Social Stigma and the Situation of Young People in Lesbian and Gay Stepfamilies

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This article presents the results of a qualitative study examining how social stigmatization made the lives of young people in gay and lesbian stepfamilies more complex. The study focused primarily on the young people’s viewpoint, which has until now rarely been taken into consideration in studies of gay and lesbian families. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescents and young adults from 15 to 29 years old. The results showed that these young people experienced social stigmatization because of the family they lived in, which in turn had repercussions on their personal, family, and interpersonal lives.

KEYWORDS gay/lesbian stepfamily, young with homosexual parents, stepfamily, social stigma

In the past, lesbian and gay families were almost invisible in the scientific literature and general population. These families, in which at least one parent indicates that he or she is lesbian or gay, came out of the shadows in the 1970s. In Canada, at least 3,000 same-sex couples now raise children; of these, lesbian couples are five times more numerous than gay male couples to report that they live with children (Ambert, 2005; Girard & Payeur, 2009). In the United States, recent data compiled by the Census Bureau indicate that at least 250,000

This research project was made possible through the financial support of the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et al culture and the centre jeunesse de Québec – Institut Universitaire.

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children were raised by a same-sex couple (Gates & Ost, 2004). In reality, this number is probably higher, as estimates suggest that the number of American same-sex couples is 10% to 50% higher than census figures relate (Gates & Ost, 2004). Although adoption and donor insemination techniques represent an increasingly popular choice among lesbian and gay couples, most children who are currently raised by same-sex parents were born into a heterosexual relationship before one of the parents declared his or her homosexuality (Ambert, 2005; Bigner, 1996; Erera & Fredriksen, 1999).

Until now, most studies of young people living with a lesbian or gay parent have focused on the impact of this situation on these children and have compared the development of young people raised by a lesbian mother with that of those raised by a heterosexual mother (Dubé & Julien, 2001; Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1997). Current research is moving away from this comparative approach by attempting to document the specificity of these families. A growing number of researchers are recognizing, for example, that members of gay and lesbian families experience, in addition to the numerous challenges inherent in learning how to be a parent, challenges specific to gay and lesbian parenting. These challenges include the parent’s coming out process and the lack of clear social norms outlining roles and expectations for these families and their members (Chamberland, Jouvin, & Julien, 2003; Erera & Fredriksen, 1999; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Hare, 1994). Several authors have likewise noted that these families are also confronted with various degrees of social stigmatization. A homophobic and heterosexist social context would appear to make life more complex for gay and lesbian families (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Berger, 1998; 2000; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Erera & Fredriksen, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Ray & Gregory, 2001).

Nonetheless, very few studies have explored the mechanisms underlying this stigmatization and its repercussions on the day-to-day life of these families, especially that of the children. The goal of our study was to document this issue from the young people’s viewpoint, an approach that has rarely been adopted in studies of children raised by gay and lesbian parents (Gottlieb, 2003; Lewis, 1980; Wright, 2001). In this article, we attempted to answer two questions, namely: Do young people who live in gay and lesbian stepfamilies feel they are exposed to social stigmatization because of this fact? If such is the case, how does this stigmatization of homosexuality and homosexual parents make their family life more complex? These questions are examined here in the light of social stigmatization theory. However, the use of this theoretical framework and the examination of these specific questions must not be seen as elements that might further stigmatize the members of lesbian and gay families. Nor should they be seen as a reason for discrediting these families or objecting to the right of gays and lesbians to be parents. Rather, we hope that by asking these questions and applying this theory more light will be shed on the processes through which stigmatization occurs as well as on its consequences. It will
then be easier to identify possible interventions so as to provide more help for young people who are in these situations, diminish the negative consequences of stigmatization, and develop less stigmatizing environments. It is in this perspective moreover that we present, at the end of the article, some suggested intervention possibilities based on the results of this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past, researchers have tended to generalize the results obtained among heterosexual stepfamilies to gay and lesbian stepfamilies. This was particularly due to the many similarities between these two family structures, such as the arrival of an adult who has no biological link with the child or the fact that the child–parent relationship predates that of the couple. Some authors now question this approach because it does not shed light on the specific challenges that members of gay and lesbian stepfamilies encounter (Baptiste, 1987; Le Gall, 2000; Lynch, 2000). Indeed, these and other authors consider that gay and lesbian stepfamilies and, more generally, families headed by a gay or lesbian parent, are confronted with issues specific to homosexual parenthood. In particular, they note that living in a society that denigrates and stigmatizes homosexuality and homosexual parents would appear to be one of the principal difficulties. In a study examining the main challenges faced by families headed by a lesbian couple, close to 80% of the mothers interviewed considered that social homophobia and the stigma of being a lesbian couple raising a child kept them from being recognized as a full-fledged family (Hare, 1994). Likewise, for the 45 lesbian mothers interviewed by Lott-Whitehead and Tully (1993), the main challenges arising from their parenting status were homophobia, social and legal inequality, and violence toward gays and lesbians. The children of gay and lesbian parents may likewise encounter stigmatization because of the type of family they belong to. For example, in a study in which they talked with 48 children between 5 and 18 years old who were raised by gay or lesbian parents, Ray and Gregory (2001) noted that several of the children were subjected to teasing and bullying because of their parents’ sexual orientation. The type of intimidation reported in this study ranged from verbal abuse and teasing to physical and sexual violence. The proportion of young people who reported such experiences was close to 50% among children from 8 to 16 years old. These children regularly mentioned that they felt isolated by their need to keep their family structure a secret (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Other studies have found that children are likewise afraid of being ostracized or made fun of by their peers if ever the latter learn about their parent’s homosexuality (Baptiste, 1987; Lewis, 1980; O’Connell, 1993).

