1. Introduction
A selection of titles of recent Flemish publications on issues related to homosexuality illustrates well the different aspects of the context of the topic in this part of Belgium. A first series of books paved the way to the legislative work on registered partnership, marriage of same-sex partners and still has to pave the way to homosexual parenthood:

- Naar de invoering van het homohuwelijk = Towards a homo-marriage (Colloquium 1997);
- Geregistreerd partnerschap = Registered partnership (Senaeve and Coene, 1998);
- Wettelijke aspecten van homoseksueel ouderschap = Legal aspects of homosexual parenthood (Borghs, 1998).

A second, more recent series puts the issue on the social welfare agenda. In this context the acronym Holebi (homosexuals, lesbians and bisexuals) is used in Flemish. Holebi-issues are in Flanders dealt with in the context of the Equal Opportunities Policy, a regional matter.

- Holebi’s en gelijkekansen(beleid) = Holebi’s and equal opportunities (policy) (Baert and Cockx, 2002);
- Hulpvragen van holebi’s = Requests for help from holebi’s (Baert, Cockx and Seghers, 2001).
- Structurele en culturele belemmeringen en succesfactoren in het leven van holebi’s: een verkenning = Structural and cultural restraints and success factors in the life of holebi’s: an exploration (Dewaele and Michielsens, 2003).

The issue got well on the popular scene by the work of a journalist.


In this contribution, we first want to mention only very shortly some legislative issues related to homosexual matters (§2). Afterwards we have to mention the absence of relevant demographic data on persons with a homosexual orientation and/or same-sex couples (§3). In a next section, we bring into the picture some elements of the societal context of matters related to homosexuality. (§4). In the main section, we present and discuss the empirical research available focusing on same-sex couples (§5). In a closing section, we reflect on what we know and don’t know about same-sex partners (§6).

2. Legal situation
Borghs (1998) identifies for Belgium the following milestones over the last 20 years in the legal situation related to homosexual issues:

- 1984: depenalisation of homosexual behaviour;
- 1984: change of the age of consent for sexual behaviour among same-sex persons;
- 1996: registration of cohabitation;
- (1998-)2000: legal cohabitation;
- (1985-)2002: long way to the anti-discrimination law;

* Center for Population and Family Studies (CBGS), Scientific Institute of the Flemish Government, Brussels, Belgium
Let us just observe that since 1999, Belgium had for the first time in the post-war period no more Christian-Democrats in the Government. Adoption of children by homosexual partners and social parenthood for the partner of a homosexual parent are on the political agenda for the next months.

Dewaele and Motmans (2003) point out the remaining legal discriminations after the recent introduction of the anti-discrimination law and marriage law in Belgium: these concern parenthood, inheritance, foreign partners and political asylum.

- homosexual couples have no possibility for adoption of children; a homosexual, non-biological co-parent has no rights or duties toward the children he/she raises;
- a child can not inherit automatically from his/her homosexual non-biological co-parent;
- the foreign partner of a homosexual person can not get easily a residence permit in Belgium; a homosexual person can only marry with a partner from a country where same-sex marriage exists i.e. only from the Netherlands;
- persecution because of the homosexual orientation is a legal ground for political asylum; however, requests on the ground of violence or repression because of the homosexual orientation are very often rejected in Belgium.

3. A demographic subpopulation?

The increase of legal interest and social policy interest for persons with a homosexual orientation and for same-sex couples did not go along in Belgium with a request for a better description of the size and characteristics of the subpopulation at stake.

With regard to relevant demographic data, we first have to reflect on who we want to be counted and why. With regard to marriage - legally possible for same-sex partners since January 2003 and practically possible since June 2003 - the National Statistical Office had in September 2003 not yet provided new marriage-count-form and divorce-count-forms (the existing ones contain information about the husband and the wife). Moreover, it was not decided yet how the same-sex marriages and divorces will be dealt with in the marriage and divorce statistics. According to a newspaper article, there have been up to 30 September 2003, 139 same-sex marriage in the six largest Belgian cities. Two thirds of these marriages concerned male couples. The largest number of homo-marriages could be found in Antwerp. We will be eager to analyse the age composition of the partners involved, their previous civil status, the duration of these marriage and the grounds for divorce. But unfortunately as for the heterosexual cases, incomplete information will be available on the involvement of children at the time of the marriage and the divorce. We will for sure be interested in comparing the male versus female same-sex marriages and compare them with the different-sex marriages, but this information will be difficult to interpret as long as we have no information on the populations at risk. If we calculate marriages rates based on the non-married population, we may have to make a distinction between the non-married population with a heterosexual orientation and the one with a homosexual orientation.

