

Children's Play Narratives: What They Tell Us About Lesbian-Mother Families

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Play narratives can offer a unique insight into the child's internal world. This study compared the play narratives of children in 38 lesbian-mother families; 73 two-parent, heterosexual-mother families; and 58 single-heterosexual-mother families recruited from a general population sample. Findings indicated positive mother-child relationships and well-adjusted children. Girls' narratives showed more affection than boys' and were more strongly associated with mothers' interview measures, suggesting that girls' play narratives reveal a more accurate picture of family relationships.

Children's play narratives have been a focus of recent studies attempting to access the child's internal world. Understanding children's play narratives can facilitate the examination of parent-child relationships from the child's point of view as well as the emotional and behavioral development of children. The focus of this investigation was on children's play narratives in lesbian-mother families in comparison with heterosexual families. The associations between these play narratives and both children's gender role behavior and mothers' reports of family functioning were also studied.

With regard to the emotional and social development of children in lesbian-mother families and the quality of the relationship between the mother and the child, the findings of empirical studies have been

remarkably consistent in that no differences have been identified between these children and children raised in heterosexual families (Brewaeyts, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981). In reviews of the literature, Patterson (1992, 1995b) concluded that children from lesbian-mother families do not show a higher incidence of psychological disorder and are no more likely to display emotional or behavioral problems such as depression, anxiety, or disruptive and aggressive behavior than their counterparts from heterosexual homes.

Previous studies of the development of children in lesbian-mother families generally relied on parental reports of children's development, through the use of either interview (Golombok et al., 1983) or questionnaire measures such as the Child Behavior Checklist (e.g., Flaks et al., 1995). Parents, however, are not necessarily reliable informants about their own children. They can be biased about the significance of certain behaviors, overemphasizing some to the exclusion of others (Robinson, Herot, Haynes, & Mantz-Simmons, 2000).

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Studies that have attempted to assess the children's point of view by using self-report measures administered to the child suffer from a number of limitations. First, children can answer questions in a way that they perceive to be socially desirable. Second,

although children of age 9 and above respond with acceptable validity and reliability to verbal interview methods (e.g., the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children; Shaffer, Fisher, Lucas, Dulcan, & Schwab-Stone, 2000, has acceptable validity for 9-year-olds), younger children tend to give less reliable reports because of both language and attention limitations. Finally, children may be reluctant to share their perceptions and experiences when asked about them directly, especially if these experiences are negative (Buschbaum, Toth, Clyman, Cicchetti, & Emde, 1992).

Researchers investigating lesbian-mother families have tried to overcome these problems with measures that incorporate toys and props, which have been shown in studies of heterosexual families to be more effective than two-dimensional stimuli (e.g., pictures) for eliciting responses that predict child behaviors (Getz, Goldman, & Corsini, 1984; Mize & Ladd, 1988). These measures include the Children's Self View Questionnaire (Patterson, 1995a), which uses hand puppets to assess children's self-reported adjustment; the Family Relations Test (Brewaeyts et al., 1997), which uses cut-out family figures to assess positive and negative feelings between the child and the mother; and an adaptation of the Separation Anxiety Test (Klagsbrun & Bowlby, 1976), which uses photographs to depict separations to understand attachment relationships (Golombok et al., 1997).

Play narratives have not previously been used to study the socioemotional development of children in lesbian-mother families. Play narratives are different from the projective measures previously used in lesbian-mother research, as the child acts out stories about familiar family scenarios using dolls. An advantage of this approach is that children's play is a means of access to children's internal representations; when presented with a somewhat familiar situation, young children usually act more or less without conscious reflection (Butler & Meichenbaum, 1981). Through their play, children can portray their experiences with others, their expectations, and their conflicts (Warren, Oppenheim, & Emde, 1996) and thus reveal important dimensions of their experience of interpersonal relationships (Woolgar, 1999). Several studies of children raised in heterosexual-mother families have used systematic play narratives with the aim of characterizing the child's internal representations (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990; Buschbaum et al., 1992; Cassidy, 1988; Oppenheim, Emde, & Warren, 1997; Solomon, George, & DeJong, 1995; Toth, Cicchetti, Macfie, & Emde, 1997; Warren et al., 1996). With dolls used to represent

family members, children have been asked to complete standardized story stems describing conflicts and emotional events. Play narratives aim to tap into children's scripts or schema and their personal experiences, as well as their ability to organize their feelings into coherent stories and the representations that they have of their parents.

From a theoretical perspective, it is well established that parent-child relationships are central to children's social and emotional development (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Maccoby, 1992). One aspect of parenting that is important for children's psychological functioning includes emotional availability and responsiveness to the child to promote secure attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). Much research using structured doll play techniques has examined the internal representations of children with different attachment relationships and suggests that the organization and coherence of children's play narratives reflects their current attachment security to their mother (e.g., Bretherton et al., 1990; Cassidy, 1988; Oppenheim et al., 1997). It has been found that securely attached children are more likely to provide favorable solutions to the stories that are presented, whereas insecurely attached children tend to end stories negatively. In addition, securely attached children tend to have positive representations of themselves and others and portray the child doll as competent, valuable, and worthy and the mother doll as providing safety and protection (Bretherton et al., 1990; Cassidy, 1988; Solomon et al., 1995). Insecurely attached children, on the other hand, are more likely to portray the child doll as helpless, isolated, and/or rejected or as displaying violent or negative behaviors (Cassidy, 1988; Solomon et al., 1995). It has also been found that children who have more representations of their mother that are both positive and disciplinary also have fewer negative representations of their mother (Oppenheim et al., 1997).

