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Maternal Attachment and the Role of Disparate Biology in Lesbian Co-Mothers

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Annisha J. Peets

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Maternal Attachment and the Role of Disparate Biology Amongst Lesbian Co-Mothers

by

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MSc, Walden University, 2015

MSW, The University of Georgia, 2005

BA, The University of North Carolina – Greensboro, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology Program

Walden University

May 2022

Abstract

Lesbian co-mothers represent a unique population whose alternative family structure has received additional attention resulting from legal changes permitting same-sex marriage. Challenging the heteronormative status quo through lesbian mothering offers numerous facets of familial relationship development and dynamics that are worth exploring. Prior research has focused on exploring how adoptive lesbian co-mothers navigate the emotional connections to their children; however, it has not adequately explored how lesbian couples negotiate unequal biological ties to their children and the extent to which biology influences which mother forms a primary bond to the child. This study explored the disparate role of biology and any influences on perceptions of equality or hierarchical connections in lesbian family relationships. Relying on queer theory, attachment theory, and family systems theory, a qualitative paradigm was used to explore the lived experiences of shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers when there was a disparate biological connection to their child. The findings revealed that there were experiential differences that occurred in shared motherhood specifically related to perceived attachment hierarchies, validation in the mothering role, and gestational envy. These differences were highlighted through seven identified themes in the data, including communication, parental desires, time spent, bonding activities, hierarchical attachment, gestational envy, and validation. The findings may be used by clinicians to promote positive social change through a better understanding of the family dynamics that may occur in lesbian-led families.

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Dedication

I dedicate my work to my sons, who have held me steadfast in my purpose throughout this journey. To my parents, I extend my humble gratitude for your guidance and encouragement that nurtured my tenacity throughout the years. You have always taught me to dig deep and work hard for the things that I aspire to achieve. I also dedicate this work to my family and few close friends for your unwavering support throughout this process. I will always appreciate all that you have done to encourage me, help with the boys, and allow me to rest and regain my strength to persevere. You know exactly who you are and the role you have played. From the bottom of my heart, I extend my gratitude to you. Finally, I dedicate this labor of love to the LGBTQ+ community. As an ally, I intend to continue to provide a platform for your voices to be heard and to assist in informing clinical providers on how to work best with you in treatment.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	3
Problem Statement.....	9
Purpose of the Study.....	14
Research Question	14
Theoretical Framework for the Study.....	15
Nature of the Study.....	17
Definitions.....	20
Assumptions.....	21
Scope and Delimitations	21
Limitations	23
Significance.....	24
Summary	25
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	28
Introduction.....	28
Literature Search Strategy.....	30
Theoretical Foundation	32
Queer Theory	36
Family Systems Theory	39

Attachment Theory	42
Literature Review Related to Key Concepts.....	44
Heteronormative Discourse	45
Lesbian Unions and Legal Imbalances	51
Hierarchical Dynamics and Quality of Couple Relationship.....	57
Summary and Conclusions	63
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	66
Introduction.....	66
Research Design and Rationale	66
Role of the Researcher	68
Methodology	70
Participant Selection Logic.....	70
Instrumentation	73
Researcher-Developed Instruments	75
Procedure for Pilot Study.....	76
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	78
Data Analysis Plan.....	80
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	83
Credibility	83
Transferability.....	85
Dependability	85
Confirmability.....	86

Intercoder reliability.....	86
Ethical Procedures	88
Summary.....	91
Chapter 4: Results.....	93
Introduction.....	93
Pilot Study.....	93
Setting.....	94
Demographics	95
Data Collection	96
Data Analysis	98
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	101
Credibility	101
Transferability.....	102
Dependability.....	102
Confirmability.....	103
Results.....	103
Communication.....	105
Parental Desires	106
Time Spent.....	108
Bonding Activities	111
Hierarchical Attachments.....	113
Gestational Envy.....	116

Validation.....	118
Summary.....	121
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	124
Introduction.....	124
Interpretation of the Findings.....	125
Heteronormative Discourse	126
Lesbian Unions and Legal Imbalances	129
Hierarchical Dynamics and Quality of Couple Relationships	131
Limitations of the Study.....	136
Recommendations.....	138
Implications.....	140
Conclusion	144
References.....	147
Appendix A: Demographic Survey.....	163
Appendix B: Interview Protocol.....	164
Appendix C: National Crisis Hotlines by Country	166
Appendix D: Social Media Recruitment Flyer	167
Appendix E: CITI Program Ethics Course Certification	168
Appendix F: Walden Internal Review Board Letter	169

List of Tables

Table 1. Relationship Between Research Question and Interview Questions 81

Table 2. Results Summary: Frequency of Thematic Codes..... 104

List of Figures

Figure 1. Tri-Theoretical Framework 35

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Lesbians live under scrutiny and social stigmas attached to their marginalized population in many countries. For instance, heteronormative family structures that include a heterosexual couple and their children demonstrate a predominant and established societal belief that individuals are categorized by discrete yet complementary gender roles within the family (Gamson, 2000). The traditional heterosexual family is fashioned as a guide for appropriate partnering, child-rearing practices, normative parenting behavior, and social acceptability (Oswald et al., 2005). Heteronormativity then assigns gender normed roles to intrafamilial interactions based on assumed relational dynamics between individuals of the opposite sex obscuring the diversification of sexuality and alternative familial identities (Peterson, 2013).

Lesbian led families challenge the core concepts of marriage and family to legitimize and denote important relationships without the assumption of heterosexuality. Within the prevailing discourse, there is limited language to describe the experience of sexual minorities (Peterson, 2013). For example, the term *other mother* is a subtle yet significant factor in queer language discourse that can denote inequality within the relationship (Peterson, 2013). Biological expressions of motherhood represent a similar inequality that privileges biological motherhood over social motherhood (Dunne, 2000; Hayman et al., 2013). The term *disparate biology* illustrates circumstances where lesbians opt into shared motherhood with only one mother sharing a biological connection to their child. Limited dialogue in this area creates a dualistic system based on

unclear representations of the lived experiences of the population that includes same-sex led nuclear families (Dunne, 2000).

In this study, I examined the actual lived experiences of lesbian-led nuclear families under conditions of disparate biology and illuminated the experiences of lesbian co-mothers that may contribute to the development of primary mother-child attachment within same-sex nuclear families. As only one woman carries and births the child, thereby establishing a genetic relationship, the other mother experiences a disparate and perhaps unparalleled mother-child relationship (Paldron, 2014). Such a disparate connection places the other mother in the position where she may experience feelings of exclusion and/or inequality around her recognition as a viable mother (Hadley & Stuart, 2009).

How lesbian-led families share motherhood has important social implications on the family system. Mothering is often synonymous with care, nurturance, and protection (Hadley & Stuart, 2009). The potential social implications of this study included the legal and sociopolitical aspects that operate against heteronormative standards, which may influence how each mother views herself in respect of their child, and accordingly, how each mother relates to their child. However, experiences around feeding, caretaking routines, affection, mothering roles, and parental inclusion may have a profound influence on the parent-child relationship despite genetic connection.

This chapter includes an introduction of the concept of maternal attachment and the role of disparate biology in the relationships of lesbian co-mothers and provides a brief background of relevant research literature. Further, in this chapter, I outline the

research problem, its relevance, and its impact on current social norms and practices while also highlighting the psychological significance. Referencing three key psychological theories, namely queer theory (de Laentis, 1991), family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), I offer a theoretical underpinning for the research study. Using the contributions of these foundational theories, the phenomena of primary attachment formation and maternal jealousy is briefly described through the modified Van Kaam (1966) phenomenological design. As the study acknowledges limited discourse in this area, concise definitions of the key concepts and constructs are provided along with the specific scope of the study, its delineations, and limitations. The chapter also outlines the study's social significance and potential psychological contributions and implications for positive social change.

Background

Discriminatory legislative practices have denied same-sex couples the right to select a marital partner regardless of sexual orientation (Webb, 2018). Same-sex couples, therefore, have challenged legislation to protect and define their civil, marital, and familial rights (Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Patterson & Farr, 2016; Webb, 2018). The negative impact of enforcing only lawful heterosexual marriage has had far reaching implications for homosexual individuals, same-sex couples, and their families. The U.S. Census Bureau (2021) established that same-sex couples were raising more than 1 million children in 2000. The American Community Survey recorded 980,000 same-sex coupled households in America, denoted by legal representation of domestic partnerships or civil unions in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Fifty-eight percent of these were married

couples, while the remaining 42% denoted unmarried unions with the majority of both being female couple households. Same sex married couples were generally half as likely as heterosexual married couples to have children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). These families are often deprived of critical legal protections related to child custody, family medical leave, recognized decision making, and survivor benefits among others (Webb, 2018).

Further, despite legal permissions for same-sex marriage in the United Kingdom and the United States (House of Commons, 2013; Webb, 2018), the normative views of families held by society continue to discount the parental competency of same-sex couples raising children (Gates, 2015; Human Rights Campaign, 2013). However, research has consistently demonstrated that children of lesbian mothers show little variance when compared with children raised in traditional families concerning psychological adjustment or sex-typed behavior, and there are even various strengths in lesbian co-mothering parenting styles (Golombok et al., 2014). Carone et al. (2021) indicated that children of lesbian mothers with an anonymous, known, or open identity donor demonstrated no differences in psychological adjustment. Further, McCannachie et al. (2020) suggested that the child's adjustment was more readily influenced by the quality of family dynamics and social stigmas than the structure of the family.

There has been a shift in the stability of same-sex led households where increases in social and legal acceptance of same-sex relationships have led to increased security in family relationships (Gates, 2015). This confidence is mostly due to intentionally raising children in same-sex households instead of being born to different-sex parents and being

raised by separated parents, one of whom is in the same-sex relationship. However, social norms and legal conditions can still influence how gay and lesbian individuals form relationships in families, with the adverse impact of societal stigma, legal policy, and public attitude being demonstrated in relational instability (Gates, 2015).

Same-sex parenting is complex where legal precedence and human civil rights may have a profound impact on the family system (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). One key aspect to consider is that laws prevent the right to parent equally in same-sex unions where there is a disparate biological relationship to the child. Such inequality influences work-family abilities, parental role and care duties, child custody, and decision-making rights (Webb, 2018). Inequalities among mothers may nurture feelings of maternal jealousy relating to relationship conflicts, bonding and direct care opportunities, and parental role validation.

Changing the legal status of marital rights has not implied a change in the entitlement to parent. Same-sex individuals who do not share a biological connection to their children, and are not married, must often establish legal recognition of their relationship to the child through adoption. Thus, mothers have found the need to legitimize their role within their families, and non-gestational mothers have found significance in establishing themselves as authentic mothers of their children (Hayman et al., 2013). Such mothers who parent within the context of same-sex unions challenge the heteronormative family beliefs that support a biological parent-child connection as essential to the creation of genuine and legitimate families (Hayman et al., 2013). When the non-gestational mother is legally disqualified, feelings of devaluation and social

invisibility may result (Gates, 2015; Hayman et al., 2013; McInerney et al., 2021). It is suggested that validation as a mother is important for the other mother in planned lesbian-led families as society privileges biological motherhood above social motherhood (Hayman et al., 2013). At the heart of the mothering experience for non-gestational mothers is the relationship between seeking connections with their family and seeking legitimacy as a mother (McInerney et al., 2021).

Additionally, in heteronormative families, it is expected and confirmed that primary parental bonds often develop between the mother and child, as the mother is perceived by Western societies to hold a more nurturing caregiver role (Bennett, 2003; Gates, 2015). However, lesbian-led families challenge this notion by offering two mothers as possible primary attachment figures (Bennett, 2003). Research has suggested that the nature and quality of the interaction with the infant are more meaningful than the mother's legal or biological connection to the child (Bennett, 2003). Biological disparity then offers the possibility that a non-biological mother could emerge as the child's primary attachment figure. This idea is particularly significant when considering that attachment relationships are often most influenced by the amount of time spent with the child, the quality of care provided, emotional investment in the child, and social cues the child receives about who is important (Colin, 1996). Legal status then becomes a significant factor of consideration, as the unequal legal status may influence emotional investment and social prompts about parental legitimacy (Bennett, 2003; Pelka, 2009). Further, despite their sexual orientation, many lesbians were raised in traditional

heteronormed families and therefore hold normed gender views about their role as a mother and that of primary nurturer and caregiver (Pelka, 2009).

Sharing motherhood is a relatively new phenomenon in which the understanding of familial dynamics and their impact on the lesbian relationship and parental relationships with children are not extensively represented in the literature (Bennett, 2003; Gates, 2015; Pelka, 2009). An increasing number of studies focus on lesbian parenting and bonding practices in adoptive mothers where neither parent has a biological connection to the child (Bennett, 2003; Goldberg et al., 2013; Tan & Baggerly, 2009), indicating that adoption is perceived to create an equal opportunity to bond (Bennett, 2003; Pelka, 2009). However, literature that focuses on attachment hierarchies has not yet considered the effect of parental relationships on child well-being within the context of planned lesbian-led families where there is disparate biology (Bennett, 2003; Goldberg et al., 2013; Paldron, 2014; Tan & Baggerly, 2009). Exploring parental relationships and their effect on child well-being can significantly contribute to the theoretical understanding of human development, legal decision, and societal perception (Bennett, 2003; Gates, 2015; Patterson, 2009; Pelka, 2009).

As heteronormative societal views assume that a biological connection leads to a primary bond, the research where adoptive mothers have established immediate quality bonds suggests a need for further research on families with disparate biology (see Hayman et al., 2013; Pelka, 2009). Exploration of the relational nuances of sharing motherhood may contribute to an understanding of relational dynamics between mothers and may have implications for relationship longevity.

Research in this area is pertinent, as legal and biological inequalities may foster a power imbalance within the lesbian relationship that places the child at risk if the couple should separate. A child may then risk losing a primary caregiver to the custody of the nonprimary but legally recognized or biological parent if the relationship dissolves (Bennett, 2003; Mundahl, 2016). This legal imbalance is a significant issue when considered against the statistical data (ONS, 2020) that supports a higher prevalence of divorce rates amongst same-sex female couples. The Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020) recorded 822 divorces amongst same-sex couples in England and Wales in 2019. This nearly doubled from their 2018 statistics that recorded 428 divorces of same-sex couples. Divorce among same-sex female couples represented 72%, with the average duration of marriage being a mere 4.1 years for women. This duration may reflect that same-sex marriage has only been legally recognized in the U.K. since March of 2014(ONS, 2020).

It is necessary to obtain an increased understanding of the issue given that same-sex marriage is now legal in many countries, yet many jurisdictions still lack an understanding of the parenting practices within lesbian family systems. Insight into relational attachments may assist judicial systems in making fair and informed decisions related to the care and socioemotional needs of the child should their parents separate. It may inform policies that directly influence the state of lesbian parenting and same-sex family relationships.

Problem Statement

The social and legal discourse of marriage and family exclude lesbian-led families as a viable pathway to parenthood, thereby disregarding the impact of relational complexities on the welfare of the involved children. Studies on lesbians test the societal, political, and legal views of normative sexualities. Rubin (2015) proposed that once a classification is labeled as “the norm,” inevitably, a conflicting “deviant/abnormal” category results. The specific behaviors or characteristics that comprise those categories affix to additional social practices and methods of social control. The LGBT community has made significant strides contesting the social norms and commands associated with the heteronormative family structure (Gates, 2015; Hunter, 2012) by gaining the legal right to marry when same-sex marriage laws passed. However, the integrity of same sex led families are challenged, scrutinized, and faced with significant inequalities (Gates, 2015). The family unit is a social construct attached to indicators of social meanings, whereby same sex led families are viewed as deviant (Hunter, 2012; Rubin, 2015).

O’Reilly (2019) asserted that despite feminist progressions, motherhood remains the unfinished business of women’s rights and liberation, as many who mother continue to be marginalized and oppressed. Sampson et al. (2018) highlighted the social prominence afforded to blood relations where the biological mother is positioned as the real or authentic mother, and where the heteronormative nuclear family is a representation of the family archetype. Within the larger institution of motherhood are mothers who acknowledge marginalization through experiences of alienation or stigmatization. Raith et al. (2015) and McInerney et al. (2021) recognized mothers who

believed they lack a voice in family discourse and those who feel obscured from society as they represent a deviant standard of motherhood because of their homosexual status. The number of women who mother outside of the ideal construct of motherhood continues to increase (Sampson et al., 2018). As such, necessary considerations are given to the plausible circumstances of oppression that occur within the context of mothering, and the opportunities for empowerment during mothering, especially for those who mother from a position of marginalization (Sampson et al., 2018).

The complexities of between-mother interactions and types of individual mothering activities help shape and evolve ideas related to what may be deemed normative and give new social meaning to the concept of mother. This complexity is pertinent when considering the lack of attention given to the dissolution of same-sex relationships where parents who do not share a biological connection are vulnerable in their legal right to maintain a parenting relationship with the child. Sampson et al. (2018) referenced the variant level of respect, recognition, and privilege relating to law and legal practices that are afforded to mothers based on a societal hierarchy that prioritizes heteronormativity. These normed standards privilege heterosexed families and biologism (i.e., the notion that the principal important and authentic familial relationship is based on biological connections), producing a hierarchy that influences the choices and opportunities for mothers.

Sarcinelli (2018) contended that whilst families have progressed toward restructuring the notion of a regular versus irregular family, such redefinition remains a topic of a political debate about the relationship between biologism and legal

relationship. The relatively novel configuration of the family represented in same-sex parented households often results in ambiguous relational statuses where intentional kinship is rarely socially or legally recognized (Sarcinelli, 2018). Gates (2015) referred to family law legislation that reiterates the significant role of biology when defining a parent, where default status is given to a biological progenitor unless otherwise specially indicated. There are legal definitions for parent offered by way of biological parent, adoptive parent, and stepparent; however, the other mother does not fit neatly into any such definition. As a result, misalignment occurs between the mother's practical kinship status and legal kinship status (Sarcinelli, 2018). Legislation related to the family and familial practices further acknowledges that in instances of divorce, the child's best interest is of paramount consideration in making a parenting order (Gates, 2015).

Challenging the heteronormative status quo of familial roles, responsibilities, privileges, and practices, same sex led families present a reconfiguration of the normative family system. Opportunities, therefore, emerge for psychologists to further explore familial concepts that include relative discourse and identification of principles that recognize diverse family structures. Professionals who work alongside mothers and other mothers can advocate for, and give recognition to, an all-inclusive mothering approach that does not alienate the role of nurturer based on biologism or legal kinship. This may assist mothers in experiencing motherhood as an empowering experience instead of an oppressive experience.

The various roles of motherhood, including that of practical kinship and legal kinship, are essential considerations that highlight the possibility of a primary mother that

is not based on biological connections. Understanding the role and practices of a primary mother and the equivalent, or complementary, role of the other mother is then critical when determining continued relationships in spite of biology during same-sex divorce proceedings (Pelka, 2009). Patterson and Farr (2016) explored the legal implications as LGBTQ+ individuals experience transitions in their social and legal status as laws begin to change to allow for same-sex marriage. The researchers indicated how social science research may inform policy that directly impact the state of gay and lesbian parents and their children. This research included defining and understanding the many pathways to parenthood that may be taken by lesbian and gay parents and an exploration of the influence of biology on family relationships. Exploring and defining the relational interactions that occur within lesbian-led families both between mothers and between mothers and child may assist in advancing the societal, political, and legal interpretations of normative families. It will give credibility to the complexity of same-sex family dynamics and offer the opportunity for legally recognized parental equality, validating the parent-child relationship for both mothers. It may also lessen the strain that legal inequality resulting from disparate biology may have on the relationship between mothers that may also contribute to maternal bloodline envy and perhaps dissolution of the relationship.

Malmquist (2015) acknowledged that lesbian couples strongly value both relationship equality and equality in attachment relationships with their children. However, these values are not often legally recognized, leaving the other mother feeling devalued (Gates, 2015). Gates (2015), Malmquist (2015), Paldron (2014), and Patterson

and Farr (2016) suggested that issues related to the intimate family connections within same sex led families are relevant to the discipline due to their significant impact on social meaning, family systems, and child development. Further, literary evidence (Bennett, 2003; Gates, 2015; Patterson, 2009; Pelka, 2009) supports the notion that exploration of parental relationships and their effect on child well-being can significantly contribute to the theoretical understanding of human development, legal decision, and societal perception.

Feelings of devaluation and disparity may perpetuate relational imbalances that influence maternal jealousy and attachment bonds. Currently, there is a gap in the literature where the complex relational nuances of sharing motherhood under conditions of disparate biology in planned lesbian led families with consideration to the relational hierarchies that may exist within the family system have not yet been explored. Studying these dynamics through the lived experiences of lesbian couples may offer legal bodies and societies a better understanding of the relational difficulties that lesbian couples face during child rearing. Research in this area may inform policies that rectify the power imbalances by offering legal recognition of both mothers. Legitimate identification of both mothers may, in turn, lessen relational inequality and associated feelings of maternal jealousy, while also providing more favorable social cues that influence parent-child attachment. Planned lesbian-led families may then experience a better quality of familial relationships and enduring unions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of planned shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers when there was a disparate biological connection to their child. In this study, I focused on the relational dynamics that influenced hierarchies within the family system. It was necessary to obtain an increased understanding of the issue given that same-sex marriage is now legal in many countries and that female same-sex couples are statistically more likely to end in divorce when compared to male couples (ONS, 2020).

Without an understanding of the parenting practices within lesbian-led family systems, including information regarding relational attachment, judicial systems may default legal care during separation to the biological parent. There is a gap in the literature regarding how lesbian co-mothers experience biology relative to a hierarchy of attachment when two nurturers were present (Bennett, 2003; Colin, 1996; McKelvey, 2014). Further, the family dynamics related to maternal jealousy in the co-mothering relationship and the parent-child relationship had not been explored in disparate couples. Exploration of these factors may contribute to an understanding of relational dynamics between mothers and may have implications for relationship longevity. These factors may have a significant impact on the care and well-being of the child if the lesbian relationship dissolves.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology?

RQ2: What are the lived experiences of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework is composed of three theories: queer theory (de Laurentis, 1991), family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). Queer theory (de Laurentis, 1991) is one of the few approaches that attend to the study of gay/lesbian issues and issues related to social construction and social norms. It highlights the political aspects that contribute to the establishment of social perceptions regarding same-sex relationships as normative or deviant. The theory sheds necessary light on the unique issues that lesbians face within the political/legal arena that influence their identities and relationships. Therefore, queer theory is essential to understanding critical intra-familial processes that may affect relational dynamics between lesbian co-mothers. The family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) discusses the interconnectedness of family members and therefore lends itself to exploring complex family relationships like that of lesbian co-mothers. How mothers navigate the co-mothering relationship is intimately connected to the processes of parent-child bonding, as according to this theory, families are emotionally interdependent upon each other (Bowen, 1978). The emotions and behaviors experienced within the system will then impact each member of the system. Family systems theory provides a basis to explore maternal bloodline envy and

the associated stability interferences as family members navigate the fluctuations in their relationships.

Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory is one of the most prevalent and empirically-grounded theories of parenting that focuses on the parent-child relationship (Bennett, 2003). The theory is referenced on countless occasions to help explain how bonds form as well as the implications of these bonds on the future outcomes of the child. The theory supports the concept that children will identify a primary nurturing bond amongst caregivers and that this bond is largely a function of nurturing bonding activities that occur between parent and child. The theory posits that attachment first exists within the context of the mother-child relationship. As lesbian co-mothers offer two contextual mother-child relationships, exploration of the lived experiences of lesbian-led families will help to distinguish how a primary bond forms when there are two mothers present. Posada et al. (2016) shared that the relationship between the quality of care that a child receives and their attachment security is a cornerstone of the attachment perspective that considers a parent-child dyadic exchange. It is then suggested that the structure of a parent's behavior is central to a child's feelings of security and that a child will prioritize relationships based on this sense of security (Posada et al., 2016). Chapter 2 includes a more detailed explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

Bowen's (1978) theory of family systems and Bowlby's (1982) foundational theory of attachment address the evolutionary and ethological approach to human relationships and familial connections, albeit through a heteronormative lens. Together, they offer theoretical underpinnings that support the processes of bonding between

mothers and between each mother and their child. Regardless of the stigmatization of lesbian family structures, research has indicated that individual outcomes are more strongly connected to the processes that occur within a family than the actual structure of the family (Farr & Vazquez, 2020). This study contains an exploration of the lived experiences of planned shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers when there is a disparate biological connection to their child. More specifically, the experience of each mother as they form connections with their child and between-mother experiences will offer a deeper understanding of the factors that significantly influence the relational dynamics of the family system. The notion of interpersonal connection formation underscores the theoretical framework composed of three theories including queer theory (de Laurentis, 1991), family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). Further exploration of the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers may reveal the role of disparate biology on the between mother relationship and mother-child attachment and bonding.

Nature of the Study

In this research inquiry, I used a qualitative phenomenological paradigm, which is consistent with gaining an understanding of the relational processes and parenting dynamics between lesbian co-mothers and their parental perceptions of any hierarchy within the attachment when there is an asymmetrical biological connection. An in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of this population represents observations of the influence of disparate biology on between mother dynamics and parent-child bonding from the perspective of the mothers, providing a richer understanding of their

experiences. The research questions were: (1) What are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology? and (2) What are the lived experienced of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child? Exploration of multiple relational dynamics within the lesbian-led family system provides better insight into how lesbian co-mothers navigate motherhood and co-parenting.

In the study, I employed a phenomenological approach by using inductive methods to illuminate the critical emotional and behavioral processes that lesbian co-mothers experience relative to their biological/ non-biological connection to their child. Relying on the modified Van Kaam (1966) method of analysis, individual participant interviews of members of both sides of the parenting dyad offered a holistic perception of the family's dynamics where the interviews captured deep and rich descriptions of the lived experiences of the lesbian-led family (Moustakas, 1994). Individual interviews of both non-gestational and gestational mothers were beneficial to illuminate essential elements of the family relationship by offering each participant the opportunity to describe interactions of relational dynamics from their unique perspective (Ganong & Coleman, n.d.). This approach maintained the integrity of the participants' narratives and experiences about the central phenomena of hierarchical attachment and factors that support inequality within the parenting relationship. Subsequent research and the application of queer theory to theories of attachment and family systems facilitated a

closer understanding and richer meaning of parent-child bonding and maternal bloodline envy in lesbian parents (Fish & Russel, 2018).

I collected data from participants using a convenience sample. Sources of eligible participants included LGBTQ+ support groups, advertisements in lesbian-oriented social media accounts, and word of mouth. The participant sample included lesbian mothers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Potential participants were considered for inclusion if participants were in an established lesbian relationship, intentionally planned to extend their family within the context of their relationship, and one mother shared a biological connection to the child while the other did not.

During recruitment, each participant was asked to complete a demographic data sheet that included participant's age, length of time in the current relationship, legal relationship status to their partner and child(ren), duration of cohabitation, number, ages, and gender of children, and the method of conception. These data were used to ensure that participants met the criteria for inclusion and assisted with the transferability of the study's outcomes, specifically the ability to apply the results to similar circumstances (Salkind, 2010).

Participants that met the criteria were provided a consent form that explained the purpose of the study and interview procedures, their rights, and the potential risks of participation. Once the individual agreed to participate, I enrolled them in the study and scheduled an interview. Interview data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews of each participant and analyzed using the modified Van Kaam (1966) method of analysis to derive a contextual and structural description of the phenomenon under

study. non-gestational and gestational mothers were interviewed to ensure each perspective was represented in the study. To better understand how the participant experienced their immediate family relationships, the interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate analysis.

Prior to the implementation of formal data collection, I conducted a pilot study to gather information that provided guidance for the substantive study given the nature of the established interview questions and with consideration given to the global shift toward teleconferencing platforms in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pilot allowed the opportunity to critically review the qualitative questions for language and clarity of content and also assisted in establishing a reasonable expected interview duration. Malmqvist et al. (2019) argued that novice researchers who conduct pilot research studies become better informed and equipped to address challenges that may occur in the full study. Conducting a pilot study served the purpose of increasing my confidence with the data collection instruments, in this case, a semi-structured interview. Malmqvist et al. further suggested that conducting a pilot supports the rigor of the study by identifying any weaknesses that can be addressed thereby enhancing the quality of the research.

Definitions

Biological motherhood: Refers to having had the experience of pregnancy and childbirth via the use of donor insemination (Gregg, 2018).

Disparate biology: Refers to circumstances where two women engaged in an lesbian partnership intend to parent where one partner shares a biological/genetic relation to her child whilst the other does not (Clarke, 2008). These parents mother within the

context of unequal biological relationships, as the non-biological parent is present from birth yet has no genetic connection to the child (Paldron, 2014).

Other mother: Refers to the non-biological/ non-gestational lesbian mother who participates in social and practical motherhood (Paldron, 2014). This mother is engaged in the role of active mothering and care duties but does not share a biological connection with her child. Whilst this term is used often within LGBTQ+ discourse, the term is not well established in heteronormative discourse.

Assumptions

It was assumed that participants responded to the interview questions in a manner that was both honest and candid, which was essential to extracting meaningful themes relative to their experiences. The inclusion criteria of the participant sample were purposeful and appropriate, therefore providing assurance that all participants had experienced the same or relatively similar occurrences. Further, I assumed that the participants had a genuine interest in participating in the study without other incentives. These assumptions were necessary, as they assisted in denoting what was true or real in the participant's life.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I focused on the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers as they related to between-mother relations and mother-child relations within a parenting context. Exploring the complexities of this relatively novel family system was contingent upon the examination of intrafamilial roles and dynamics that influence how its individual members interact with, and respond to, each other. The study acknowledged that there are

multiple forms of lesbian-led families including adoptive mothers and those who share biological motherhood through intrauterine insemination, in vitro fertilization (IVF), intracytoplasmic sperm injection, and IVF with reception of oocytes from partners or what is commonly referred to as reverse IVF (Zeiler & Malmquist, 2014). However, this study focused on lesbian mothers who intentionally parented within the context of their relationship where one mother shared a biological connection to the child and the other did not. Parents who had children resultant from heterosexual relationships before the lesbian relationship were excluded from the study. Couples where both mothers distinguished their role through legal adoption in the absence of biological connection were excluded from the study, as were mothers who engaged in reverse IVF to share biological/gestational motherhood. Reverse IVF is the process by which one mother's fertilized eggs are placed into the other mother to be the gestational carrier. Whilst these mothering experiences may share some commonalities, the experiences related to disparate biology and intentional mothering in this context was unique to the participants of the study.

A theoretical framework that addressed maternal jealousy that was not considered for this study was that of social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which acknowledged a person's sense of self based on their external relationships. While the theory highlighted social comparison processes that may nurture feelings of injustice and jealousy, the theory was not used as this study was more concerned with the resultant impact of feelings of jealousy on the family system rather than the individual development of feelings of envy or resentment.

The theory of emotional availability was also considered due to its relation to the concept of attachment. Emotional availability (Biringen, 2008) was designed to provide an indicator of the quality of parent-child relationships using a dyadic model that allows measurement of both parental and child behaviors. Emotional availability focuses on various dimensions of the parent-child relationship (Saunders et al., 2015). However, the emotional availability rating scale requires that the child also be able to rate the parent-child relationship dyad. The theory was not used because there was no established age for participants' children and it could not be assumed that they would be of age to provide such information.

Limitations

As the study relied on convenience sampling, as opposed to random sampling, the results of the study could only be suggested toward a greater population. The study is limited in that its dependability relies on the quality of data collection and analysis of subjective participant data (Creswell, 2013). The dependability of the study refers to the ability to establish the findings of the study as consistent and repeatable (Creswell, 2013). Transferability was limited due to both the size and participant make-up of the sample. As the study was complex, unrelated factors such as the length of the relationship, age of children, and community supports may have prevented transferability of the findings. The participants were reasonably confident and socially explicit in their sexual identities and individualities relating to their sexual preferences. Therefore, this study might not transfer to those individuals who remain unsure of, or socially guarded

about, their intimate relationships that may be less likely to submit to an interviewing process (Pelka, 2009).

Cultural biases related to heterosexual norms, gender norms, and expectations of parental bonding activities were expected to influence study outcomes, as I was traditionally gender reared in a heteronormative society. To maintain objectivity and validity of the data, I conducted in-interview member checking. Alternate explanations for the emergent themes were considered to strengthen the researcher interpretation (Salkind, 2010). When data collection from the sample yielded no new information, saturation was attained (Hayman et al., 2013).

Significance

Motherhood represents a universal phenomenon that is generally assumed within a heteronormative context and discourse (Webb, 2018). The manner in which lesbian-led families share motherhood has significant implications on the family structure. The societal stigmas attached to diverse family structures such as lesbian-led families have been recognized as contributing to significant stressors that affect the relationships in lesbian family dynamics (McKelvey, 2014; Pelka, 2009). Lesbian co-mothers who have disparate biological relationships with their child also face difficulties with parental inclusion and inequality, social invisibility, legal disadvantages relating to child custody, disparities in parental decision-making rights, and intrarelational envy (Hayman et al., 2013; Malmquist, 2015; Paldron, 2014; Webb, 2018). Some mothers may find these challenges insurmountable, leading to significant difficulties in the relationship that threaten the dissolution of the relationship. This is particularly significant as legal and

biological inequity in the lesbian relationship may foster a power imbalance that places the child at risk should the couple separate (Bennett, 2003; Mundahl, 2016). With the divorce statistics of same-sex female couples recorded at 72% with an average duration of about 4 years (ONS, 2020), legal imbalances suggest that a child is in jeopardy of losing a primary caregiver to placement in the custody of the nonprimary but legally recognized biogenetic parent.

The findings of this study contribute to the body of literature that informs psychological, sociological, and legal practices associated with family systems by highlighting factors that influence, strengthen, or threaten intra-familial relationships in lesbian-led families. The findings of the study support policy and legal changes toward the provision of equitable care and legal protections to childbearing lesbian couples to diminish the number of societal stressors that may negatively impact lesbian relationships. In doing so, therein lies the opportunity for positive social change by increasing knowledge that could potentially strengthen and enhance lesbian-led family systems and offer the emotional and physical welfare of the child as legally and socially paramount.

Summary

Much of the discourse related to family systems and mothering is based within a traditional heteronormative position. Lesbian-led families challenge the normed concepts of marriage and family by offering two nurturers with whom a child can form a primary bond. The disparity in biological expressions within the relationship introduces factors that may influence which mother emerges as the primary mother to the child. While

normative legal standards privilege biogenetic motherhood over social motherhood, many factors including direct care opportunities and parental role validation are important aspects to consider in the development of the mother-child relationship (Salinas-Quiroz et al., 2018). Similarly, these factors also likely influence the between mother relationship and may foster feelings of maternal jealousy.

In this study, I examined the actual lived experiences of planned shared motherhood and relational dynamics of lesbian co-mothers who mother through circumstances of disparate biology. It was suggested that biogenetic and nonbiogenetic lesbian mothers likely experience a dissimilar yet intricate experience that perhaps creates an incomparable mother-child relationship (Paldron, 2014). Such a disparate connection could place the non-biological mother in a position where she might experience feelings of exclusion and/or inequality around her recognition as a viable mother (Hadley & Stuart, 2009). This was a significant factor, as a number of same-sex couple households are raising children; however, statistically, lesbian couples are more likely to end in divorce than gay couples (ONS, 2020; U. S. Census, 2015). It was indicated within the literature (Colin, 1996; Posada et al., 2016) that attachment relationships are most influenced by time spent, quality of care, emotional investment, and social cues the child receives about who is important. Legal disqualification of parenthood, feelings of devaluation, and social invisibility may all then influence the prompts and feelings of parental legitimacy. These factors may influence both the mother-child relationship and between-mother relationship such that if the lesbian

relationship dissolves, there are significant implications regarding continued custody and parental involvement for the child (Malmquist, 2015).

As the quality of bonds is important to consider in parent-child relationships, there was a gap in the literature regarding how biology influenced the hierarchy of attachment when two mothers were present. Additionally, the influence of maternal jealousy on the co-mothering relationship and mother-child relationship had not been explored in couples that shared disparate biological connections to their child (Pelka, 2009). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of planned shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers when there was a disparate biological connection to their child.

The study was explored using the underpinnings of queer theory (Rubin, 2015), family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) to discuss the interconnectedness of complex family relationships including relational processes, emotional interdependence, and bonding behaviors. Chapter 2 includes a detailed discussion of the literature surrounding the topics briefly reviewed here, including attachment and maternal jealousy. Chapter 2 contains the literature search strategy, theoretical foundation, literature review, and summary. The chapter will explain what we already know and what we have yet to learn about the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The integrity of same-sex-led families has been challenged, and scrutinized, and has faced significant inequalities rooted in heteronormative indicators of family. The social and legal discourse of marriage and family excludes lesbian-led families as viable by discrediting the motherhood experience because it does not fit the general representation of the family archetype. A social prominence is afforded to biogenetic relationships, and this can force non-biological mothers to parent from a position of marginalization, which can impact the family dynamics. While there have been numerous studies related to same-sex parenting, there appears to have been less of a focus on the dynamics and nuances of a lesbian family system. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of planned, shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers when there was a disparate biological connection to their child.

Researchers have acknowledged numerous types of family structures related to homosexual parenting (Bennett, 2003; McKelvey, 2014; Zeiler & Malmquist, 2014), yet the unique experiences of lesbian couples who share motherhood through disparate biology are limited in the literature. Discourse related to the concept of marriage and family is rooted in a heteronormative context such that viable parenting in lesbian-led families is largely disregarded (Gates, 2015; Hunter, 2012). Consequently, the prominent discourse also discounts the influence of relational complexities on the well-being of children relative to their continuity of care if parental relationships should dissolve. The purpose of this qualitative exploration was to illustrate the lived experiences of planned,

shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers when there was a disparate biological connection to their child. As same-sex marriage is now legal in many countries, it was important to obtain an increased understanding of the lesbian-led family dynamics. U.K. statistics indicate that female same-sex couples are more likely to end in divorce than male couples and the average length of marriage is approximately 4 years (ONS, 2020).

Sarcinelli (2018) argued that while the perception of families has progressed toward a restructuring of the concept of a family, the redefinition continues to be debated regarding the relationship between biogenetics and legal rights. The lesbian-led family system is a fairly newly recognized family structure only recently afforded legal permission, and the relational status of non-biological kinship to children is seldom acknowledged socially or legally (Sarcinelli, 2018). Family law legislation privileges the role of biology in the legal definition of *parent*, thereby conferring custodial status to the identified biological parent unless specifically directed otherwise (Gates, 2015). Parental terms such as *biological parent*, *adoptive parent*, and *stepparent* are legally established in the literature. However, there is no specific legally identified term that delineates and affords rights to a secondary mother who has primarily reared a child through practical kinship but does not share a biological connection (Gates, 2015; Pelka, 2009; Sarcinelli, 2018).

Motherhood includes various roles, responsibilities, and duties, many of which contribute to the development of enduring parent-child bonds (Bennett, 2003; Pelka, 2009). The body of literature related to same sex adoptions highlights the possibility for a non-biological mother to emerge as a primary mother (Bennett, 2003; Goldberg et al.,

2013; Pelka, 2009; Tan & Baggerly, 2009). When this role and its associated practices are fully considered and understood, it becomes critical to determine the continuity of such relationships that occur despite biology during same-sex divorce proceedings.

Lack of legal recognition and associated rights of non-biological mothers can nurture feelings of parental inadequacy and inequality, leaving these individuals feeling devalued (Gates, 2015; Malmquist, 2015; McInerney et al., 2021). Feelings of devaluation and inequality may perpetuate relational imbalances that influence the parent-child and between-mother dynamics within the family system. The literature did not fully address the experiences of lesbian co-mothers sharing motherhood through disparate biology relative to the influences and relationships of the parties within the family system. Exploration of these experiences may contribute to an understanding of the relational dynamics that occur in this type of family structure and may have implications for relationship longevity. Results of studies into these experiences may also influence the legal and social care policies that indicate the care and well-being of the child should the lesbian relationship dissolve.

This chapter is organized into sections that include the introduction, literature search strategy, theoretical foundation of the study, literature review, summary, and conclusion. The literature review is presented based on key concepts that relate to the current literature in this area.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature sources used were obtained through various search engines and database resources. I conducted a search of Walden University's online library and also

accessed articles from databases that included PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, EbscoHost, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, and the Walden Dissertation Library. I also used Google and Google Scholar to retrieve information from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Health Statistic Reports, Public Law Defense of Marriage Act, the Human Rights Campaign, House of Commons Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, Mundahl Law, Office for National Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau, and other online sites related to lesbian-led families.

Search entries included phrases and a combination of phrases related to the phenomenon such as *lesbian mother*, *lesbian co-mother*, *other mother*, *non-biological mother*, *(m)other*, *same-sex family*, *homosexual family*, *disparate biology*, *maternal jealousy*, *lesbian parent-child bonding*, *same sex marriage*, *domestic partners*, *two parent lesbian family*, and *legitimate lesbian mother*. In addition, I searched theoretical frameworks using the words: *homosexual*, *queer*, *attachment*, *relational*, and *family systems*. As I reviewed the literature, I focused on how lesbian couples develop and sustain bonds when their family system includes planned disparate biological connections to their children.

I implemented an iterative approach to the search process to develop the literature search framework. Beginning with the terms *lesbian* and *co-mother*, I collected articles that provided historical contextual data as well as further resource information (researchers, journals, references/bibliographies, books, and websites). Where appropriate, I reviewed the supplementary resource information and applied it to the literature search by retrieving original articles and sources. Through citation tracking, all

articles that were cited as notable relevant articles were reviewed to expand the base of the literature. When I reviewed the articles individually, I identified and isolated key concepts and their associated terms to include during key term searches. I also identified studies that were closely related to the phenomenon of this study to increase the relevance and alignment of the body of research evidence from which this study is drawn. I ensured that all related concepts were included and then revised and refined the scope of the study as I increased my knowledge of the topic from the literature. I repeated this process consistently until I no longer found new key terms or much of the literature indicated author reappearance. In accordance with Zwakman et al. (2018), I continued to review and refine the research questions based on the information supported in the literature to ensure the most valuable contributions to the topic were included, which would provide a strong evidentiary base for the study. In addition, I searched the dissertation database both at Walden University and external to Walden University to obtain examples of dissertations that used the same key terms and those that used the same phenomenological methodology. In the instances where I could not source a sufficient amount of current literature related to a relevant concept, I used older research studies such as the apparent original source of the information.

Theoretical Foundation

The complexities of this exploration are best supported by three theoretical underpinnings that include queer theory (de Laentis, 1991), family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). As I explored theories that might support the concept of lesbian co-mothers in a parenting role and the intricacies that may

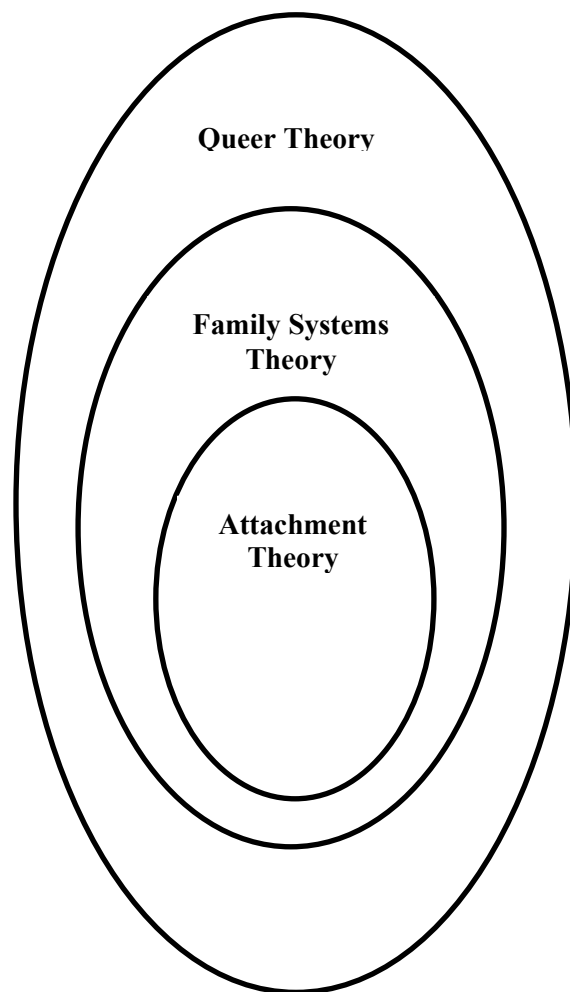
occur within the intrafamilial relationships, it was important to me to consider that these concepts occur outside the realm of heteronormativity. At a macro level, the larger society operates from a heteronormative perspective whereby the language generally associated with the terms *marriage* and *family* assumes heterosexual relationships. Language was important to consider, as it operates as the medium through which social meaning is attached. Language supports the delegation of gender roles and applies descriptive implications that delineate normal versus abnormal behavior. The family structure is influenced at a mezzo level by the social meanings, rules, and roles for acceptable behavior that are reinforced through social and legal sanctions and prohibitions. Family structures are also impacted by the internal family expectations and dynamics that come from family of origin and family partnership structures. When the structure of the family conflicts with the views and behaviors of the larger heteronormative societal framework, how individual members of the family relate on a micro level may be influenced. Further, at the micro level, inter-generational relationships and parent-child bonding play a role in understanding the experiences of family members.