But how to define these populations at risk? Information on homosexual partnerships is difficult to grasp. Persons of the same sex that registered their partnership contract or that adopted a legal cohabitation can not for 100% be identified as homosexual couples. Legal (unmarried) cohabitation was from its beginnings much more popular in Flanders (9 out of 10) then in Wallonia and much more popular among different-sex couples (9 out of 10). In 2000 there were in Belgium about 4.000 case of legal cohabitation; in 2001 about 25.000. Population data on legal cohabitation are not (yet) made available because of reasons related to the protection of privacy. Official statistics have not yet been published.

The identification of same-sex partnerships is even more uncertain when we use the household statistics of the Population Register. Households in which the reference person
Research on homosexual partners and parents in Flanders (Belgium)

is living together with a non-related person of the same sex can be selected. However, this living together of two non-related same-sex persons does not reveal anything on their partnership status. Similar exercises could be done for all households of a larger size but in these cases even more speculation is needed about the kind of non-relatedness with the reference person. In the household statistics, same-sex partners without living-in children belong to the non-family households with more than 1 person.

In the Belgian Census one can in principle look at couples of the same-sex, but this was never done. We made a request to cover this in the census data (Socio-economic Survey) of 2001.

In section 5 we will see what surveys can tell us about the partnership status of individuals with a homosexual orientation and about same-sex couples.

Information on the sexual orientation of individuals in the population is not available. Moreover, measurement of this orientation is not an easy task. For Flanders estimations about the prevalence of homosexuals are at about 5% (Vincke & Stevens, 1999) or closer to 10% (Vlaeminck, 2001). A population survey in 1991 among 5,000 respondents aged 20-49 identified 5 respondents who in the interview admitted that their steady partner was of the same sex (non-published CBGS-data). In a recent survey via internet among about 1,000 students, only 6 out of 500 having a partner revealed their partner was of the same sex (0.6% or 1.2%). In the Belgian context numbers or serious efforts to make estimates, do not seem to matter much.

4. The societal context
Individuals with a homosexual orientation and same-sex couples live and operate in a particular political, social and cultural context.

4.1 Opinions and attitudes
To sketch part of the normative context of issues related to homosexuality, we present a selection of opinions on homosexual issues.

Over the last 20 years, the European Value Study treated the issue of homosexuality in terms of how often (from never to always) one considers homosexuality as justified. Researchers considered this context free question as a measure of acceptance; a point which is questionable. The acceptance of homosexuality increased in the 1980s in almost all Western countries. However, this does not imply that homosexual behaviour is accepted as normal. On a 10-point justification scale, the mean score in most countries remained below 5. In Belgium it increased in the 1980s from 3.02 to 3.87. Belgium kept its middle position in the list of 15 countries involved (Ester, Halman and De Moor, 1994). The opinions on homosexuality further changed towards more acceptance in the 1990s (Elchardus et al., 2000). The Belgians that considered homosexuality as never justified decreased from 64% in 1981 over 54% in 1990 to 35% in 1999. The proportion that considered homosexuality always justified increased over these years from 9% over 15% to 31%. This trend belongs to a broader trend of increasing self-determination with regard to the body (as is the case for suicide, abortion, euthanasia). This period trend goes along with an age trend. All this results in the observation that the oldest persons in 1999 have in this respect the same opinion as the youngest persons in 1981. Across these two decades, opinions related to self-determination with regard to the body remained strongly related to religion. Analysing period and cohort trends, one can observe that tolerance for homosexuality (but also for divorce, suicide, abortion and euthanasia) increased for all cohorts between 1981 and 1990, but afterwards a stagnation was observed (Lesthaeghe and Moors, 2000). But even in 1999, one can observe a strong polarisation between the group that considers homosexuality as always unacceptable (20%) and the group that considers homosexuality as never unacceptable (26%); a phenomenon not observed with regard to abortion and divorce (Waege and Heinderickx, 2000).