As well as shedding light on parent-child relationships, play narratives can be useful in detecting behavioral problems in children. Associations have been found between representations of parental figures in 4- and 5-year-old children's play narratives and children's behavior as rated by their mother (Oppenheim et al., 1997). In addition, more aggressive/negative emotional themes within stories have been linked to a higher incidence of behavior problems as rated by parents and teachers (Warren et al., 1996). A higher level of behavior problems has also been seen in children who told more stories that were both aggressive and incoherent than in those who did

not (von Klitzing, Kelsay, Emde, Robinson, & Schmitz, 2000).

It has been demonstrated, therefore, that analysis of the content and structure of children's play narratives can reveal the children's perceptions of their relationship with their parents and indicate the presence of behavioral problems. The utilization of a technique that taps into the child's own perceptions of family relationships may also increase understanding of different family forms from the child's point of view. This technique thus has the potential to add an important dimension to research into parent-child relationships in lesbian-mother families, namely that of children's perspectives on these relationships. It has frequently been argued that children in lesbian-mother families have a poor relationship with their mother and, where relevant, the mother's female partner. Although evidence from existing studies does not support this assumption, it is conceivable that difficulties in mother-child relationships have not been detected because of the overreliance on maternal reports and the low reliability and validity of the assessments administered to the children themselves. If greater difficulties in mother-child relationships do exist, we expect that children in lesbian-mother families, when compared with those from heterosexual families, would (a) represent mothers as less positive, (b) represent mothers as showing inappropriate discipline, either extremely high or extremely low, (c) show more aggressive/negative emotion themes within the narratives, (d) give less coherent story narratives, and (e) give less favorable endings to their stories.

Play narrative research has also found that there are differences between the narratives of boys and those of girls. von Klitzing et al. (2000) showed that boys told significantly more aggressive narratives with fewer affection themes and less coherence than girls. In addition, when girls showed aggressive themes, they were more likely to be associated with behavior problems as reported by parents and teachers. An additional aim of the present study is to reexamine sex differences in narratives, irrespective of family type, and to explore within-sex variation using the Activities Inventory (Golombok & Rust, 1993a, 1993b), a modification for school-age children of a standardized measure of sex-typed behavior designed to differentiate within as well as between the sexes (Golombok & Rust, 1993a, 1993b). By relating the Activities Inventory to the play narratives, we may investigate the relationship between sex-typed behavior and play narratives for boys and girls separately. For example, we can explore the

question of whether more masculine boys produce more aggression themes and more feminine boys give more affection themes within their narratives. Such an association, if established, would increase understanding of the relationship between children's internal representations and gender development.

A common criticism of existing research on lesbian-mother families is that studies have relied on volunteer or convenience samples and therefore it is not known whether and to what extent these samples are biased (Stacey & Bilbarz, 2001). The present sample was derived from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC; Golding & the ALSPAC Study Team, 1996), a geographic population study of nearly 14,000 mothers and their children recruited during pregnancy. As all of the ALSPAC lesbian mothers were asked to participate in the present investigation, this provided an opportunity to study a representative sample of lesbian-mother families and carefully matched comparison groups.

In the present study, the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & the MacArthur Narrative Working Group, 1990) was administered to 5-9-year-old children. The MSSB is a standardized tool in which children are asked to complete a set of play narratives describing emotional events and conflicts. Through the use of small dolls, children are presented with vivid story beginnings and are left to take over the narrative at the point of conflict within the story. Story stems are coded according to a standardized system that identifies both content themes and representations of parents (Robinson, Mantz-Simmons, Macfie, & the MacArthur Narrative Working Group, 1995). Coding also involves identifying whether the conflict was resolved within the narratives (Oppenheim, Milika, & Cross, 1998) and how coherent the stories were (Wagner & Oppenheim, 1998).

The study investigates the play narratives elicited from children raised in lesbian-mother families compared with children in two-parent and single-parent heterosexual families in terms of (a) the structure of the narratives, including the coherence and emotional resolution, and (b) content themes and representations of parents within the narratives. The structure and content of the narratives were also examined in relation to measures of family functioning assessed by interview with the mothers to examine the relationship between children's play narratives and the quality of parent-child relationships. The findings relating to parent-child relationships and children's psychological development are described in detail

elsewhere (Golombok et al., 2003). Although existing research has investigated the relationship between mothers' ratings of children's behavioral problems and children's play narratives (Oppenheim et al., 1997; von Klitzing et al., 2000; Warren et al., 1996), associations between the narratives and mothers' reports of family functioning have not previously been explored.