Queer theory provided the macro-level lens through which the concept was explored. Queer theory lent credence to the variance in sexuality as it understands that this population operates outside the heterosexual norms of society. At a mezzo level, family systems theory supported the interconnectedness and relational dynamics of family relationships. However, this theory and its language are typically suggestive of heteronormative values and were considered within the context of queer theory to explore

the complexities of family relationships in lesbian-led families. Finally, attachment theory provided the study a footing to further explain the micro level concept of primary and secondary bonds in parent-child relationships. While attachment theory is ordinarily applied to heteronormative circumstances, queer theory functioned to modify the lens of attachment theory to extend to the bonding practices when two mothers were present. These theories taken together offered a comprehensive, yet structured, theoretical framework for this research study. The theories will be discussed in order of influence, starting with queer theory, as it represents a larger systemic position. Family systems theory will then be discussed, followed by attachment theory. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of the manner in which the three theories build upon one another to demonstrate the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Figure1

Tri-Theoretical Framework



Queer Theory

Queer theory operates as a derivative of *critical theory*, a theory dedicated to revealing and deconstructing the rigid claims that anchor cultural perceptions, beliefs, and practices (Conquergood, 1991). Conquergood (1991) explained that critical theory confronts the historical, social, and conceptual constructs that produce, influence, and place limitations on culture. Queer theory, which surfaced in the 1990s, has been influenced by researchers and theorists (Butler, 1990; de Laurentis, 1991; Rubin, 2015; Sedgwick, 2008) who accept sexuality as a fluid concept. Teresa de Laurentis, a scholar and critical-theorist associated with the feminist movement, is credited for coining the phrase *queer theory* in 1991 (Jagos, 2009). De Laurentis (1991) rationalized the use of the term to relate to three critical areas: (a) a rejection of heterosexuality as the standard for all sexual dispositions, (b) a concentration on gender that challenges the frequent assumption that gay and lesbian studies are a singular and standardized object, and (c) an assertion of the various cultural influences of race on the development of sexual biases. De Laurentis proposed these three areas as the rubric of queer theory that support the refinement and reconstruction of the discourse associated with sexuality. Queer theory then broadens its scope to embrace all forms of sexual identity and behavior that are branded as normative or deviant in society (Rubin, 2015). These theorists employed a deconstructionist critical approach to challenge heteronormativity and the associated institutions that intentionally or inadvertently privilege heterosexuality as a societal tenet and a standard to be upheld.

Jagos (2009) detailed the complex and disordered origins of queer theory in its attempts to emerge from an established feminist theory relative to gender and sexuality. Queer theory has been historically negated because it does not adopt a systematic set of tenets and lacks a foundational logic or consistent position. Queer theory is enigmatic and resists defining itself, whereas such refusal to demarcate itself has been largely accepted as a tactical strength. Lack of demarcation opens the theory to the possibility of endless opportunities to re-invent itself based on current knowledge (Edelman, 2004; Jagos, 2009).

Despite queer theory's lack of confirmation as an established theory within the literature, it firmly and consistently supposes an opposition to the normative. Queer theory relates to this study by lending credence to non-heteronormative sexualities and the variance that occurs in sexual practices (Butler, 1991; Rubin, 2015). Queer theory accepts the flexibility of sexuality and, therefore, does not offer firm definitions or descriptions of inclusions or limitations. Queer theory is not bound by a single identity; instead it relies on the notion that individual differences in sexuality are complex and acceptable (Sedgwick, 2008). Queer theory can be viewed as an evolutionary attempt to analyze the heteronormative movement that classifies individuals based on their sexuality. Averett (2021) argued that motherhood is often deconstructed as a pinnacle point to consider femininity. The feminist theorization of motherhood privileges biologism, demarcating it as an act solely performed by females and fails to consider parenting when motherhood does not align as expected. Averett indicated that queer

parenting research offers the opportunity to depart from a focus on biologism to contest heteronormative assumptions of family.

Few-Demo et al., (2016) used queer theory to challenge the inherently heteronormative discourse in the family studies field to include LGBTQ + parent families as a critical part of the conversation. Few-Demo et al. suggested a discourse analysis and paradigm shift that acknowledged the fundamental disadvantage of LGBTQ + parents while progressing toward an inclusion of LGBTQ + parents in social teachings related to family structure. Few-Demo et al. (2016) used queer theory as a platform to address prevailing heteronormative discourses and give credibility to sexuality variance that impacts same-sex led families. Previous researchers have supported the utility of queer theory to challenge the prevailing discourse as it relates to non-normative families. Similarly, Gregg (2018) used queer theory in a qualitative study of the healthcare experiences of lesbian women becoming mothers to construct a family structure that challenged traditional heteronormative views. Queer theory was used to introduce and reimagine the experiences of the non-biological mother whose assumptions regarding family may differ from their biological lesbian mother counterparts in terms of the socialization attached to achieving motherhood.

With an overt stake in its own indefinability, the efficacy of the theory rests on an ability for it to remain open to its own potential. Rubin (2015) highlighted the political aspects that contribute to the establishment of social perceptions regarding same-sex relationships as normative or deviant and challenged the associated social discourse, construction, and norms. The norms are particularly important as they not only relate to

legal and political aspects of normative practices, but also include the institutions of family and marriage. Social meanings, rules, and roles of a heteronormative family of origin, may be experienced and relayed inversely in a lesbian-led family and will have practical implications on the interpersonal relationships of the family members. As Gregg (2018) highlighted, queer theory also supports the notion that two members of a lesbian parenting couple could view and experience motherhood incongruently therefore, providing a supportive rationale to use this theory to explore shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers managing disparate biological relationships to their child.

Queer theory was selected for its utility in this study as it sheds necessary light on the unique challenges that lesbians face within political and legal institutions erected on heteronormative assumptions and identities. The research questions were directly related to queer theory in their study of queer parenting experiences such as that of lesbian-led families and co-mothering. The research questions offer insight into another layer of queer discourse that has the potential for incongruent mothering experiences of lesbians.

Family Systems Theory

The family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) discusses the interrelatedness and interdependence of individuals within a family unit suggesting that individuals operate as a function of their family, and are therefore, an instinctual unit that should not be considered in isolation. The fundamental basis of Bowen's (1978) theory supports the perception of the family as a visceral unit whereby any changes within the functioning of one member of the family unit, inevitably and involuntarily impose changes in the functioning of the other members of the family unit. The theory suggests that individuals

are interdependent and do not operate in isolation, but instead, automatically impact others in the family. Family systems theory is the first and most prominent theory to explain the influence of the person in their environment that can also be extrapolated to greater organizational structures (Hooper, 2007).

Family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) offers a foundation through which to understand complex family structures and relationships such as those of lesbian-led families and lesbian co-mothers. Mills-Koonce, et al. (2018) acknowledged three tenets of family systems theory that support its relevance to LGBTQ+ families. These tenets include the principles of wholeness and order, hierarchical structure, and adaptive self-organization. Essentially, Mills-Koonce, et al. explained these tenets as an extension of family systems theory that offers a framework for understanding how one event can initiate a multitude of subsequent events within the family, as well as understanding the effect of the individual family members' reaction to these events on their health and wellbeing. How mothers navigate the co-mothering relationship is intimately connected to the influence of larger organizations such as institutional structures and social meanings, but also the intimately connected processes of parent-child interactions. Family systems theory highlights the continuum along which family units rest, influencing and being influenced by, the greater society and the individual components of the family. It provides a vehicle through which to explore the intricate between-mother dynamics that may occur within the family unit relative to the societal influences on each individual. Hooper (2007) suggested that the family systems theory can also contribute to attachment theory to produce additional theoretical support through which to examine

parent-child attachment and relational processes pertaining to members of the family unit. How each member's behavior is executed within the family environment has significant implications for the individual members, the unit as a whole, and the interactions with the greater community (Mills-Koonce, et al., 2018).

Hooper (2007) and Mills-Koonce, et al. (2018) acknowledged the complementary application of using family systems theory alongside attachment theory to explain and highlight the specific relational experiences that occur in parenting that represent the events that occur within the family system, but also how they are then connected to the individual unit, with the child being at the center of the family unit. The coupling conceptualized by Hooper in her exploration of parentification acknowledged that according to the literature the central elemental bonds are maternally related such as in the case of this study. Additionally, numerous studies (Goldberg, 2009; Miscioscia, et al., 2017; Reczek, 2016) relied on family systems theory to assist in understanding and explaining aspects of same-sex family subsystems such as parenting roles and expectations, parenting desires, relationship satisfaction, and quality of relationship outcomes. In her qualitative exploration of ambivalence in gay and lesbian family relationships, Reczek (2016), utilized family systems theory to highlight the manner in which family connections are entrenched in the broader social constructs of heteronormativity. Reczek explored the conceptualization of family when considering same sex relationships and heterosexism. Miscioscia, et al., (2017) contributed a quantitative exploration to the literature that is set against the foundation of family

systems theory. They noted that the greater understanding of facets of familial subsystems was associated with exploring issues within the family subsystem.

The quality of family interactions and behaviors of the individuals are interrelated and best explained under the utility of the family systems theory (Miscioscia, et al., 2017) making it beneficial to be used in this study. There is a general understanding denoted in the literature where family systems is credited for usefully explaining the interrelatedness of the family members that contributes to the development of unique family dynamics and interactions. The research questions explored the concept of shared motherhood within a specific type of family subsystem and sought to gain an understanding of the inner workings of the family. Family systems theory is therefore, related to the relational dynamics and outcomes in a manner that is particularly relevant to this research study.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is revered as one of the most prominent theories to address the evolutionary and ethnological approaches to the development of human relationships (Bennett, 2003). The theory as posited by Bowlby (1982) has often been relied upon to explain the formation of bonds associated with functional and healthy development that are rooted in the quality of the parental attachment relationship (Hooper, 2007).

Attachment theory suggests that children will identify primary nurturing bonds (usually maternal) amongst caregivers and that the quality of this bond informs the child's future outcomes. The nurturing bonding activities that occur between parent and child and the information relayed regarding emotional security underlie the quality of the attachment (Bowlby, 1982). The social and emotional development of the child is grounded in the

child's experiences with their parent with an emphasis on security and consideration of parental separation, deprivation, and loss. The quality of the relationship between the parents and between the parents and their child is also noted as an important factor of parent wellbeing including relationship satisfaction and parent-child bonding (Little & Sockol, 2020).

Pelka (2009) conducted a qualitative exploration of the manner in which same-sex couples navigate the unequal biological connection to their children in terms of their ability to emotionally connect. Attachment theory is used successfully by Pelka (2009) as the framework to support the study of the development of emotional dynamics within the family system. Salinas-Quiroz et al. (2018) also explored lesbian shared motherhood and the implications of their dual presence on the parent-child relationships. They applied attachment theory to assist with the exploration and coding of themes related to quality of care to the child such as being available, expressing emotions, and agreeing on roles. The use of attachment theory supports the exploration of the family dynamics including maternal jealousy that may influence quality of care in same-sex led families.

Bowlby's earlier work recognized the intergenerational transmission of attachment relationships (Hooper, 2007) that are pertinent in this study. It gives reference to the heteronormative views and values of society, and the lesbian mothers' attachment styles that are developed from their family of origins. Further, the lesbian-led family structure confounds the original bounds of the theory by offering two contextual mother-child relationships and the possibility for either to emerge as a primary mother. As such, this research study is highly relevant to, and critically challenges, theories of attachment

that suppose one maternal primary caregiver. When one considers lesbian divorce through the trifocal lens of attachment theory, family systems theory, and queer theory, the significance of primary parental loss and its potential impact on the future outcomes of the child becomes significant. It is therefore, quite reasonable to address the research questions: (1) what are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology through the trifocal lens? and (2) what are the lived experiences of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child.

Attachment theory addresses the parent child relationship dynamics that present within the planned lesbian-led family system. Family systems theory supports the interconnectedness of the members of the family including the between-mother dynamics and mother and child dynamics. It also seeks to explore the influence of the larger society on the family subsystem whereby queer theory acknowledges the heteronormative views that may influence how couples identify themselves and manifest their roles within the family.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The literature review addresses the key concepts being studied, heteronormative discourse, lesbian unions and legal imbalance, and hierarchical dynamics and quality of couple relationship.

Heteronormative Discourse

Discourse is a relevant and pertinent feature of lesbian related research as language operates as a primary medium of expression that shapes one's world, one's identity, their sense of power, and their sense of oppression. Language further operates as a construct that distinguishes one's role and place in society through delineated classifications and their associated definitions (Hunter, 2012; Rubin, 2015). Rubin (2015) stated that the family system operates as a social construct with inherent indicators of social meaning where according to this heteronormative construct, same-sex led families are perceived and classified as deviant. According to Rubin, the use of the word 'deviant' indicates an abnormality and implies that there is something wrong with those individuals who comprise this classification, presenting them in a negative vein societally.

While the LGBTQ+ population has made significant strides challenging the societal and legal views attached to heteronormative family structures, same-sex led families are faced with significant inequalities (Gates, 2015). Notwithstanding the advances of the feminist movement, motherhood remains an area where many women experience marginalization and oppression (Averett, 2021; O'Reilly, 2019). Sampson et al. (2018) highlighted the social distinction given to biological parents as authentic and valid where the family archetype is represented by a heteronormative nuclear family within the discourse.

Heteronormativity as a social construct may be rooted in the notion that the involvement of both a male and female biological progenitor are required to produce offspring with this concept producing the socially and legally accepted definition of

family (Averett, 2021; Mundahl, 2016; O'Reilly, 2019). As such, alternative family arrangements that vary and embrace diversity in available relationship possibilities may be deemed less viable, and invalidated in the social discourse related to marriage and family. Patterson and Farr (2016) indicated that the discourse on marriage has also traditionally held that a marriage refers to the union of a male and female and, therefore, the concept of family is mutually heterosexual and patriarchal. The fairly recent legal recognition of same sex unions has contributed to a shift in the discourse related to the perception of marriage and similarly forces exploration of normative discourse by contesting the dominant standard (Malmquist, 2015; Rubin, 2015; Webb, 2018).

Lesbianism and motherhood have been traditionally portrayed as oxymoronic whereby lesbians are ostracized for an inability to conceive children, and if they do, are stated to provide substandard care (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Holland-Muter, 2018; Muzio, 1996). Holland-Muter (2018) argued that according to the discourse associated with hegemonic motherhood, a mother cannot be a lesbian and a lesbian cannot be a mother, as this very notion of becoming both undermines the essence of normative sexuality and disrupts the heterosexual matrix.

Research (Biblarz & Stacey, n.d.; Carone et al., 2020; Cowl, et al., 2008; Gates, 2015; Miscioscia, et al., 2017; Schofield, 2016) has confirmed that lesbian parenting and the outcomes of their offspring are comparably effective to that of their heterosexual counterparts. However, societal institutions continue to utilize heteronormative benchmarks and discourse whereby lesbian-led families are not often recognized and are subjected to a marginal existence (Perlesz et al., 2006). Perlesz et al. (2006) suggested

that lesbian parents and their subsequent family counterparts are forced to define and defend the alternative structure that is family. Peterson (2011) further offered queer theory as an opportunity to analyze the heteronormative discourse that illuminates the problematic binary social constructions fixed in the notion of stable and static gender and sexual identities. Queer theory contests the concepts of dyadic gender roles that underlie parental and familial roles and responsibilities that dictate socially accepted rules for how one is expected to behave relative to their position within the family.

Holland-Muter (2018) discussed discourse related to “the good (heterosexual) mother”, a key social construct that compels women to conform to heteronormative standards of motherhood. In her qualitative exploration using narrative interviews of 23 self-identified lesbian women in Cape Town, South Africa, she found that the measure of a mother was evaluated against a dominant social context and practice. The dominant social practice critically assigned gender identity roles associated with mothering that included prioritizing the needs of a husband and their offspring. The presence of two mothers introduced what could be seen as a replication within the family, where the presence of one mother represented a societal norm and the presence of a second in-home mother must be designated another term. The term for this within queer language is ‘other mother’, a subtle yet significant variance of expression that is used to distinguish between the two mothers and can denote an inequality within the relationship (Peterson, 2013). Reczek (2016) argued that this is because the biological expression of motherhood is privileged in society as being real and valid. The presence of another mother who does not neatly fit into the existing heteronormative definition of stepmother, foster mother, or

adoptive mother is socially misunderstood and often rendered invalid or non-viable (Hayman et al., 2013; McInerney et al., 2021).

While distinct roles and responsibilities are associated with mothering discourse under normative circumstances, the role and features of the other mother are not clearly defined or established. Limited discourse in this area creates a dualistic system of motherhood based on unclear representations of the actual lived experiences of lesbian-parented nuclear families where social/practical motherhood is not legally recognized or privileged (Dunne, 2000; Peterson, 2013). Further, the name a child designates to each mother attaches meaning and significance to their position in their lives, yet also delineates it from the position of the other mother. Brown and Perlesz (2008) analyzed the role of language in the portrayal of non-biological lesbian mothers that contributes to the perception of maternal viability. Their research of the literature suggested that discourse related to the maternal concept either affirms or deprecates the maternal identity of non-biological lesbian mothers. Further, they identified 45 different terms used to describe the lesbian mother who has not given birth to her children that likely influence the mothering and familial experience. Brennan and Sell (2014) explored the effects of language on the transition of social/ non-biological mothers into motherhood and found that this transition was affected by language across multiple areas. Their qualitative exploration included twenty women who were identified as social mothers through donor insemination. Brennan and Sell found that the language attached to the non-biological mother at an individual, family systems, and societal level influenced how validated mothers felt in their maternal roles whilst also acknowledging that commonly

and consistently accepted language for this role is largely nonexistent. The absence of written and spoken language that validates and recognizes the maternal role and identity of these mothers underscores a heteronormative standard that privileges biological motherhood (Brennan & Sell, 2014). Further, the limited discourse in this area does not explore whether or not, or the extent to which, the naming of each mothering role influences the attachment formation, or designates any such parental hierarchy (McKelvey, 2013).

In their qualitative exploration using multigenerational family interviews with 20 lesbian-parented families in Australia, Perlesz et al. (2006) analyzed how lesbian-parented families defined and described themselves. They referred to family as a verb rather than a noun, thus focusing on how the concept of family was performed rather than constructed. In doing so, the lesbian-led families were not compared against heteronormative standards but rather explored within the context of social progression, as people who were positioned to illuminate a richer understanding of family. By both defining and describing their personal experiences of family, an interplay between how individuals think about family and how they actually *do* family emerged. Perlesz et al. found that participants struggled with the influence of biology on defining features of their familial relationships. Biology emerged as a significant feature central to the description of the family, however, emotional support also emerged as a significant feature that may have existed in the absence of a biological relationship.

The alternative family forms acknowledge a shift from an emphasis on biological relationships to place more weight on social relationships, which serves to legitimize the

broader network that fosters fluidity in family relationships constructed by choice.

Perlesz et al. (2006) extrapolated from the interviews the complex connections between bloodlines and love-lines in the demonstration of family. It is significant to consider that often the mothers who choose to establish a lesbian-parented household, have themselves been reared under heteronormative standards and the dominant sociocultural context. As they adapt flexibly to the nuances of these circumstances, they too must shift culturally in their discourse, definition, and description of family (Baker, 2019; Fish & Russel, 2018; Mundahl, 2016).

As heterosexuality continues to be preserved as the default position of dominance and privilege within society, Peterson (2013) argued that there is limited language in the prevailing discourse to accurately describe the experiences of sexual minorities. The term disparate biology has been used to describe circumstances where lesbians choose shared motherhood when only one mother has a biological connection to their child. It is significantly different from circumstances of step-mothering where a male progenitor may continue to parent the child, and adoptive mothering where the mother may not have a biological relationship to the child, but is afforded the legal permissions and rights of parenthood.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Research Literature on Heteronormative Discourse

The literature associated with this key concept generally accepts the fluidity of gender and sexuality as well as the complexities of family systems. The majority of the literature accepts the concept as a relatively new phenomenon with various nuances that would benefit from continued exploration to foster understanding. In doing so, the

qualitative researchers offer lesbian mothers a voice and an overt stake in the discourse associated with mothering. By illuminating the impact of discourse on various aspects of mothering, the experiences of lesbian mothers are validated and can offer a contribution to social change efforts in this area. As heteronormative discourse is often assumed, the exclusivity of heteronormativity is explored in the research in a manner that highlights incongruences and their effects on the family system.

However, with little quantifiable evidence, it is difficult to extrapolate much of the research findings to the larger populations. A notable weakness in this area is that research participants have been relatively homogenous (white and middle class) across the studies, and therefore, findings may not necessarily be transferable across cultures and socioeconomic standings. Societal stigmas attached to lesbianism may cause the marginalized population to be less available to the additional intrusion of research studies.

Lesbian Unions and Legal Imbalances

Variance in sexual preferences has become more apparent in mainstream society resulting in the creation of families that operate against normed standards. The U.S. Census reported that same-sex couples were raising more than two million children in the year 2000 (Family Equality Council, 2012; U.S. Census, 2015). The American Community Survey (U.S. Census, 2021) recorded 980,000 same-sex led households denoted by legal acknowledgement of domestic partnerships or civil unions in America in 2019. In the same census, 33% of female same-sex led families indicated having at least one child under 18 years of age living in their homes. It was not further articulated

whether these children were intentionally reared in same-sex parenting circumstances or whether the children were born into heterosexual parent relationships that later transitioned into same-sex rearing. What is known, is that with or without legal permissions and privileges, one's sexual preference does not preclude their desire or ability to parent.

Although the incidence of lesbian motherhood has risen, the non-biological partners of biological mothers are not automatically recognized as viable parents. In many cases, non-biological lesbian mothers have no legal rights to their children and must fight even for social recognition and permissions as a result of inherently discriminatory legal practices that are based in heteronormativity (Patterson & Farr, 2016; McKelvey, 2013; Webb, 2018). Permissions naturally afforded to birth parents such as child custody, family medical leave, recognized decision making, and survivor benefits are not often assigned to non-birth mothers in the absence of a legal petition (Webb, 2018).

As the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in 2015, child custody decisions involving lesbian parents have also evolved (Mundahl, 2016). All fifty states in the United States permit same-sex adoption if one partner of the parenting couple is the child's birth or adoptive parent (Turco, 2019). Several states such as Massachusetts, California, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia amongst others allow same-sex second-parent adoptions to occur in civil unions, where if granted, a same-sex led family may experience joint parental custody of

their child offering some legal parity to the non-biological parent (Mundahl, 2016; Turco, 2019).

Notwithstanding these advances, legal statutes do not explicitly prohibit judicial members from considering one's sexuality when discerning the appropriate custodial agreement for a child (Mundahl, 2016). As such, characteristics that influence parenting such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender role behavior may be adversely scrutinized during proceedings like these. This can result in a parent being restricted from having legal parenting privileges and result in imbalances within the same-sex couple relationship. By statute, a non-legal parent has no rights to parenting time, custody, or decision making, which may be critical to consider especially in the instance that the relationship between parents dissolves (Mundahl, 2016; Peterson, 2011). While some states such as Massachusetts presume dual legal parental rights to both spouses in same-sex marriages into which a child is born, some parents may still find it necessary to pursue legal adoption to validate the dual parental relationship across other states and jurisdictions (Turco, 2019).

