



# Concerns of emerging adults who were born and raised in planned lesbian-parent families

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Concerns  
Emerging adulthood  
Lesbian-parent families  
Problem behavior  
Donor-conceived offspring

## ABSTRACT

In the sixth wave of the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study, the concerns of 76 (37 female and 39 male, all cisgender) 25-year-old donor-conceived offspring of lesbian parents were investigated through an open-ended question in an online survey and analyzed using thematic and content analysis. The number of concerns reported varied between 0 and 5 per respondent, with a mean of 1.78 ( $SD = 1.24$ ). Nine participants reported no concerns at all. Among the remaining 67 participants, concerns focused on their family, work, education, personal health, and partner relationship. None expressed distress about the heteronormative society or growing up in a planned lesbian-parent family. Those who listed more concerns reported more internalizing problems. When the number of concerns was included in the analysis, homophobic stigmatization experienced at the ages of 17 and 25 was no longer significantly associated with problem behaviors.

## 1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a specific life stage that has been identified in individuals aged 18–29 in high-income, developed countries (Arnett, 2000, 2015). Emerging adults have more freedom from parents than adolescents but often do not yet have the traditional achievements of later adulthood (e.g., permanent work, family planning; Fussell and Furstenberg, 2014). During emerging adulthood, changes in various life domains occur simultaneously, as this stage is not only defined by structural changes, but also by freedom and opportunities for exploring one's identity and finding meaning in the realms of work, romantic relationships, and world views (Arnett, 2000, 2015; Fussell and Furstenberg, 2014). For example, emerging adults may be in the process of completing their education and gaining work experience that prepares them for a career. As they become more independent of their parents, their capacity for adult intimacy with peers and romantic partners develops (Arnett, 2015).

Emerging adulthood is receiving increasing research attention (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2015; Fussell and Furstenberg, 2014). Although studies on adults raised in same-sex parent families are not new (Goldberg, 2007;

Lick et al., 2013; Tasker and Golombok, 1997), little is known about emerging adults who were conceived through sperm donation and raised in planned lesbian-parent families. Now that the first generation of these offspring has reached emerging adulthood (Gartrell, Bos, and Koh 2018), there is a unique opportunity to focus on their concerns and challenges in this stage of life.

### 1.1. Approaches framing studies of lesbian-parent families

#### 1.1.1. Between-difference approach

To date, most studies on same-sex parent families have been conducted using a between-difference approach, in which lesbian-parent families were compared with heterosexual two-parent families (Bos and Gartrell, 2020). Some between-difference studies were prompted by the public debate over whether the two family types differed in parenting competencies and child outcomes (Farr et al., 2017). Specifically, this debate focused on whether: (a) children needed both a mother and a father for healthy development; (b) lesbian women should be allowed to parent; and (c) lesbian parents could be appropriate socialization agents. The earlier studies assessed same-sex parent families

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106430>

Received 28 September 2021; Received in revised form 2 February 2022; Accepted 20 February 2022

Available online 23 February 2022

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in which the children were born in one of the parent's previous heterosexual relationship (e.g., Golombok and Tasker, 1996); the later studies focused on planned same-sex parent families (c.f., Bos and Gartrell, 2020, for an overview).

Most studies comparing the psychological adjustment and peer relationships between children and adolescents of lesbian-parent families and those of heterosexual two-parent families found no significant differences between family types (e.g., Baiocco et al., 2018; Bos, Van Balen, and Van den Boom, 2007; Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Golombok et al., 2003). In contrast, very little is known about planned lesbian-parent families with emerging adult offspring. The ongoing U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) followed donor-conceived offspring of lesbian parents from conception to emerging adulthood (Gartrell, 2021). When these offspring reached the age of 25, comparisons with a demographically matched group failed to show any differences on their parent-child relationship quality, school and job performance, and emotional and behavioral problems (Gartrell, Bos, and Koh, 2018).

The between-difference approach was fundamental to inform family policy and regulations on assisted reproduction, as well as to further theoretical understanding of the influence of family structure and family processes on child development. But it was criticized because it implicitly or explicitly relied on "deficit" models that assumed negative outcomes for lesbian parents and their children (i.e., "differences = deficits") (Prendergast and MacPhee, 2018). Further shortcomings of this approach were its limited focus on diversity and unique processes related to being a lesbian-parent family, such as disclosure of the parents' sexual orientation to peers, experiences of and coping with homophobic stigmatization, or the strengths and resilience of lesbian parents and their children (Prendergast and MacPhee, 2018).

#### 1.1.2. Within-difference approach

Studies using a within-difference approach explored processes unique to same-sex parent families. Some of these studies focused on offspring born into a previous heterosexual relationship of the biological parent, while others focused on offspring in planned lesbian mother families. One unique process concerns the ways that children in these families negotiate the disclosure of their parents' sexual orientation. Interviews with adults raised in same-sex parent families revealed that most of them, as children, were open about their parents' sexual orientation. Those who did not disclose their parents' sexual orientation cited heteronormative pressures (Goldberg, 2007).