METHOD

Participants

Families were obtained through the ALSPAC. ALSPAC enrolled any woman expecting a baby and residing in Avon between April 1, 1991, and December 31, 1992 (Golding & the ALSPAC Study Team, 1996; Golding, Pembrey, Jones, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 2001). Women were recruited to the study soon after the confirmation of pregnancy and completed questionnaires at various time points from pregnancy onward.

The present investigation was initiated when the ALSPAC children were 7 years old. Eighteen lesbian-mother families were identified through their response to a routine postal questionnaire when the child was 85 months and through letters about the present investigation to all mothers in the study. As lesbian-mother families who had moved into the area since the birth of their child would not have been identified by ALSPAC, snowball procedures were used to identify other lesbian mothers who were living within the geographical boundaries of the study. Snowballing is a widely used procedure for sampling hidden populations (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Heckathorn, 1997; Morrison, 1988; Spreen & Zwaagstra, 1994) and is most effective when initiated from a representative sample (Heckathorn, 1997). We carried out the snowballing procedure by asking ALSPAC mothers to approach other lesbian families in Avon, by making contact with local and national lesbian and gay organizations, and by placing advertisements in community centers and in the local and national press. A further 20 lesbian-mother families were recruited in this way. The ALSPAC and non-ALSPAC lesbian mothers were compared on sociodemographic information and on measures of family functioning and psychological state (Golombok et al., 2003). After we controlled for age, we identified significant differences for only 5% of the variables, the proportion that would be expected by chance, which suggests that the non-ALSPAC families were closely comparable to those recruited directly through ALSPAC. The few differences that emerged reflected higher occupational status and fewer psychological problems among the ALSPAC mothers. Thus, 38 lesbian-mother families were included in the investigation.

Of the lesbian-mother families, 20 were headed by a single mother, and 18 were headed by a lesbian couple. All women identified as lesbian and had been involved in a

lesbian relationship at some point since the birth of the child. Twenty-eight of the children had been born into a heterosexual family, and the average age of these children when the mother entered a lesbian relationship was 4.1 years. The remaining 10 children had been conceived by donor insemination, and all of them had been raised since birth without the presence of a father in the family home.

We studied the lesbian-mother families in comparison with two control groups who were selected from the total ALSPAC sample: (a) 73 two-parent heterosexual families in which the child had lived with both the mother and the father since birth and (b) 58 families headed by a single-heterosexual mother in which the child had lived with only the mother since the age of 18 months or younger. We matched the control groups to the lesbian mother groups according to (a) the mother's highest educational level during pregnancy and (b) the number of children in the family when the child was aged 47 months, so that we could control for the potentially confounding effects of these demographic variables.

Ninety-one boys and 78 girls participated in the study, and there were similar proportions of boys and girls in each family type. The mean age of the children was 97 months ($SD = 9.77$). The mean age of the mothers was 37 years ($SD = 4.92$). There were no significant differences between groups in the proportion of boys to girls or in mother's age. In addition, no group difference was found for social class as measured by either mother's occupation or mother's educational qualifications. Children's age differed significantly between family types, $F(2, 166) = 1.56, p < .001$. Children from single-parent families were the oldest, with a mean age of 101 months, and children from the lesbian-mother families were the youngest, with a mean age of 91 months.

Mothers and children were visited at home by interviewers who had been trained in the study techniques. There were two interviewers, both of whom were White and female. Because of the nature of the study, it was not possible for the interviewers to be blind to family type. Data were collected from the mother by interview and questionnaire. Interviews were conducted with 99% of mothers. Audiotaped assessments were conducted with 100% of the children.

Procedure and Measures

The MSSB

A subset of seven story stems was taken directly from the MSSB (Bretherton et al., 1990). Several studies have provided evidence for the validity of the MSSB for both content and performance features (Oppenheim et al., 1997; Warren et al., 1996). Stories were selected to assess children's responses to a range of socioemotional dilemmas. Each child was given story beginnings or "stems" describing a range of emotionally laden, conflictual family interactions that they were then asked to complete. The examiner

began the task by telling the child, "We are going to tell some stories using the toys that we have here."

The children were asked to pick a family from a range of dolls that represented adults and children of different sexes and of mixed ethnicity. The gender of the child protagonist doll was matched to the gender of the child participant. Children were not told which sex to choose for the doll that represented the second parent, to give them the opportunity to depict their own family structure if they so chose (i.e., children from lesbian-mother families could choose two mother dolls). The child was asked to name each of the dolls that represented children. The examiner then told the child, "I am going to start telling you what happens in the story, and then you show and tell me what happens after that. There are no right or wrong answers."

The stems were presented in an animated, dramatic manner, and children were encouraged to assist in the setting up of each story. Every story stem ended with the invitation, "Show me and tell me what happens next." Nondirective comments such as, "Does anything else happen in the story?" were used to facilitate the children's answers, and each stem had specific probes to focus the child on the dilemma in hand. If anything seemed unclear, the examiner asked, "What is happening here?" When the story seemed to be resolved or the child was very stuck, the examiner used her discretion to ask, "Is that the end of the story?" or "Does anything else happen?" When the story came to an end the examiner moved to the next story stem.