In their qualitative study that included 31 interviews of lesbian and gay parents and their six adult children, Gash and Raikin (2016) found that legal status ambiguity presented significant challenges for same-sex parents. These parents reported frustrations relating to inability to assert their legal rights in a variety of institutions such as health and education where authority figures challenged the legality of their parenting rights. Even when parents had been afforded the legal rights to their child, they often found themselves unable to adequately carry out their parenting responsibilities because the

individuals in authority did not acknowledge their ability to exercise their legal rights. Gash and Raiskin concluded that legal qualms, ignorance of the law, social apprehension, and ingrained social norms undermine the ability for same-sex parents to assert and perform their lawful duties as parents. This leaves same-sex parents in a battle to prove their parenthood and validate their role in their child's life. Gash and Raiskin further reported that parents are likely to have to continuously prove themselves in their parental role throughout the life of their child.

Similarly, Gabb (2017) utilized autobiographical information and original data from empirical research to advance the understanding of lesbian parenthood. Gabb found that entrenched heteronormativity and social contestation forced some mothers to feel the need to choose between motherhood and their sexuality. Both Gabb (2017) and Holland-Muter (2018) uncovered women's experiences that contribute to feelings that their sexuality must be kept distinctly separate from the construct of motherhood in order to be viewed by society as a good mother, thus contributing to the notion that non-biological motherhood is socially invisible. Women are forced to surrender a key part of who they are and find difficulty in achieving both motherhood and freedom of sexuality in a legal atmosphere that is inconsistently supportive (McInerney et al., 2021). According to Gabb (2017), queer kinship is diverse and wide-ranging with deep undergirding emotional investments where the ability to engage in familial relationships and responsibilities is subjected to considerable scrutiny. Despite the overall desire for family being relatively static, heterosexed standards within the law, with all its rights and privileges, are rarely the default standard for same-sex parents.

As lesbian women often possess egalitarian values (Patterson & Farr, 2016), legal imbalances in parenting recognition can prompt involuntary and irrepressible inequalities that impact the interpersonal dynamics of the family members. Goldberg and Garcia (2015) argued that while there is extensive literature that examines the predictors of heterosexual parents' relationship dissolution, very little research has been conducted in this area relating to same-sex parent couples. Goldberg and Garcia studied the predictors of relationship dissolution within the first five years of parenthood amongst 190 couple participants. The participant sample included 57 lesbian couples, 49 gay male couples, and 84 heterosexual couples. The study conducted by Goldberg and Garcia supports the Office of National Statistics' (2021) report that indicated a higher prevalence of same-sex partner divorces within the first four years and specifically Goldberg and Garcia found dissolution within the first 5 years of adoptive parenthood. Doss and Rhoades (2017) reported a similar result in their meta-analyses of 21 couple interventions related to same-sex couples transition to parenthood.

In 2000, Gartrell et al. explored lesbian mothers' relationship dissolution and found that within the first five years of their child's life, over 30 percent of the 23 couples included in the study had dissolved their relationships. While the reasons for dissolution were not further explored in depth within that study, subsequent studies by Gartrell et al. (2006), and Goldberg and Garcia (2015) reported interpersonal processes including relational conflict and poor communication as significant predictors of relationship dissolution in same-sex parents. Park et al., (2015) qualitatively explored the influence of legal contexts on the experiences of parenthood for 51 same-sex couples and found that

legal barriers or lack of legal protections left the family unit feeling vulnerable and distressed. Same-sex couples viewed legal contexts as a method by which to make sense of whether or not they had a supportive environment within which to rear a family.

Unlike heterosexual couples, same-sex parents may then experience a number of external legal and social stressors that could influence the intra-familial dynamics of the family.

While I did not find any studies that explored the relationship between legal barriers and same-sex parenting relationships' dissolution directly, it is plausible to consider that such legal imbalances may make it more difficult to navigate same-sex parenthood and relationships.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Lesbian Unions and Legal Imbalances

These studies draw on the existing literature relating to heteronormative structures to test the bounds of heteronormativity and explore in what ways legal structures and social contestations affect parenting. They add to the body of literature relating to LGBTQ+ family formation and maintenance in a manner that brings light and credence to the experiences of the population. While the studies are all mostly qualitative in nature, the longitudinal studies conducted by Galtrell et al. (2006) utilized a large sample of 73 participants. Additionally, Goldberg and Garcia (2015) offered a comparative analysis of multiple family forms that include LGBT and heterosexual families. However, it remains important to consider that in the studies discussed, the sampling continues to be relatively homogenous comprised of White and upper-middle class families who are likely to be better positioned to navigate legal and social impartialities to assert their position in society. It may be more difficult for individuals in other racial and ethnic backgrounds

and of lower income to obtain the legal security that may contribute to parenting and relationship confidence. The studies did not directly address how the lack of legal protections for same-sex families and specifically non-biological mothers may influence family dynamics or place these mothers and their children at risk should the relationship dissolve.

Hierarchical Dynamics and Quality of Couple Relationship

Heteronormativity assigns gender-normed roles and rules to intrafamilial interactions based on assumed relational dynamics that occur between individuals of the opposite sex. It therefore, renders the fluidity of sexuality and alternative familial identities as virtually imperceptible (Peterson, 2013). The universal phenomenon of motherhood defines motherhood biologically while its social rules and expectations remain rooted in heteronormativity. Mothering is generally synonymous with a specific type of nurturing care and protection, the dynamics of which may change when two mothers are equally present in the family system (Hadley & Stuart, 2009; McKelvey, 2014). The transition to parenthood for lesbian mothers inevitably shifts the individual's allocation of time, energy, and resources, but also shifts the family dynamic (Farr & Tornello, 2016; Little & Sockol, 2020). Experiences around feeding, caretaking routines, affection, naming, discipline, and parental inclusion may profoundly influence the development of the parent-child relationship regardless of biogenetics. Establishing one's parental role as well as negotiating the division of parenting tasks may also present conflicts around these roles and the relationship of each mother to child (Farr & Tornello, 2016; McKelvey, 2014).

According to McKelvey (2014), in her qualitative meta-story of 10 non-biological lesbian mothers' postpartum experiences, there were a number of pertinent themes that were identified within the lesbian family system. These included "Defined by who I am not", "Trying to protect my family: The world can take them away", and "The new normal". McKelvey acknowledged that these themes highlight the lack of viability that non-birth mothers have articulated experiencing that may impact their family system and the challenges associated with the transition to parenthood. It is noted that the perspectives of the non-biological mothers were deficient in the literature where this portion of lesbian mothers lacked a voice in pertinent issues related to education, healthcare, clinical practice, and leadership, amongst others (McKelvey, 2014).

Same-sex couples place value on biological parenthood as they associate the opportunity for shared biological bonds with supporting the development of healthy parent-child relationships (Zeiler & Malmquist, 2014). Mothers also appear to place an emphasis on relational equality where unequal genetic connections to their children may create inequities. Unequal genetic ties may contribute to complexities within the family that include strong emotions like jealousy and resentment (Zeiler & Malmquist, 2014). Farr and Tornello (2016) suggested that the issue of biological relatedness is significant for these couples as when only one parent possesses legal responsibility for the child, issues of social or legal invisibility may result. Further, social invisibility may result when biological motherhood becomes associated with the child's preference for a parent, nurturing feelings of jealousy between mothers.

According to Goldberg et al.'s (2014) study of intimate relationship challenges during early parenthood of same sex couples, parents reported the presence of a child's preference for one parent over the other. The qualitative exploration included 84 individuals comprised of 42 couples (17 lesbian, 13 gay, and 12 heterosexual) who had been placed with a foster child approximately three months prior to the study. The study revealed that hierarchical attachments created feelings of rejection and relationship tensions between the parents where the preferred parent may have experienced feelings of guilt and burden while the non-preferred parent felt excluded and dejected. Although the impact of these dynamics on the between-mother relationship is important to consider, the findings must also be considered contextually where the study participants included heterosexual, gay, and lesbian adoptive parents of children in the welfare system. These children were of variant ages and the most obvious preferences were denoted in older children who may have also displayed more difficult behaviors (Goldberg et al., 2014). The participants did not include individuals who share disparate biological relationships to the children though the study did explore legal insecurities similar to those that may be experienced by a non-biological mother. Fears regarding the lack of legal security reflected a lack of confidence in the parenting relationship because of a fear to commit to, or become overly invested in, the relationship with the child. Differences in how developmental bonds are approached or the intensity of these bonds created frustrations for mothers placing additional stress on their relationships (Goldberg et al., 2014). LeBlanc et al. (2018) conducted a dyadic study of 100 same sex couples and found a strong pattern of associations that suggested that perceived legal insecurities and

imbalanced recognition contributes to distress of the individual's mental health and stress within their intimate relationships. Per family systems theory, when one partner is distressed, the other partner is inevitably affected.

According to Hadley and Stuart (2009) who utilized a multiple case study approach to explore parental identification in 13 lesbian mothers, lesbian mothers often have egalitarian views to parenting and also retain a hierarchical structure with one mother emerging as the primary caregiver. In her qualitative exploration of 15 lesbian couples with internationally adopted children, Bennett (2003) reported that birth mothers were more likely to perform additional childcare tasks than their co-mothers and that attachment hierarchies also exist in lesbian families where the quality of the child bond is often influenced by the preferred mother's personality and how they were parented as a child. Hadley and Stuart (2009) confirmed these results in their qualitative research and suggested that co-mothers had a tendency to purposefully distribute equal childcare responsibilities with caretaking arrangements that allowed them to meet the financial requirements of parenting. However, when an imbalance occurred, the biological mother emerged to assume the additional caregiving responsibilities while the co-mother tended to engage in more work outside of the home. Despite this, participants emphasized that when both mothers were present in the home, childcare responsibilities were shared fairly equally (Hadley & Stuart, 2009). Malmquist's (2015) study of equality in 96 Swedish lesbian mothers explored parenting roles and found that while equality was idealized for lesbian parents, in reality, biogenetic connections set the benchmark for the depiction of parental roles. The significance of biogenetics in parental roles was explained in terms of

the nurturing bonds that develop during breastfeeding, a task afforded to the birth mother that the non-birth mother cannot equally experience.

Pelka (2009) explored shared motherhood in 30 lesbian co-mother couples and found it important to consider whether or not a mother's socialized expectations of motherhood were actualized in her own experience. According to Pelka, most lesbian mothers had heterosexual templates of motherhood having been reared by heterosexual parents and therefore, possessed preconceived notions of what their parenting experience might be like and what would be expected of them in a parenting role. The presence of two mothers could be seen to create competing rather than complementary roles in some parenting tasks. Pelka found that maternal jealousy resulting from infant preference for one mother over the other was predominantly an issue for those couples where both women wished to experience pregnancy and birth. Infant preference was primarily demonstrated for the birth mother and non-biological mothers reported feelings of insecurities when this occurred in spite of their intentional attempts toward equal mothering. The study utilizes a sample of 10 mothering couples who adopted infants, 10 who used assisted insemination, and 10 who relied upon in-vitro fertilization to biologically co-mother. In this way, many of these mothers experienced parity in the legal and/or biogenetic connection to their children. This set them on equal footing as they initiated their journey into motherhood. Less information is known about how family dynamics may be impacted when mothers attempt to navigate motherhood on unequal terms.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Hierarchical Dynamics and Quality of Couple

Relationship

Preceding research has recognized the numerous pathways to motherhood for lesbian couples and the challenges associated with the initial transition into parenthood. Research has also established the value of biological ties in parenting and the intention of mothers to set out to be equally invested and involved in parenting tasks. However, despite these intentions, it is well established in the literature that the transition to parenthood can also represent a period of heightened stress. Many of these studies explore the parenting and familial dynamics during a period when the families are admittedly in flux and attempting to adapt to the nuances of motherhood and family life. Additionally, while qualitative in nature, the interview questions often focused on perceptions of differences between the mothers in terms of how they parented or how they bonded. More open ended questions or questions that equally explored the commonalities in parenting and bonding may have yielded different results in these studies. Further, the participants were again relatively homogenous and self-selecting. They were confident enough in their personal relationships to submit to interviewing where other women whose sexuality and parenting choices may have been less accepted may have been less likely to be open to participation. Therefore, participants may have been qualitatively different and not representative of the average experience of lesbian mothers who differ in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and social acceptance. Generalizability is then significantly inhibited and the results may be underrepresented in the broader population.

Summary and Conclusions

Prior research has been set within heteronormative contexts where acceptable standards of gender roles, rules, and behavior are rooted in heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships. Whilst research has acknowledged gender and sexual fluidity and various pathways by which to create families, legal and social institutions maintain a more static approach in the language and rules assigned to individuals who operate outside of normative behavior. The legal change to allow recognition of same-sex marriage in the last seven years has been significant in providing validation and recognition to an otherwise marginalized population. However, this change although significant, has not undone the social norms and values that persist in social ideologies of family and relationships. Lesbian mothers are attempting to carve out a space within legal and social sanctions that acknowledges, accepts, and validates unconventional family forms such as those of same-sex parented households.

While we understand language to be the means by which we assign social meaning and understanding, limited discourse and lack of stable language in this area may create difficulties in extrapolating and understanding the experiences of lesbian-led families. Queer theory accepts the notion that fluidity exists outside of classification and that the nuances of lesbian motherhood may be unique to families based on the pathway to parenthood, desire and motivation to parent, and legal and social validation. Further, emphases and privileges placed on biogenetic relationships may create stressors and imbalances in what is otherwise sought as an egalitarian relationship. The desire to be accepted both socially and legally during the transition to motherhood is prominent

though it appears that equality in the parenting relationship may be relatively more abstract.

The literature has established that non-biological mothers have expressed feelings of social invisibility and legal insecurity in their recognition as parents and that these challenges may impact their familial relationships. It is further confirmed within the existing literature that interpersonal challenges in lesbian families can result in early relationship dissolution. Earlier studies of lesbian families included participants who were rearing children resultant from prior heterosexual relationships. Many of the more recent studies that have explored the family dynamics in lesbian couples have relied on lesbian parents through adoption, which creates some parity in each mother-child relationship. There has been less focus on the parenting experiences of mothers who share a disparate biological connection to their child yet intentionally conceived and mother their child within the context of their relationship. An open exploration of these dynamics may illuminate the lived experiences of lesbian-mothers including the strengths and challenges that they face in parenting.

In this study, I sought to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on the co-mothering experience under unequal biogenetic conditions. Many lesbian mothers may desire parenthood, yet lack the resources to carry through adoption or forms of in vitro fertilization that would allow the mothers to be co-biological progenitors of their child. The study therefore, also introduced the opportunity for mothers of any societal class, ethnic background, or race to have a voice in the literature. This extends knowledge in the discipline that may assist in better understanding the specific interpersonal dynamics

of co-mothering, aspects of support, and also, factors that represent a challenge. In doing so, we may come to better understand how relationships are strengthened, impaired, or maintained between lesbian co-mothers and between each mother and their child. While historical legal practices relating to family law are rooted in heteronormative standards, results of this study may provide judicial systems increased information to guide the legal care of children in the event of separation or divorce between their parents.

Both queer theory and family systems theory accept the flexibility and variability in lesbian relationships as well as their family systems. Attachment theory accepts the elemental bonds created between a parent and child, and similarly acknowledges the surrounding factors of the familial environment, rules, and roles that may influence the development of these bonds. It is important to consider that as this is a relatively new phenomenon, the exploration into a deeper understanding requires rich and meaningful inquiries that are best supported by narrative interviews. The gap in the literature explored the lived experiences of this population under specific circumstances in terms of their biological relationship to their child and the relational processes that occurred within the family. A qualitative phenomenological design of inquiry was applicable as it allowed the opportunity to achieve first hand descriptions of how lesbian co-mothers identified and understood their mothering role, as well as, how they related to one another within the family unit. Chapter 3 contains comprehensive information regarding the study's methodology including the research design and rationale.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of planned lesbian co-motherhood when there was a disparate biological connection to the child. In this study, I focused on the relational dynamics that influence hierarchies within the family system. The findings of this study increase the understanding of parenting practices within lesbian-led family systems to guide the legal care of children in the event of separation or divorce. The issue is pertinent given that female same-sex couples are statistically more likely to end in divorce than male couples (ONS, 2021). Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study, including an introduction, the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions were: (1) What are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology? and (2) What are the lived experiences of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child? The central concept of the study is the relational processes of attachment that may influence the dynamics of the lesbian family system. Bowlby (1982) developed the theory of attachment to explain the manner in which internal working models of connecting to others are developed over time. The concept of attachment has been largely

associated with child development whereby early life experiences form the foundation of how we relate to others, particularly in close relationships such as those between parent and child.

Between-mother dynamics is also an important concept in this study that may underscore challenges related to maternal envy or resentment in their respective parenting roles. While lesbian relationships rest on the premise of equality (Clarke et al., 2005), unequal biological ties to children may influence between-mother dynamics.

Heteronormative expectations of motherhood dictate that maternal roles and identity may be challenged by a non-biological lesbian mother. Ben-Ari and Livni (2006) suggested that the birth of a baby may shift lesbian relationship dynamics from egalitarian to hierarchical. Feelings of envy may arise as mothers negotiate the disparate biology and maternal roles associated in child rearing (Pelka, 2009).

The nature of this research inquiry is qualitative to understand the relational processes and parenting dynamics between lesbian co-mothers. First-hand descriptions of how co-mothers perceive their role and relate to one another within the family unit were necessary to obtain a comprehensive understanding. Qualitative interviews delivered rich narrative descriptions of each co-mother's experience. Such deep information was unlikely to be gleaned from fixed interview questions such as those delivered in a survey with a limited response format.

In this study, I used a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology is one of five qualitative research traditions. Phenomenological researchers seek to understand the fundamental nature of a particular phenomenon. This tradition typically relies on the

exploration of experiences through the use of in depth narrative interviews with up to 10 individuals (Moustakas, 1994). In the current study, lesbian co-mothers provided their perceptions of their maternal role and connection with their child through individual interviews. This type of research provided a self-reflective lens through which to understand how lesbian co-mothers perceive their interaction with their child and significant other.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is to recruit participants, generate interview questions, conduct interviews, and analyze the resulting data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As the researcher, I represented an observer or ‘outsider’ perspective in that I do not belong to the same sexual orientation group as the participants (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). It was pertinent to consider this position, as despite my observer status, I have an active role in the portrayal and presentation of marginalized voices. My position outside of the population may have been advantaged in that all data were equally scrutinized for thematic content whereas someone more intimately familiar with the population may have overlooked features of the data and neglected valuable insight because the information presented was contextually assumed (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Researcher naivety may have also adversely affected the information gathering processes if the psychological and social distances between the researcher and participants were not sensitively addressed (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). I did not have any personal or professional relationships with the participants and did not hold a position of power or authority over them.

Participants were lesbian co-mothers who intentionally parent within the context of their relationship and where one parent shares a biological connection to the child and the other does not. I screened for applicants that may have had a direct professional connection with me during my practice as a social worker, which would ethically exclude them from the sample selection. No applicants met this criteria.

During the informed consent process, all participants were informed that their participation was not mandatory and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also informed of their rights to confidentiality and to have their identities protected. I also informed them of my duty to report abuse of protected populations including children and the elderly per my lawful mandate as a clinical professional. It is essential that the researcher be candid regarding plausible biases that may influence the study (Creswell, 2013). For example, I may possess biases about how families should behave that might have influenced how I perceived the behavior of others. To address the issues that may have arisen as a result of researcher bias, I engaged in reflective practices through bracketing prior to and during the interviews.

Creswell(2013) also highlights the researcher's role in identifying and addressing ethical issues that may arise. It is necessary to be forthright and honest about information associated with participant relationships that could be seen to influence the information shared by participants, or how I perceive participant narratives. However, there were no connections to the participants that required disclosure to the chairperson and the IRB.

The process of researcher reflexivity assists the researcher in identifying and maintaining awareness of their influence on the study (Raheim et al., 2016). Researcher

reflexivity is imperative in maintaining the trustworthiness of qualitative methodology. The researcher must remain self-aware and conscious of power relations and ethical issues. A reflexive researcher acknowledges the possibility of bias and power relationships impacting the interpretation of the study results. It therefore, contributes to the veracity and trustworthiness of the study.

My position as a researcher was presented as a student currently enrolled in a doctoral program with no direct affiliations made to my professional practice. As Bermuda is a small community, it was possible for any Bermudian participant to be acquainted with my relatives or me. However this concern did not arise, as there were no Bermudian participants in the study. Incentives were not offered for participation in the study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population of this study was lesbian co-mothers. The population is acknowledged in the literature as hidden or hard to reach as a result of social stigma, marginalization, and/or vulnerability (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Matthews & Cramer, 2008). Traditional sampling methods are indicated as less effective in identifying and recruiting hard to reach populations. Matthews and Cramer (2008) suggested that technological innovations such as voluntary web based communities for connecting to and recruiting study participants may be beneficial when researching a hidden population such as LGBTQ+ individuals.

Following the suggestions of Matthews and Cramer (2008) to use technological platforms to enhance recruitment, I recruited participants using a convenience sampling strategy. Convenience sampling represents a type of arbitrary sampling where members of a target population, in this case lesbian co-mothers, are selected based on practical criteria such as willingness to participate, accessibility, and availability (Etikan et al., 2016). As this population has been indicated to be particularly difficult to reach, the convenience sample was recruited through technological LGBTQ+ support groups established in the Facebook/Instagram platforms and other online PRIDE support groups. They were also recruited through other sources that included local and foreign LGBTQ+ support groups, word of mouth, and snowballing. The participant sample included mothers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

The participant selection was limited to either member of a lesbian couple who co-parent within the context of their union and where one mother shared a biological connection to the child and the other did not. These biological or non-biological co-mothers fell between the ages of 25 and 50, which signified the average child bearing and rearing years for a woman (Daugherty & Copen, 2016). Lesbian co-mothers were excluded from participation in the study if neither partner shared a biological relationship with the child or if both mothers shared a biological relationship with the child, i.e. through reciprocal IVF. Each participant was asked to complete a demographic data sheet that included participants' ages; length of time in current relationship; legal relationship status; duration of cohabitation; number, ages, and gender of children; relationship to

each child; method of conception; employment; and income. Acquiring these details at the outset ensured participants met the criteria.

Creswell (2013) suggested that when using a phenomenological methodology, the participant group may vary from three to 15 participants. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that phenomenological researchers interview anywhere between five and 25 individuals to obtain a comprehensive analysis of a particular phenomenon. However, Marshall (1996) and Patton (1990) emphasized that the variance in participant sample size is attributed to the notion that qualitative researchers need not stipulate exact sample size. Instead, the research determines the number of participants necessary to sufficiently answer the research questions. Therefore, I postulated that data collection from a total of eight to 10 individual participants, whether gestational or non-gestational was reasonable to address the research questions.