Same-sex couples, same-sex partnerships, and homosexual marriages
A Focus on cross-national differentials
From the 1990s on, opinions on legal same-sex partnership and same-sex parenthood were put on the opinion agenda. In 2001 a survey among Young Europeans treated the issue in terms of the right of homosexuals to get married and on what young people think that the opinions of their age-mates are. Just under six young Europeans out of ten think that young people of their age tend to be in favour of the right of homosexuals to get married, an increase of 7 points compared to 1997. On the other hand, adoption of children by homosexuals remains a controversial topic, even though opposition has decreased: 41% think that young people of their age are in favour of it versus 36% in 1997. No differentials by nationality, sex or age were available for this group of young people.

A population survey on Fertility and Family in Flanders in 1991 asked male and female Belgians aged 20 to 40 (N=5,000) their opinion on whether ‘A homosexual couple can as good as a man and a woman take care of a child’; strong disagreement among the respondents prevailed (non-published CBGS-data). A population survey in Flanders Vlaanderen Gepeild (Flanders Measured) in 1998 among male and female Belgians aged 16 to 84 (N=1,500) revealed that 74% considers the legal recognition of other living arrangements than marriage acceptable (Waege and Agneessens, 2001).

Only in 1999 a first survey among homosexual men and women of all ages was organised in Flanders (N=1,557). They were asked about their perception of the attitude of heterosexuals towards ‘holebi’s’. Males and females with a homosexual orientation thought that this perception was rather positive (mean score of 65 on a 100-point scale). This perception was unrelated to gender, age or educational level. This homosexual sample considered the homosexual man as most discriminated, followed by the lesbian woman, and then by the bisexual man. The bisexual woman was considered least discriminated (Vincke and Stevens, 1999).

Early 2003 - at the time the marriage of same-sex partners was approved in Belgium - a Marketing Bureau organised a survey in Flanders among respondents aged 15-55 (N=565) on homosexuality, same-sex marriage and same-sex parenthood. The results revealed that 49% of the Flemish men are against the same-sex marriage. Moreover, according to 53% of the men same-sex couples have no right to have children. More in general, 1 out of 6 Flemish men considers homosexuality as ‘condemnable’. Flemish women seemed to be more tolerant: 26% are against the same-sex marriage; 67% think same-sex couples can have children. Only 7% of the women considers homosexuality as ‘condemnable’ (newspaper).

A population survey on Population Policy Acceptance among respondents aged 20 to 65 (N=4,000) fielded in September-October 2003 in Flanders asked for opinions on same-sex marriage and homosexual parenthood. Flemish people disagree on these matters. Only 6% is very much in favour of the gay-marriage; only 8% accepts fully parenthood of two men. The group that is very much against theses issues amounts to 20%.

As the topics dealing with homosexuality have changed over time and as the samples are of varying quality, it is hard to come up with firm conclusions. However, we observe a trend towards more acceptance/tolerance, however disagreement still prevails.

4.2 Policies at different levels and in different domains
Policy issues related to homosexuality, individuals with a homosexual orientation and same-sex partners and marriages are treated in Belgium at different levels. At the European level, the European Parliament approved in 1994 a resolution on the equal rights of homosexuals. At the Belgian national level, the anti-discrimination law (2002) and the same-sex marriage (2003) were recently major milestones taking away many legal discriminations.
At the regional Flemish level, the Flemish Government introduced in 1995 a Minister for Equal Opportunities Policy. Besides her equal opportunities policy for women, the Minister developed one for target groups, being minority groups having a degree of self-organisation, namely migrants, homosexuals and disabled persons. In 1999 the new Minister for Equal Opportunities Policy explicitly identified five target groups for a equal opportunities policy: women, migrants, homosexuals, poor people and disabled persons. In 2001 a Focal Point for Equal Opportunities Policy was set up. Since 2000, equal opportunities policies for holebi’s become more and more mainstreamed in Flanders. The topic was dealt with in the policy domains of education, welfare, culture and youth. All these domains collaborated e.g. to organize a first Week of Diversity, focusing in 2003 on holebi’s.