The seven MSSB story stems that were used included spilled juice (child makes a mess), mother's headache (conflict between parent and peer), burnt hand (child burns hand touching forbidden food), lost keys (child witnesses parents arguing), bathroom shelf (child is forbidden to touch bathroom shelf but sibling has a cut and asks for a plaster from the shelf), burglar (child is in bed at night and hears a frightening noise), and three's a crowd (conflict between sibling and peer desires).

Scoring

Responses to the story stems were transcribed for each child. This included all of the speech in the children's stories as well as nonverbal descriptions, such as the children showing mother figures spanking or hugging the child figures. The transcriptions of each story were coded according to a standard scoring scheme consistent with published approaches to scoring and data reduction (Oppenheim et al., 1997).

Narrative structure. The scale of *emotional resolution* (Oppenheim et al., 1998) is a 6-point scale designed to assess whether the narrative is resolved emotionally after the story is completed, with scores from 1 to 3 indicating different levels of *unresolved* and scores from 4 to 6 indicating different levels of *resolved*. Scores were recoded into a binary code: resolved or not resolved. The rating of emotional resolution is global, taking into consideration the emotional atmosphere of the story, the content themes in the narrative, and the narrative's organization.

Narrative coherence was coded on an 11-point scale from 0 (*no response*) to 10 (*a very coherent logical sequential series of events that are related to the story stem*) and took into account the coherence of the stories, shifts in narratives, embellishment, and whether the story was related to the original stem (Wagner & Oppenheim, 1998). Narrative coherence was also recoded into a binary code: coherent or incoherent.

Content themes. Content themes were coded according to a system developed by Robinson, Mantz-Simmons, Macfie, and the MacArthur Narrative Group (1995). Coding is based on the presence or absence of the following themes in the narrative: three relationship themes (exclusion, aggression, and empathy/helping), and four moral issues (escalation of conflict, affection, punishment, and verbal conflict). Each of these seven content themes was coded as present or absent for each narrative. If the theme appeared repeatedly, the code was still only given once. For example, if aggression occurred twice in one narrative, it would be scored only once.

Parental representations. The children's representations of their parents were coded separately for each parent for the presence or absence of the following positive and negative representations (Robinson et al., 1995). The five positive representations were protective, caretaking, affectionate, helpful, and forgiving. The seven negative representations were harsh, rejecting, ineffectual, anger, physically abusive, verbally abusive, and bizarre/atypical. Parental representations of discipline/control (i.e., of parents as authority figures who provide discipline) were also coded for each parent. Each of the 13 parental representations was coded as present or absent for each narrative, and if the same representation appeared more than once during the narrative, the code was given only once.

Role of mother/father. To assess which parent was actively used in each story, we gave separate codes for the role of the mother and the father. These codes indicated the extent to which the mother and the father were used during each narrative. For each narrative, we gave a binary code to indicate whether the mother doll was used within the narrative and a binary code to indicate whether the father doll was used within the narrative.

Reliability and Data Reduction

Children's narratives were coded by two raters. Differences were then conferenced, and the consensus codes were used for data analysis. Unconferenced codes for the two raters were compared for a random sample of 33% of the transcripts to assess interrater reliability. Cohen's kappas were very satisfactory ($Mdn = .90$; range = .71-.97). Additionally, one randomly selected story from a sample of 45 of the children's narratives (26% of the narratives) was coded by a third trained rater blind to family type. The mean percentage agreement was 89% (range = 82.2%-100%).

For each code, we computed an aggregate by summing across the seven narratives, so that each aggregate code is a

score out of 7. We calculated internal consistency for each aggregate code using Cronbach's alpha. Codes with the lowest frequencies and/or poorest internal consistency were dropped. In addition, some codes that were infrequently coded but were correlated with each other were combined as follows: exclusion, aggression, escalation of conflict, and punishment were combined and labeled *conflict themes* (alpha of aggregate = .80). The representations of the mother labeled harsh, rejecting, and physical abuse were combined and called *mother hostility* ($\alpha = .47$). The remaining aggregate codes were retained for use, as they showed at least moderate consistency across the seven narratives and were not very highly correlated with each other: narrative coherence, emotional resolution, affectionate themes, mother discipline, and father discipline (median Cronbach's $\alpha = .50$; range = .48-.77).

Previous researchers have examined the hypothesis that the telling of aggressive themes in an incoherent narrative is associated with behavior problems (von Klitzing et al., 2000). The use of aggressive themes in a resolved conflict may have a very different meaning from the use of aggressive themes in a narrative where conflict is not addressed in the story stem. Therefore, narratives that used aggressive themes and were also incoherent were coded as incoherence/conflict (alpha of aggregate = .44).

In summary, the following variables were used in the analysis: narrative coherence, emotional resolution, conflict themes, affectionate themes, mother hostility, mother discipline, father discipline, mother role, father role, incoherence/conflict.

The Activities Inventory

Gender role behavior was assessed with the Activities Inventory, an adaptation for 7-year-old children of the Pre-School Activities Inventory (PSAI; Golombok & Rust, 1993a, 1993b). A particular advantage of the Activities Inventory with respect to the current study is that, in addition to its ability to show differences between the sexes, it was developed specifically to identify variations in gender role behavior within each sex, allowing "masculine" and "feminine" girls and boys to be differentiated. It produces an overall score of gender role behavior, with higher scores representing more masculine or less feminine behavior.