Some authors have questioned these results by pointing out that children raised by a gay or lesbian parent do not report any more intimidation
or stigmatization than those raised by a heterosexual parent (Golombok, 2000; Tasker, 2005). However, they are more likely to remember being called homosexual by their classmates, perhaps because the children of gay and lesbian parents pay more attention to this kind of teasing given that it reminds them of their family life (Tasker, 2005).

In a qualitative study of six gay and lesbian parents and stepparents who were part of a stepfamily, Berger (2000) explored the specific nature of stigma. The study’s results suggest that these family members are particularly vulnerable to social stigmatization because they belong to three invisible minority groups that are subject to prejudice: stepfamilies, homosexuals, and homosexual parents. Numerous authors have noted negative stereotypes about stepfamilies, which are often seen as less functional, less stable, and not as beneficial for children than intact families (Berger, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 1990; Parent, Poulin, & Robitaille, 2004; Saint-Jacques, 2000). In addition to this first form, Berger (2000) identified two other forms of stigmatization that are experienced specifically by gay and lesbian stepfamilies, one regarding homosexuality and the other, lesbian and gay parents. Despite some progress in the last few years, lesbians and gays are still subjected to a heterosexist culture and homosexuality is still condemned and viewed with hostility by part of society (Gillis, 1998; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Indeed, many people still consider that homosexuality and parenthood are incompatible (Berger, 2000). Despite what studies demonstrate about this subject, these people believe that being raised by a lesbian or gay parent can negatively affect the social and psychological development of children, “contaminating” their sexual identity and encouraging them to become lesbian or gay themselves. Other people who mistake homosexuality for pedophilia are opposed to lesbians and gays having the right to be parents, claiming that they will be tempted to abuse their own children (Erera & Fredriksen, 1999).

Having to live in a homophobic context that denigrates their family life would thus appear to be the main challenge for lesbian and gay parents and their children. This context likewise seems to favor the development of certain processes that allow family members to face difficulties. Based on a literature review of gay and lesbian families, Oswald (2002) concluded, for example, that families run by one or more lesbians or gays use diverse strategies that help to create and sustain a sense of family, and to be recognized socially and legally as full-fledged families. These strategies are intentional and highly varied: choosing the people who compose the close social network, managing the disclosure of one’s homosexuality, building supportive homosexual community resources, and employing certain ceremonies or rights to have one’s union legally recognized. Bozett (1987) also observed the use of these strategies, particularly the management of homosexuality disclosure, among teenagers and young adults with a gay father. Bozett noted that young people primarily use such strategies because they are afraid of being identified themselves as lesbians or gays. The use of these strategies depends
on how discernable the child believes the parent’s homosexuality to be, how much he identifies with his parent’s sense of being different, and his age and living arrangements (see also Tasker 2005). Bozett also considered that young people have less control of their behavior and that of others, and thus are more likely to opt for nondisclosure. As for older children, though they have more control of their behavior and that of the people around them, they are also more conscious of the homophobic values of our society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social stigmatization theory, particularly Link and Phelan’s (2001) conceptualization, was used to examine the lives of young people in gay and lesbian stepfamilies. The advantage of their interpretation, which is quite recent, is two-fold: First, it was based on a large number of earlier studies of the subject; second, it was developed with the firm intention of clarifying a concept that has often been criticized for its lack of precision. Social stigmatization refers to a process of discriminating against and ostracizing people who are seen as having socially undesirable characteristics. To be able to speak of a stigmatization process, there must be five continuously and simultaneously interacting components. These components are: 1) social selection and labelling, 2) stereotyping, 3) separation between “them” and “us,” 4) status loss and discrimination, 5) power (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Stigmatization results first of all from social selection and labelling (Link & Phelan, 2001; Rogel, 1997). The selection process extracts from among the large number of differences between human beings those that are considered to be important in a given social context. Once this process is complete, categories are created and people are classified according to whether or not they belong to these different categories. A label is then attached to those people who are perceived, based on shared representations and values, as transgressing social standards. To be able to speak of stigmatization, the label must be associated with a set of undesirable characteristics which form a stereotype (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). In the case of homosexuality, for example, the simple fact of being recognized and identified as such does not constitute a stigma. If this attribute is to become a stigma, the fact of being gay or lesbian must be associated with various negative stereotypes. It has furthermore been shown that the friends and family of people who are seen as having a stigma can themselves be excluded, rejected, and marginalized by society through a process called “stigma transfer” (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Poupart, 2001; Rogel, 1997). The association between the label and certain negative stereotypes becomes a rationale allowing people to believe that people who are negatively labelled are mean, immoral, and even fundamentally different from people who are not labelled. It is then that a separation occurs between “them” and “us.” Considered to be different and
inferior, stigmatized people are belittled, rebuffed, and ostracized. They, thus, become vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination. The last component of the stigmatization process is power. Power is seen to be directly related to stigmatization because it allows those who control it (individuals, groups, or institutions) to determine what is socially tolerable and what is not (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Fiske, 1993). It likewise allows these controllers to impose their viewpoints, define the rules of the game, deny people equal rights, and reduce the chances of certain groups (Appleby & Anastas, 1998).