4.3 Regional level: Focal Point Equal Opportunities Policy

In 2001 the Flemish Government set up a focal point for Equal Opportunities Policy that supports through research and advice the equal opportunities policy. The global goals of this focal point are: to contribute to structural and long-term research with regard to equal opportunities; to support and promote the global development and the execution of the equal opportunities policy and of the integration of this policy in other policy domains and other societal structures; and to sensitive target groups and the broader population for the equal opportunities issues. Four research units are distinguished within this focal point: one on women, migrants, age, holebi’s. Within the research unit on holebi’s - active since May 2002 - research is oriented towards sociological research about the structural and cultural constraints and success factors for equal opportunities of holebi’s, the experience of (un)equal chances by holebi’s and the representation of homo- and bisexuality in media and school materials. This focal point set up last year a network of experts and has made an overview of all holebi-relevant research in Flanders (see section 5).

4.4 Organisations, working groups and services

A full description of the societal context must include the role of the organisations and services related to issues on homosexuality, but this is beyond the scope of this contribution. In brief: in 1953, the first Flemish holebi-organisation was founded in Brussels. In 1977, two Flemish holebi organisations merged into one Federation of Working Group Homophily (FWH), bringing together several organisations and working groups. In 2002 this federation changed its name into Holebi-federation. In 1987 a first Flemish holebi-youth organisation (Verkeerd Geparkeerd - Wrongly Parked) was set up. In 1995 three Flemish holebi youth organisations merged into one (Wel Jong Niet Hetero - Young yes, but not straight) bringing together many smaller local units. The Brussels and Walloon region also have their organisation (respectively Holebi Overleg Brussel, HOB, since 2000 and Fédération des Associations Gays et Lesbiennes, FAGL, since 1999). The International Lesbians and Gays Association (ILGA) and European ILGA (founded in 1996) have currently their main quarters in Brussels. The Holebifabriek is a Flemish volunteer organisation working on youth and sexuality. Archives and documents on matters related to homosexuality are collected since 1966 by the Fonds Suzan Daniel. A Flemish magazine on issues related to homosexuality is called Zizo. A phone service for matters related to issues on homosexuality (Holebi-foon) is supported by the Flemish Government. Information on matters related to issues on homosexuality is posted on special pages of teletext of the public television channel: the Holebittest. At the municipal level, emancipation officers have the possibility to integrate issues on holebi’s in their policies. The Flemish Minister also supports the ‘Pink Houses’ in major Flemish cities that can negotiate with the local authorities.

In the next paragraph we will see how this societal context is reflected or not in the available empirical research and/or how the available empirical research reflects part of the societal context.
5. Research on same-sex partners and parents

In this contribution, we want to focus on the available empirical research in Flanders on same-sex partners and same-sex parents. But even a recent Special issue on ‘Social Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay issues in Europe: the state of the art’ (Coyle and Wilkinson, 2002) did not reveal much on same-sex partners and parents. First of all, this state of the art in Europe was given by mainly British scholars. A comparative study between the US and Britain was written up by an American (Hegarty, 2002). Two Belgian - Flemish - authors reported on the confidant support and the mental wellbeing of lesbian and gay young adults in a longitudinal analysis (Vicke and Van Heeringen, 2002).

Secondly, how do we have to interpret the selected substantive themes that are dealt with in this state of the art? They concern: symbolic beliefs about sexual orientation, arguments against lowering the age of consent for sex between men, the mental wellbeing of young homosexuals, planned lesbian parenting, sexual decision making and systemic therapy with homosexual clients. The main point of the editors of this special issue is that debates about essentialist versus social constructionists approaches are a feature of lesbian and gay psychology in Europe and that epistemological differences map into methodological differences with the positivist work relying mostly on quantitative data and the social constructionist work mostly on qualitative data.