Studies have also focused on other social experiences unique to offspring raised in same-sex parent families, such as the relationship with their sperm donor (Koh et al., 2020), and experiences of homophobic microaggressions (i.e., subtle or indirect negative comments regarding sexual minorities and same-sex parent families, such as "who is your real mother?"; Bos and Gartrell, 2010; Carone et al., 2018; Farr et al., 2016; Green et al., 2019; Lick et al., 2013). In the NLLFS, there were no differences in internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behaviors by donor type when the offspring raised in planned lesbian-parent families were 10, 17, and 25 years old (Carone et al., 2021). Furthermore, at age 25, most NLLFS offspring with an anonymous donor felt comfortable about not knowing him. Nearly half of those who met their donor in childhood or after the permitted disclosure age for an open-identity donor had good feelings about the relationship with their donor (Koh et al., 2020).

Regarding experiences of homophobic microaggressions, studies revealed that from childhood to emerging adulthood, the offspring of lesbian parents were subjected to hostile comments related to their family type (e.g., Farr et al., 2016; Gartrell and Bos, 2010). However, they experienced less stigma as adults than in earlier developmental periods (Lick et al., 2013). Experiences of homophobic stigmatization have been associated with more psychological problems throughout the life course among offspring in planned lesbian-parent families (e.g., Bos et al., 2008; Bos and Van Balen, 2008; Van Rijn-Van Gelderen et al.,

2015). Also, when the offspring of lesbian parents were not explicitly asked about homophobic stigmatization, but were asked to tell something about their lives, they proffered this topic themselves (Fairtlough, 2008).

#### 1.2. Emerging adulthood

In the U.S., the lesbian baby boom (Patterson, 1994) dates to the 1980s, when fertility clinics first offered sperm donation to prospective lesbian parents. In this first generation of lesbian parent families, the mothers were mainly White, middle class, and highly educated, possibly a reflection of the cost of donor insemination, which was not reimbursable by insurance (Gartrell et al., 1996). Many children conceived during that first generation have now reached emerging adulthood (Gartrell et al., 2018; Gartrell, 2021). From the emerging adults' perspectives, accepting responsibility for oneself, making one's own decisions independently from parents, becoming financially self-sufficient, and having a long-term romantic relationship are essential aspects of this period (Arnett, 2000).

Developmental regulation theories emphasize that emerging adults' goals direct their life paths by guiding and regulating their behavior (e.g., Salmela-Aro, 2009). According to these theories, people set goals that fit their life situation and stage, such as completing their education, searching for a job, and finding a partner (e.g., Heckhausen et al., 2010). Each of these goals has the potential to engender its own set of concerns (Barlett and Barlett, 2019). The concerns of emerging adults can serve a variety of functions, such as distraction from emotionally overloaded topics or situations, or cognitive preparation for worst-case scenarios (Borkovec et al., 1983; 1998). Concerns can also include uncontrollable, negative thought patterns regarding a future issue.

The most frequently mentioned goals and concerns of emerging adults related to work and education, followed by romantic relationships (Fonseca et al., 2019, 2020; Ranta et al., 2014). Several studies found that demographic variables were associated with these concerns. Work-related concerns, for example, were more frequently mentioned by women and by those who did not have a positive relationship with their parents (Massey et al., 2008). Education-related concerns were more often reported by emerging adults who had not yet graduated or were unemployed (Fonseca et al., 2019). Contextual features also mirrored emerging adults' concerns. For instance, emerging adults' concerns about the future were influenced by unfavorable macroeconomic trends during an economic crisis (Fonseca et al., 2019; Ranta et al., 2014). To date, however, knowledge is lacking about the concerns of emerging adults born in planned lesbian-parent families through donor insemination.

#### 1.3. The current study

In the current study, we explored the concerns of emerging adult offspring of lesbian parents. The study is based on the U.S. NLLFS that started in 1986 and was designed to provide data on the first cohort of lesbian-parent families from the children's conception through donor insemination into their adulthood (Gartrell, 2021). At Wave 6, the offspring were 25-year-old emerging adults, providing a unique opportunity to investigate their concerns. To our knowledge, this is the first study that investigates the general concerns of emerging adult offspring from planned lesbian-parent families.

We investigated concerns related to family, work, and education (Ranta et al., 2014), since becoming independent from one's parents is an essential task during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015). We also asked if there were concerns other than the above, to give participants an opportunity to express those that were most important to them. We did not explicitly inquire about concerns related to cultural heteronormativity, though we anticipated that this theme might emerge.