Whatever the nature of the stigma with which people are plagued, they will be confronted with the negative consequences of the stigmatization process (Poupart, 2001). Not all people react in the same way however. Research into stigmatization has found, for example, that the subjective experience of stigmatized people or groups is influenced by certain dimensions of the stigma, in particular its “concealability, [that is] whether the stigmatizing condition can be hidden from others” (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). In the case of concealable attributes like homosexuality, people who have such an attribute or who risk being subjected to its negative consequences through stigma transfer know that they can be discredited and ostracized if the attribute is discovered (Crocker et al., 1998). People are then tempted to verify other people’s attitudes concerning this attribute and attempt to predict reactions to its disclosure. They might also watch their behavior and language so as not to disclose their genuine social identity; on the other hand, they might consider how to reveal their condition and the best way to go about it (Goffman, 1963).

A certain consensus has also been reached in research that shows that stigmatization significantly influences the development of stigmatized people’s identity, their self-image, and their relationship with others (Crocker & Major, 1989; Croizet & Martinot, 2003; Dupont, 2003). However, because the impact of stigmatization on people with negatively perceived characteristics would seem to be more subtle than we might have initially believed and would seem to vary according to poorly understood factors, we must be careful about hasty associations (Appleby & Anastas, 1998). For example, it would be tempting to believe that stigmatized people, because of their belittled social identity, have lower self-esteem than nonstigmatized people. However, a review of the research conducted in the last two decades shows that stigmatized people do not necessarily have lower self-esteem than do nonstigmatized people; on the contrary, the members of certain stigmatized groups have higher self-esteem than do nonstigmatized groups (Crocker & Major, 1989). These results have been particularly observed among African Americans. The results, drawn in particular from studies of African Americans, suggest that stigmatized persons, rather than being passive victims with no power over their situation, often succeed in protecting themselves from prejudice and discrimination by employing self-esteem protection strategies (Crocker et al., 1998; Croizet & Martinot, 2003). Likewise, the emotional
effect of this process on stigmatized people is poorly understood. Some authors consider that this effect is greater on those with nonvisible stigmata (Dupont, 2003). These people would seem to have lower self-esteem and be more anxious and depressed than those with visible stigmatizing characteristics. However, other authors consider that, because those with visible stigmas can never hide their attribute and must continually endure people looking at them, this process affects them just as much but perhaps in a different manner (Crocker et al., 1998).

Finally, certain authors have emphasized that stigmatized people risk internalizing, through their interactions with others, the idea that they are less worthwhile and not normal. This internalizing of social definitions and stereotypes can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and self-hate, which, in the case of homosexuality, can be transformed into an internalized homophobia (Appleby & Anastas, 1998). This internalizing can become a significant cause of stress and psychological distress. Meyer (1995) went farther in affirming that being a member of a stigmatized minority group, as is the case with gay women and men, is in itself a major source of stress.