5.1 Publications on homosexuality in Flanders

In Flanders, empirical research on same-sex couples is scarce, but not in-existent. On demand of the Focal Point on Equal Opportunities Policy a overview has been made in 2002 of research on holebi’s in Flanders. The overview includes all research that was carried out at research or education institutes and policy or field-organisations in Flanders or was done outside Belgium but on the situation in Flanders, and resulted in a written report. The search resulted in 287 publications that were organised by kind of publication and by content (Baert and Cockx, 2002). The results are quite informative about the selective approach of the topic in Flanders. Almost all reports/publications date from the 1990s or later. According to the kind of publication 5 categories were distinguished: policy oriented scientific research; theory oriented scientific research; training research by students; popularized publications (polls, survey among readers, popular work) and educational material, besides a category of ongoing research. The most informative, but anyhow surprising, result is that about 40% of the reports/publications concerns the work of higher education students. This reflects not only who is interested in the topic, but also indirectly reveals something about the quality and the scope of the research. According to the 21 content categories (publications could be at most in two categories), a quarter belongs to the category of ‘social climate’ treating issues such as public visibility and acceptance of homosexuality, discriminations of homosexual persons and the policy concerning homosexuality. One out of six publications were on sexual identity (identity formation, coming out) and 1 out of 7 on health issues (well-being and aids/hiv). Topics such as family of origin, leisure time, marriage, income and labour, training and education, housing, age, death, religion were almost completely absent. The authors conclude that most theory- and policy-oriented research is focused on requests for help and welfare problems and counseling, containing the risk of making the group a ‘problem group’. The work from students covers a much broader range of topics and provides a much more diversified image, considering the homosexuals as a group being part of a broader network and participating in the social life. It is also more focused on the comparison with heterosexual persons (Baert and Cockx, 2002).

5.2 Research on same-sex couples and parents

5.2.1 Partnership status of individuals with a homosexual orientation

Already in 1971, Ross mentioned in ‘Modes of adjustment of married homosexuals’, his study with 11 Belgian homosexuals that were married at the time of the interview. This study is referred to in a Dutch literature overview (Gijs et al., 1989) on homosexual men in marriage.
Even if the sampling method of surveys with individuals with a homosexual orientation is quite well described in some studies, the studies are quite vague on their criterion, even if it is self-identification, to include a person in their sample.

In a small survey sample (N=115) in Flanders in 1999 86% participants identified as homosexual and 14% as bisexual (Baert, Cockx and Seghers, 2001). Besides, 77% belonged to the age group of 26-50 and 48% had a higher educational level. In this study, no information is available on how many respondents had a (steady) partner. We only learn that half of the participants cohabited with the same-sex partner and that this was more the case for women. 32% lived alone; this was more the case for men. The others still lived with a hetero-partner or with their parents. Males had had significantly more sexual partners over their life course and over the last 12 months.

Based on what is called a 'Policy oriented general survey of Flemish homosexual men and women', Vincke and Stevens (1999) provide some information on the partnership status of the respondents (Brussels was not included in this study). Using a quota-sample design (sex, age, educational attainment, place of residence), the researchers could reach 60% of the required quota. Homosexuals without any educational degree or with only a primary school degree and homosexuals of the age 55 and over were heavily underrepresented. More precisely, 127 homosexuals of the age 65 and over with at most a primary school degree were required according to the quota-schema: there was none in the sample. Interviewers actively searched at meeting places for homosexuals the respondents required according to the quota-scheme. Several respondents contacted the interviewers spontaneously at these places and volunteered to participate. Besides, the survey was posted in a Holebi-magazine and through a Holebi-organisation. However, it is hard to find out which precise criterion was used to invite persons to participate or to participate. The final sample consisted of 54% men and 46% women; 26% were younger then 25, 7% were older then 50. Some partnership related characteristics were collected. Across cohorts (born after 1955), the group having experienced a first attraction to a same-sex person by age 19 has increased (from 44% to 76% for women and from 62% to 81% for men) as well as the proportion that self-identified as homosexual by age 19 (from 39% to 79% for women and from 54% to 86% for men). Along the same line, the group that had the coming out by age 19 increased (from 28% to 73% for women and from 28% to 77% for men). Among these homosexuals, the age at which they experienced a first sexual contact with a same sex partner has decreased. The proportion having had this experience by age 19 increased (from 20% to 40% for women and from 13% to 36% for men). To compare: a general population survey from 1991 revealed that across the cohorts 1955-71 the proportion having experienced a first sexual intercourse by age 19 remained at about 50%, both for men and for women (Corijn, 1995).