The original version of the PSAI is a psychometrically constructed instrument that has been standardized on more than 2,000 subjects, predominantly in England, but also in the United States and the Netherlands. Split-half reliability is .88 ($N = 2,330$), and test-retest reliability over a 1-year period is .64 ($N = 33$; Golombok & Rust, 1993b). The modified version used in the current study contains 24 items and is divided into three sections: toys (7 items), activities (11 items), and characteristics (6 items). Children are read a list of statements about what two types of children like to do and are asked to decide which group of children they are most like and whether that is really true for them or only sort of true for them, according to the format derived by Harter and Pike (1984). For example, the experimenter may

ask, "Some kids play with jewelry, and other kids don't play with jewelry. Are you more like the ones who like playing with jewelry, or are you more like the ones who don't like playing with jewelry?" After the child has answered, the experimenter then asks, "Is that really true for you or is that only sort of true for you?" The same procedure is carried out for each of the 24 items, which are then summed across "masculine" and "feminine" items, and an overall score of sex-typed behavior is calculated.

Mother Interview

The mothers were interviewed according to an adaptation of a standardized interview designed to assess the quality of parenting (Quinton & Rutter, 1988). The interview lasted 1.5 to 2 hr and was tape-recorded. This procedure has been validated against observational ratings of mother-child relationships in the home, demonstrating a high level of agreement between global ratings of the quality of parenting by interviewers and observers (concurrent validity, $r = .63$). Detailed accounts were obtained of the child's behavior and the mother's response to it, with reference to the child's progress at school, use of spare time, peer adjustment, and relationships within the family unit.

Overall ratings of the quality of parenting were made according to strict coding criteria that took into account information obtained from the entire interview, as follows: (a) expressed warmth was rated on a 6-point scale from 0 (*none*) to 5 (*high*) and was based on the mother's tone of voice and facial expression when talking about the child, spontaneous expressions of warmth, sympathy and concern about any difficulties experienced by the child, and enthusiasm and interest in the child as a person; (b) overall mothering quality was rated on a 5-point scale from 0 (*very poor*) to 4 (*very good*) and measured the extent to which the child and mother enjoyed each other's company and showed affection to one another and the extent to which the mother took responsibility in terms of discipline; (c) family cohesion was rated on a 5-point scale from 0 (*no cohesion*) to 4 (*high cohesion*) and measured how the family functioned together and the quality of the interaction between family members.

In addition to these overall ratings, the following individual variables were rated from the interview material: (a) mother's overt warmth to child was rated on a 4-point scale from 0 (*little or none*) to 3 (*marked*) and is a rating of demonstrably warm behavior between the mother and the child, (b) severity of disputes was rated on a 4-point scale from 0 (*no confrontations*) to 3 (*major battles*) and assessed the intensity of disputes during conflict with the child, (c) frequency of smacking was rated on a 7-point scale from 0 (*none*) to 6 (*more than once per day*).

So that we could calculate interrater reliabilities for the mothers' interviews, we had a second interviewer, who was blind to family type, code 35 randomly selected interviews. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients for expressed warmth, overall mothering quality, and family cohesion were .96, .95, and .75, respectively. Pearson pro-

duct-moment correlation coefficients for mother's overt warmth to child, severity of disputes, and frequency of smacking were .80, .88, and .86, respectively.

RESULTS

Comparisons Among Family Types

Analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were carried out to compare the mean scores on MSSB narrative variables among lesbian-mother families, heterosexual single-parent families, and heterosexual two-parent families. Although correlations between child's age and the outcome variables were nonsignificant, other studies have shown a significant effect of age on narrative outcomes, and therefore child's age was included as a covariate. Power analysis indicated that with a significance level of .05, the ANCOVA had an 80% chance of detecting a significant medium-size effect, according to Cohen's (1988) effect size definitions. As shown in Table 1, there were no significant differences among family types for the narrative structures or for any of the themes or parental representation variables. Neither were there significant differences among the three family types for use of mother and father figures in the narratives.

Comparisons Between Boys and Girls on Narrative Variables

Scores on narrative variables for boys and girls for all of the families combined were compared with independent samples *t* tests (see Table 2). Power analysis showed that with a significance level of .05 there was a 94% chance of detecting a medium-size

effect. There was a significant difference between the mean number of girls' and boys' affectionate themes. Girls told stories with significantly more affectionate themes ($M = 1.1$, confidence interval [CI] = 0.82 to 1.40) than did boys ($M = 0.51$, CI = 0.33 to 0.68). There were no significant differences between negative themes in the girls' and boys' narratives, and there were no differences on any of the other narrative variables.

Correlations Between Narrative Variables and Gender Role Behavior

For boys and girls separately, correlations were computed between the narrative variables and the children's Activities Inventory scores (see Table 3). For boys, use of more affectionate themes was significantly correlated with less sex-typed gender role behavior. Use of more mother hostility was significantly correlated with more sex-typed gender role behavior for boys. For girls, use of more mother hostility was correlated with less sex-typed gender role behavior. Other variables were not significantly related to gender role behavior for boys or girls.