I posted a recruitment flyer to various online LGBTQ+ support forums including *PRIDE Bermuda*, a Facebook group that includes members and allies of the LGBTQ+ population in various areas of the world. Due to the hidden nature of the population, Instagram accounts where individuals directly indicated their relationship and motherhood status received a generic recruitment message through direct message. I provided potential participants with my contact details, which included my Facebook/Instagram account info, email, and telephone number. In doing so, they had various options to access me at their level of comfort. I also gave permission for individuals to share the recruitment flyer or details of the research study with individuals they knew who met criteria. I distributed a demographic survey to potential participants

for criterion checking. Only individuals that met the criteria based on their responses to the demographic survey were invited to continue participation. Once I confirmed the eligibility of participants, I contacted them to solicit their participation in a videoconferencing interview. The duration of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

The participant sample size was related to saturation in that the sampling was guided by the data collection and analysis (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 1990; Saunders et al., 2018). When the data that had been collected and analyzed suggested informational redundancy whereby analysis supported existing codes and themes with no new emergent codes or themes being represented, saturation was achieved. Saturation suggests the empirical confidence that further data collection and analysis are unlikely to yield new themes (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2018). As a result, increasing the sample size by adding participants was unnecessary (Creswell, 2013; van Rijnsoever, 2017).

Instrumentation

Potential participants were invited to participate in a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). The researcher-produced questionnaire design confirmed that participants met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study. I developed the questionnaire using the proposed framework suggested by Whiting et al. (2017), with consideration given to the established questionnaires used by Paldron (2014) and Price (2007), who researched this population. The demographic survey requested responses to questions such as the biological status of the parent to the child, whether participants were involved in the relationship at the time they planned to become mothers, and

whether they remained in a relationship at the time their children were born. The questionnaire also included items intended to gather demographic information from participants, including current relationship status; length of time in the relationship; method of conception; and ages of the children they share. Once I confirmed participants as eligible for inclusion, they were invited to participate in a 60-minute individual interview to discuss their relational experiences further. These interviews occurred in a videoconferencing format that allowed me and the participants to meet virtually regardless of location. Individuals interested in participating provided their preferred contact information (Appendix A).

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. Relying on the principles for semi-structured interviews as discussed by Seidman (1998), I collected data from lesbian co-mothers either gestational or non-gestational. The semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were researcher developed and used primarily open-ended and non-leading questions to assist in deepening the understanding of participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The questions explored the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology. Additionally, the questions explored the lived experiences of the family dynamics of these mothers based upon their perception and description of intrafamilial relationships. Patterns in the development and resolution of between-mother conflict was explored. The demographic questionnaire and interviews were conducted using the telecommunications application Zoom, which allowed me to directly communicate with the participants through shared audio, and/or video using convenient

electronic devices such as a laptop, desktop computer, or mobile phone. The use of this application allowed the opportunity to communicate conveniently with participants regardless of location. Zoom has a built-in recording feature that was used to capture and record audio communications. Subsequently, I transcribed the interview data, categorized the data, and sorted it into appropriate codes.

The screening survey assisted in controlling the scope of the study by ensuring participants met the criteria for inclusion and were likely to have experienced the phenomenon under study. The semi-structured questionnaire guided the interview process. The questions sufficiently focused on bracketed topics and questions as suggested by Moustakas (1994) to elicit experiential responses related to the phenomenon. I summarized and verified the responses of the participants relative to their experiences to ensure the data sufficiently answered the research questions and improved the validity of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher-Developed Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to explore the experiences that influence attachment hierarchies in planned lesbian-led families with disparate biology and how feelings of maternal bloodline envy may affect parent-child bonds. A semi-structured interview approach allowed the interviewer to follow a guideline for questioning and also allowed the opportunity to ask additional questions that arose from what the participant shared regarding their experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 1998). I also had the flexibility to offer prompts intended to encourage elaboration or clarify participant statements.

Brod et al. (2009), describe content validity as the assessment of the extent to which the questionnaire items adequately reflect the participant perspective. Content validity supports the collection of appropriate and meaningful data by assessing whether the questionnaire items effectively reflect the perspectives and experiences of the population of interest (Brod et al., 2009). To establish content validity in developing screening and interview questions, I referenced existing literature that focused on lesbian mothers relative to their parenting experiences (Bennett, 2003; Paldron, 2014; and Price, 2007). I also ensured that the interview questions would primarily seek to answer the research questions, namely what is the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology? and what are the lived experiences of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child? With consideration given to the existing discourse in lesbian family relationships (Paldron, 2014, Pelka, 2009, and Price, 2007), data gathered from demographic questionnaires and participant interviews with members of both sides of the co-mothering dyad, there were sufficient data collection instruments to analyze participant experiences as they pertained to the research questions.

Procedure for Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to gain insight into the qualitative research methodology. Specifically, I sought two participants through word of mouth and networking to test the semi-structured interview process. One participant was a

gestational mother and the other a non-gestational mother. An email was sent inviting participation in the pilot study, the results of which are not formally reported in the results section of this study. An established date and time was arranged to conduct the semi-structured interview through teleconferencing. The nature of the pilot study was intended to test the qualitative interview process for question language, clarity of content, and length. The pilot study also offered the opportunity to test the applicability of conducting interviews through a teleconferencing platform. Following the pilot, interview questions were slightly amended based on the interview outcomes.

This pilot study collected information that provided guidance for a substantive study given the nature of the established interview questions and with consideration given to the global shift toward teleconferencing platforms in light of the pandemic COVID-19. The pilot allowed the opportunity to critically review the qualitative questionnaire and interview processes. Malmqvist et al. (2019), argued that novice researchers who conduct pilot research studies become better informed and prepared to address challenges that may occur in the substantive research study. Conducting a pilot study also served the purpose of increasing confidence with the data collection instruments, in this case, a semi-structured interview. Malmqvist et al. (2019), further suggested that conducting a pilot supports the rigor of the study by identifying any weaknesses that can be addressed, thereby enhancing the quality of the research. The IRB approval number for the pilot study and study was 01-07-21-0318716.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The data was collected from gestational and non-gestational lesbian co-mothers who parented within the context of their current lesbian relationship. As the researcher, I was responsible for the collection of the data. Moustakas (1994) referred to all research participants as co-researchers as the essence of the phenomenon of study originates from their perceptions and experiences. Whilst the participants have co-researcher status, their primary role was to provide rich experiential data.

Participants were recruited through technological LGBTQ+ Support Groups such as Facebook/Instagram and other online PRIDE support groups. I also recruited participants through other sources that include local LGBTQ+ support groups, and by word of mouth. All individuals who expressed interest in participation were provided a demographic questionnaire to complete to ensure they met the criteria for inclusion. The search was extended to include LGBTQ+ ally groups both locally and internationally. Over the course of a six-month period, I collected data from participants who met the criteria to be included in the study. The participants included six lesbian gestational co-mothers and five non-gestational co-mothers. The participant interviews were conducted using the telecommunications application Zoom, which allowed me to directly communicate with the participants through shared text, audio, and/or video using convenient electronic devices. The use of this application allowed the opportunity to communicate conveniently with participants regardless of location. Data collection events were scheduled for an interview that was expected to last approximately 60 minutes. A second interview was unnecessary as all participants were able to respond

comprehensively to the interview questions during the first interview. Zoom has a built-in recording feature that was used to capture and record audio communication.

When participants had contacted me, completed the demographic questionnaire, and were approved for inclusion in the study, I provided them with a copy of the informed consent via email. The informed consent explained the study's intent to examine the experiences of shared motherhood in planned lesbian co-mothers where disparate biology is present. Participants were informed of the focus of the experiential data to be elicited and the format for the interviews including the expected time commitment toward the interview. Participants received information regarding the manner in which the data were to be presented to ensure their confidentiality. It was important that they felt comfortable enough with me to share their experiences candidly. I offered participants the opportunity to pose questions regarding the process in a format that was convenient to them (whether via text, telephone, or email communication). If the participant indicated interest and willingness to participate in the study, a time was then scheduled for them to engage in an interview. At the conclusion of the scheduled interview, participants were thanked for their participation and invited to ask questions or address any concerns arising as a result of their participation. I analyzed the data and continued to seek participants until the data revealed saturation had been reached.

Due to the sensitive and intimate nature of the interview details, participants may have built trust and rapport with me and therefore, meaningfully ending their involvement in the study was important (Morrison et al., 2012). As such, a participant debrief occurred at the end of the study that included recognition for the participants

contributions to the study (Morrison et al., 2012). Recognition included expressions of gratitude and an open invitation to participants to follow up with the researcher for further dialogue about the study results if desired.

Data Analysis Plan

The first research question was what are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology? In order to address this question, I asked participants to explain their decision to co-parent and describe any relational disagreements or challenges that arose in making that decision. The second research question was what are the lived experiences of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child? In order to address this question, I asked participants to explain the relational dynamics and bonding activities in the between mother relationship and mother and child relationships. (Table 1. *Relationship Between Research Question and Interview Questions*).

Table 1*Relationship Between Research Question and Interview Questions*

Research question	Interview questions
RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology?	<p>IQ 1: Tell me about your decision/ plan to have a child/children?</p> <p>IQ 2: How is your role as mother represented in your family?</p> <p>IQ 3: What do you think contributes to your role/connection as a mother?</p> <p>IQ 4: How does your biological connection (or lack of biological connection) to your child influence your relationship with your child?</p> <p>IQ 5: In the absence of a genetic relationship, what helps you to feel most connected to your child?</p> <p>IQ 6: What causes you to feel disconnected?</p> <p>IQ 7: Were you aware of any disagreements in making the decision to have a child/children? Tell me about those disagreements?</p> <p>IQ 8: If there were disagreements, how were they resolved?</p> <p>IQ 9: How does your relationship with your child impact your relationship with your partner?</p> <p>IQ 10: Explain any frustrations you have experienced in your role as a co-mother.</p> <p>IQ 11: How have these frustrations affected your relationship with your child?</p> <p>IQ 12: How have these frustrations affected your relationship with your partner?</p> <p>IQ 13: Have you ever experienced feelings of envy or resentment toward your partner that are related to their role as a co-mother?</p> <p>IQ 14: What, if anything, would you consider changing to improve the relationship with your partner?</p> <p>IQ 15: What, if anything, would you consider changing to improve the relationship with your child?</p>
RQ2: What are the lived experiences of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child?	

Once the data was collected via participant interviews, it was transcribed. Transcription was conducted by typing out the interview data while listening to the audio recording of the interview. Once the data was converted from a verbal to written format, the methodical coding process began. Utilizing bracketing to correct researcher categorization biases, the data was preliminarily coded and grouped into meaningful units according to an emergent theme (Van Kaam, 1966). Every quote relevant to the study's phenomenon was highlighted. The emergent themes were then examined against the data set to ensure each quote accurately represented the lived experience of the participants relative to the phenomenon under study.

The Van Kaam (1966) method indicates that individual textural descriptions should be created using verbatim quotes from each participant. Next, individual structural descriptions were created to interpret the social, emotional, and cultural component of participant experiences. Finally, the textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to offer a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This analysis process provided a rich understanding of the participants' co-mothering experiences without changing their narratives and stories regarding their experiences.

The data were researcher coded and analyzed by hand. Given the constraints of time, at the conclusion of the interview, the researcher summarized key points or themes that were obtained to provide a general sense of the participants experiences and offer preliminary conclusions. Qualifying and clarifying questions were also asked throughout the interview to confirm understanding of the information being shared. Participants

therefore, had the opportunity to validate that the preliminary conclusions accurately reflected their voice and the actual meanings conveyed in their narratives.

Discrepant cases and non-confirming data are included in the findings.

McPherson and Thorne (2006) propose that observations that emerge contrary to the analytical themes elucidate alternative explanations that can deepen our knowledge of the phenomenon. These contradictory observations offer enhanced insight to the complexities of the phenomenon whilst also enhancing the credibility of the study (McPherson & Thorne, 2006). Such findings prompt a conceptualization of the phenomenon from a broader lens and initiate a review of the fundamental understanding of the investigated phenomenon. The findings of any discrepant cases were documented subsequent to the general thematic patterns illuminated in the study that offered a general set of principles related to the phenomenon. These exceptions are offered as a perceptual awareness of how and when the general principles may be best applied to the phenomenon (McPherson & Thorne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

The credibility of a study refers to the degree to which the research interpretation is believable with particular credence given to the extent of agreement between the research participants and researcher (Mills et al., 2010). The study's credibility hinges on researcher reflexivity, analyst triangulation, the ability to achieve saturation, and the acceptance of outliers as an opportunity to conceptualize the phenomenon from an alternate lens (McPherson & Thorne, 2006; Saunders et al., 2018; van Rijnsoever,

2017). Researcher reflexivity allows the researcher the opportunity to engage in self-awareness by acknowledging their role within the context of the research and openly communicate the intersecting relationships between the participants and themselves (Dodgson, 2019). This occurs by acknowledging biases that may occur due to being a heterosexual mother and outsider to the research population. As a mother, I may hold my own preconceptions of the role of a mother that must be acknowledged. Identifying and communicating these biases may increase the internal validity of the study as well as deepen the understanding of the researcher's role in the study (Dodgson, 2019).

To address the issues that may have arisen as a result of researcher bias, I engaged in reflective practices through bracketing prior to and during the interviews. Following the interviews, the participants had the opportunity to review the data for accuracy through a process referred to as in-interview member checking. Member checking allowed the participants to verify and validate the research data during the interview (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing a secondary coder, offered another perspective of the emergent themes in the data, assisted in determining when saturation was reached, and increased internal validity (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Relying on the concept of analyst triangulation as described by Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999), multiple coders analyzed the data with a goal of understanding various perceptions of the data and identifying blind spots in the analysis. This avoided the perception of the data being selective to the interpretation of only the primary researcher (Amankwaa, 2016).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability to demonstrate that the findings of the study are applicable in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To address transferability, I detailed the parameters of the study and included an explanation of the specific population under study, participant sampling techniques, and the requirement of participants. I positioned the study such that participation was extended to individuals from various cultural backgrounds across multiple countries to ensure variation in participant selection. Doing so increased the ability to apply conclusions from the study to various other settings (Amankwaa, 2016). The study provides rich descriptions and comprehensive analysis of the interpreted data such that contextual components of the data were identified and reflect the parameters of the study.

Dependability

The dependability of the study rests on the notion that the conclusions of the study are consistent and repeatable (Amankwaa, 2016). To address dependability, in addition to the study parameters, and sampling strategies, I have provided the screening questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide such that this study may be replicated in another population if desirable. Coding methods and strategies are also clearly denoted in the study. The use of a secondary coder for triangulation supports the dependability of the study as it allows for multiple perspectives during the coding and analysis process. A detailed description of the methodology of the study, identifying parameters associated with the population sample, and using a secondary coder are all means by which dependability is addressed in this study (Amankwaa, 2016; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Confirmability

Confirmability also assists in establishing the empirical value of the study. It is the extent to which the findings of the study are objective based on the participant voice, void of the influence of the researcher's bias, impetus, or appeal (Amankwaa, 2016). The presence of the secondary coder increases the degree of neutrality of the study by offering an additional perspective to the data. By engaging in reflexive practices, I also acknowledge any known biases and discuss how data will be categorized and coded (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). During coding, I considered whether or not each statement was subjected to my own experiences and whether it would have been more appropriately coded in another manner. Consultations occurred between me and my secondary coder to address such perceptual influences. I was also cognizant of negative or discrepant cases that may have been inconsistent with the majority of the interviews. This data was considered carefully and comprehensively in terms of how it applies to specific contextual information (McPherson & Thorne, 2006). These strategies assist in establishing the confirmability of the research.

Intercoder reliability

Intercoder reliability denotes the degree to which two or more coders agree on the coding and classification of the data content when applying the same coding scheme (Lavrakas, 2008). According to Campbell et al. (2013), qualitative data is often more difficult to work with as words can have multiple meanings and are subject to interpretation and contextual understanding. The researchers (Campbell et al., 2013) indicate that the literature lacks guidance for establishing a standard of intercoder

reliability. This is particularly more complicated when utilizing a semi-structured interview format as the questions tend to extract narrative responses that often require several codes at once (Campbell et al., 2013). However, intercoder reliability is a critical element of the content analysis as without it, the data interpretation cannot be regarded as objective or valid (Lavrakas, 2008).

I recruited the assistance of an experienced analyst who also had some familiarity and understanding of family systems in terms of discourse and behaviors. The secondary coder was knowledgeable in the theoretic underpinnings of the study, but did not have any direct interaction with or knowledge of participant identities. As such, the secondary coder and I discussed the method of coding and I coded the interviews separate from the secondary coder to avoid introducing analyst bias (McPherson & Thorne, 2006). We then compared codes, discussing similarities and differences in the coding. Any significant differences in the coding were intended to be discussed with the dissertation chair and methodologist to determine if there is significance in the discrepant data that should be further considered (Amankwaa, 2016; McPherson & Thorne, 2006), however, there were none.

To enhance the rigor of the study, *intra-coder reliability* was also applied, which is when data is analyzed by the same coder at different points in time (Amankwaa, 2016). The data was independently coded and subsequently the thematic content and codes were reviewed against the coding of the secondary coder. The data was then independently coded again. Each transcript was reviewed on at least three occasions to ensure the content was thoroughly, consistently, and sequentially coded. Consistency in

coding at various points in time is said to be indicative of intra-coder reliability in qualitative research. Many elements intended to enhance the trustworthiness and overall empirical value of the study were incorporated.

Ethical Procedures

This study follows the ethical guidelines and procedures established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University. Before beginning the research study, I completed an application requesting permissions from the Walden University IRB (Appendix F). Permission was also requested from the IRB to access participants and collect data. Permission was received and the approval number 01-07-21-0318716 provided. Participant protections followed the policies and procedures of the IRB (Walden University, 2018a; Walden University, 2018b) and the American Psychological Association (2017) guidelines. Forms that were used in the study, including the participant demographic survey (Appendix A), semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B), participant informed consent form, and pilot were included in the IRB application. The participant informed consent form specified that participants choose to participate in the study of their own free will and also had the right to terminate their participation at anytime and for any reason during the study without consequence. This information was also reiterated at the beginning of the interview. Further, the consent form informed that participants would not receive compensation for their participation. Their participation would however, contribute to the body of research and current understanding of the relational intricacies in lesbian-led families.

There was minimal risk of physical harm or psychological distress to participants involved in the study. While it was not anticipated that participants would experience distress as a result of their participation in the study, I understood that the interviews may have elicited emotionally laden responses from the participants. Should the participants have experienced emotional discomfort during their participation in the study, they were provided community agency resources that they could access for support, which included the number of a 24-hour crisis help line. Crisis hotline numbers were provided for Bermuda, USA, U.K., and Canada, and can be found at Appendix C. This information was provided to participants during the informed consent process. Participants requiring support were encouraged to contact the agencies on their own as the support agencies generally desire to communicate directly with the individual seeking assistance. This would also eliminate the opportunity for the participant to feel pressured to follow through with the assistance if I were to make the initial contact with the agency. If a participant became upset where it appeared that they may have been unable to continue without significant discomfort, I indicated an intention to discontinue the interview with them.

If participants chose to discontinue their involvement in the study, or needed to discontinue due to experienced discomfort, new participants would have been recruited using the same procedure previously described in the chapter. There were no anticipated ethical issues regarding the recruitment flyer and format. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher and were informed of the confidentiality of their data including the use of a pseudonym. The informed consent process helped to

communicate the nature of the study, its risks and benefits, as well as the rights of the participant. This communication also served as an opportunity to build rapport with the participants. The participants were informed that if they wished to file a complaint regarding their involvement in the study, they could do so by contacting the Walden IRB on the contact information provided in the consent.

Participants were given the option to choose their own pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality if they wished, or one would be researcher assigned. None of the participants chose a pseudonym and were subsequently referenced as either gestational or non-gestational mother. The interviews were audio recorded via Zoom as indicated in the informed consent form and transcribed. For the purposes of this study, a designated Zoom account was created. All data collected were kept confidential by using a password protected electronic file. Only the secondary coder and I had access to the data. The password-protected computer, on which the electronic file was stored, was located in a locked office. All participant information associated with the research specific Zoom account will be removed and the account will be deleted at the end of the study (Iacono et al., 2016). The data will be securely stored for a period of five years following the completion and approval of the dissertation by Walden University. At the end of the five-year period, the data will be destroyed by deleting all associated computer files.

An ethical issue that may have been encountered during data collection as a result of my position as a mandated reporter, included the possibility of participants revealing any information related to the abuse of children. While my overall goal was to protect the privacy of participants, they were informed of my duties by law to report abuse of a

vulnerable population. This information was shared during the informed consent process. I did not ask any direct questions related to the abuse of children within their families, however, should participants have made a disclosure related to the concern of child abuse, I would have reminded them of my duty to report such information to the relevant protective service agency. While this did not occur, if it had and participants wished to withdraw from the study subsequently, they were free to do so without judgment or consequence.

The study did not offer any incentives for participation. To minimize the chance of a power differential occurring in the relationship between myself and the participants, I ensured that any applicants who may have been a direct client of mine previously were excluded from the sample selection. I endeavored to maintain ethical standards throughout the study concerning the protection of participants and their data in accordance with the standards set forth by the Walden University IRB and the American Psychological Association.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I explained the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness related to the study. I restated the research questions for the study and reviewed them against the interview questions in the semi-structured interview protocol. I also defined the phenomenon of the study and provided a logical rationale for the use of phenomenological research design. I addressed the potential influence of professional and personal relationships with the participants as well as researcher bias and how these issues will be managed. The methodology section

included a description of the participant recruitment, sampling procedure, and participant selection processes. The section provided an overview of how data were collected and explained the data analysis plan. The concept of utilizing a secondary coder was introduced as a method by which to increase the trustworthiness of the study. Further, the chapter included a discussion of the ethical considerations necessary to ensure the integrity and maintenance of ethical standards in accordance with the Walden University IRB. The goal of this phenomenological study was to gain an increased understanding of the experiences of lesbian-co-mothers as it relates to the relational attachment between mother and child and between each mother when one mother shared a biological connection to the child and the other did not. The methodology as described in Chapter three provides a guide for gathering and analyzing data in a manner that supports the purpose of the study and underscores the discussion of the subsequent findings in Chapter four.

In Chapter four, I discuss the results from this study by describing any influences on the study including participant demographics, data collection and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and the summary. I review the purpose of the study and research questions and discuss themes that emerged from the interviews. Any modifications in data collection are discussed and evidence of the study's trustworthiness is detailed before presenting the results.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of planned shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers when there was a disparate biological connection to their child. The research questions were: (1) What are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology? and (2) What are the lived experienced of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child? The information obtained in this study represents the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers and their perceptions of shared motherhood when one mother shared a genetic relationship to the child and the other did not. The results illuminate our understanding of how disparate biology contributes to the relational dynamics within the lesbian-led family system. Both gestational and non-gestational mothers were interviewed about their experiences navigating motherhood and co-mothering. The interviews were coded for common themes, some of which included time spent, caretaking roles, communication, and attachment/bonding. This chapter reviews the pilot study, setting, demographics, data collection and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary of the research findings.

