

Families of the Lesbian Baby Boom: Parents' Division of Labor and Children's Adjustment

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This study assessed lesbian couples' division of labor, their satisfaction with division of labor and with their relationships, and their children's psychosocial adjustment. The 26 participating families were headed by lesbian couples, each of whom had at least 1 child between 4 and 9 years of age. Parents' relationship satisfaction was generally high but was unrelated to measures of parental division of labor or of children's adjustment. Although both parents reported sharing household tasks and decision making equally, biological mothers reported greater involvement in child care, and nonbiological mothers reported spending longer hours in paid employment. Parents were more satisfied and children were more well-adjusted when labor involved in child care was more evenly distributed between the parents.

The frequency of lesbian childbearing in the United States has been growing in recent years to such an extent that many researchers have referred to a "lesbian baby boom" (e.g., Patterson, 1992; Riley, 1988; Weston, 1991). From both theoretical and applied perspectives, the families of the lesbian baby boom are of considerable interest (Patterson, 1992, in press). Little research has been reported to date, however, about these families. Existing work suggests that children born to lesbian mothers are developing normally (McCandlish, 1987; Patterson, 1994; Steckel, 1987), but there is little information about the possible sources of individual differences among children or parents (Patterson, 1992). The present article reports a study of division of labor and satisfaction with division of labor among lesbian parents, as well as psychosocial adjustment among their children. Thus, the central question posed by the present research was, How do lesbian couples with young children allocate labor involved in household maintenance and child care, with what degree of satisfaction, and with what implications, if any, for the children in their care?

Previous research has established that, in heterosexual families, allocation of labor generally occurs along gendered lines. An extensive body of research attests that women do the great majority of work involved in household maintenance and in care of children (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Hochschild, 1989; Kurdek, 1993). Although differences between husbands' and

wives' work at home may be reduced somewhat when the couple has no children and when wives also work in paid employment outside the home, working wives without children nevertheless have been found to perform the majority of household labor (Blair & Lichter, 1991).

Among heterosexual couples, the transition to parenthood has traditionally been associated with a movement toward increasing specialization of roles. For example, studies by a number of investigators (e.g., Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Cowan et al., 1985; Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988) have reported that after the birth of a child, wives take on increased household and child-care duties. Husbands, in contrast, focus more energy on paid employment outside the home.

Studies of lesbian couples, on the other hand, have shown that they tend to divide household labor on an equal basis (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1993; Peplau & Cochran, 1990). Not only do lesbian couples tend to divide labor evenly, but they also have been found to voice strong preferences for egalitarian allocation of household work. All of the published studies, however, have involved lesbian couples without children.

One issue considered in the present study concerns the implications of childbearing for division of labor among lesbian couples. Do lesbian couples with children allocate family responsibilities in ways that are similar to the gender-based specialization characteristic of heterosexual families, with one partner undertaking most of the household and child-care responsibilities and the other undertaking most of the paid employment? Or do lesbian couples maintain egalitarian roles even when there are children in the household? The first aim of this study was to address these questions by describing the division of family responsibilities among lesbian couples with young children.

Another topic of concern in this study was mothers' satisfaction with their domestic arrangements. A number of investigators have reported that satisfaction among heterosexual mothers is higher when household and child-care labor is shared to a

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greater extent by fathers (Cowan & Cowan, 1987, 1988; Fish, New, & Van Cleave, 1992; Goldberg, Michaels, & Lamb, 1985; Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). Among lesbian couples without children, satisfaction is higher when household labor is allocated in an egalitarian fashion (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Peplau & Cochran, 1990). Little is known, however, about lesbian couples with children. A second aim of this study, then, was to assess lesbian mothers' satisfaction with division of labor and with their couple relationships.

Of special interest among the families of the lesbian baby boom is the role of biological connections as influences on family life (Patterson, 1992, in press). In most families headed by lesbian couples, each child is biologically related to one but not both of his or her mothers. This biological link usually also carries with it legal rights and responsibilities not accorded the nonbiological mother (Polikoff, 1990). Are such differences between biological and nonbiological mothers associated in any way with experiences of family life? A third aim of the present research was to compare biological and nonbiological parents in terms of their contributions to household labor, child care, and decision making within the family, as well as to assess satisfaction with their roles.

A fourth issue of major interest is the extent to which parents' allocation of family responsibilities is associated with psychosocial adjustment among their children. Studies of two-parent heterosexual families have found that greater involvement of fathers in child care is associated with positive developmental outcomes among their children (Radin, 1981). Feminist scholars (e.g., Okin, 1989) have suggested that an equal division of labor between parents provides children with a model of justice that will be beneficial to their development. Will equal sharing of household and child-care labor, if observed among lesbian couples with children, be associated with positive outcomes for children? A fourth aim of the present study was to assess possible links between parents' division of labor and psychosocial adjustment among their children.