In this study, we attempted to further our understanding of the concept of social stigmatization and to shed light on how it occurs so as to determine: a) if young people living in gay and lesbian stepfamilies are subjected to it; then b) identify, if necessary, the various forms of this exclusion and discrimination process. Clarifying the concept of social stigmatization likewise made it possible to document its effects, which was necessary if we were to determine how it contributes to making the lives of young people from gay and lesbian stepfamilies more complex.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The data presented in this article were drawn from a qualitative study of young people living in gay or lesbian stepfamilies in the Province of Québec, a largely French-speaking province in Canada. To participate in the study, the young people had to be or had to have been living in a gay or lesbian stepfamily either all the time or part time (a minimum of eight days per month) for at least one year. The decision to include young people who were only living part time in this family organization was based on the fact that this type of stepfamily was their reality and that it occurs frequently, particularly in father-headed stepfamilies (Baptiste, 1987; Berger, 2000; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Saint-Jacques, 2000; Saint-Jacques, Drapeau, Cloutier, & Lépine, 2003). Young people conceived through donor insemination techniques during a previous relationship and those who were living in a stepfamily after the widowing of a parent were excluded from the study population because it was assumed that these
types of stepfamilies had certain particularities and functioned somewhat differently from other types of stepfamilies.

The final sample of 11 young people was composed of 9 females and 2 males from 15 to 29 years old ($M = 21.4$ years old). The minimum age of the study population was set at 15 because the research objectives and data collection method required a certain capacity to reflect on situations and properly express one’s thoughts. During the recruitment period, the age criterion was raised to a maximum age of 29. This was done to increase the number of participants to the desired amount and to benefit from the young adults’ greater maturity, which, it was hoped, would contribute another perspective. Consequently, the results presented here came from participants who were at different stages in life; in some cases, their time in a gay or lesbian stepfamily was a few years behind them. These elements represent some of the study’s limitations.

Most of the participants were Caucasian, with only one participant being from South America. The mother was the homosexual parent in most of the cases ($n = 8$). In this sense, the stepfamilies described by the young people were primarily feminine stepfamilies, a fact that must be considered in the data interpretation. Nonetheless, three of the young people lived part or full time with their father and his partner, and two of the participants were living in both a gay and a lesbian stepfamily, that is their biological parents, after their separation, formed new same-sex relationships. Most of the participants had only lived in a gay or lesbian stepfamily once in their lives, but some ($n = 4$) had done so on two separate occasions. On average, the young people lived in stepfamilies full or part time for 5.7 years, whereas the average length was 7 years. Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the sample.

The sample used was composed of volunteers who had responded to posters and a campuswide e-mail sent to the students and personnel of a

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<th>Matricentric or patricentric same-sex couple</th>
<th>Time spent in lesbian/gay stepfamily</th>
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<td>David</td>
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<td>Vicky</td>
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<td>Rosalie</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Matricentric</td>
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<td>Katia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Patricentric</td>
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<td>Catherine</td>
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<td>Patricentric</td>
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<td>Anne</td>
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<td>Mélanie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>11 years------------------------------</td>
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Canadian university, but also of people contacted through the snowball technique. The use of these sampling techniques made it possible to efficiently contact a small population that would otherwise have been difficult to reach (Ouellet & Saint-Jacques, 2000). The people interested in participating in the project contacted the researcher. The researcher presented the project objectives, verified the selection criteria and explained the required participation. A meeting time was also foreseen for data collection. The participants 18 and over gave their written consent in a consent form. Though consent was given by the parents in the case of minors, the children had to sign to indicate their agreement.

Data Collection Method

The data were collected through interviews. This type of data collection is particularly appropriate when the goal, as is the case with this study, is to obtain in-depth rather than wide-ranging information, to determine meanings, processes, and practices, and to work with relatively small sample sizes (Mayer & Saint-Jacques, 2000). The use of this technique allowed us to obtain detailed information about the young people’s lives in gay or lesbian stepfamilies and made it easier to explore the meaning they gave to their reality.

A semi-structured interview was conducted. It was chosen because, despite the fact that there was limited current knowledge about the subject, there was a theoretical framework that helped identify certain dimensions likely to have an impact on the lives of young people in gay or lesbian stepfamilies. This type of interview is recommended when the goal of the research is to identify the respondents’ perceptions of the study subject and to document the behavior and attitudes expressed (Mayer & Saint-Jacques, 2000). An interview guide comprising the various themes and questions exploring the young people’s experience of stigmatization and its impact was developed specifically for this research project by the authors and pretested with a young adult. For example, we asked the young people to tell us whether they found it difficult to be in a family like theirs and, if so, to tell us about certain occasions and their impact. We also asked them whether people had ever laughed at, upset, or hurt them by talking about their family of family members. If such was the case, the participants were invited to describe these experiences, to specify whether they occurred frequently or rarely, and to talk about how these experiences affected them. If these experiences were to be considered as stigmatization, they had to comprise the five, aforementioned stigmatization components identified by Link and Phelan (2001).