Pilot Study

Before conducting the formal study, I conducted a pilot study to gather information that would guide the substantive study given the sensitive nature of the

interview questions and with consideration given to the global shift toward teleconferencing platforms in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pilot allowed me the opportunity to critically review the qualitative questions for language and clarity of content as well as assist in establishing a reasonable expected interview duration. Pilot interviews were conducted with two individuals, one gestational and one non-gestational mother, who met criteria for the study. Participation was solicited through networking and word of mouth. After receiving interest in participation, the demographic questionnaire and pilot consent forms were sent to participants via email for review. Both participants consented to engage in teleconferencing interviews that were conducted and recorded via Zoom. The interviews were conducted using the established semi-structured questionnaires. At the completion of the formal interview, participants were asked to provide feedback regarding the interview experience as it pertained to language, content, and length. Conducting the pilot study was beneficial, as it increased confidence with the data collection instruments, in this case, a semi-structured interview as well as the teleconferencing format. There were no changes to the instrumentation or data analysis strategies as a result of the pilot interviews. The data collected from the pilot interviews are not reported in the main study results.

Setting

It should be noted that data collection for this study occurred during the height of a global pandemic. While the pandemic increased the worldwide reliance on technological interfacing that supported easily engaging participants from various countries, it did likely impact the mothering conditions and experiences of the

participants. As such, these participants, many of whom were pregnant or engaged in parental leave during the pandemic, may have had quite a different experience of motherhood than mothers who experienced pre-pandemic motherhood. Additionally, participants who engaged in the study were from Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States. The location of the participants is relevant in terms of the social and legal supports available to lesbian mothers as it may have also influenced their experience of motherhood.

Due to the nature of the pandemic and work from home/ shelter in place requirements, participants were often in the middle of caretaking duties at the time of the interview and there were some interviews that were briefly interrupted to check on/manage the children. Consideration was therefore, given to the length of the interviews so as not to compromise the care of the children. Despite this, participants all acknowledged feeling comfortable to share both positive and challenging aspects of their experiences candidly. Participants did not relay any concerns around their anonymity and appeared to be more interested in the outcome of the research and the impact of the results.

Demographics

Participants were 11 lesbian mothers: six gestational and five non-gestational. One mother was a non-gestational mother who was pregnant at the time of interview, and another mother was a gestational mother who had become a non-gestational mother just prior to her interview. Participants interviewed were located in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. All of the participants were married, and all participants

intentionally made the decision to have children within their relationship. The length of relationship for participants fell between six years and 12 years, with all participants having begun to live together within a year of their relationship. At the time of the interview, the age of the mothers ranged from 31 years old to 43 years old. All of the mothers possessed a high school diploma or collegiate degree. The mothers represented middle to upper class socioeconomic status within their respective countries. The participant pool was represented by Caucasian, Hispanic, and mixed-race mothers.

Intrauterine insemination was the predominant method of conception used by mothers, with IVF and intracytoplasmic sperm injection also having been used. All of the non-gestational mothers were listed as the other parent on their child's birth certificate and therefore operated under the assumption of full legal custodial status, though some acknowledged that they were unsure about the true status of their custodial parenthood. Despite having been listed as an "other parent" on their child's birth certificate, two of the non-gestational mothers undertook confirmatory adoption procedures to secure legal equal parentage to their child that would extend beyond their primary jurisdiction to be legally recognized in all states and countries.

Data Collection

Interview data were collected from 11 lesbian mothers. Six mothers identified as gestational/biological mothers, while five mothers acknowledged non-gestational motherhood. Participants learned of the study through a recruitment flyer, by word of mouth, or through direct contact on social media accounts and expressed interest in participation. Information regarding participation was sent to them via email. Each

participant received a demographic questionnaire and an informed consent form. They were requested to respond via email with the words “I consent” after reviewing the document and agreeing to participate. Once confirming their eligibility to participate in the study, I coordinated a time with participants to conduct a Zoom interview. I informed them that the interview would be recorded via Zoom for later transcription. Zoom interviews were conducted from July 7 to August 16, 2021. There were no unusual circumstances that occurred during data collection. Each interview was recorded via Zoom and received as an audio file and saved to my Walden University email account for later transcription.

Instead of conducting a subsequent interview for member checking as was the plan presented in Chapter 3, I summarized participant experiences at the end of statements and/or at the end of interview to ensure clarity of content. Participants were invited at the end of the interview to provide further clarification and offered the opportunity to ask any additional questions about the research study. This adjustment was made because mothers were often balancing working from home and managing the children due to pandemic circumstances. I was granted permission by the IRB through submission of a change in procedures form to engage in convenience sampling by allowing other individuals to post the recruitment flyer to their own social media accounts or share the research study via word of mouth. I was also granted permission to change the wording on the recruitment flyer to provide a less formal and more conversational tone to the flyer by replacing phrases such as “interview” with “chat.”

Data Analysis

The Van Kaam(1966)qualitative method of analysis supports an open-ended flexible exploration of participants' experiences, feelings, and descriptions. I engaged in bracketing as a first step to data analysis to acknowledge any bias that I may have had based on my personal experiences. During the data collection process, I engaged in memo writing of thoughts that occurred to me or concepts the participant shared that stood out to me. This gave me the opportunity to engage in reflective practices following data collection with the intent of identifying personal biases. What I noted was an increased ability to relate to frustrations associated with increased care taking duties that foster exhaustion. I realized that having a young child myself meant that this was also a prominent feature in my current personal experiences, and I therefore needed to ensure that I acknowledged but did not overweight this area. I also engaged in coding and recoding, stepping away from the data for a week and returning to them to ensure I was coding the data consistently and that the data were not influenced by my personal mood, fatigue, or distractions. I engaged in recoding on two separate occasions, which also served the purpose of increasing my familiarity with the data.

I separated interviews into two lists of gestational and non-gestational participants to offer a further opportunity for comparison between the two groups. I began highlighting and grouping portions of the text to create meaningful units or codes. These codes represented the invariant trends in the data that were stable such as the influence of the amount of time spent, feeding abilities, emotional feedback, and validation in role. I then validated these data trends by checking them against the full data

transcript for alignment. Where they did not align, trends were eliminated so that only central themes would be illuminated. Each data set was analyzed in this manner until saturation was achieved. I initially identified 24 thematic categories. I later narrowed these down to seven meaningful themes. These seven overarching themes included communication, parental desires, time spent, bonding activities, hierarchical attachment, gestational envy, and validation. The way the data emerged will be explained explicitly further in this chapter.

Discrepant case circumstances were considered which included one gestational mother who had become a non-gestational mother just prior to the interview and another non-gestational mother who was pregnant through reciprocal IVF. Reciprocal IVF means that this mother's pregnancy resulted from her wife's fertilized embryo being implanted into her uterus. Thus, this mother would share a gestational relationship with her newborn, but not a genetic/biological relationship. These cases had unique quality features in that mothers were able to consider perspectives of being both the gestational and non-gestational mother in their family units in a manner that was intended to further connect the family through the children (as donors were consistent). In some instances, these mothers provided competing perspectives related to attachment and bonding. They were able to acknowledge an indescribable influence of biology on the strength of the connection to their child while also indicating a strong connection to their non-gestational child, albeit different. One gestational mother shared:

You know what, I think there's something that is unexplainable with the biology connection. And I would never have noticed it until [my wife] had our other child.

And we've talked about this endlessly... but there's just something there between [gestational child] and I, and I don't love [gestational child] more than our second [non-gestational] kid, but there's just something different there. The only explanation we can come up with is the biology, that I carried [gestational child], so we have this connection that's unexplainable.

This information was factored into the analysis as it related to considerations toward hierarchical attachment and biological influences. Another discrepant case included a non-gestational mother of a set of multiples. Her description of her experience introduced the idea that the number of children requiring care could influence the quality of early connection and bonding activities. When asked about anything that causes her to feel disconnected as a mom, she replied,

I can't say there is. Recently, it was breastfeeding awareness month, a couple of weeks ago, there was a lot of conversation on social media, people were saying, "When my wife was breastfeeding, I felt disconnected from the children." And I think maybe that could have happened if we just had one child, but there were [multiples]. And so, it's like, while she was breastfeeding maybe one or two, I was bottle feeding the other(s). So, I never felt like I missed certain aspects of their growing as an infant and their feeding and that routine because there were [multiple] children. But I do see that challenge with disconnection from same-sex couples that only have one child.

My aim in this study was to identify how lesbian mothers perceived their partner relationships and mother child relationships in the absence of biological parity within the

family unit. I asked participants questions related to the connectedness in their relationships specifically seeking information about things that worked well to contribute to the quality of connection and factors that may have compromised the quality of connections. I also sought to determine the commonalities and differences between the two groups based on their lived experiences of their journey to and through co-motherhood.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To evaluate the qualitative content and analysis of the study, the criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (2006) were relied upon. They suggested that the trustworthiness of a study rests on its ability to meet quality criteria in the areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which support the study's rigor and worthiness.

Credibility

I used several strategies to maintain the credibility of my study whilst also adjusting for the social climate and the schedules of the participants. I noted that formal member checking by way of following up with participants for a review of their transcripts may not have been easily accommodated for many participants. Additionally, it became clear that many of the participants shared email addresses with their wives or their wives had access to their email addresses such that the confidentiality of interviews may have been compromised if emails of the transcripts had been sent. Instead, to demonstrate efficiency in the process, I offered clarifying questions and statements throughout the interview to ensure that the descriptive content was understood and

interpreted correctly. In cases where it was not, the participant had the opportunity to offer further clarifying statements regarding their opinions, feelings, and experiences. At the end of many of the interviews, I also offered a summary of the participant's experience or key takeaways from the interview to allow the participant a further opportunity to confirm that their experiences were accurately relayed. Two forms of bracketing were used to identify and bring awareness to my own biases and their potential influence on the data.

Transferability

In order to address transferability, I collected data using the procedures I described in Chapter 3. I was able to interview participants from multiple countries and ethnic backgrounds. By clearly outlining the eligibility criteria for the study, I was able to establish transferability in this study. The addition of the demographic questionnaire offers a general participant profile that may be utilized to better understand the extent to which these results may be applicable to similar situations or individuals. Therefore, this study can be replicated with same-sex families across various jurisdictions.

Dependability

To address dependability, I engaged in triangulation whereby a secondary coder reviewed my codes to determine theme consensus. This practice also supported me in identifying data saturation. The secondary coder confirmed that statements were appropriately and logically grouped into a particular category based on the expressed rationale. We discussed themes that we thought might be present in the data, such as "maternal jealousy". Further discussions helped to list, group, and compare themes across

groups to assist in justifying the invariant trends in the data. As I was able to interview both gestational and non-gestational mothers to obtain both mothering perspectives, the dependability of the study was enhanced.

Confirmability

To address confirmability, I relied on the input of the secondary coder during the data analysis process to assist me in ensuring that I was following qualitative analysis protocols. In doing so, we were able to agree upon lists and groupings, the invariant trends in the data, and textural and structural descriptions to illuminate the seven core themes that would best support the data. As the secondary coder provided independent feedback on my groupings and identified trends, my interpretations of the data were scrutinized in a manner that would identify personal biases or potentially faulty conclusions. Together, we were able to agree on the seven final themes and acknowledge when data saturation had been established.

Results

The data revealed seven themes, namely communication, parental desires, time spent, bonding activities, hierarchical attachment, gestational envy, and validation. The themes provided the basis for the research questions to be answered. As I reviewed the data, I noted that both gestational and non-gestational mothers emphasized the communication in their relationships. The communication was one of the major themes that supported the quality of the between mother relationship as well as the parent child connection. Time spent including the amount of quality time spent with the child(ren) and with one's partner also emerged as a significant theme when considering the research

questions from the perspective of both the gestational and non-gestational mothers. It was evident that the participants shared common perceptions about their mothering experiences and an awareness of the nuances that occur in same-sex motherhood. This awareness assisted me in answering my research questions.

The first research question in the study was: What are the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families when sharing motherhood within the context of disparate biology? The second research question in the study was: What are the lived experienced of the family dynamics of co-mothers in planned lesbian-led families regarding their perception and description of parental attachment and bonding when only one mother shares a biological connection to their child?

Table 2

Results Summary: Frequency of Thematic Codes

Thematic code	Frequency in interview narratives
Communication	33
Parental desires	26
Time spent	17
Bonding activities	35
Gestational envy	14
Hierarchical attachment	21
Validation	31

Communication

Participants' descriptions of their experiences appeared to be heavily influenced by the between mother communication. Most participants described having discussed future family desires very early on in their dating relationship. Communication set the foundation for mothers to be able to express their desires, expectations, and feelings about their motherhood role. One gestational mother expressed,

When [my wife] and I met, it was just something that we both talked about that we wanted, and we knew the challenges that were going to come ahead. And I think there were a lot of conversations around feelings of, if I'm carrying first, how does [she] feel, not having the genetic piece to it. And so, just a lot of conversation around that. But we always knew that it was something we wanted to do, regardless of the challenges.

Another non-gestational mother expressed,

I always knew I wanted children. I just knew that it was never a desire for me to birth a child. And so, when [my wife] and I started dating, I mean, geez, probably within the first two weeks of our relationship, we were already talking about our future and kids and marriage. And so, the conversation was very simple because she always had a desire to carry kids, and this was perfect because I have zero desire. And so that's kind of how we made the decision for her to carry and use a donor.

Data codes in this area included, emphasize healthy communication, early discussions about family, sharing feelings, agreement to prioritize maternal age, avoiding

difficult conversations, early communication about motherhood desires, no disagreements, on the same page, alignment in decision making, and lacking a voice in parenting. These codes were then grouped into categories such as communication style, expressive communication, restricted communication, and timing of communication. An invariant trend in the data revealed that communication was central to the journey to motherhood. Apart from the decision to have children, communication was highlighted as an integral part of deciding who would become the gestational mother, what method of conception would be utilized, donor selection, parenting roles and duties.

Parental Desires

Participants frequently shared their personal desires related to motherhood and the extent to which those desires were aligned or conflicted with that of their partner. The trend of 'parental desires' was illuminated as a key component that nurtured the quality of the between mother relationship. Where desires were aligned, participant's expressed feeling connected with their partner. However, in families where parental desires were misaligned, challenges in the relationship were described. Parental desires were connected to the journey to motherhood regarding who would carry the child, the method of conception, and donor selection. This theme was also connected to the actual mothering role relating to bonding and caretaking duties of the child(ren). One gestational mother offered,

we were very like-minded in the sense that, you know, we were raised very differently, but going into having children or trying to have a family, we had very, very similar intent in the sense of how we would like to do things. We were very

much on the same page, and I feel like we, there was no huge disagreements in anything that either one of us are doing.

Another non-gestational mother shared her experiences and the impact of misalignment on her relationship with her partner.

Well, I didn't really have a plan to have children, it was [my wife] who really wanted kids. It was important to her to become a mother, and I just felt like who was I to take this dream away from her? I was like, like I loved her enough that I would support her if she wanted to do that. And I knew like, I don't know, I wanted to be a mother too, but I had some reservations about not feeling like very involved and as, I don't know, like part of the process or if they would feel like they were my children.... We never really discussed all the options around it. They just said that she was younger and healthier. So, we just, she just was the one to be the one to carry.

Another mother shared her experience of choosing a donor by stating, For me, I just wanted someone with a darker complexion because I have a darker complexion. I wanted darker hair, just the, the European sort of colors that I have. [My wife] was hard to negotiate on this one. She needed to have a kid, and she's like, this isn't going to be my biological child, so I want them to look like me. So, we had a few disagreements about this.

When asked to describe how her role as a mother is represented in her family, one mother shared,

sometimes I feel undermined it's hard to co-parent with somebody who has different beliefs and parenting techniques and, and some of them, like, I do agree with her when and what she says, but some of them, I don't. So, it's very hard to raise a child with somebody else for sure. So, we have a lot of fights about that.

Data codes that emerged from participant statements included indifference, did it for my wife, wanting a donor with similar physical features, desire to carry, desire to connect children through donor, desire for connection, wishes for more time, desire to support wife, wanting to share responsibilities more, wishes there was more time to bond, wanting healthy children, wanting to have a genetic connection, expectations of motherhood, wanting to create good human beings, wanting to be the number one mom, desire for a traditional mom role, parenting beliefs/values, wish to breastfeed, and never wanted to carry. Codes were organized into categories of family planning desires, connection desires, parenting role desires, and desires for children. Parental desires emerged as a data theme that supports participants expressed wishes, desires, and expectations for themselves, their partner, their children, and their family unit. In cases where desires were met, mothers relayed a more positive experience of motherhood. In instances, where mothers felt as though their desires went unmet or their reality significantly differed from their expectations, more frustrations in the mothering role were expressed.

Time Spent

Another thematic trend in the data significantly connected to both research questions was time spent. All participants indicated that the amount of time spent with

their child influenced their perception of parental attachment and bonding and influenced the between mother relationship when sharing motherhood. One mother stated,

I think hopefully, and I think again, this is a really difficult time, but I hope to just be able to have more date nights and time. Like making sure that we do have time to just us, because as much as it is all about our family, we still have to make sure that we are keeping each other grounded in being who we are and not having motherhood form us as new people. The reason that we are good moms is because we are who we are and you don't want to lose that and get caught up in, you know, everything is about, well, what does, at this point, what does [our child] need? It's still about you being a human and an individual right?

A non-gestational mother shared her experience by describing the impact of being a working mom on the relationship with her child as she stated,

[our child] got really attached to her when she was on maternity leave. She spent more of that time with [our child] and then they would do a lot of cuddling. And I wasn't present because I was working. So, when I was, it was during [our child's] waking hours while [our child] was awake and then I would come home and it would be dinner and bedtime. But because [our child] had spent all day with her, [our child] didn't want me to be the one to put [our child] to bed. It hurts my feelings a lot. It hurts my feelings a lot that [our child] kind of pushes me away. I feel like I'm always in the distance.

A gestational mother shared,

If I could change one thing, it would be to be there in the moment sometimes. It's hard because of all the juggling. It sucks when I'm in the middle of playing a game and someone calls me about work, I have to answer. And so, they get frustrated because they're like, oh, you're on the phone. And I'm like, this is how we're making money. Put our phones away.

Another mom shared,

I would just say take more time for us. We are so busy, it's unreal. And I can't remember the last time that – I mean COVID didn't help for sure, but I can't remember the last time where we just like went out for dinner or did something without the kids. It's just hard to find that balance. I'm trying to do everything and we're trying to get everything caught up that we just forget to make time. By the time the kids go to bed, we go to bed.

The overwhelming majority of mothers, both gestational and non-gestational responded “spending more time” when asked about any one thing they would change to strengthen the mother child relationship and/or the between mother relationship.

Some of the data codes related to time spent included prioritize spending time with child, building connections requires time and energy, more date nights and time, more time to play, being a stay at home mom, highly present, no time away, 1:1 mom time, more time means more opportunities to bond, quality time spent focused on child. Codes were organized into categories of quality time with child, active presence, couple quality time, and impact on connection. Time spent emerged as a core theme of the mothering experiences impacting both the quality of bonds in the mother child

relationship and the between mother relationship. Mothers who did not spend their desired amount of time with their child expressed feeling that they wished they had more time with their child and believed that this time would strengthen the connection. When high value was placed on amount of time spent and the association with the bond formed, mothers expressed frustration if they felt that themselves or their wives were not spending enough time with the child to support the connection. Mothers also noted that increased time spent with the children did have some impact on their romantic relationship as attention to child care duties often took away from opportunities for mothers to spend quality time together. All mothers did note that this time was essential to nurturing their connection and expressed a desire to prioritize increasing the time they spent together engaged in non-mothering duties or conversations.

Bonding Activities

As mothers described how their mothering roles were demonstrated in their families, they also discussed how these roles influenced the family dynamics including feelings related to their partner, and how connected they felt to their child. Mothers were often intentional about the activities they engaged in to build the bond with their children. Bonding activities represented one of the seven core thematic trends. A non-gestational mother explained,

so at the beginning, [my wife] breastfed for 15 months and so they gained quite a close bond from that, which is wonderful, obviously. But as a two-mom family, I found it really tough because I felt like I was kind of shoved into a dad role. Like you dads are obviously very important, but they're expected to be a secondary

parent in general, right? And I think it's just because they, you go into it as a dad without the bias, without any capabilities to be able to breastfeed and stuff. So, you expect to not be able to comfort your child. That didn't hit me that that was a possibility until that day, until day two after [our child] was born. And so, yeah, so I found it really tough because and in some ways [our child] still does prefer [my wife] because that's where [our child] got [their] comfort from.

Mother's expressed being quite intentional about the role they carved out as a mother. "I did as much as I could. I was the nappy changer, I got up in the night. Like I was the person that I did everything I possibly could to give myself a role."

Another mother expressed,

It was evident obviously, right from the beginning, like you know the smells, like the breastfeeding right. Like all that stuff that is just kind of innate you know for me, I tried from the beginning to, you know, do lots of that skin to skin, try and do everything I could that she, you know, could also do. So, like I, of course I couldn't do the little breastfeeding that, right. But I would like to, you know, try to get [our child] on the bottle like for her to pump and then for [our child] to take the bottle with me quickly so that [our child] would, I would also be, you know able to feed [our child]. That was a big thing, I mean, if I can help out feeding [our child] and then kind of be connected to [our child] from early on that was important. Just be close to [our child] and kind of get [our child] to recognize me as you know, mom as well, right.

Codes for participant narrative experiences included breastfeeding, playing, skin to skin contact, bottle feeding, cooking, cleaning, emotional support for wife, initiative to bond, instinctual comfort, bedtime routines, prenatal support, stay at home mom, maternity leave, parental leave, spending time, and intentional role in mothering. These codes were then organized into categories that included direct caregiving, indirect caregiving, biological nurturance, intentional bonding, and between mother bonding. The primary theme that emerged was that of bonding activities. These are described as activities whether instinctual, intentional, or otherwise that supported strengthening connections of bonds between mother and child and also between mothers.

Hierarchical Attachments

Insightful comments about experiences related to bonding activities also illuminated data trends related to hierarchical attachment; the development or perception of primary and secondary bonds in the parent-child relationship. When explaining how her child responds to her as the biological mom and her wife, one gestational mother described

You know when someone comes over and they're super happy to see their auntie or uncle, but at the end of the day, it's mom they want? It gets that same attention. So [our child] loves my wife and gets excited to see her, but [our child] doesn't run to her like [our child] will to me. If [our child] wants something [our child] comes to me. If she tries to go to [our child], [our child] tells her to go away.

Another gestational mother explained,

Like we're kind of the same parents. But I mean, yeah, definitely, we got that connection of like, they have my little personalities and again, they look like me. They, they do tend to, I would say treat me more like a traditional mom role. They're more, they'll come to me if they're hurt or they'll want, if they want to be nurtured, they'll come to me first usually.

