scales of the CBCL. There was also a significant correlation between adolescent life satisfaction and psychological health: Those with higher scores on life satisfaction scored lower on psychological health problems (see Table 4). Fisher *z* analyses showed that the

above associations were not significantly different for the groups with and without coparent adoption or the groups with and without shared custody.

According to Fisher *z* analyses, the correlations between the adolescents' assessments of their separated mothers' relationship quality and the adolescents' scores on externalizing and total problem behavior were significantly different for the groups with and without coparent adoption. In the group without coparent adoption, adolescents who rated the quality of their separated mothers' relationship lower had lower scores on the externalizing and total problem behavior scales. For the group with coparent adoption, however, the correlation between the quality of the mothers' relationship and externalizing problem behavior and total problem behavior was not significant.

Fisher *z*s were also significant for the correlations between adolescent problem behavior and the mothers' ratings of their communication with their ex-partners. For the group without shared custody, the Pearson *r* correlations were not significant. The correlations were significant for the group with shared custody: Birth mothers who gave lower scores to the communication with their ex-partners reported more

Table 3. Characteristics of Families With and Without Coparent Adoption and With and Without Shared Custody

	Coparent Adoption				Shared Custody			
	No (n = 16)	Yes (n = 21)	Mann-Whitney U or χ^2	p	No (n = 10)	Yes (n = 25)	Mann-Whitney U or χ^2	p
Years since breakup				.005			90.00	.200
M	12.63	8.53	66.50		12.00	9.60		
SD	3.38	4.32			3.47	4.60		
Adolescent reports				.885			117.00	.183
Life satisfaction			155.50					
M	7.83	8.00			7.56	8.28		
SD	1.76	1.57			1.57	1.48		
Percentage of time with comother			68.00	.012			48.00	.064
M	27.46	43.10			22.14	42.08		
SD	25.70	19.01			21.19	21.44		
Closeness to both mothers (%)			4.42	.034			3.20	.074
M	20.00	54.50			12.50	48.00		
Mother reports				.471			.58	.445
Birth mother was single at T5 (%)	68.80	57.10	0.52		70.00	56.00		
M	80.00	68.40	0.44	.507	85.70	65.00	1.07	.302
SD	2.38	2.40	153.00	.819	2.30	2.40	118.50	.807
Birth mother no. partners after breakup	1.03	1.67			1.34	1.47		
M	1.60	1.40	69.50	.720	1.60	1.40	47.00	.832
SD	1.52	1.27			1.52	1.27		
Comother no. partners after breakup				.001			66.50	.362
M	3.15	2.18	56.00		2.71	2.42		
SD	0.38	0.91			0.76	0.93		
Birth mother			147.00	.920			79.00	.090
M	6.37	6.35			5.00	6.90		
SD	3.17	2.98			3.37	2.75		
Comother			80.00	.784			45.00	.355
M	7.06	6.95			5.83	7.18		
SD	3.21	2.84			3.49	2.83		

Mothers' relationship quality according to

Teen

Birth mother

Comother

Table 4. Associations Between Adolescent Psychological Well-being and the Studied Family Characteristics Separately for Families With and Without Coparent Adoption and With and Without Shared Custody