Data Analysis

The interviews, which lasted on average 1 hour and 15 minutes, took place either in the participants’ home or in an office on the university campus.
The interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent and completely transcribed with a word processor to facilitate analysis. The material collected during the interviews was then analyzed in keeping with standard procedures for thematic content analysis (L’Écuyer, 1990; Mayer & Deslauriers, 2000), using N’Vivo software (version 1.3). The material was first read several times to become more familiar with the content and identify the particularities that would determine the main analysis categories (L’Écuyer, 1987). The material was divided into statements, then reorganized so that similar statements were grouped into themes, then into categories and subcategories. An entire categorization system was developed for this study since there was no previously existing system that might have served as a starting point. Peer debriefing was likewise conducted to decrease the risk of bias during analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents the results relevant to the research questions. These results were first of all used to determine whether young people living in gay and lesbian stepfamilies were subjected to social stigmatization and, if this was the case, to identify the family characteristics that were stigmatized and the various forms of this process. The following results describe how social stigmatization contributed to making the family life of these young people more complex.

The Object of Stigmatization: What is Stigmatized?

The various statements of the participants interviewed here provided an answer to the first research question about gay and lesbian stepfamilies and confirmed that the young people encountered social stigmatization. Their statements showed that this stigmatization came more from living with a lesbian or gay parent than from being in a stepfamily.

If I go around saying that my father has a girlfriend, nobody will say anything. But if I said that my mother has a girlfriend, everybody would talk about it. (Rosalie, 19 years old, 8 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

Although none of the young people felt judged or belittled because they lived with a stepparent, all of them confirmed the existence of stereotypes about homosexuality and homosexual parents. They likewise denounced the judgments made about their family organization and the difficulties ensuing from this social stigmatization. In particular, the young people mentioned they regularly heard others saying that homosexuality was abnormal, immoral, and unnatural, that being raised by a lesbian or gay
parent might negatively affect children’s social and psychological development, and that children of lesbian or gay parents would automatically become lesbians or gays by contamination.

Even today I heard somebody talking about it. . . . She went to a meeting about gay and lesbian parents and when she came back, she said, “Well aren’t those children gonna be screwed up.” (Rosalie, 19 years old, 8 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

Some people found out that my mother is a lesbian and I got all sorts of questions like, “Are you afraid of becoming one?” Because of all the prejudice, they all think it’s hereditary. (Mireille, 21 years old, 2 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

Types of Stigmatization

The young people’s statements showed that they encountered two types of stigmatization, namely direct and indirect. Four of the young people recounted having been directly stigmatized when their parent’s homosexuality was brought out and used to belittle, reject, and discriminate against them. This was the case of Vicky who talked about how she was called a lesbian and then rejected by her classmates when they found out her mother was a lesbian:

Some people aren’t very nice, you know. They started teasing me, things like, “Your mom’s a lesbian and you’ll be one too.” When I went to school, nobody would talk to me anymore. Even my boyfriend avoided me. (Vicky, 15 years old, 7 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

These experiences mainly occurred when the children were in primary or secondary school. At this age, many young people have a more conservative view of things and find it difficult to imagine other possibilities. In most cases however, these experiences were infrequent and unrepresentative of their daily lives. The young people’s statements indicated that they were not always directly stigmatized and pointed out that the homophobic discourse of certain people, groups or institutions also contributed to their stigmatization. One young woman told about how her classmates, who did not know about her family situation, reacted when a teacher dealt with the question of homosexuality and gay and lesbian parents:

I remember once that my teacher started talking about how there are same-sex couples that get married, have children, and get divorced. . . . Everybody reacted by saying, “That’s disgusting! If my father ever did that, I’d never talk to him again!” Didn’t I feel great! (Katia, 20 years old, 2 years in a gay stepfamily)
The young people interviewed felt that both forms of stigmatization were just as difficult to deal with, especially when they were enrolled in primary or secondary school. Several elements can explain this, in particular the fact that, at this age, young people are particularly sensitive to prejudice about homosexuality and do not wish to deviate from the apparent norm. In addition to their young age, which kept them from stepping back and developing certain strategies to protect themselves from this stigmatization, another element that might explain the greater impact of these stigmatizing situations in younger people was brought to light by the statements of two participants. They emphasized that these experiences occurred shortly after they learned about their parent’s homosexuality; furthermore, this announcement was often made a short time after their parents separation, or sometimes simultaneously. In these situations, the potential stressors associated with each one of the familial and developmental transitions may sometimes have combined to magnify the impact of these stigmatization experiences.

Impacts of Stigmatization: How Stigmatization Made the Young People’s Lives More Complex

The participants’ statements clearly indicated that young people living in gay or lesbian families encountered social stigmatization because of their family structure. Once this element was established, the objective was to determine how this situation made the young people’s lives more complex. The first element that emerged from the statements was that, after hearing and seeing people denigrate their family life so often and describing it as “unnatural” and harmful for children, some of the respondents ended up by internalizing this idea and considering themselves and their families as abnormal and bizarre.