In the sample of homosexuals, 90% men and 84% women were never married; 2% were still married. About half of the men had a partner; two thirds of the women had a partner. Mean duration of this partnership was 3.4 years for men and 5.2 years for women. 80% of the group thought that their partnership was visible enough. About 90% were happy or more than happy in their partnership. There were minor differences in the appreciation of the degree of happiness: 50% men called themselves very happy; 41% women called themselves perfectly happy. However, the criteria for a partnership were not specified in the report. Nor was information available on how many persons lived together with their partner or on the frequency they met each other. However, some specific aspects of commonality were measured: 27% men and 35% women had a common account; 24% shared home-ownership; 25% had a life insurance for the partner. No comparisons with other groups or evaluations can be made as we don’t now the size of the cohabiting group. The report says that the responsibility for the household income is shared by 60% and that legal arrangements in case of death or divorce are more rare than oral arrangements. However, again the report is not precise about the reference group. One in
10 persons had children from a heterosexual relationship (8% men and 11% women). Unfortunately, no information is available on where these children lived and on the frequency of contacts with them. 4% of the women had children from a homosexual relationship. About half of the persons expressed the wish to have children.

5.2.2 Research on homosexual versus heterosexual couples

Being interested in research on same-sex couples, we would like to find plenty examples such as the work of Kurdek (1998) ‘Relationship outcomes and their predictors: longitudinal evidence from heterosexual married, gay cohabiting, and lesbian cohabiting couples’. Based on his study, Kurdek can e.g. conclude that relative to married partners, gay partners reported more autonomy, fewer barriers to leaving the partnership and more frequent relationship dissolution and lesbian partners reported more intimacy, more autonomy, more equality, fewer barriers to leave the partnership and more frequent relationship dissolution. Moreover, he could conclude that the strength with which the dimensions of the relationship quality were linked to each relationship outcome for married partners was equivalent to that for both gay and lesbian partners. Even more, we would like to see more studies in which the type of couple (gay, lesbian, heterosexual) is just one of the independent variables as in Kurdek’s (1997) study on the dimensions of relationship commitment. But European research is far away from that.

At the University of Ghent, students of the Faculty of Sociology worked on ‘Homosexuality and relationships’ (Coolen, 1987) and on ‘Intimacy and sexuality in male homosexual relationships’ (Deenen, 1992). At the Faculty of Psychology (Unit of experimental-clinical and health psychology), students are involved in a research programme on homosexual versus heterosexual couples.

Dewaele (2001) in his study on ‘Relationship characteristics of homosexual couples’ e.g. analysed the relationship between destructive and constructive communication and relationship satisfaction among heterosexual and homosexual couples. Among the homosexual couples that had expressed interest to participate in the research, only 33% sent back the materials. As such 15 homosexuals couples with a relationship of minimum 6 months participated and were matched (age of both partners, duration of relationship) with heterosexual couples from an existing couple database. Data from the oldest and the youngest partner in the same-sex couple were respectively compared with those of the man and the women in the different-sex couple. Relationships between aspects of the satisfaction with the partnership among the partners were compared for both the same-sex and different-sex group as were relationships between aspects of the communication patterns within the relationship and relationships between the satisfaction with the partnership and the communication patterns. Similarities prevailed, differences were minor. Reynaert (2001) focused in her work on ‘Communication and empathic accuracy among lesbians’ and Struyver (2001) on ‘Individual characteristics and satisfaction with the partnership among homo- and heterosexual couples’.