	Total Group	Coparent Adoption			Shared Custody		
		No	Yes	Fisher z	No	Yes	Fisher z
Internalizing problem behavior (CBCL)							
Years since breakup	.12	.04	.28	.36	.05	.17	.28
Adolescent life satisfaction	-.63***	-.82***	-.52*	1.58	-.69*	-.57**	.67
Adolescent % time with comother	-.01	-.06	-.14	-.21	.20	-.10	-.56
Adolescent closeness to both mothers	.02	.14	-.09	-.63	-.05	.20	.51
Birth mother was single at T5	.24	.39	.16	-.69	.32	.12	-.49
Comother was single at T5	-.15	.32	-.28	-1.28	-.16	-.21	-.09
Birth mother no. partners after breakup	-.04	-.15	.01	.44	-.22	-.05	.40
Comother no. partners after breakup	.15	.60	.19	-.98	-.13	.21	.46
Mothers' relationship quality per adolescent	-.14	.39	-.27	-2.03	-.18	-.35	-.34
Mothers' relationship quality per birth mother	-.09	-.08	-.10	-.05	.64	-.43*	-2.81**
Mothers' relationship quality per comother	.01	.47	-.07	-1.21	.10	-.02	-.19
Externalizing problem behavior (CBCL)							
Years since breakup	.23	.20	.35	.34	.08	.28	.48
Adolescent life satisfaction	-.31	-.56***	-.37	.66	-.47	-.23	.55
Adolescent % time with comother	-.24	-.15	-.43	-.79	.01	-.30	-.59
Adolescent closeness to both mothers	-.26	-.12	-.34	-.63	-.40	-.20	.45
Birth mother was single at T5	.20	.47	.10	-1.13	.46	.06	-1.01
Comother was single at T5	-.09	.28	.06	-.50	-.36	.09	.84
Birth mother no. partners after breakup	.07	-.07	.12	.52	-.29	.11	.94
Comother no. partners after breakup	.30	.47	.67**	.59	-.45	.64**	1.66
Mothers' relationship quality per adolescent	-.07	.78**	-.11	-2.96**	-.36	-.08	.54
Mothers' relationship quality per birth mother	-.27	-.06	-.39	-.93	.57	-.56**	-2.95**
Mothers' relationship quality per comother	-.33	.31	-.44	-1.66	.06	-.41	-.79
Total problem behavior (CBCL)							
Years since breakup	.22	.06	.42	1.03	-.09	.29	.90
Adolescent life satisfaction	-.51***	-.76***	-.44*	1.42	-.69*	-.39	.94
Adolescent % time with comother	-.17	-.21	-.33	-.33	.03	-.22	-.47
Adolescent closeness to both mothers	-.18	-.07	-.27	-.56	-.28	-.04	.50
Birth mother was single at T5	.30	.47	.21	-.82	.49	.15	-.89
Comother was single at T5	-.08	.32	-.05	-.84	-.24	.01	.62
Birth mother no. partners after breakup	.03	-.17	.13	.82	-.36	.11	1.12
Comother no. partners after breakup	.25	.71	.47*	-.74	-.16	.46*	.88
Mothers' relationship quality per adolescent	-.08	.59*	-.16	-2.15*	-.26	-.19	.14
Mothers' relationship quality per birth mother	-.20	-.04	-.30	-.72	.61	-.53**	-2.99**
Mothers' relationship quality per comother	-.19	.32	-.28	-1.29	.07	-.22	-.47
Psychological health problems (STPI)^a							
Years since breakup	.33	.31	.37	.18	.11	.31	.46
Adolescent life satisfaction	-.56***	-.69***	-.45	.99	-.81**	.37	1.59
Adolescent % time with comother	-.27	-.27	-.28	-.03	-.41	-.22	.46
Adolescent closeness to both mothers	-.18	.03	-.30	-.92	-.20	-.03	.35
Birth mother was single at T5	.32	.64**	.11	-1.76	.80	.12	-2.12
Comother was single at T5	-.02	.28	-.22	-1.13	-.40	-.06	.65
Birth mother no. partners after breakup	.26	-.08	.43	1.45	-.19	.38	1.29
Comother no. partners after breakup	.14	.60	-.08	-1.51	.29	.05	-.33
Mothers' relationship quality per adolescent	.01	.49	-.20	-1.89	-.43	-.01	.83
Mothers' relationship quality per birth mother	-.25	-.32	-.20	-.09	.12	-.31	-.96
Mothers' relationship quality per comother	.15	.39	.01	-.84	.02	.28	.43

^aBased on the mean scores of three STPI subscales (trait anxiety, trait anger, and trait depression).

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

internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behavior in their offspring.

DISCUSSION

Parental relationship dissolution presents challenges to all types of families. The overall impact depends on numerous factors, ranging from individual resilience to family communication styles to the ability to stay connected during transitions (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1999). In addition to the routine hardships associated with parental separation, same-sex parents contend with cultural scrutiny of their choice to form families in the first place, followed by further criticism if they break up (Garner, 2004; Oswald & Clausell, 2006).