I began to understand that homosexuality wasn’t accepted and wasn’t normal. I learned that society rejected it and that I was weird. (Mélanie, 29 years old, 11 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

This newfound awareness was particularly difficult for the youngest respondents because not only was it in contradiction with their heartfelt conviction that their family life was completely normal, it also ended up influencing their perception of themselves and their family life.

I took it hard because it wasn’t normal. I had to live with a couple that wasn’t normal. I thought it was normal, you know, but the society around me said it wasn’t. How was I supposed to handle all that? I think that’s too much responsibility for a child. (Mélanie, 29 years old, 11 years in a lesbian stepfamily)
Once they were aware of the negative prejudices about homosexuality and lesbian and gay parents, the young people were afraid that their parent’s sexual orientation would come to light because they knew that, if this happened, they themselves would become vulnerable to social stigmatization. These fears took various forms—the fear of being judged by others, being called lesbian or gay, being rejected by their peers—and sometimes represented a considerable source of stress for these young people.

I was always scared of being labelled by someone saying, “Hey, if your father is gay, then you’re gay too because it’s genetic. (Mickaël, 25 years old, 5 years in a gay stepfamily)

In addition to the individual impact of these fears on the young people, the fear of being judged by others, which was intrinsically linked to the pervading homophobia and heterosexism, also had an impact at the family level, albeit more indirectly. This outcome was observed in two young people who reacted very negatively to the announcement of their parent’s homosexuality, in particular because they were afraid of what other people would say. This difficulty in accepting the parent’s new sexual orientation affected the child–parent dyad and hindered the development of a positive relationship with the stepparent. The case of Anne illustrates this type of impact. Despite an open attitude toward homosexuality in general, Anne had considerable difficulty in accepting that of her mother, in particular because she was afraid of her classmates’ reactions:

In general, it doesn’t bother me. But this was my family, and I wasn’t so sure anymore. I kept telling myself that I would have to hide it, that I couldn’t tell everyone, that everyone was going to think it was weird. It was mostly other people’s reactions that bothered me. (Anne, 21 years old, 8 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

Her reaction grew more bitter with the arrival of her mother’s new partner, an arrival which confirmed that a point of no return had been reached and which was perceived by the girl as the cause of several losses. Anne refused every attempt by her stepmother to establish contact. Their relationship became so tense that it began to affect the relationship between Anne and her mother who finally asked Anne to leave and go live with her father.

Afraid of being rejected, mocked, or discriminated against if people learned that their parent was lesbian or gay, these young people also wondered about how to manage the disclosure of their family structure. The issue of how or how not to expose the family to the outside world implied that these young people had to develop different strategies which inevitably made their relationships with their peers more complex. These strategies resulted from the young people’s answers to different questions: Can I talk
openly about my family or should I keep it secret? Who can I talk to about it? When is the best time to talk about it? How should I talk about it if it comes up? The answers to these questions emphasized the young people’s need to camouflage their family composition, particularly during the period following the announcement of a parent’s homosexuality and a new relationship. To keep their parent’s sexual orientation from being discovered, some of the young people chose to avoid talking with their friends about their family, whereas others preferred to hide the stepparent’s true nature by presenting him/her as a friend of the parent, a tenant, or a member of the family.

I never talked about it. I wasn’t interested. I knew what kind of town I lived and I wasn’t about to tell everyone my father was gay. When you’re 16 or 17, it’s easy for people to say, “You’re gay too!” I wasn’t at all interested in getting involved in that. (Mickaël, 25 years old, 5 years in a gay stepfamily)

The use of this strategy modified the young people’s lives, in particular by limiting their relationship with their peers. Some of the participants said that their desire to keep their parent’s homosexuality secret entailed not inviting friends to their home or their parent to school or work activities. For these young people and their parents, it was thus more important to avoid being stigmatized and rejected by others than to go to certain, very ordinary events. The different strategies related to family disclosure management helped the young people to protect themselves up to a certain point from other people’s judgements. However, these strategies also had perverse effects, in particularly the difficult isolation arising from the decision to keep the family structure secret.

They told me not to talk about it. I think they felt a lot of pressure from their neighbors and felt judged by other parents. France (the partner of Mélanie’s mother) told me once that someone threw tomatoes at the house windows. And I can remember my mother saying, “Don’t say anything. Don’t talk about it!” (Mélanie, 29 years old, 11 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

The participants’ statements likewise showed that their need to hide their family structure was particularly strong when the announcement of homosexuality or the forming of a stepfamily was still a recent event. Over time however, this decision did not appear to them to be the only possibility, and most of the young people spoke more openly about their family situation than they did in previous years. This change seemed to be linked to different elements, in particular the impression of greater social tolerance for homosexuality and homosexual parents, as well as the young person’s
growing ability to stand up to other people’s judgements, as is illustrated by the following quote:

I’m older now. I couldn’t care less whether people like me. But I think when you’re young, things like your group of friends and whether people like you and include you in activities are really important, whereas now, who cares?! (Mélanie, 29 years old, 11 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

Apart from the different ways of managing their family’s exposure to the outside world, some of the young people (n = 5) used other strategies to counteract negative views of their family. Even though this is not the main theme of this article, we decided to briefly present them given their relevance for practitioners working with these young people and for future research. Certain young people stated, for example, that they had learned not to overdramatize certain situations, to take their classmates’ negative comments more lightly and even to laugh about them. Others chose their friends carefully, consciously keeping away from those who had prejudices about homosexuality and other socially belittled characteristics. However, the most frequently mentioned strategy by the young people was to confront those who made hurtful comments in an attempt to have them soften their opinions. As the young people were living with a gay or lesbian, they felt that they were well placed to attenuate prejudices and that, out of respect to gays, lesbians, and their children, it was even their duty to do so.

I try to expand people’s horizons a little without stepping on their beliefs and ideologies.

I’m trying because prejudices are exactly that, pre-judging, and “homosexuality,” it’s not exactly what you think. That’s not really the reality. I try to open people’s eyes to show them that it doesn’t make any difference. (Mireille, 21 years old, 3 years in a lesbian stepfamily)

Finally, two young people mentioned that discussions with professionals and other young people in the same situation helped them to better deal with stigmatization by showing them that their problems were not as exceptional as they had thought.

DISCUSSION

There is currently no consensus among authors in the field about whether young people living with a gay or lesbian parent undergo stigmatization because of their parent’s sexual orientation (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004). Whereas some have maintained that young people are subjected to teasing and bullying (O’Connell, 1993; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001),
others have noted that children raised by one or more gay or lesbian parents are not stigmatized any more than other young people (Golombok, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Still others have contended that the research does not support the argument that stigmatization due to the parents’ sexual orientation is an issue for young people (American Psychological Association, 1995). The present study examines this question and likewise explores the process through which this stigmatization occurs and its consequences in the lives of these people. This study sheds new light on these questions by choosing to talk to the children who, in previous studies, were not given the chance to express their opinions. The first objective was to determine whether the young people in these stepfamilies felt they were exposed to social stigmatization because of their family structure. The statements of the young people interviewed here clearly show that the social prejudices about their family structure represented a major difficulty. All these young people mentioned this difficulty. Indeed, it was the main and sometimes the only disadvantage they associated with being part of a family headed by gay or lesbian parents. The results of this study thus tend to support the viewpoint of authors who have stated, based primarily on the opinion of lesbian and gay parents and step-parents, that social stigmatization is an important issue for the members of gay and lesbian stepfamilies (Berger, 1998, 2000; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Erera & Fredriksen, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Hare, 1994; O’Connell, 1993; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Thus, even though these young people did not see themselves as having a socially undesirable characteristic, they felt the negative effects of stigmatization. This result confirms Goffman (1963) and Rogel’s (1997) observation that a stigma’s degrading characteristic can spread to the people close to a stigmatized person.

Nonetheless, the young people’s statements called into question the idea of a triple stigmatization proposed by Berger (2000). Indeed, none of the participants stated that they felt judged or depreciated because they lived in a stepfamily; rather, the stigmatization was exclusively directed at homosexuality in general or at that of the parent in particular. One possible hypothesis would be that, despite the fact that these three characteristics were all present, they were not all judged as severely because society disapproves more of homosexuality and homosexual parents than it does of stepfamilies. Indeed, it is possible that the stigma attributed to stepfamilies is gradually diminishing as the associated stereotypes evolve in keeping with the growing proportion of these families in the population. Saint-Jacques (2000) observed that young people in stepfamilies did not fit the generally held stereotypes about this family structure. In her opinion, this result indicated the growing acceptance of stepfamilies. Indeed, this family type would seem to be progressively losing its “abnormal” characteristic, whereas homosexuality and homosexual parents are still judged to be socially “deviant.” It is likewise possible that despite the stereotypes about
these three characteristics, the young people in stepfamilies were more sensitive to the judgements about homosexuality in general and their parent’s in particular because these two attributes were thought to be more abnormal than stepfamilies.

The present study also examined the impact that social stigmatization had on the young people’s daily lives. The results showed that social stigmatization made the young people’s interpersonal relationships and their personal and family lives considerably more complex. At the personal level, we particularly noted that some of the young people had internalized the social discourse presenting gay and lesbian families and their members as being “abnormal.” This process has already been brought to light in studies of social stigmatization and is quite typical of stigmatized people (Appleby & Anastas, 1998). Furthermore, the young people we interviewed expressed various fears, such as that of being judged or rejected by others, or that of having their whole identity reduced to being the child of a lesbian or gay parent. Some of the young people likewise were afraid of being labelled as lesbian or gay because of their parent’s sexual orientation. Nonetheless, this fear was perhaps not as central a concern for the young people as some authors have noted (Bozett, 1987). In some cases, the invisibility of the stigma associated with homosexuality and lesbian and gay parents influenced the young people because they were aware that once their parent’s homosexuality became known, they would in turn become vulnerable to rejection and discrimination.