At the University of Leuven students worked on ‘Partnership among homosexual men’ (Mostinckx, 1970); ‘Patterns and issues of partnership formation among homosexual men’ (Meers, 1986) at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and on ‘Towards the homo-marriage. Theological-ethical reflections’ (Vanhees, 1998) at the Faculty of Theology.

5.2.3 Research on lesbian mother families

Allen and Demo (1995) present the families of lesbians and gay men as a new frontier in family research. On the basis of a review of over 8,000 articles published between 1980 and 1993 - which is ten years ago - in nine journals that publish family research, they concluded that research on lesbian and gay families is quite limited, and that where these families have been studied, they have been problematized and their diversity has been overlooked. Laird (1993) also observed that only three areas comprise the core of our
knowledge base (until that time): same-sex partnerships and romantic relationships; lesbian mothers and to a lesser degree gay fathers and the psychological development and social adjustment of children of lesbian and gay parents. Allen and Demo conclude that a reorientation of the researcher’s attention is needed towards a model that incorporates the dynamics of family relationships and the multiple contexts in which sexual orientation is relevant.

At the University of Leuven a student made ‘Reflections from the sociology of the family on homosexual parenthood and homosexual families’ (Dirkx, 1999). Others reviewed the literature on ‘The wish for children among gays and lesbians’ (Smets, 1986), ‘Lesbian motherhood’ (Martens, 1998) and on ‘The psychosexual identity formation of children of homosexual parents’ (Moors, 1999).

At the University of Ghent, students have similar interests ‘Homosexual parenthood: between wanting and being able’ (Peerera, 1997); ‘Homosexual parenthood in view of the concerns of the child’ (Panesi, 2000) and ‘The psychosocial development of children from an alternative family form’ (Devos, 2001).

At the department of Developmental and Life Span Psychology of the Dutch speaking Free University of Brussels there is a longitudinal investigation on children who were born in a lesbian household. All lesbian couples who entered the donor insemination programme at the Centre of Reproductive Medicine (University Hospital Brussels) between 1986 and 1991 were asked to take part in a longitudinal study of lesbian families. Data were collected several times: at the start of the inseminations; between the child’s first and second year of age (50 couples); between the child’s fourth and sixth year of age (30 couples) and when the children were between 7 and 17 (24 couples).

Major publications cover the following issues:

- The donor concept (Children from anonymous donors: an inquiry into homosexual and heterosexual parents’ attitudes, Brewaeys et al., 1993; An attempt to reconstruct children’s donor concept: a comparison between children’s and lesbian parents’ attitudes towards donor anonymity, Vanfraussen et al., 2001; Why do children want to know more about the donor? The experience of youngsters raised in lesbian mother families, Vanfraussen et al., 2003);
- The child development and family functioning (Donor insemination: child development and family functioning in lesbian mother families with children of 4-8 years old, Brewaeys, 1997; What does it mean for youngsters to grow up in a lesbian family created by means of donor insemination, Vanfraussen et al., 2002; Family functioning in lesbian families created by donor insemination, Vanfraussen et al., 2003).

Part of this work was also published in French in ‘Homoparentalités. Etat des lieux (Gross, 2000).

We select some results from this study of 50 lesbian couples at the time their children were between 1 and 2 years (Brewaeys et al., 1995): 85% of the women involved reported to have an exclusive homosexual orientation and 15% were bisexual. 8% allocated themselves a sex role with mainly masculine characteristics. More then half of the lesbian mothers had a higher education; two thirds called themselves Catholic. The mean duration of the partnership at the time of the birth of the first child was eight years, but with a range from 2 to 13 years. The age of the biological mother at the time of the birth of the first child was on average 32 years, varying from 24 to 37. 40% of the couples made no distinction at all between the biological and social mother i.e. the parental roles were identical. 60% of the couples thought that a child could only have one mother, the mother’s partner had a different role but educational responsibilities were equal and shared. Other issues that were analysed concerned the lesbian mother’s view on donor anonymity at two points in time; the disclosure about the use of a donor, the two-mother
family, the lesbian identity towards the children, family/friends and colleagues; the name-giving to the biological and the social mother; the division of childcare tasks.