In the current study we also investigated whether the number of concerns was associated with internalizing and externalizing problems,

since a previous NLLFS study showed an indirect effect of stigmatization experienced during adolescence on internalizing problems during emerging adulthood (Bos et al., 2021). Experiences of homophobic stigmatization during emerging adulthood were also a significant predictor of internalizing problems in that stage of life (Koh et al., 2019). However, these studies did not focus on concerns. We therefore investigated whether homophobic stigmatization experienced during adolescence and emerging adulthood was still a significant predictor when the number of concerns mentioned by the participants was included in the analyses.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Between 1986 and 1992, the parents of the current study participants were pregnant or trying to conceive through sperm donation. They were recruited for the U.S. NLLFS through advertisements in lesbian/gay newspapers and distributions of flyers at lesbian events or in women's bookstores, and interested prospective lesbian parents were invited to call the researchers (Gartrell et al., 1996). This resulted in a cohort of 84 families at Wave 1, consisting of 70 birth mothers, 70 co-mothers, and 14 single mothers. The 84 pregnancies resulted in 85 offspring, including one set of twins. Due to an extended recruitment phase, there was a 5.5-year difference between the birth of the youngest and oldest offspring.

Data were further collected when the offspring were 2 (second wave), 5 (third wave), 10 (fourth wave), 17 (fifth wave), and 25 (sixth wave) years old (Gartrell, 2021). The parents were interviewed or surveyed at each wave, whereas the offspring were surveyed since the fourth wave. During the sixth wave—when the offspring were legal adults—77 families with 78 offspring (including one set of twins) were still participating, with a 92% retention rate to date (Gartrell, 2021). All offspring completed the survey at age 25. However, one participant completed the survey at age 26, and one participant had an incomplete survey. These two participants were excluded from the analyses of the current study, resulting in a total of 76 offspring.

All participants had been conceived through donor insemination, were 25 years old, born in the U.S., and identified their gender with the sex assigned at birth (37 females and 39 males). The majority identified as White (90.8%,  $n = 69$ ) with 9.2% ( $n = 7$ ) identifying as people of color. Of the people of color, three identified as African American/Black, one as Latina or Hispanic ( $n = 1$ ), and three as other/mixed ( $n = 3$ ). Sixty-one (80.3%) participants identified as heterosexual, 4 (5.3%) as lesbian/gay, and 11 (14.5%) as bisexual. Most participants (82.7%,  $n = 62$ ) lived independently of their parents, had completed an associate's degree or higher educational level (88.2%,  $n = 67$ ), and were employed (94.7%,  $n = 72$ ).

### 2.2. Procedure

After approval from the Sutter Health Institutional Review Board (Project Title: The National Lesbian Family Study, #20.070-2; IRBNet# 348911-15), each participant upon reaching the age of 25 was contacted by email. The email explained the purpose and procedure of the study and assured each participant that participation in the current wave, as in all prior waves, was entirely voluntary. All participants provided informed consent. Once the protected online survey was administered and completed, each participant received a \$60 gift card. Data collection began in 2012 when the oldest participant turned 25 and was completed in 2017 when the youngest turned 25.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Concerns

The current study focused on the following open-ended question

contained in the Wave 6 offspring survey: "Please describe any concerns or worries you have about family, work, education, or other things." There was a blank space in which the participants could type their responses. After coding the concerns (see data analysis plan) it was possible to count the number of concerns.

#### 2.3.2. Homophobic stigmatization

At Wave 5, when the participants were 17 years old, they were asked whether they had been treated unfairly because of having (a) lesbian mother(s) (0 = No, 1 = Yes). At Wave 6, when the participants were 25 years old, homophobic stigmatization was measured with a scale consisting of six items. Participants were asked how often they had been stigmatized as adults for being raised by (a) lesbian mother(s) for each item (e.g., "Peers asked annoying questions"). Answer categories ranged from 0 = Never, to 4 = Very frequently. Because of the distribution and small cell sizes for each item, the answer categories were recoded so that 1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, and 4 = Very frequently were collapsed. Therefore, each item was recoded as 0 = No experience of homophobic stigmatization and 1 = Experienced homophobic stigmatization. After this recoding, the six items were tabulated, with totals ranging from 0 to 6, and higher scores indicating multiple stigmatizations associated with having lesbian parents.

Previous NLLFS studies showed that homophobic stigmatization at Wave 5 was indirectly associated with problem behaviors at Wave 6 (Bos et al., 2021). Also, homophobic stigmatization at Wave 6 was significantly related to problem behaviors at Wave 6 (Koh et al., 2019). Because of these findings, homophobic stigmatization at Waves 5 and 6 was included in the current study.