Furthermore, knowing that they are likely to be stigmatized if their attribute is made known, people with a concealable attribute and those around them often use diverse strategies to avoid disclosing their identity (Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963). It was therefore not astonishing to find that several participants wondered about how to manage the disclosure of their family structure, and used various strategies to deal with this issue. Several of the strategies that the young people developed to protect themselves from negative social judgements about their family structure resembled the social control strategies identified by Bozett (1987) namely boundary control, nondisclosure, and disclosure. Nonetheless, the results presented here suggested that the children and teenagers did not only use these strategies because they were afraid of being labelled as lesbians or gays, as Bozett (1987) proposed, but also to avoid being stigmatized because they were part of a gay or lesbian stepfamily. An analysis of the young people’s statements likewise showed that the use of one strategy over another depended on certain factors mentioned by Bozett (1987); however, the analysis also identified another factor, namely the time that had passed since the announcement of the parent’s homosexuality and the formation of their stepfamily. Most of the young people interviewed here reported that, in the period immediately following the disclosure of their parent’s homosexuality and the formation of a new couple, they felt the
need to keep their family’s characteristics secret and often developed various strategies to accomplish this and control the family’s boundaries. Over time however, a large proportion of the young people said they began talking more openly about their situation and using more strategies that clearly presented their family. This tendency was also observed by Ray and Gregory (2001) in an Australian study of gay and lesbian parents, their children, and the teachers of their children. These authors noted, for instance, that whereas 64% of the children in grades 7–10 spoke openly about their family to certain people, this rate climbed to 86% in grades 11 and 12. These young people, like those interviewed in the present research, explained that they were more comfortable talking openly about their family as they grew older because their classmates were more mature and less intolerant about differences. The young people in the present study also emphasized that, as they grew older, they felt more capable of dealing with other people and their opinions.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The present research had certain limitations, including the small number of participants, the possible homogeneous nature of the sample, and the consideration of only one actor’s viewpoint. Although these limitations were related, at least partially, to the small sample size of the study, it would be worthwhile to conduct studies with larger, more diversified samples so as to enrich, validate and refine the results obtained here. This project shed light on the impact of stigmatization on the quality of the child/homosexual parent and child/stepparent dyads, an impact that would also be interesting to explore at greater length. The study also showed that the young people were not passive victims of the social stigmatization of their family structure, but rather that they used different strategies to counteract it. It would be worthwhile to further examine the nature of the strategies developed by the young people and their family members to deal with stigmatization and the strategies’ respective effects on the various dimensions of their well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The present study illustrates the difficulty for young people from gay and lesbian stepfamilies of living in a society that denigrates and discriminates against homosexuality and homosexual parents, and underscores the possible consequences of this stigmatization. These results are of direct concern to social workers and others social practitioners who, in addition to having developed expertise with minorities and oppressed people and groups, are used to evaluating situations involving not only individuals but also their
environment. They are called upon not only to act on the individual consequences of stigmatization, but also on the social and political factors that contribute to this exclusion and marginalization. Social practitioners must be sensitive to the possible consequences, both positive and negative, of social stigmatization, and evaluate them carefully without assuming that the parent’s sexual orientation is the cause. It is likewise essential that they examine their own beliefs about homosexuality and lesbian and gay parents and that they think about the possible impact of these beliefs on their work.

In more concrete terms, the stigmatization experienced by these young people indicates the importance of initiatives to make life in gay or lesbian families a normal part of our society. In particular, the results of this study point to the necessity to make educational personnel more aware of the diversity of young people’s family backgrounds. Once people are made more aware of this issue, it would be important to incorporate the reality of gay and lesbian families into the school curriculum of children and teenagers so that they are presented with different types of families. The different programs for combating homophobia in the educational system could provide interesting intervention possibilities, particularly with teenagers. Finally, we should not forget the parents who are confronted with these situations, some of whom are not sure what attitudes and behaviour to adopt concerning the disclosure of their situation to their children and the outside world. They must receive information mentioning that their family life is normal and that they can obtain specific help if they encounter difficulties.

NOTES

1. The expression “heterosexual stepfamily” is used to distinguish these family structures from those headed by a homosexual parent.

2. Consequently, and given the limited number of studies looking specifically at gay and lesbian stepfamilies, the present literature review is not limited to studies of this particular subset of families, but rather includes studies of families with at least one homosexual parent. Information concerning the family structure of respondents are noted when they are known.

REFERENCES