At the time the children were between 4 and 8 years there were still 30 lesbian mother families involved in the study and they were compared with 38 heterosexual families with a donor insemination child and with 30 heterosexual families who had a naturally conceived child (Brewaeys et al., 1997). We select some results: the quality of the couples’ relationship and the quality of the mother-child interaction did not differ between lesbian mother families and either of the heterosexual family groups. The quality of the interaction between the social mother and the child in lesbian families was superior to that between the father and the child in both groups of heterosexual families. Children’s own perception of their parents was similar in all family types: the social mother in lesbian families was regarded by the child to be as much a ‘parent’ as the father in both types of heterosexual families. With regard to their emotional/behavioural development, boys and girls raised in lesbian mother families were well adjusted and their gender role development did not differ from that of child raised in heterosexual families.

Some years later a total of 41 children aged between 7 and 17 years, and 45 parents, took part in another follow-up study, mainly on the concept of the donor. (Vanfraussen et al, 2001). 54% of these children preferred donor anonymity at this point in their life, whereas 46% wanted to know more about the donor. The majority of the mothers preferred the donor to remain anonymous. At the time of this follow-up study, 6 of the 24 couples were separated. In all but one family, these parents had established a kind of co-parenthood or had arranged contact between the children and both mothers on a regular basis.

Obviously also students worked on this topic: ‘The development of insight in family relationships among children that grew up in alternative living arrangements: a study among KID children of lesbian couples’ (Verbelen, 1989), ‘Impact of lesbian parenthood on the interpersonal relations within the household, the family and the broader social context’ (Vandenoetelaer, 1998); ‘The family concept of children born to lesbian mothers by donor insemination: a comparative study with children of heterosexual parents (Nekkebroek, 1999); ‘Homosexuality and the wish for children (Santacruz, 2001).

6. Conclusion and discussion
What do we know and what do we don’t know about issues related to homosexuality in Flanders? Since same-sex marriage is possible in Belgium, homo-related organisations admitted several times in the newspapers that now it does not matter (anymore) how many persons (will) opt for a same-sex marriage. Apparently, to abolish a discrimination was the issue, not marriage itself. We will have to wait a long time to see the first official data on homo-marriages. What is very well documented from research on same-sex parents in Flanders is how well children in lesbian families are doing.

In the current Flemish literature on issues related to homosexuality, one can read much from a perspective of discrimination (at school, at work, experience with, anticipation of,...). However, this perspective and the related information could be more informative, if comparisons with other groups - that can be or are discriminated - were made. If we read that 8% of the homosexuals is teased several times a week, we miss any context to evaluate this number. Moreover, one can read a lot on contacts of persons with a homosexual orientation with health and welfare organisations (evaluation of attitudes, knowledge of the personnel on homosexuality, preference for personnel). But again the information collected is given without any reference to any other group that can have or has difficulties in their contacts with health and welfare organisations. If we read that 20% of the homosexuals thinks the physician has not the appropriate knowledge, we miss any reference to evaluate this number.
Both the qualitative and quantitative studies on persons with a homosexual orientation in Flanders take very much an insider’s perspective and any broader framework or any comparative stand is missing. Moreover, negative issues and shortcomings get priority. Opportunities and strengths of this subgroup of people is seldom touched upon.

In a overview of materials for an equal opportunities policy related to homosexuality issues, authors come up for all kinds of domains (from education, welfare, health, over youth, culture and sports, labour, housing to media and tourism) with lists of objectives that are needed to create the appropriate conditions and lists of objectives that must be realised to obtain an equal opportunities policy (Sergeant and Backx, 2002). Here again, one gets the impression that the perspective of holebi’s is over-emphasized and that persons with a homo- or bisexual orientation are treated as a very specific target group without putting the issues in a comparative and broader context. According to our view, the word ‘holebi’s’ could be replaced in these lists of objectives by the name of many other ‘minority’ groups of different kinds.

7. Bibliography


Research on homosexual partners and parents in Flanders (Belgium)


Same-sex couples, same-sex partnerships, and homosexual marriages
A Focus on cross-national differentials