#### 2.3.3. Internalizing and externalizing problems

To assess internalizing and externalizing problems at Wave 6, the Adult Self-Report (ASR) was used (Achenbach and Rescorla, 2003). The ASR was developed to measure internalizing and externalizing problems for people aged 18–59 and, as such, is appropriate to use for emerging adults. The ASR consists of 123 statements on problem behavior. Participants were asked whether the behavior described in the statement was not true (0), somewhat or sometimes true or very true (1) or very true or often true (2) for them in the past 6 months. Of the 123 statements, 39 refer to the higher-order broadband subscale Internalizing Problems (based on the following syndrome subscales: Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, and Anxious/Depressed), and the score can range from 0 to 78. Thirty-five statements refer to the higher-order broadband subscale Externalizing Problems (based on the syndrome subscales Rule-Breaking Behavior, Aggressive Behavior, and Intrusive Behavior), and the score can range from 0 to 70. The remaining items refer to the syndrome subscales Thought Problems and Attention Problems, which were not used in the current study. Some examples of the ASR internalizing problems statements are: "I keep from getting involved with others" (from the Withdrawn subscale), "Heart-pounding" (Somatic Complaints), "I am fearful or anxious" (Anxious/Depressed). Examples of the ASR externalizing statements are: "I do things that cause me trouble with the law" (Rule-Breaking Behavior), "I get in many fights" (Aggressive Behavior), and "I try to get a lot of attention" (Intrusive Behavior). In our current study the ASR internalizing and externalizing problems broadband scales had high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 and 0.84, respectively.

### 2.4. Data analysis plan

First, the answers to the open-ended questions were categorized into family, work, education, or another topic by two authors working independently and there was 100% agreement. These two authors were also the first and second coders in the remainder of the coding steps.

Second, coding was performed within each category. This coding was based on content analysis, a qualitative method for systematic classification and description of text material (Morgan, 1993; Mayring,

2004). With this method, the textual information of the written answers within a specific category (family, work, education, or another topic) was coded into themes and subthemes, and by doing so, inductive data-driven coding was used. Initially, the first coder read all the participants' responses to the open-ended question multiple times and then designed a coding system for each category with central themes and sub-themes that appeared in the answers. This coding system was discussed with the second coder, adjusted if necessary, and then adopted as the definitive coding system (see Table 1).

Next, each of the abovementioned authors coded the responses of the first 24 participants (corresponding to about one-fourth of the total sample), and based on this, the intercoder reliability between the two coders was calculated. Preliminary analyses showed that some ( $n = 9$ ) participants of the total sample did not have concerns, and these participants were not used for the intercoder reliability. The coding of the two coders was entered into the software program SPSS version 26, and a Krippendorff's alpha was calculated (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007; Krippendorff, 2004). It revealed that the reliability between the coders was 0.76. After discussing the responses on which they disagreed, they reconciled into a single code for each response. Because of the high level of intercoder reliability, the first coder then continued coding the remaining answers. To manage, code, and analyze the textual data, the qualitative software program MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019) was used. Based on the coding system, the overall number of concerns was calculated for the quantitative analyses.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to assess whether the participants' demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, living with parents, level of education, and employment) were significantly related to the number of concerns. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then used to assess gender differences in the number of concerns, while nonparametric tests were used to determine differences in the number of concerns based on race/ethnicity, sexual

orientation, living with parents, level of education, and employment. Nonparametric tests were necessary because the cell sizes for the categories on these demographic variables were too small to use a standard ANOVA. Second, analyses were conducted to assess bivariate associations among the studied variables (i.e., homophobic stigmatization at Waves 5 and 6, the number of concerns, and internalizing and externalizing problems). Next, the unique contribution of these predictors on internalizing and externalizing problems was examined with a linear multiple regression analysis. This was done separately for internalizing and externalizing problems. The preliminary analyses and the bivariate and linear multiple regression analyses were performed through SPSS version 26.0, and included participants who did and who did not report at least one concern.

### 3. 3. Results

#### 3.1. Concerns

The mean number of listed concerns was 1.78 ( $SD = 1.24$ ), with a range between 0 and 5. Nine participants reported no concerns. Of these nine, four were female and five male; seven identified as White, and two as people of color (one Latina and one African American); all identified as heterosexual; seven lived independently of their parents; seven had completed an associate's degree or higher; and all nine were employed. Three of them explained their lack of concerns, such as Janine (pseudonyms are used for all quotes) who mentioned: "I actually don't have concerns. My family is happy even if we are not the closest, work is good. Education is done and I am very happy about how it went. My boyfriend and I am living in [a city] and we are very happy together and how we live our life."

Sixty-seven participants replied to the open-ended question with a description of one or more concerns. In this group, 33 were female and 34 male; 62 were White, 2 African American, and three other/mixed (unspecified); 52 identified as heterosexual, 11 as bisexual and 4 as gay/lesbian or bisexual; 55 lived independently of their parents; 60 had an associate's degree or higher; and 63 had a paid job.