While most gestational mothers acknowledged their child's preference for them especially in times when they were seeking nurturance, safety, or security, non-gestational mothers also shared similar views, "[our child] doesn't want me, like [our child] will like, there's moments where [our child] will say, 'Not you mom, I want mommy. I want mommy, no, mommy do it, mommy.'" Another non-gestational mother shared,

So you know, and [our child] has that connection to [my wife]. So like at least at this stage, right, when [our child] is, you know, still quite young, right, like if [our child] falls and hits their head, right, like [our child] wants [my wife], you know, [our child] wants that comfort yeah. So, for me, like try to you know, if [our child] need comforting, I try and just kind of keep them with me and say, you know, it's okay, like I can also comfort you, right.

The amount of time spent also appeared to contribute to perceived hierarchical attachment as one gestational mother shared,

Well, I am the primary parent. This is where you might see the differences between me and her. I basically feel like a single parent for the most part. She

works a lot and then when she is there, she's not there really. Her connection is different with [our child]. So yeah, it's pretty much all as me.

A non-gestational stay at home mother expressed,

there's no biology, science, nothing that could make me love [our child] anymore.

I am a stay-at-home mom. So I'm with [our child] the majority of the day.

Probably the reason [our child] gets excited for the most is, [our child] loves food.

And so, I do all the preparation of [our child's] food, snacks, reading, I mean you

name it, I'm pretty much there. Not so say that [my wife] is not because when

she's home, we share that role, but for sure, nurture like I said, probably the

highlight is the preparation of the food because [our child] loves it.

Participant narratives were coded as child seeks nurturer; child preference for activity, pushing mom away, feeling hurt, understanding instinctual connection, superior connection through biology, indescribable connection through biology, mother feeling left out, breastfeeding promotes natural connection, primary care, and number one parent. These codes were then organized into categories that included child's bio parental preference, parental rejection, equal parental preference, superior biological connection. Perceived parental hierarchies or the notion that one mother could emerge clearly as a primary mother despite the presence of two mothers was identified as a core theme based on the data trends. Both biological and non-gestational mothers consistently agreed that children appeared to demonstrate a preference toward the gestational mother.

Gestational Envy

The sixth trend that was prominent in the data was that of gestational envy. Gestational envy refers to feelings of envy experienced by non-gestational mothers toward the mother who carried the child. Experiences of sharing motherhood and the family dynamics associated with parental attachment when one mother shares a biological relationship with the child and the other does not highlighted feelings of gestational envy. One mother described,

I think in the beginning you know, when they were just so connected, right like [our child] wanted her and only wanted her because, you know, they have that relationship right. I mean it, you know, like I said, its biological, like you can't, you can't argue with that. It's you know, I think maybe then I was, I mean not, and I don't know if envious would be the right word. I mean, I just maybe wished that I could have had that with [our child] as well, right. So, you know, maybe I was a bit, oh, I wouldn't even use the word jealous. I mean, maybe longing for that with [our child], but also realizing that it's not you know a realistic expectation.

When asked if she had ever experienced feelings of envy or resentment to her wife that were related to her role as a co-mother, another non-gestational mother shared her experience by stating,

Absolutely. Yeah absolutely. I experience that. Yeah. Yeah. It's related to the fact that when [our child] is sick or sad, like [our child] wants mommy and in the middle of the night, if I come down, I'm kind of the tougher parent as well, like

not really on purpose, but [my wife] is really friendly because I think before [our child] was born, we really thought that [my wife] would be the harder one because she's less emotional than me. I do wish sometimes that she'd be that role so I could be the softer one but that's just not the way that we are as people. I say, yeah, my envy has always come from how close they are, which I attribute to breastfeeding. So, it all stems from breastfeeding.

Another non-gestational mother described,

Not envy, more resentment, yeah. Like when I feel like I'm taking on more of the household responsibilities, cooking, cleaning, laundry, like I tell her, I feel like I'm a mule or I'm a maid. So, I feel like, you know, like sometimes I'd like her to step up. She gets to spend a lot of the time with [our child] because [our child's] like a cling on to her, while I'm getting everything done. Like [our child] doesn't ever give her a break. But I think deep down its her too who doesn't want to get up and do stuff. So, I resent that kind of stuff big time.

Gestational mothers' experiences in this area were coded as resentment of bio mom, breastfeeding envy, desire to be the comforter, primary nurturer, resentment of non-gestational mother, frustrations with mothering position, feeling pushed aside, and no resentment or envy. These were then placed into categories of maternal frustrations, role resentment, and biological envy where gestational envy emerged as the core theme to capture the mothering experience in this area.

Validation

Validation was highlighted as a theme due to its influence on the mother-child relationship and the feelings mothers shared about themselves in their respective mothering roles. This area specifically elucidated the shared experience and feelings associated with being acknowledged as a mother by others. Non-gestational mothers especially explained feeling like they were often overlooked in their role, perhaps not intentionally, but expressed feeling as though biological mothers were privileged in the validation they received as 'real' mothers. One non-gestational mother shared,

like a lot of the people know that [my wife] was the one who carried the child(ren) and like things that people say like, oh, you have to forgive her for her moods and this, like she brought those kids into the world for you, or you know, like just comments. And then her [family], like, I don't know, like maybe they, I sometimes feel like maybe they think that they're more important like they trumped me because they're blood. And that they can have more of a say than me when it comes to our kids. I always feel kind of outnumbered.

Another mother explained,

we've started having these conversations with these people within our family and friends to explain to them that just because she carried and birthed them doesn't mean that she's the only one that gets to make decisions in their lives. It's not a great place to be because, it's almost like I always have to do better than a traditional parent. It's almost like if I birthed the kids, I don't have to try as hard as I do now, but because I didn't birth them, now I have to try ten times harder

just to prove to people that I am a valid parent and that they are just as equally my children.

When asked about any frustrations she may have experienced in her role as a mother, one gestational mother shared,

I would say as a same-sex parent, yes, just because there are still just societal differences where we take [our child] out for a stroll at the park – mainly that’s about where we go – and we’re just constantly getting asked the question, who’s the mother, or who’s the real mother? And that just takes a mental toll, especially on my wife, I would say, but it really affects me too, seeing that, and many times having to correct people. And some don’t do it in an ill-mannered way. Other’s may be taken aback and just don’t know how to approach a conversation or ask in a sensitive manner. And so, it’s always being questioned as a same-sex parent on not just who’s the real mother or who really gave birth, like out of the two. And sometimes it could just be very offensive. And having to just either respectfully just share quickly, okay we are both mothers, and then kind of continue on, but those stay with you of course. Those moments stay with you. And so, I think just having to address that has been the most difficult. I mean it happens weekly.

Additional experiences were shared to support this theme which included,

I think where we experienced that has been when we were going through more of like the classes that you go through before birth and instructors were very mindful and using the word partners as opposed to mom or dad, or just those heteronormative norms and not being inclusive. But it’s kind of been 50-50, kind

of mix of the two that we've experienced where some providers will start off not using inclusive type words and then they'll realize, oh, you're both the mothers, or you're both to be mothers, and so then they start changing their verbiage, which we appreciate, because then we feel seen. There's been times where the verbiage has not been changed, even though we've said before, this is my wife and we're both the parents. Some providers will just look at me and dismiss my wife and that also been very disheartening to see. And so, there's still much work to be done, I think, in educating others just about our community and how to be more inclusive by the words that we use.

Codes for related participant narratives were feeling invisible, needing to prove motherhood, I am the daddy, just as much a mom, we're equal, we're both the moms, not seen, they're just as much yours too, family disqualifying motherhood, and invalidating questions. These were categorized as systemic invalidation, proving validity, and internalized invalidations. Many mothers reported frustrations related to insensitive comments made by others rooted in heteronormative assumptions of mothering roles. These comments or questions were often made by strangers but were also made by close relatives of the mothers and the healthcare professionals they dealt with. Mothers expressed that having to deal with comments and questions about the validity of their role as a mother caused them to feel as though they needed to prove themselves as an equally competent and nurturing mother.

Participants discussed a variety of issues that they experienced in their motherhood roles. They noted the challenges that they have faced sharing motherhood in

same-sex families and also insightfully discussed factors that strengthened or weakened family bonds whether between mother or between mother and child. They shared the importance of their role and offered conclusions about their experiences within the context of the societal supports or legal protections afforded to them. It should be noted that all the mothers who participated in the study were residing in jurisdictions where same-sex marriage laws had been passed and where laws permitted a second mother to be listed on the birth certificate. Confirmatory adoption was not a necessity for these mothers to experience custodial parentage of their child in a way that also might create disparity in the mothering relationship. As such, these mothers entered motherhood on a mostly equal footing except for biological connections. None of the mothers reported experiencing any significant discriminations in their roles as mothers that may have highlighted parental inequality. The seven themes identified here are representative of the shared experiences amongst the participant mothers. These data trends also provide evidence for the answers to the research questions by explaining the lived experiences of lesbian co-mothers in planned lesbian led families when sharing motherhood through disparate biology and providing further information about the family dynamics of these mothers as they offered their perceptions and descriptions of attachment and bonding through disparate biology.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed how seven core themes emerged from participant narratives of their experiences. I determined that there are experiential differences that occur in shared motherhood when one mother has a biological or gestational connection

to their child and the other does not. Non-gestational mothers appear to experience a secondary placement in the hierarchy of attachment, decreased validation in their role as mother, and increased gestational envy. Participants described quality of communication, parental desires, time spent, and intentional bonding activities as significant factors that contributed to their family dynamics, including those between mothers and between mother and child. Time spent was especially highlighted for its importance in strengthening and maintaining the connections that each mother shared with their wife and their child. However, time spent did not invalidate the overwhelming and indescribable contribution of nature or biology in terms of the perceived hierarchical attachment, as mothers described a child's preference for their biological/gestational mother in times where the child sought comfort, nurturance, safety etc. The biological mother generally emerged as the primary source of security and comfort for their child even when the non-gestational parent was highly present and fully engaged in the activities that would bond or connect them to the child such as feeding, playing, bedtime routines etc. These interviews contain a wealth of information regarding how same-sex mothers experience motherhood and offers some insight into what future mothers might expect to experience should they choose to pursue motherhood as either a gestational or non-gestational mother. The information contained in these interviews is valuable in assessing how we can contribute to the body of knowledge that helps support same-sex mothers as they journey to and through motherhood.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss how the findings of this study compare with the findings of the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. The findings will be

interpreted within the context of queer theory, family systems theory, and attachment theory. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies based on these results will be shared. I will then describe how I believe this study can promote positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study was conducted in order to learn more about the lived experiences of same-sex mothers when one mother shared a biological connection to their child and the other did not. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into planned shared motherhood and better understand the family dynamics that may occur in lesbian same-sex families. The phenomenological nature of this research provides information about the relational processes and parenting dynamics that develop between lesbian co-mothers and their children. It was important to me to conduct this research, as the journey to motherhood and subsequent legalities and supports associated with motherhood for same-sex families appears to have been largely overlooked in same-sex marriage laws. This means that should relationships dissolve, non-gestational mothers are left with questionable custodial arrangements of their children whereby biological motherhood is privileged over social motherhood. It was therefore important to explore the influence of biology on the family dynamics in same sex relationships and gain further information about how families interact and connect when one mother shares a biological connection to their child and the other does not.

The key findings of this study suggest that gestational and non-gestational mothers experience motherhood differently and that a biological connection, or the absence thereof, contributes to many of the experiential differences. Gestational or biological mothers appear to experience a perceived primary attachment bond to their children, while non-gestational mothers experience a decreased validation in their role as

mother and more feelings of gestational envy than gestational mothers. Significant factors that contributed to family dynamics, specifically between mother connections and mother child connections, included quality of communication, parental desires, time spent, and intentional bonding activities. Time spent was highlighted in participant narratives for its importance in strengthening and maintaining the connections that each mother shared with their wife and their child. However, time spent did not invalidate the overwhelming and indescribable contribution of nature, or biology, in terms of the hierarchical attachment, as mothers described their perceptions of a child's preference for their biological/gestational mother in times where the child sought comfort, nurturance, safety etc. The biological mother generally seemed to emerge as the primary source of security and comfort for their child even when the non-gestational parent was highly present and fully engaged in the activities that would bond or connect them to the child such as feeding, playing, bedtime routines etc. The only occasion where this experience did not appear consistent was in a family with a set of multiples. In this family, the mothering load and connections were relayed as more equal and less hierarchical.

Interpretation of the Findings

Chapter 2 described three key concepts of the study including heteronormative discourse; lesbian unions and legal imbalance; and hierarchical dynamics and quality of couple relationships. Below, I will describe how the results of this study relate to each of the key concepts identified followed by how these results are related to the established tri-theoretical framework that includes queer theory, family systems theory, and attachment theory.

Heteronormative Discourse

One of the key concepts that arose from a review of the literature around lesbian co-mothering was the limited discourse around the unique experiences of lesbian couples that deliberately share motherhood through disparate biology. Most discourse related to the concept of marriage and family in the literature is rooted in heteronormativity, whereas the viability of parenting in lesbian-led families is generally disregarded (Gates, 2015; Hunter, 2012). Consequently, the prominent discourse also discounts the influence of relational complexities on the wellbeing of children relative to their continuity of care should relationships dissolve. Sarcinelli (2018) offered that while the perception of families has progressed toward restructuring the ideas of normal versus abnormal families, the redefinition continues to be politically debated with regard to the relationship between biogenetics and legal rights.

Hunter (2012) and Rubin (2015) suggested that language operates as a construct that discerns a person's role and position in society through classifications and their associated definitions. The results of this study revealed that discourse related to lesbian motherhood was pertinent to the mothering experience. Mothers expressed frustrations around lack of validation in the mothering role, specifically that of the non-gestational mother. Language as a medium of expression appeared to influence a mother's sense of authenticity and/or power in their identity as a lesbian mother. When mothers were respected in their mothering position without question or scrutiny, they acknowledged feeling more supported and confident in their role. However, those mothers that were questioned or scrutinized felt that they had to prove the authenticity of their mothering

status by being “more than a mother.” This confirms the knowledge shared by O’Reilly (2019) and Averett (2021) that motherhood remains an area where many women experience marginalization and oppression, whereby the family archetype is represented by a heavily predominant heteronormative nuclear family discourse and where biological parents are given the social distinction of an authentic/valid mother while alternate motherhood is perceived as less valid. When the notion of biologism and motherhood do not align cleanly as expected, society has a difficult time de-essentializing the concept of motherhood.

Holland-Muter (2018) similarly found that the social misunderstandings around the role of a secondary or non-gestational mother that operate against assigned gender identity roles and dominant social practices influenced the mothering experiences of non-gestational mothers. The findings also confirm knowledge in the discipline that suggests that heteronormative rearing and social norms also directly influence parental expectations of motherhood that may have been rooted in family of origin roles and practices. Mothers then found themselves having to adapt and shift their own cultural perception, discourse, and description of motherhood and family as similarly reported by Baker (2019) and Fish and Russel (2018). McInerney et al. (2021) similarly suggested that maternal legitimacy and the lack thereof creates a dynamic relationship between the family process and quality of relationship. As with the majority of the literature in this area, this study’s participant sample is consistent in that it is relatively homogenous with participants generally being majority White and middle class such that the findings may not be transferable across cultures and socioeconomic standings.

Heteronormative Discourse and the Tri-Theoretical Framework

Chapter 2 discussed three key theories that together form the theoretical framework that supports this study. Queer theory (de Laurentis, 1991) operates at the macro level and represents systemic perspectives of marriage and family that are generally rooted in heteronormative views. Averett (2021) suggested that queer theories are significant, as motherhood has been generally discussed in feminist theories. Discourse is relevant as we move the discussion toward gender equality and the systemic construction of gender, its roles and meanings. The findings of this study highlight the importance of language and the social meanings that are connected to the term *mother*. The social meaning attached to this term inherently delegates rules and implies role expectations for individuals designated as mother (Averett, 2021). The presence of two mothers and societal attempts to delineate between the social roles and rules attached to this alternative structure appears to foster some level of confusion and inquiry whereby lesbian mothers are subjected to questions of their maternal status. This is likely associated with the fact that lesbian family structures operate against the normed and widely accepted idealization of the family structure. The findings of this study suggest that lesbian mothers find these inquiries intrusive, insensitive, and frustrating to manage as they perceive their role as mother to be generally aligned with the overarching normed discourse associated with mothering, consistent with the qualitative findings of McInerney et al. (2021). At a mezzo level, within their family systems as described by family systems theory (Bowen 1978), mothers seem to easily and seamlessly delineate between their mothering identities, roles, and duties. While some frustration does exist

within the family dynamics when role expectations are misaligned between mothers, this frustration is not described as being associated with the discourse or language used within their families around mothering. Mothers report that their children easily differentiate between mothers and easily communicate their desire or needs of a specific mother. Less emphasis was described on specifically what name each mother was called, and instead, more emphasis was placed on the intimate understanding of which mother was being requested to meet the needs/desires of their child. Therefore, language emerged as a meaningful but not critical part of the attachment development associated with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) that operates at this study's micro level.

Lesbian Unions and Legal Imbalances

Research in this area suggested that while advances had been made in the legal arena that allow for same-sex marriage, family law distinctions related to same-sex parenting required additional attention. Despite the overall desire for family being relatively static, heteronormed standards within family law, with all its rights and privileges, are rarely the default standard for same-sex parents. In this study, all participants were married with their unions being legally recognized. Each participant was also able to be listed as the "other parent" on their child's birth certificate, a significant stride toward correcting legal imbalances for same sex parents. Non-gestational mothers reported favorably their ability to engage in parental leave following the births of their children and reported experiencing little to no legal discriminations associated with their parenting statuses. However, further questioning of the status revealed ambiguity around the strength of the legal rights associated with their name

being on the birth certificate. Many mothers reported being unaware if the status of the non-gestational mother as a legal mother could be contested outside of their jurisdiction. Because of this, at least two mothers sought confirmatory second parent adoption proceedings to ensure their firm legal right to their child/ren regardless of their jurisdiction.

Patterson and Farr (2016) suggested that due to an emphasis on egalitarian values within the population, legal imbalances in parenting recognition could nurture involuntary and irrepressible inequalities that impact the interpersonal dynamics of the family members with a significant number of lesbian unions dissolving within the first 5 years (Doss & Rhoades, 2017; Gartrell et al., 2006; Goldberg & Garcia, 2015). Park et al. (2015) explored the influence of legal contexts on experiences of motherhood in same-sex couples and found that legal barriers or lack of legal protections left the family feeling vulnerable and distressed. This study revealed the absence of distress or feelings of vulnerability where participants generally reported a sense of protection in their role as a mother. These findings may confirm and/or extend knowledge in this area that suggests that being listed on a child's birth certificate offered mothers a sense of legal security whereby participants experienced less stress around legal barriers. Similar to the results found by Gartrell et al. (2006) and Goldberg and Garcia (2015), participants of this study who did express distress in their relationship reported relational conflict and poor communication as significant contributing factors to relational challenges. Little and Sockol (2020) further acknowledged the impact of romantic relationship dissatisfaction and challenges in the parent-infant bonding dyad that may support relationship

disruptions through separation or divorce. The transition into motherhood is therefore an important one, as the quality of the between-mother and mother-child relationships may be heavily influenced by internal and external symptoms of distress.

Lesbian Unions, Legal Imbalances, and the Tri-Theoretical Framework

Previous research and the findings of this study support the notion that the macro level systemic influences of the legal system on queer families influences the intrafamilial dynamics of lesbian mothers. Legal imbalances and lack of legal protections foster vulnerability and distress in the family while perceived legal recognition and equities appears to nurture a sense of security that supports the between-mother and between mother and child relationship. Mothers described an ability to parent without fear of losing their child/ren in a manner that further supported the attachment development with their child/ren. Mothers who achieved second parent adoption reported an increased sense of family security and also frustrations at having had to go through great lengths to confirm their motherhood status as the process does not consider their relationship with their child. Instead, mothers pursuing second parent adoption must adhere to the same process as if they were adopting a child unknown/unconnected to them. The presence of legal recognition, protections, and careful attention to legal processes for same sex parents may support the strength of interpersonal family dynamics and longevity of same sex unions by eliminating systemic stressors.

Hierarchical Dynamics and Quality of Couple Relationships

Prior literature suggests that mothering has generally been synonymous with a specific form of nurturing care and protection, the dynamics of which may change when

two mothers/nurturers are equally present in the family system (McKelvey, 2014). The transition to parenthood for lesbian mothers is an intentional decision that inevitably shifts the dynamics of the family. Novel experiences contributing to the shift may include feeding and caretaking routines, affection, discipline, and parental inclusion. How one experiences the parental role and division of parental tasks may profoundly influence the between mother relationship and the mother-child relationship (Little & Sockol, 2020). In their case study of 13 lesbian mothers, Hadley and Stuart (2009) explored parental identification and found that lesbian mothers often possess egalitarian views to parenting and also retain a hierarchical structure with one mother emerging as the primary caregiver. Bennett (2003) reported similar results of attachment hierarchies in lesbian families that were related to the distribution of childcare tasks. Malmquist's (2015) study offered that while lesbian mothers may strive for equality in parenting, in reality, biogenetic connections often set the benchmark that established parenting roles and hierarchies. Lesbian mothers in this study reported a demonstrative child preference for their gestational mother, especially in moments when they were seeking security or protection. Some mothers articulated explicit verbal and emotional rejection of the non-gestational mother during these periods. Mothers attributed this preference to early feeding routines and specifically breastfeeding by the gestational mother as well as additional time spent with the child/ren. Little and Sockol (2020) found that the attachment security of the adult was closely associated with their intimate relationship satisfaction as well as the parent-child bonding. This suggests that mothers who experienced secure attachments individually were better able to bond and connect with

their spouse and child. This study confirms the results of the literature in this area that suggested that despite the presence of two nurturing mothers, more often than not, one mother was perceived to emerge as the primary caregiver and that that mother was normally biogenetically related to the child. This study confirms the significance of biogenetics and specifically the role of the gestational mother related to the nurturing bonds that develop during breastfeeding, an experience afforded to the gestational mother that the non-gestational mother cannot equally experience.

The disparity in these experiences supported some mothers' feelings of envy toward the gestational mother often also described as a desire or longing to be "the one" or "number one mom". Non-gestational mothers reported feeling left out in the early infancy periods when they could not be involved or equally experience the bonding and nurturing that occurred between the gestational mother and infant. Despite intentional attempts to create connections with their children, they could not compete with the influence of biology. In Pelka's (2009) study of shared motherhood in lesbian co-mothers, many mothers possessed preconceived notions of their expected mothering experience based on heteronormative experiences attached to their own rearing. However, the presence of two mothers often created competing rather than complementary roles in parenting tasks. In this study, when roles appeared to be more competitive than complementary, mothers reported experiencing significant challenges in the quality of their relationship. They discussed significant frustrations around role expectations and division of tasks specifically if they felt that their tasks left them with less direct connection or caretaking of the child. Mothers expressed feeling that the

disconnect in their roles contributed to a child developing a preference for the parent who was afforded more direct caretaking opportunities, thereby confirming Pelka's (2009) findings. This study further confirms Pelka's (2009) findings in that expectations of maternal experiences and perceived infant preference for one mother may nurture feelings of gestational envy in the non-gestational mother, especially in instances where the non-gestational mother also wished to experience pregnancy and birth. For those mothers who indicated no desire to experience pregnancy and birth, feelings of gestational envy were less prevalent.