Key findings in the current study of separated-mother lesbian families were that there were no significant differences in adolescent psychological well-being associated with coparent adoption or shared custody. On two of the five studied family characteristics (length of time since the mothers broke up, adolescent life satisfaction, quality of the relationship between the adolescents and their mothers, mothers' partnership status after breakup, and quality of the relationship between the separated mothers), a significant difference was found between families with and without coparent adoption. In contrast to families without coparent adoption, those with such status remained intact significantly longer, and the offspring were more likely to report closeness to both mothers. The only characteristic associated with adolescent psychological well-being was adolescent life satisfaction, independent of coparent adoption or shared custody status. With regard to coparent adoption or shared custody status, correlations differed only for the associations between adolescent psychological well-being and how the adolescents and birth mothers perceived the quality of the interactions between the ex-partners.

The data also revealed that nearly all breakups occurred by the time the NLLFS offspring were 13 years old and before the former couples could have obtained the legal equivalent of same-sex marriage or civil union in their state of residence (Badgett, 2009; Gates, Badgett, & Ho, 2008; Rothblum, Balsam, & Solomon, 2008; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004). Custody arrangements were typically negotiated by the separating mothers (Gartrell et al., 2006). Even though some former couples did not have the

option of coparent adoption and others chose not to pursue it, nearly three quarters were sharing custody after breaking up, and they were more likely to do so if the comother had legally adopted the index offspring. This association between coparent adoption and shared custody could have been a causal relation or a selection effect. In some NLLFS families, sharing custody after breaking up may speak to the enduring qualities of relationships built on equality. In others, having legal coparent status may have served as a reminder that, if warranted, the comother could pursue legal action if her parenting rights were challenged (Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000, 2006; Goldberg, 2010).

Although the rate of parental separation in this study is higher than the divorce rate among the heterosexual parents of age-matched adolescents in the U.S. National Survey of Family Growth (Gartrell et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005, 2006), nearly three quarters of separated NLLFS mothers are sharing custody, in contrast to a majority of divorced heterosexual American mothers who have sole physical and legal custody of their children (Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005). Shared childrearing after heterosexual divorce has been associated with more favorable outcomes, particularly if the relationship between the ex-partners is amicable (Emery, 2011). The shared arrangements in most separated lesbian-mother families may account for the relatively high scores on life satisfaction reported by adolescents in the present study. Other possible explanations for these YQOL-R scores are that in almost all separated-mother families, more than 5 years had elapsed since the breakup, and on average, the mothers rated their communication with their ex-partners as relatively cordial. Also, the NLLFS mothers have a history of relying on counseling and other forms of support at times of difficulty (Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000, 2006). Establishing a home environment that encouraged open communication about diversity and discrimination may have set the stage for processing feelings about other life challenges, such as the mothers' relationship dissolution (Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000, 2006; Goldberg, 2007).

That coparent adoption status and custody arrangements bore no association to the psychological well-being of the adolescent offspring in separated-mother families may reflect the small size of the subgroups. Although the offspring

typically spent more time with their birth mothers, families in which the comothers had legally adopted remained intact significantly longer after the index offspring's birth; the offspring in such families spent more time with their comothers, yet rated the quality of their mothers' relationship lower. The latter finding may be explained in part by the overlap in families with coparent adoption and shared custody. Adolescents who regularly spent time with both mothers may have witnessed more residual conflict between the ex-partners than adolescents who saw their comothers less frequently.

In families without coparent adoption, the finding that adolescents with fewer behavioral problems rated the quality of their mothers' interactions lower may be a reflection of family dynamics or resilience or both. A previous study on the entire NLLFS sample found that adolescents who demonstrate close, positive relationships with their mothers demonstrate resilience in response to stigmatization (Bos & Gartrell, 2010). Preparation for the prospect of adversity may have facilitated the development of coping strategies in adolescents whose mothers broke up, especially if the ex-partners failed to resume an amicable relationship.