Twenty-three (17.2%) of the concerns were family-of-origin related, 43 (32.1%) were about work, and 15 (11.2%) were about education. In addition, 53 concerns (39.5%) were about other issues than family of origin, work, or education (e.g., starting a serious relationship, own health, finances, relationship with current partner, and housing).

By using a content inductive data-driven analysis, several subthemes emerged from the above-described concerns (see Table 1). In describing these findings, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from the quotations.

##### 3.1.1. Concerns about family of origin

The 23 concerns about the family of origin related to four subthemes: (1) concerns about the relationships with their parents; (2) concerns about the participants' dependency on their parents; (3) concerns about their parents' health; and (4) other concerns related to their parents.

Four listed concerns about not having a good relationship with their parent(s). For example, Zoe wrote, "I truly hope that my relationship with my biological parent gets better with time. It goes through ebbs and flows but I hope it is more stable in the future." Jack said he had worries about his relationship with his mothers, "[...] they do not share emotions well and I feel often detached or left out." One participant replied that he would like to have "a better relationship with [my] father."

Six concerns related to the participants' dependency on their parents, such as Samuel who wrote: "I am worried that at my age I am still too dependent on my parents." Four participants reported that they still lived with their parents, and wanted to move out and live independently.

Four concerns focused on the parents' health. In one case, the participant stated that the parent was ill. Two participants linked the parent's health condition to the fact that the parents had to deal with

**Table 1**  
Main and sub-thematic coding categories.

Main thematic coding category	Sub-thematic coding category	Number of concerns	% <sup>1</sup>
<b>Concerns about family</b>		<b>23</b>	<b>17.2</b>
	Relationship with parents	4	17.4
	Dependency on parents	6	26.1
	Parents' health	4	17.4
	Other parent-related concerns	9	39.1
<b>Concerns about work</b>		<b>43</b>	<b>32.1</b>
	Future career plans and prospects, and achievability of these plans	19	44.2
	Current job <sup>2</sup>	12	27.9
	Finding a job <sup>3</sup>	12	27.9
<b>Concerns about education</b>	Finishing education	15	11.2
<b>Concerns unrelated to family, work, and education</b>		<b>53</b>	<b>39.5</b>
	Starting a serious relationship <sup>4</sup>	17	32.1
	Own health <sup>5</sup>	22	41.5
	Finances	7	13.2
	Relationship with current partner	5	9.4
	Housing	2	3.8

<sup>1</sup> Percentages (presented in bold) belonging to the main thematic coding categories are based on the 134 concerns that are mentioned by 67 participants. Percentages belonging to the sub-thematic coding category (presented in italic) are based on the total number of concerns in a specific sub-theme.

<sup>2</sup> High workload and stress: 6, Job is not fulfilling or not offering many opportunities: 5, Financially insecure situation: 1.

<sup>3</sup> Finding a job that would be satisfying and fulfilling: 6, Finding a job that would give a financially stable situation: 5, No explanation: 1.

<sup>4</sup> Finding the right partner for a serious romantic relationship: 12, Finding the right partner to start a family: 5.

<sup>5</sup> Health issues in general, no specific information: 2, Well-being: 4, Psychological diagnosis: 2, Social problems: 5, Meaning in life: 9.



stress. In one concern, it was mentioned that there were health issues without further elaboration.

There were nine concerns about other parent-related issues. For example, one participant mentioned that she was living too far away from her parents and indicated that this could prove very difficult in the long run. Another participant was worried that bad things might happen to her beloved family members. In another case, the participant was worried about losing touch with his family.

### 3.1.2. Concerns about work

There were 43 work-related concerns with three subthemes: (1) concerns about future plans and career prospects, and achievability of these plans; (2) concerns about current job; and (3) concerns about finding a job.

In 19 concerns, participants reported that they did not have a clear career plan and were worried about their career prospects, or that they had doubts about whether their future goal would be achievable. Britt, for example, wrote, "I'm concerned, I'm not sure I will be able to reach my goal of having a career as [...]," whereas Olivia stated, "I worry that I will not find the area I want to work in and be able to fully explore and practice my skills and passions."

Twelve concerns were about the participants' current jobs. In six cases that was about the high workload and stressful, demanding jobs, and finding a good balance between work and private life. Levi wrote, "my work is just stressful, and it can be difficult to brush things off or relax at times." Karen mentioned, "it's my dream job, but also can be very stressful and draining, so I worry about the sustainability of the position." There were five concerns in which participants described their job as not fulfilling or not offering many opportunities. As Joy described, "I have been at my current job for about a year and I'm not sure that it's allowing me to reach my full creative potential." Ann wrote, "I have concerns that my work will not provide advancement opportunities in the timeline that I want." Finally, there was one participant who referred to a financially insecure current job.