It would be interesting to determine if mothers' feelings of gestational envy or associated frustration were influenced by individual attachment anxieties and attachment avoidance as described by Little and Sockol (2020) that may have impacted their relational connection abilities. In their 2020 study conceptualized using family systems theory and minority stress theory, Farr and Vazquez found that systemic influences such as homonegative microaggression experiences and their perceived competence as parents did predict the quality of the parent-child relationship. In cases when parents had a greater perceived parental competence, the bond experienced in the parent-child relationship was stronger. In instances where homonegative microaggressions were greater, closeness or the quality of the parent-child relationship was decreased. As such, how parents experience their external world in regard to parenting and general experiences, subsequently influences the quality of the intrafamilial connections.

Hierarchical Dynamics, Quality of Couple Relationship and the Tri-theoretical Framework

Despite an identification as lesbian, most lesbian mothers possess heterosexual templates of motherhood rooted in systemic heteronormativity. This is because most often, lesbian mothers have been raised by heterosexual parents and therefore, possess preconceptions of the parenting experience (Carone et al., 2020). The assertions and denials of one's mothering status through a queer lens can foster feelings of invisibility, devaluation, and anger around the typecast of *real* or *authentic* mother (McInerney et al., 2021). That is, heteronormativity will only accept the biologically related, legally recognized parent as real, while queer theory (de Laurentis, 1991) contends that although oxymoronic, maternal practices can extend to include polymaternal family structures that represent a complex triangulation of intimate relational dynamics between mothers and their children (Gibson, 2014). Gibson (2014) suggested that queering concepts offers a lens to view predictable concepts in unexpected ways due to the disruption of normative practices. Such inconsistencies and dichotomies that exist between biological motherhood and social motherhood can perpetually influence the intimate family dynamics of same sex families. While lesbian mothers may have some level of awareness of these systemic dichotomies and their influences, the actual lived experience associated with the attachment of such categorization may influence how a mother perceives herself and her role within the family system. Feelings of devaluation, perceived parental preference, and disappointments around parental role expectations can create feelings of distress within the family system. Per family systems theory and the understanding of family process

dynamics, Farr and Vazquez (2020) acknowledge the affective mental health of LGBTQ+ parents whereby, when one partner is distressed, the other partner is inevitably affected. Feelings of gestational envy associated with social invisibilities and child rejection can also obstruct parent child bonding that is critical to form secure attachments to a parental figure. When discussing the impact of the larger society on the individual family relationships, and with consideration given to the rate of relationship dissolution in lesbian couples, it is important to also examine how systemic changes might support the strengthening of the family unit to alleviate distress in queer maternal practices.

Limitations of the Study

One significant limitation of this study was the reliance on convenience sampling as opposed to random sampling. While attempts were made to reach a wide global populace of individuals, the nature of the population as hidden or difficult to reach required a reliance on word of mouth and snowball sampling. Due to the hard-to-reach nature of the population, the recruitment poster was revised to use less formal research language and recruitment was extended to include the ability to make direct social media contact with persons who publicly shared their family status and may have met eligibility criteria for participation. These revisions were submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation.

Snowballing based on known connections meant that participants ended up being particularly homogenous with the representative proportion of the sample being Caucasian, married, with middle to upper income. The study participants were located in areas where same-sex families possessed more legal supports and wider community

acceptance. The results of this study may have differed should the representative sample of the population have been more diverse. The pilot study sample was comprised of African-American, unmarried, middle income individuals who were not located in an area with legal supports or wider community acceptance. Their account of their experiences was significantly different in some areas than that of the participant sample suggesting that this study may not be generalizable to a wider more diverse population.

Transferability is further limited by the sample size as unrelated factors such as length of the relationship, age of the children, and community supports may impede transferability. The children of the participants in this study were fairly young, with the majority in their formative years. Legal imbalances were not a prevalent factor amongst the study participants, however, literature suggests that legal imbalances may influence family dynamics and quality of connections.

The dependability of the study relies on the quality of data collection and analysis of subjective participant data. As a heterosexual single Black mother from a relatively small and conservative country, I may inherently possess cultural biases related to heterosexual norms, gender norms, and expectations of parental bonding activities. I have been traditionally gender reared in a heteronormative society and as a new mother may have also over identified with some of the shared nuances of parental expectations versus reality. As my status supported rapport building with the participants, it is difficult to note if it significantly influenced analysis of the data and therefore, must be acknowledged as a limitation.

Recommendations

This study yielded multiple recommendations for future research. The first is that the study should be repeated in diverse populations and in jurisdictions where legal imbalances continue to persist. Much of the established literature in this area focused on adoptive mothers and/or the biological/gestational mothers, though we know that current trends are allowing mothers to explore motherhood in many different ways including through reverse IVF. Practices such as these change the methods by which women can pursue motherhood and perhaps impact family dynamics. Further research with diverse populations and diverse methods of achieving motherhood, both biologically and socially, will provide further insight into how lesbian mothers navigate maternal practices in the face of disparate biology when also having to manage legal inequalities in the relationship with their children. This may provide the opportunity to learn pertinent information about how the larger systemic rules and structures impact individual family units and the associated bonds that occur in these family units. It would also provide the added benefit of increasing the transferability of study results.

A second recommendation of the study is that a similar study be conducted on mother's that have experience being both the gestational and non-gestational mother in the same family unit. The participants that presented with this structural dynamic in this study revealed some unique insights about the influence of biology that could benefit from further exploration. Particularly, one mother held a gestational but not biogenetic relationship with her child having carried the fertilized embryo of her wife. It would be interesting to determine if any relational hierarchies are more heavily influenced by

gestation or biology. As discussed in Chapter 2, research related to lesbian motherhood has tended to focus on either the gestational mother, the non-gestational mother, or the adoptive mother. During my research, I did not come across any studies that focused on mothers who held experiences as both the gestational and non-gestational mother in their family dynamics, which may occur when both mothers equally have an intentional desire to pursue biological motherhood.

Additional research is also recommended to further examine between mother relational expectations and hierarchies. The results of this study revealed unique challenges that mothers encountered around discrepancies or alignment between their parental expectations versus their reality in the role as mother. Few research studies focus on the between mother relationship and specifically its impact on the family dynamics. While maternal jealousy has been discussed by Pelka (2009) and forms part of the established literature in this area, the results of this study reveal that there could be varying emotional factors such as connection envy, resentment, adoration, and partner gratitude that influence the between-mother relationship and the connection with their child. The extent to which mothers perceive their importance or status in the family relative to their maternal practices and mother-child connections may influence how their behaviors either support or impede relational bonds in the family. Given the high dissolution rates amongst lesbian couples and the subsequent impact that such dissolutions may have on their children, this population may benefit from further exploration of factors that contribute to relational challenges to extrapolate further ways to support and strengthen their family units.

Implications

Positive Social Change

Maternal practices represent a universal phenomenon that is generally assumed from a heteronormative lens with associated discourse. Lesbian parenting deviates from these norms in that two women cannot naturally breed, however, two women can nurture and coparent in a manner that queers motherhood. This notion has not yet consistently and explicitly been supported in the larger systemic structures such as legal and healthcare arenas that continue to privilege biological motherhood over social motherhood. The stigmas or lack of viability afforded to lesbian led families have been recognized in the literature as a contributor to the distress that can impact relationships within the lesbian family system (McInerney et al., 2020; McKelvey, 2014; Pelka, 2009). Information related to lesbian adoption of a nonrelated child is more readily available. However, these studies accept an equality in the parenting relationship that each mother enters into the relationship with an intent to bond with the child, having established equal legal rights and provisions without the added imbalance of biogenetic relationships. Lesbian co-mothers who experience disparate biological relationships with their child also face difficulties with parental inclusion and inequality, social invisibility, legal disadvantages relating to child custody, disparities in parental decision-making rights, and gestational envy (Hayman et al., 2013; Malmquist, 2015; Paldron, 2014; Webb, 2018). Such significant distress can create feelings of displacement or disconnect from the family unit that may threaten dissolution of the relationship (Little & Sockol, 2020). With the divorce statistics of same-sex female couples recorded at 72% with an

average duration of about four years (ONS, 2021), family legal practices should be closely considered as they inevitably impact the children of the union.

The findings of this study provide non-gestational mothers a voice and highlights the notion that despite well-intentioned efforts toward equal connections, biology appears to play an important role in how society perceives a mother and confirms the privilege afforded to biological motherhood that is not extended to non-gestational mothers as social mothers. Further, the findings suggest that the apparent legal supports offered by way of second parent naming on the birth certificate, may provide a false sense of security to mothers about the extent of their legal rights to their child. Mothers who sought custodial security through second parent adoption clearly articulated frustrations around the adoptive processes and suggested that such legal practices should be reviewed and amended with consideration given to same sex family unions. Ordinarily, a second parent in a legal union is not required to engage in adoptive proceedings to confirm their legal parentage to their child. Advancements made with same sex marriage laws failed to extend to this area of legal practice to make appropriate amendments with consideration to same-sex families.

The findings contained in the study can therefore be used to advance the knowledge in the body of literature that informs psychological, sociological, and legal practices associated with family systems. Special consideration should be given to those factors that emerged as threats to the intrafamilial relationships in lesbian led families. The confirmation of perceived relational hierarchies and gestational envy acknowledge a further disadvantage that non-gestational mothers may face when maternal practices and

legal practices converge. At an individual and familial level, the information found here when considered with the results of previous studies can assist psychologists in better understanding and supporting same sex parents. Psychologists may be able to offer supportive interventions tailored to these mothers but also to the couple that may help more appropriately manage the unique stressors that they face in their mothering experiences. Such interventions may operate to validate mothers in their role in a world that renders them invisible, strengthen and preserve the integrity of the lesbian union, and support attachments in the parent-child relationships.

At a societal level, the findings of this study may further support policy reviews and legal amendments toward the provisions of equitable care and legal protections to childbearing lesbian couples. Provisions that allow for equal rights to parent by law for both gestational and non-gestational mothers, and forego the need for second parent adoption proceedings to confirm motherhood, may diminish the societal stressors that negatively impact lesbian motherhood. Over time, such provisions may advance the social perception of motherhood such that biological motherhood becomes less privileged and social motherhood becomes better understood and supported. In doing so, therein lies opportunities for positive social change by increasing knowledge that could potentially strengthen and enhance lesbian led family systems and offer the emotional and physical welfare of the child/ren as legally and socially paramount.

Queer theory (de Laurentis, 1991) was used in this study to provide a macro-level lens through which to explore lesbian motherhood. It lends credence to the variance in sexuality and understands that this population operates outside the heterosexual norms of

society. This theory proved suitable for explaining and understanding the lived experiences including the relational and family dynamics of lesbian mothers. The findings highlighted the influence of sexuality on language, social meanings, rules, and roles, associated with motherhood and parenting thereby confirming the sexual variance that exists in opposition to heteronormativity.

Secondary to this theory, family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) was used to explain the interconnectedness and relational dynamics of the intrafamilial relationships. The heteronormative values that are typically associated with the theory were set aside in favor of a using a queer lens. The findings of this study are in line with family systems theory in that lesbian mothers operate as a function of their family, and are therefore, an instinctual unit where individual members should not be considered in isolation. Similarly, any changes within the functioning of one mother or child, inevitably and involuntarily imposes changes on the functioning of the entire family unit. The study further confirms the notion that family systems are also susceptible to the influences of their environment including systemic influences like the legal, social, and healthcare systems.

Finally, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) found its utility in explaining the bonding practices between mother and child. This was particularly important as this theory is ordinarily related in heteronormative terms whereby the presence of two mothers challenges the theory. Attachment theory suggests that children will identify a primary nurturing bond amongst caregivers (usually maternal) that is rooted in emotional security. Despite the presence of two mothers, the results of this study demonstrate that at

least in the early developmental years, a child has a tendency to demonstrate a preference for their biological/gestational mother and that it is this mother that the child will seek when they want to fulfill their basic need for emotional security. Exceptions to this rule existed in families where the non-gestational mother was highly available and equally or primarily engaged in feeding and caring routines confirming attachment theory's suggestion that nurturing bonding activities that occur between mother and child relay information to that child about their emotional security in a manner that supports the strength of their connection.

The findings of this study, therefore, confirm the suppositions of both attachment theory and family systems theory albeit through the lens of queer theory that allowed the theories to be further explored in context. This implies that the experiences of lesbian motherhood in many ways are very similar to heterosexual mothers, yet how these roles are experienced can also be quite unique when two mothers are present. The application of queer theory allows for the understanding of variance in family presentation, and it is this area that may require additional focus and attention to support lesbian led families systemically.

Conclusion

Heteronormative family structures have set the standard for the rules and norms associated with family systems, including how individuals should behave within their unions as well as in the relationships with their children. The notion of mothering while queer has been perceived as oxymoronic in that one could not choose to be in a

homosexual relationship and still possess the ability to breed (Averett, 2021; Webb, 2018). Lesbian mothers have challenged this existing status quo to go on to successfully mother despite the challenges set against them. However, systemic influences including legal imbalances and legal provisions rooted in heteronormative values can influence how lesbians engage in motherhood. Biological expressions of motherhood when considered against heterosexed guides for child rearing and maternal practices, are met with privilege and protections. However, mothers who mother from a non-biogenetic position, or what can be considered social motherhood, operate against such normed standards. These women are not inherently afforded the legal and social protections and privileges of their partners. Such inequalities begin to set the stage for imbalances and relational hierarchies that threaten the integrity of lesbian-led families.

This study of the influence of disparate biology on family dynamics illuminated experiences of lesbian co-mothers that confirm the existence of relational hierarchies. Specifically, the findings confirm the societal and legal privileges of the gestational or biogenetic mother over those of the non-gestational/non-biogenetic mother in instances where second parent adoptions were not pursued. Further the findings confirm a perceived child's hierarchical preference for their gestational mother especially when the child seeks nurturance, security, and protection. This means that much of the legal and socio-emotional protections of motherhood are afforded to the gestational mother whereby societal scrutiny renders the non-gestational mother invalid and often times invisible. Her role is not easily and seamlessly carved out having likely been reared under heteronormed values herself. Experiences that foster feelings of exclusion and gestational

envy are valid, and may influence how each mother views herself in the relationship, in respect to her child, and in terms of her place in society. The mother-child relational experiences of each mother, are then likely unparalleled, differing significantly.

According to the literature, there are many challenges that lesbian mothers face that could contribute to relational difficulties and subsequent dissolution. How mothers experience motherhood through the imbalances of disparate biology is important for understanding the factors that may strengthen and preserve relationships and also those areas that challenge and stress relationships. If the family is considered the nucleus of all civilization, the basic social unit of society where all social nature is experienced, then it is important to protect the family from intervening causes.

At the most fundamental level, family structure and family processes matter because they operate as the essential building blocks of society, and ultimately humanity. Evidence demonstrates that children who are raised in healthy two-parent families are more likely to lead healthy and successful lives than those who have not experienced the same level of family security and stability (Gates, 2015; Golombok et al., 2014). What we now are able to contribute to the literature is the experiential evidence of lesbian family insecurities that are fostered by systemic biases. While we may be unable to thwart the influences of biology on relationship hierarchies, we can utilize this information to offer increased legal and social supports for mothers who are mothering from a position of marginalization, that they may be validated and protected in their role and supported in their unions.

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Appendix A: Demographic Survey

Thank you for your interest in the study designed to explore relationships in lesbian co-mothers where one mother shares a biological connection to their child and the other does not. The following questions are intended to help determine the likelihood that this study will apply to your experiences. Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible.

1. How old are you ?
2. What is your gender?
3. Are you currently involved in an intimate relationship with another female?
4. How long have you been in the current relationship with your partner?
5. Do you share a child with your female partner?
6. Was your child conceived during the relationship with your current female partner?
7. Do you share a biological connection to your child?
8. Does your partner share a biological connection to your child?

Please also provide the following demographic details:

Age, Gender, and biological relationship of each child in the family.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Preferred Telephone Number:

Confidential Email address:

Skype/Zoom acct:

Preferred method of contact:

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Initial contact, description of study, obtain informed consent.
2. Set up convenient interview per the participant's preferred method of contact.
3. Audio record interview using the following semi-structured format

Demographics:

- a. How long have you been in your current relationship?
- b. How long have you and your partner lived together?
- c. What is the legal status of your relationship?
- d. What is your legal custodial status to your child?
- e. What method of conception was utilized?
- f. What is your current age, education level, occupation, and annual income?

Interview questions:

- g. Tell me about your decision/plan to have a child/children?
- h. Where you aware of any challenges or disagreements in making that decision?
- i. How is your role as mother represented in your family?
- j. What do you think contributes to your role/connection as a mother?
- k. How does your biological connection (or lack of biological connection) to your child influence your relationship with your child?
 - l. In the absence of a genetic relationship, what helps you to feel most connected to your child?
 - m. What causes you to feel disconnected?

n. Were there any disagreements in making the decision to have a child/children?

Tell me about those disagreements?

o. If there were disagreements, how were they resolved?

p. How does your relationship with your child impact your relationship with your partner?

q. Explain any frustrations you have experienced in your role as a co-mother.

r. How have these frustrations affected your relationship with your child?

s. How have these frustrations affected your relationship with your partner?

t. Have you ever experienced feelings of envy or resentment toward your partner that are related to their role as a co-mother?.

u. What, if anything, would you consider changing to improve the relationship with your partner?

v. What, if anything, would you consider changing to improve the relationship with your child?

4. Thank participants for their time and participation.

5. Offer participant the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher.

Appendix C: National Crisis Hotlines by Country

Bermuda

Community Mental Health Services

(441) 236 3770 available 24 hours per day 7 days per week

USA

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1 800 784 2433 or 1 800 273 8255 available 24 hours per day 7 days per week

Canada

Crisis Services Canada

1 833 456 4566 available 24 hours per day 7 days per week

United Kingdom

Samaritans

+44 (0) 8457 90 9090 available 24 hours per day 7 days per week

Appendix D: Social Media Recruitment Flyer

Are you a mom and lesbian? Share a child with your wife or girlfriend? Let's talk!

I am working on a study called "*Maternal Attachment and the Role of Disparate Biology amongst Lesbian Co-Mothers*" that could help lawmakers and family care providers like magistrates, lawyers, doctors, and counselors better understand systemic influences on lesbian family dynamics. I am looking for mothers to chat with me about their experiences as a mother and the relationships between mother and child and mother and your partner.

This conversation will be part of the doctoral study for Annisha Peets, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

About the study:




- One set of questions related to your relationship and parenting that will also help ensure eligibility to participate in the study.
- One 60-90 minute Zoom/Webex/Skype interview conversation.
- One 15-30 minute follow up call.
- To protect your privacy, no names will be collected, and you are not required to use video during the call. You may participate from any country.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- A member of a lesbian couple who have a child born within the lesbian relationship.
- One mother has a biological relationship with the child and the other does not. You can participate if you are the biological mother or the non-biological mother.

If you have questions or wish to confidentially participate, please email me at annisha.peets@waldenu.edu or text/whatsapp [REDACTED].

Appendix E: CITI Program Ethics Course Certification

		Completion Date 19-Aug-2020 Expiration Date N/A Record ID 37591409
This is to certify that:		
Annisha Peets		
Has completed the following CITI Program course:		
Student's Doctoral Student Researchers 1 - Basic Course	(Curriculum Group) (Course Learner Group) (Stage)	Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).
Under requirements set by:		
Walden University		
 Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative		
Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w2e63481c-d978-4afe-9839-f45483a82d24-37591409		

Appendix F: Walden Internal Review Board Letter

From: IRB <irb@mail.waldenu.edu>
Sent: Thursday, January 7, 2021 18:32
To: annisha [REDACTED]
Cc: Yoly Zentella [REDACTED]
Subject: IRB Approval Granted, Conditional upon Partner Approval - Annisha Peets

Dear Ms. Peets,

This email is to notify you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your application for the study entitled, "Maternal Attachment and the Role of Disparate Biology amongst Lesbian Co-Mothers," conditional upon the approval of the research partner, as documented in a signed notification of approval from the Bermuda Ethics Committee, which will need to be submitted to the Walden IRB once obtained. You may not commence the study until the Walden IRB confirms receipt of that signed notification of approval from the Bermuda Ethics Committee.

Your approval # is 01-07-21-0318716. You will need to reference this number in your dissertation and in any future funding or publication submissions. Also attached to this e-mail are the IRB approved consent forms. Please note, if these are already in an on-line format, you will need to update those consent documents to include the IRB approval number and expiration date.

Your IRB approval expires on January 6, 2022 (or when your student status ends, whichever occurs first). One month before this expiration date, you will be sent a Continuing Review Form, which must be submitted if you wish to collect data beyond the approval expiration date.

Please note that this letter indicates that the IRB has approved your research. You may **NOT** begin the research phase of your doctoral study, however, until you have received official notification from the IRB to do so. Once you have received this notification by email, you may begin your data collection. Your IRB approval is contingent upon your adherence to the exact procedures described in the final version of the IRB application materials that have been submitted as of this date. This includes maintaining your current status with the university. Your IRB approval is only valid while you are an actively enrolled student at Walden University. If you need to take a leave of absence or are otherwise unable to remain actively enrolled, your IRB approval is suspended. Absolutely NO participant recruitment or data collection may occur while a student is not actively enrolled.

If you need to make any changes to your research staff or procedures, you must obtain IRB approval by submitting the IRB Request for Change in Procedures Form. You will receive confirmation with a status update of the request within 10 business days of submitting the change request form and are not permitted to implement changes prior to receiving approval. Please note that Walden University does not accept responsibility or liability for research

activities conducted without the IRB's approval, and the University will not accept or grant credit for student work that fails to comply with the policies and procedures related to ethical standards in research.

When you submitted your IRB application, you made a commitment to communicate both discrete adverse events and general problems to the IRB within 1 week of their occurrence/realization. Failure to do so may result in invalidation of data, loss of academic credit, and/or loss of legal protections otherwise available to the researcher.

Both the Adverse Event Reporting form and Request for Change in Procedures form can be obtained on the Tools and Guides page of the Walden website: <https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/research-center/research-ethics/tools-guides>

Doctoral researchers are required to fulfill all of the Student Handbook's [Doctoral Student Responsibilities Regarding Research Data](#) regarding raw data retention and dataset confidentiality, as well as logging of all recruitment, data collection, and data management steps. If, in the future, you require copies of the originally submitted IRB materials, you may request them from Institutional Review Board.

Both students and faculty are invited to provide feedback on this IRB experience at the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=qHBJzkJMUx43pZegKlmdiQ_3d_3d

Sincerely,
Libby Munson
Research Ethics Support Specialist
Office of Research Ethics and Compliance
Walden University
100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 1210
Minneapolis, MN 55401
Email: irb@mail.waldenu.edu
Phone: (612) 312-1283
Fax: (612) 338-5092

Information about the Walden University Institutional Review Board, including instructions for application, may be found at this link: <http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/researchcenter/orec>