Relations Between Family Functioning Variables and Narrative Variables

Nonparametric correlations were computed between the narrative variables and parenting measures, first for all children and then for boys and girls separately (see Table 4). Table 4 shows a number of significant correlations between parenting measures and the narrative variables. All of the significant

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and *F* and *p* Values for Comparisons of Narrative Variables by Family Type

Narrative variable	Lesbian-parent families (<i>n</i> = 38)		Single-parent heterosexual families (<i>n</i> = 58)		Two-parent heterosexual families (<i>n</i> = 73)		<i>F</i> (2, 168)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Narrative coherence	5.63	1.40	5.41	1.67	5.79	1.45	1.45	<i>ns</i>
Emotional resolution	5.53	1.41	5.29	1.69	5.62	1.55	1.28	<i>ns</i>
Conflict themes	0.76	0.85	0.85	0.98	0.75	0.72	0.33	<i>ns</i>
Affection themes	0.82	1.06	0.81	1.13	0.74	1.11	0.37	<i>ns</i>
Mother hostility	0.03	0.09	0.10	0.31	0.08	0.19	1.14	<i>ns</i>
Incoherence/conflict	0.79	1.12	1.02	1.36	0.73	1.03	1.21	<i>ns</i>
Mother discipline	2.29	1.31	2.47	1.66	2.55	1.48	0.55	<i>ns</i>
Father discipline	0.76	0.91	0.74	1.09	0.85	1.05	0.27	<i>ns</i>
Mother role	6.21	1.02	6.40	0.72	6.29	0.79	1.41	<i>ns</i>
Father role	3.74	1.41	3.60	1.39	3.78	1.16	0.27	<i>ns</i>

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and *t* and *p* Values for Comparisons of Narrative Variables by Sex of Child

Narrative variable	Boys (<i>n</i> = 91)		Girls (<i>n</i> = 78)		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Narrative coherence	5.59	1.49	5.67	1.56	-0.31	167	<i>ns</i>
Emotional resolution	5.40	1.58	5.59	1.55	-0.80	167	<i>ns</i>
Conflict themes	0.85	0.90	0.71	0.78	1.05	167	<i>ns</i>
Affection themes	0.51	0.83	1.10	1.28	-3.54	129	< .01
Mother hostility	0.06	0.17	0.09	0.28	-0.79	167	<i>ns</i>
Incoherence/conflict	0.90	1.23	0.77	1.10	0.73	167	<i>ns</i>
Mother discipline	2.44	1.59	2.49	1.41	-0.20	167	<i>ns</i>
Father discipline	0.90	1.09	0.67	0.95	1.48	167	<i>ns</i>
Mother role	6.27	0.83	6.35	0.82	-0.56	167	<i>ns</i>
Father role	3.88	1.28	3.51	1.29	1.85	167	<i>ns</i>

correlations were higher when girls were examined alone, whereas for boys alone none of the correlations was significant.

For girls, a number of significant correlations were found between family functioning variables and narrative variables. Mother's expressed warmth correlated negatively with conflict themes, incoherence/conflict, and father's discipline, showing that higher levels of mothers' expressed warmth are associated with less conflict, less incoherence/conflict, and less fathers' discipline within the narratives. More family cohesion was associated with fewer conflict themes and less mother hostility within the narratives. With regard to overall mothering quality, higher levels of mothering quality were associated with more emotional resolution but less incoherence/conflict. Higher overt warmth to the child from the mother was associated with higher narrative coherence, higher emotional resolution, and more affection themes within the children's narratives. Additionally, higher frequency of smacking by the mother was associated with both more mother hostility and more mother discipline within the children's narratives.

As the correlations between the children's narrative scores and the mother's reports of family functioning were much higher for girls than for boys, we carried out an analysis to examine whether this could

be explained by sex differences in the mothers' reports. Parenting scores were compared between boys and girls through independent samples *t* tests (see Table 5). There were no differences between boys and girls for any of the six parenting variables.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present investigation using narrative play techniques are largely in line with those of studies of volunteer samples that pointed to positive mother-child relationships and well-adjusted children in lesbian-mother families. Children from lesbian-mother families and children from heterosexual families represented their mothers as equally positive and showed their mothers to have similar levels of discipline. Similarly, children from lesbian-mother families showed no more aggressive/negative emotion themes within the narratives, had no less coherent story narratives, and had just as favorable endings to their stories as children from heterosexual families.

Previous research has shown that children with secure attachment relationships have well-organized and coherent stories, have favorable solutions to their stories, and have positive representations of them-

Table 3
Correlations Between Activities Inventory Scores and Narrative Variables

Gender	Narrative coherence	Emotional resolution	Conflict themes	Affection themes	Mother hostility	Incoherence/conflict	Mother discipline	Father discipline
Boys	-.08	-.14	.19	-.35***	.24*	.13	.10	.14
Girls	-.09	-.06	.08	-.16	.25*	.13	-.07	-.01

Note. For boys, *n* = 90; for girls, *n* = 76. Values are Pearson's correlations.
* *p* < .05. *** *p* < .001.