In total there were 12 concerns related to finding a job. In six cases, there was a concern about finding a job that would be satisfying and fulfilling. Tom, for example, wrote: "I worry that I won't find a job that I really love." Five concerns were explicitly related to finding a job that would give financial stability. Paula, for example, had worries about finding a job that would provide her with enough money and freedom to be happy. One participant mentioned that finding a job was a concern without any explanation.

### 3.1.3. Concerns about education

Regarding the 15 concerns about education, one subtheme was found, namely, concerns regarding finishing their education. For example, John reported, "I wish I would have my bachelors' degree, but other than that I really don't have any other worries." Kiera mentioned that she was nearing the end of her master's program and was worried about all the things she had to do in the next three months. A lack of motivation to complete school was also expressed. For example, Derek wrote, "I know I need to go back to school for graduate work, but I have no desire to do so." Gabriel described not being very motivated to finish college.

### 3.1.4. Concerns not related to family, work, or education

There were 53 concerns mentioned by the participants that were unrelated to family, work or education, and five subthemes were identified: (1) concerns about starting a serious relationship; (2) concerns about their own health and well-being; (3) concerns about finances; (4) concerns about partner relationships, and (5) concerns about housing.

Seventeen concerns were about finding the right partner for a serious romantic relationship (12 participants) or starting a family (five participants). Regarding finding the right partner, Scott, for example, reported, "I am concerned about the difficulty of finding success in romantic relationships and wonder if or when I will find someone." An

example of concerns related to finding a partner with whom to start a family was reported by Olivia, who wrote, "I worry I will not develop a partnership that has stability and growth. I worry that I will never feel able to have children."

Twenty-two concerns were about the participants' health. In two concerns, the participants only mentioned that they had health issues, and no specific information was included in their answers. Four concerns were related to well-being issues, such as Paula, who wrote, "I'm worried about never being happy." Two participants wrote that a health concern was related to a psychological diagnosis. Five concerns were related to social problems, such as James who wrote, "It takes me so long to be comfortable being myself with new people." Finally, nine concerns were about meaning in life, such Theo who wrote, "I am worried that 10 years from now I won't feel that I will have fulfilled or be on the way toward fulfilling my potential contributions to the world."

Seven concerns were related to financial issues. Boyd, for example, wrote, "I worry about attaining and sustaining financial independence in a way that doesn't detract from my level of personal fulfillment." Relational problems with the current partner were mentioned in five concerns. For example, Karen mentioned, "My relationship is in some ways the deepest one I've had yet, but can also be very challenging, so I worry about that as well." Two participants reported that they were worried about finding a house, but did not give further information.

## 3.2. Number of concerns and the associations with demographic information

As shown in Table 2, there was no significant gender difference in the number of concerns. Also, none of the other demographics (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, living with parents, level of education, and employment) were related to the number of concerns reported by the participants.

## 3.3. Associations between homophobic stigmatization, the number of concerns and internalizing and externalizing problem behavior

Twenty-nine (38.2%) of the 76 participants in the current study reported at Wave 5 that they had been treated unfairly because of their family type, and 42 (55.3%) indicated that they had no such experiences (five participants in the current study did not respond to this question at Wave 5). The mean score on homophobic stigmatization at Wave 6 was 2.26 ( $SD = 1.75$ ) on a scale range from 0 to 6. On average, the reported

**Table 2**  
Comparisons of gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment, sexual orientation, and living with parents, with number of concerns<sup>1</sup>.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> / Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender			0.02	0.894
Female	1.76	1.07		
Male	1.79	1.40		
Race/Ethnicity			164.00	0.148
People of color	1.14	1.07		
White	1.84	1.24		
Sexual orientation			419.00	0.601
Gay/lesbian/bisexual	1.60	0.91		
Heterosexual	1.82	1.31		
Living with parents			377.00	0.705
No	1.74	1.17		
Yes	2.00	1.58		
Education			221.00	0.178
No associates' degree	2.44	1.81		
Associate's degree or higher	1.69	1.13		
Employment			85.00	0.181
No	2.50	1.00		
Yes	1.74	1.25		

<sup>1</sup> Mean: 1.78,  $SD = 1.24$  (min = 0, max = 5). Note: ANOVA was carried out for gender, Mann-Whitney *U* tests for race/ethnicity, education, employment, sexual orientation, and living with parents.

number of concerns at Wave 6 was 1.78 ( $SD = 1.24$ ). The 76 participants' score on internalizing problems was 13.16 ( $SD = 8.68$ ) on a scale with a possible range from 0 to 78, and 8.70 ( $SD = 6.32$ ) on externalizing problems on a scale with a possible range from 0 to 70.