Finally, in families with shared custody, birth mothers who gave lower ratings to the communication with their ex-partners reported more behavioral problems in their adolescent offspring. Ongoing conflicts between ex-partners who interact on a regular basis may have had a negative effect on the psychological adjustment of their offspring.

A strength of the NLLFS is that it is a prospective longitudinal study with a very high retention rate over a quarter century. Its quantitative and qualitative design allows in-depth exploration of family members' perceptions and experiences at different time intervals, with the opportunity to track continuity and change in family structure, the impact of parental separation on well-being, and factors that contribute to successful family transitions. In addition, gathering data from mothers and offspring provides more nuanced perspectives on family outcomes.

This study is limited in that it is a convenience sample that is not necessarily representative of the population of same-sex parented families as a whole. It bears replication with more ethnically, racially, geographically, and economically diverse samples. Although the NLLFS is the largest and longest running prospective

investigation of planned same-sex families, our findings would be strengthened through diverse population studies that compare same- and different-sex parent families formed through DI, adoption, surrogacy, and traditional methods. In addition, the current study would benefit from more information about the couples' interpersonal processes as they considered the option of coparent adoption, when available, and negotiated custody arrangements at breakup.

The present study also raises considerations for family health professionals. The detrimental effects of parental relationship dissolution have been well documented in the empirical literature (Emery, 1999). In heterosexual families, high rates of parental conflict are associated with more litigation and poor child outcomes (Emery, 2011). For same-sex parent families, it is important for clinicians to understand the interplay between the legal and contractual arrangements a separating couple may have chosen—to the extent that coparent adoption is available—and the interpersonal strengths and skills that each parent may or may not bring to difficult negotiations. As an example, a clinician might explore the separating couple's history concerning shared parenting, asking (a) had the mothers established an egalitarian parenting arrangement prior to the breakup and (b) had the mothers experienced conflict over parenting style, parent-child bonding, or public acknowledgment of the comother's role. If divergent parenting styles is the issue, the mothers might be advised to enroll in a parenting skills enhancement course. Interventions for a separating couple that failed to establish an egalitarian parenting arrangement might include helping the mothers calendar a custody schedule that specifies who will attend which special events, when the child will be with each mother, and who is responsible for child-related activities. Professional guidance is also warranted when separating couples have difficulty developing a process for dispute resolution.

Our findings suggest a number of topics for future research. (a) What is the influence of homophobia on custody arrangements after same-sex parents separate (Bos, Gartrell, Peyser, & van Balen, 2008; Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort, 2008; Gartrell & Bos, 2010)? For example, if the biological mother attempts to invalidate the comother's legal adoption status, is she more likely to prevail with a judge who opposes same-sex parenting? (b) At the time of relationship dissolution, do same-sex

parents seek support and guidance from their families of origin, other lesbian and gay friends and parents, and heterosexual divorced parents (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2011)? Such information will assist family health professionals in tailoring their interventions to the types of resources that may be most beneficial. (c) How will same-sex marriage affect relationship dissolution rates in lesbian- and gay-parent families (Badgett, 2009)? Are custody negotiations likely to shift from the private to the public arena when coparent adoption is universally available? (d) How do separated same-sex-parent families compare with the families of their divorced heterosexual siblings (Rothblum, 2001)? Are same-sex couples more likely than different-sex couples to share custody when they break up? How do the psychological health outcomes compare for same- and different-sex-parent families in which the parents have separated?

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to provide empirical longitudinal data on parental relationship dissolution in planned lesbian families. Our findings show that nearly all breakups occurred before the former couples could have obtained the legal equivalent of same-sex marriage in their state of residence. At the age of 17, most offspring rated their satisfaction with life relatively high, and most mothers considered the communication with their ex-partners cordial. Separated mothers were significantly more likely to share custody if the comother had legally adopted the offspring. The percentage of adolescents reporting closeness to both mothers was significantly higher in families with coparent adoption. As legal co-custody and guardianship becomes more universally available, regardless of a parent's sexual orientation or biological connection to the child, future studies will continue to expand our understanding of family dynamics when same-sex parents break up.

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