Table 4
Correlations Between Family Functioning Variables and Narrative Variables

Family functioning variables	Narrative coherence	Emotional resolution	Conflict themes	Affection themes	Mother hostility	Incoherence/ conflict	Mother discipline	Father discipline
Boys and girls								
Mother's expressed warmth	.14	.13	-.17*	.04	-.03	-.18*	-.05	-.15
Family cohesion	.15	.16*	-.12	.01	-.21**	-.16*	-.05	.04
Overall mothering quality	.18*	.20*	-.13	.09	-.08	-.16*	-.06	-.07
Mother's overt warmth to child	.17*	.16*	.00	.17*	.00	-.09	.02	.01
Severity of disputes	-.16*	-.14	.06	.04	.09	.14	.08	-.01
Frequency of smacking	-.16*	-.16*	.14	.07	.18*	.17*	.18*	-.01
Boys								
Mother's expressed warmth	.07	.08	-.07	-.03	.11	-.07	.04	-.01
Family cohesion	.14	.12	-.04	-.12	-.10	-.13	.04	.04
Overall mothering quality	.15	.16	-.11	.05	-.01	-.09	-.05	-.04
Mother's overt warmth to child	.06	.04	.05	.00	.06	.02	.19	.09
Severity of disputes	-.16	-.12	.05	-.02	.14	.14	-.01	.01
Frequency of smacking	-.13	-.15	.12	.10	.13	.20	.09	.05
Girls								
Mother's expressed warmth	.22	.20	-.30**	.08	.18	-.30**	-.15	-.30**
Family cohesion	.17	.22	-.24*	.16	-.34**	-.19	-.16	.01
Overall mothering quality	.21	.24*	-.15	.12	-.15	-.24*	-.08	-.13
Mother's overt warmth to child	.30**	.29*	-.04	.32**	-.07	-.20	-.19	-.07
Severity of disputes	-.17	-.18	.09	.09	.03	.16	.19	-.01
Frequency of smacking	-.20	-.18	.16	.03	.23*	.14	.28*	-.07

Note. Spearman's rho was used for the correlations. For boys, $n = 91$; for girls, $n = 78$.

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

selves and others (e.g., Bretherton et al., 1990; Cassidy, 1988; Oppenheim et al., 1997). As children from lesbian-mother families did not differ in the degree of coherence of the stories or in the extent to which the stories were emotionally resolved, this suggests that there were no differences in the attachment security of these children compared with chil-

dren from heterosexual families. This is further supported by the finding that children from lesbian-mother families were no different than children in heterosexual families in the representations of their parents. Although the study did not measure security of attachment directly using the Strange Situation test, this finding contributes to existing knowledge

Table 5
Family Functioning Variables by Sex of Child

Family functioning variable	Boys ($n = 91$)		Girls ($n = 78$)		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Mother's expressed warmth	4.14	1.02	4.22	1.03	-0.48	167	<i>ns</i>
Family cohesion	3.01	1.01	2.85	1.05	0.90	167	<i>ns</i>
Overall mothering quality	3.26	0.73	3.19	0.82	0.53	166	<i>ns</i>
Mother's overt warmth to child	2.31	0.77	2.38	0.74	-0.75	167	<i>ns</i>
Severity of disputes	1.23	0.67	1.33	0.64	-1.02	167	<i>ns</i>
Frequency of smacking	0.80	0.71	0.86	0.80	-0.49	167	<i>ns</i>

and is the first study to examine children's attachment security in lesbian-mother families.

The presence of more aggressive/negative emotion themes within stories has been linked to a higher incidence of behavior problems as rated by parents and teachers (Warren et al., 1996), and a higher level of behavior problems has been found among children who tended to tell more aggressive and incoherent stories (von Klitzing et al., 2000). Children from lesbian-mother families did not have more conflict themes in their narratives, nor did they have more aggressive/incoherent stories than their counterparts from heterosexual homes, which suggests that these children were no more at risk for behavioral problems.

It could be argued that the failure to detect group differences was due to poor reliability of the MSSB or that the MSSB does not provide a good measure of children's representations of their family relationships. However, analysis of interrater reliability showed there to be a high level of agreement between raters. Also, as mentioned earlier, several studies have provided evidence for the validity of the MSSB for both content and performance features (Oppenheim et al., 1997; Warren et al., 1996). These factors suggest that the MSSB is an acceptable measure of children's representations of their family relationships, and, given the power of the sample to detect medium-size effects, the lack of differences between the groups appears to be a genuine finding.

It is interesting that children in each of the family forms used the father dolls to the same extent, despite the fact that children in the single-parent and lesbian-mother groups were growing up without a father in the family home. Although given the choice of sex for the doll that represented the second parent, all of the children from lesbian-mother families chose a mother and a father doll for their play narratives. It seems, therefore, that even though these children live in nontraditional families, they have a clear idea of what constitutes a traditional family and of social norms and may have been conforming to what they considered to be the demands of the task by choosing a mother and a father. It is also possible that such a choice reflects the children's assumption that their lesbian parents are not markedly different from the normative family arrangement; parents are just seen as parents regardless of their sex. Another contributing factor may have been that 77% of children in lesbian-mother families were still having regular contact with their fathers. Of primary interest for this study, however, is not whether children chose a mother and a father to play with or two mothers but

what they had each parent say and do and feel in response to the presented dilemmas.