Table 3 shows the bivariate associations between internalizing and externalizing problems at Wave 6 and the predictors (the number of concerns and homophobic stigmatization at Wave 5 and 6). Inspection of the correlations showed that for internalizing problems, there were significant bivariate associations between homophobic stigmatization at Wave 6 and the number of concerns at Wave 6. For externalizing problems, there was only a significant bivariate correlation with homophobic stigmatization at Wave 6.

Multiple regression analyses were carried out to examine these predictors' unique contributions to internalizing and externalizing problems. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 4. For internalizing problems, only the number of concerns reported at Wave 6 was significantly associated with internalizing problems, explaining 14% of the variance. Conversely, none of the predictors (i.e., stigmatization at Wave 5 and Wave 6, and concerns at Wave 6) were significantly associated with externalizing problems.

#### 4. Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study using qualitative data to explore the family, work, education, and other concerns of emerging adults raised in planned lesbian-parent families. Their responses revealed that these 25-year-old emerging adults had common concerns with emerging adults as a whole (Arnett, 2015; Schulenberg and Schoon, 2012). Also, of particular interest is that none of the participants explicitly expressed any fears about societal heteronormativity connected with their family background.

The most frequently described concerns did not fall into the category of concerns related to family, work, or education. While this finding contrasts with most studies of emerging adults who were not from lesbian-parent families (Fonseca et al., 2020; Ranta et al., 2014), it aligns with theories (e.g., Settersten et al., 2015) suggesting that emerging adults nowadays use more unique, individual criteria for their perception of adulthood than traditional social landmarks (i.e., work and education).

The most frequently listed concerns fell into the (sub)categories of the participants' health and well-being, and starting a serious relationship. Previous studies among emerging adults also found that one of the most prominent goals is forming a romantic relationship (Fonseca et al., 2020; Ranta et al., 2014), and therefore it is not surprising that concerns for the NLLFS offspring were linked to this specific goal.

Among work-related concerns, some mentioned that they still did not have a clear career plan and were therefore worried about future prospects. Some indicated that their current job was stressful, with a high workload, and that they had difficulties in finding a good balance between work and personal life. These concerns are typical for emerging

**Table 3**

Bivariate associations between internalizing and externalizing problems (Wave 6), homophobic stigmatization (Wave 5 and 6), and number of concerns (Wave 6).

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Homophobic stigmatization at Wave 5	–			
2. Homophobic stigmatization at Wave 6	0.27*	–		
3. Number of concerns at Wave 6	0.07	0.08	–	
4. Internalizing problems at Wave 6	0.20	0.24*	0.26*	–
5. Externalizing problems at Wave 6	0.16	0.24*	0.22	0.61**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ . Note: Bivariate analyses with homophobic stigmatization at Wave 5 are conducted with a Spearman  $r$  correlation and are based on a sample size of 71 because 5 participants at Wave 6 did not respond to the homophobic stigmatization question at Wave 5. All the other bivariate analyses are performed with a Pearson  $r$  correlation and based on a sample size of 76.

**Table 4**

Linear multiple regressions on internalizing and externalizing problems (Wave 6), homophobic stigmatization (Wave 5 and 6), and number of concerns (Wave 6)<sup>1</sup>.

	B	SE	Beta	$p$	95% CI	
					low	high
Internalizing problems at Wave 6						
Homophobic stigmatization at Wave 5	2.24	2.10	0.13	0.289	–1.94	6.42
Homophobic stigmatization at Wave 6	1.02	0.59	0.20	0.088	–0.16	2.20
Number of concerns at Wave 6	1.65	0.81	0.23	0.045	0.04	3.27
$R^2 = 0.13, F = 3.43, p = .022$						
Externalizing problems at Wave 6						
Homophobic stigmatization at Wave 5	1.79	1.55	0.14	0.251	–1.30	4.88
Homophobic stigmatization at Wave 6	0.69	0.44	0.19	0.120	–0.18	1.56
Number of concerns at Wave 6	0.92	0.60	0.18	0.130	–0.28	2.11
$R^2 = 0.11, F = 2.63, p = .057$						

<sup>1</sup> Based on a sample size of 71 because 5 participants at Wave 6 did not respond to the homophobic stigmatization question at Wave 5.

adults who are transitioning to an adult life with more personal responsibilities (Nelson and Barry, 2005), financial independence, and overall autonomy (Arnett, 2000; Billari, 2001; Lee and Mortimer, 2009).

Family of origin concerns mainly related to participants who were unhappy due to dependency on their parents. Previous studies on emerging adults showed that financial independence from parents is a salient marker in this stage of life (e.g., Settersten et al., 2015). Based on previous studies, however, in the U.S., the majority of middle- and upper-class emerging adults in their thirties are still receiving financial assistance from their parents (e.g., Settersten et al., 2015).

The current study also investigated whether experiences of homophobic stigmatization experienced during adolescence and emerging adulthood were still significant predictors when the number of concerns mentioned by the participants was included in the analyses. When homophobic stigmatization experiences and the number of concerns were entered simultaneously in the regression analyses, concerns were significantly related to internalizing problems. In contrast, experiences with homophobic stigmatization were no longer significantly associated with internalizing or externalizing problems. It is possible that having concerns is mainly an internal process, and therefore more related to internalizing than externalizing problems. Nevertheless, previous studies on same-sex parent families have shown that we should not underestimate the effects of homophobic stigmatization on the well-being of emerging adults born and raised in lesbian-parent families (e.g., Bos et al, 2019; Koh et al., 2019). In addition to direct effects of discrimination experienced by the offspring, stigmatization of their parents may have affected the psychological adjustment of the offspring at any stage of their growth and development. However, our current findings suggest that it may be warranted to take a closer look at the influence of homophobic stigmatization on well-being and problem behavior in the context of other problems.

A strength of the current study is that data were derived from the only study following offspring of sexual minority parents longitudinally from birth to emerging adulthood. Due to the prospective nature and high retention rate of the longitudinal study (92%; Gartrell, 2021), the present findings were not biased by overrepresentation of Wave 6 offspring who continued participation because they were doing well. Another strength was the access to qualitative data offering insight into perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of emerging adults that could be combined with quantitative data about stigmatization and problem behavior. The phrasing of the open-ended "concern" question in the online survey did not cue the participants for homophobic

stigmatization concerns, and, as such, may have provided a broader perspective on problematic experiences at this stage of life than earlier studies of lesbian-parent families.

The current study also had several limitations. First, in the online survey the emerging adults were asked to describe their concerns and worries. Verbal interviews might have provided more information because follow-up questions could have been asked if an answer was unclear or incomplete. Within the answers to such follow-up questions, it might also have been possible to gauge the intensity of concerns and to rank them according to their impact on daily life. Our study had no follow-up questions to provide this in-depth information. Although we were limited to counting the concerns, the sheer number provides some insight into the level of distress experienced by each participant.

Second, how the offspring were asked to describe their concerns or worries about their family, work, education, or other aspects of their life, without specific mention of their lesbian-parent family, might have influenced their responses. This might be a specific question for future research.

Third, despite the high retention rate, the total sample size is small and the emerging adults were mostly White and highly educated. Therefore, the sample was not representative of the population of all emerging adults raised in planned lesbian-parent families. To increase generalizability of the findings, we recommend that future studies be conducted with a demographically diverse population of sexual minority parents and their offspring. In addition, the number of participants with concerns who were people of color, did not have a bachelor or master's degree, and/or were unemployed was too small to allow the investigation of whether the intersectionality of the participants' characteristics was associated with the content of their concerns.

Finally, the open-ended "concern" question was last in an online survey that included many items, including questions on experiences of homophobic stigmatization. It is possible that fears about societal heteronormativity associated with their family type were not mentioned as a concern because participants considered this topic already covered in the survey. Since the NLLFS emerging adult offspring are well aware of the negative stereotypes about same-sex parent families (e.g., Fair-though, 2008), it is also conceivable that participants did not wish to confirm them by identifying their family type as a concern.

Despite these limitations, the findings have important practical implications. Healthcare professionals assisting prospective sexual minority parents can assure them that emerging adult offspring in the present study expressed general concerns that do not relate to the stigmatization of being raised in lesbian-parent families. However, it should be taken into account that current study participants were not asked whether their parents' sexual orientation represented a concern. Although healthcare professionals working with these offspring should be aware that they can experience homophobic stigmatization because of their mothers' lesbianism or growing up in a heteronormative society, the impact of such stigmatization may vary with the individual. Support networks for prospective sexual minority parents have been shown to be very helpful in providing information and allaying anxiety about raising children in different family types (Leal et al., 2021; Schrijvers et al., 2021).

Along with the aforementioned practical implications, the findings from this study indicate several future directions. Future research would benefit from larger and more diverse samples with an intersectional focus. Most planned lesbian-parent families studied to date have been White, middle-to-upper middle class, and highly educated (Bos et al., 2019; Bos and Gartrell, 2020). Little is known about how intersections of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, genetic and non-genetic relationships between parents and children affect planned lesbian-parent families (Bos et al., 2019; Brainer et al., 2020; Farr and Vázquez, 2020). Also, up until now, most empirical work has been based on cross-sectional and self-reported data. The use of longitudinal designs and multiple informants from sources outside the family (e.g., teachers, peers, intimate partners) could provide valuable additions to the

literature (Bryman, 2016).

Due to the small sample size, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, this cohort of 76 offspring from lesbian-parent families reported typical and common concerns during emerging adulthood. Most concerns were not related to family of origin, work or education, but were focused on individual psychological issues concerning their health and well-being and about starting a committed romantic relationship.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Acknowledgment

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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