When comparing the narratives of girls and boys, the only difference we found was in affectionate themes, with girls' narratives including significantly more affection than boys' narratives. This supports previous findings that boys' narratives included fewer affection themes (von Klitzing et al., 2000). However, evidence from the current study did not support von Klitzing et al.'s (2000) finding that boys told significantly more aggressive narratives with less coherence than did girls. Examination of within-sex differences in the story narratives, through the use of a measure of gender role behavior, did not show a significant relationship between the use of negative themes and masculinity/femininity for boys or girls. However, there was a significant within-sex relationship between the use of affectionate themes and masculinity/femininity, such that boys who used more affectionate themes had less masculine gender role behavior. This within-sex result is consistent with the between-sexes result of greater affection shown by girls than boys. For both girls and boys, those with more masculine and less feminine gender role behavior gave more harsh representations of their mother.

When examining the associations between the children's story narratives and the family functioning measures assessed through interview with the mother, we found a number of significant relationships. However, when we examined for boys and girls separately, we found that the associations held for girls but not for boys. For girls, more positive family functioning as reported by the mothers tended to be associated with more coherent, emotionally resolved, and affectionate narratives. Confirmation of an association between these reports of family functioning and the children's narratives provides important further validation for the MSSB.

Why were the associations between play narratives and mothers' interview scores only present for the girls in the study? A possible explanation is that there was a difference between mothers' actual behavior toward daughters and sons. For this reason, we compared family functioning variables for boys and girls. None of these variables showed a gender difference, which suggests that mothers were not reporting different relationships with boys and girls.

Another possible explanation for this difference is that girls have superior language skills to boys. Meta-analysis has indicated that there is an overall language advantage for girls, but the difference is quite small (Hyde & Linn, 1988). Children's scores on

statutory national curriculum assessments (known as SATs) were analyzed for the current sample to compare boys' and girls' scores for reading, writing, and spelling. Girls were found to have significantly higher scores for both reading and writing, but no difference was found between boys and girls in terms of spelling. This suggests that the girls in the study may have had some general language advantage that influenced their performance in the MSSB.

A further possible explanation is that girls may be more likely to express emotions and feelings about their parents than are boys and therefore may be more likely to represent their relationships with their parents within their play. This would support findings from studies of autobiographical narratives showing that girls focus more on interpersonal relationships than do boys (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Fivush, 1989, 1991). These authors found that girls mention more specific people and relationships and place their personal experiences in more interpersonal contexts. Also, girls provide more emotional information about their past than do boys. Research on gender role development indicates that men and women are socialized into different interpersonal orientations. Women are encouraged to be nurturant and socially connected, and men are encouraged to be independent and autonomous (see review by Golombok & Fivush, 1994; Maccoby, 1998). As early as 2 years of age, girls engage in more nurturing behaviors than boys (Eagley, 1987). Even during the preschool years, girls talk about emotions and emotional experiences more than boys (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987). Although in the current study there were few recorded differences between the content of girls' and boys' narratives, inspection of the data suggested that the content was more related to real-life relationships for girls than for boys.

One implication of this finding is that narrative play techniques are more useful in informing us about parent-child relationships when carried out with girls than with boys. Girls appear to represent their interpersonal experiences within their play, meaning that the interpretation of their narratives has potential usefulness in gaining insight into relationships from their point of view. Boys seem to be less likely to incorporate interpersonal relationships within their play, and therefore researchers should take more caution when interpreting their narratives.

One of the limitations of this study was that lesbian-mother families varied in terms of their family characteristics. Some children had been raised in a lesbian family from birth, whereas others had been

born into a heterosexual household and had experienced parental separation, which is associated with negative outcomes for children's psychological well-being (Amato, 1993; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabell, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). However, an advantage of the study is that it was based on a general population sample. Despite some of these children having experienced parental separation, the children raised in lesbian-mother families did not show differences in their play narratives from those raised in heterosexual homes, which thus adds weight to the view that children are not at risk from being raised in a lesbian household. Although the families investigated in the present study cannot be deemed truly representative of the general population of lesbian-mother families because of the supplementation of the sample through snowballing, the study constitutes the closest approximation achieved so far.

Another limitation is that the MSSB is perhaps more suited to the study of clinical populations. In the current nonclinical sample, the range of the children's functioning was restricted. This meant that children had very low scores on some of the narrative variables. Future research may benefit from a more sensitive scoring system designed especially for use with nonclinical samples.

Despite these limitations, it appears that children do not experience negative psychological consequences from being raised in a lesbian-mother family, nor do they suffer in terms of their relationship with their parents. These findings have implications for policymaking regarding lesbian-mother families in relation to child custody disputes, adoption and fostering, and access to assisted reproduction procedures. However, caution should be taken in interpretations of boys' play narratives, as boys seem to be less likely to represent interpersonal relationships within their play.

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