Another issue of interest concerns the nature of pathways through which expected links between parental division of labor and child adjustment might emerge. In his model of the determinants of parenting, Belsky (1984) argued for the importance of linkages among marital relations, parenting, and child outcomes. In the context of the present research, these ideas suggest that greater relationship satisfaction could be expected among lesbian couples who share household labor and child care equally, and more favorable adjustment could be expected among children whose parents are more satisfied. In other words, mothers' relationship satisfaction might be expected to mediate linkages between parental division of labor and child adjustment. Another aim of the study, then, was to evaluate these expectations about possible pathways through which child adjustment and parental division of labor might be linked.

In summary, this study sought to investigate division of labor among biological and nonbiological lesbian mothers, their satisfaction with role arrangements and with their couple relationships, and the possible associations of these variables with children's adjustment. Twenty-six families headed by lesbian couples with at least one child between 4 and 9 years of age participated in the study, which assessed each of the major variables by using standardized instruments. The principal expecta-

tations were that lesbian couples would be more satisfied and their children better adjusted when household and child-care labor was divided more equally between the parents.

Method

Eligibility and Recruitment of Families

Families were drawn from those who took part in the Bay Area Families Study, a research project focusing on the families of the lesbian baby boom (Patterson, 1994). Families were eligible to participate in the Bay Area Families Study if they met each of three criteria. First, at least one child between 4 and 9 years of age had to be present in the home. Second, the child had to be born to or adopted by a lesbian mother or mothers. Third, only families who lived within the greater San Francisco Bay Area (e.g., San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and San Jose) were considered eligible.

Recruitment began when I contacted friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who might be likely to know eligible lesbian mother families. I described the proposed research and solicited help in locating families. From names gathered in this way, I telephoned each family to describe the study and to ask for their participation.

On making telephone contact, I introduced myself, explained how I had obtained the family's name, described the study, and answered any questions. I also asked whether the family met criteria for participation, and if so, whether they would be willing to take part in the research. When a mother agreed, usually after consultation with other members of her family, an appointment was arranged for me to visit the family in their home. The process of discussion, decision making, and appointment setting required between 2 and 10 telephone conversations per family; in some cases, letters were also exchanged before an appointment was made. In all, contact was made with 39 eligible families, of whom 37 participated in the study. Thus, approximately 95% of the families who were contacted did take part.

Participating Families

Of the 37 families who participated in the Bay Area Families Study, 26 were headed by a lesbian couple, and the data presented here are based on the responses of these families. Thus, 52 mothers and 26 children took part in the present study. Their characteristics were much like those of the entire group of 37 families (Patterson, 1994): The mothers were predominantly in their late 30s, White, well-educated, and relatively affluent. The average age for both biological and nonbiological mothers was 39. Twenty-four (92%) of the biological and 23 (86%) of the nonbiological mothers were White. Nineteen (73%) of the biological and 18 (69%) of the nonbiological mothers reported having earned a college degree; in addition, 12 (46%) biological and 14 (54%) nonbiological mothers reported having earned a graduate degree. Eighteen (69%) biological and 20 (78%) nonbiological mothers reported at least \$20,000 a year in individual income. Considering income from both mothers together, all of the families reported annual incomes of at least \$30,000; 15 (58%) families reported annual incomes of \$60,000 or more.

In each family, the focal child was between 4 and 9 years of age (mean age = 6 years 2 months); there were 12 boys and 14 girls. Twenty-four (92%) of the children were born to lesbian mothers, and 2 (8%) had been adopted within the first 3 months of life. All had lived with their biological or legal adoptive parent continuously since their birth or adoption. All were in full-time residence with their mothers at the time of the assessments.

For purposes of facilitating the statistical analysis and discussion of results, the biological or legal adoptive mother of the focal child was designated as the *biological mother*, and the other was designated the

nonbiological mother. In one family, the mothers acknowledged that one of them was the biological mother of the focal child but did not wish to identify one as the biological and the other as the nonbiological mother; in this case, assignment was made by flip of a coin.¹

Materials

The principal assessment of parents' division of labor was an adaptation of Cowan and Cowan's (1990) "Who Does What?" measure. Assessment of couple relationship quality was accomplished with an adaptation of Locke and Wallace's (1959) Marital Adjustment Test. Assessments of children's adjustment were drawn from Achenbach and Edelbrock's (1983) Child Behavior Checklist and from Eder's (1990) Children's Self-View Questionnaire.

Who Does What? For an assessment of division of labor as well as satisfaction with role arrangements in each family, a form of the Who Does What? for parents of 5-year-olds (Cowan & Cowan, 1990) that had been adapted specifically for this study was administered to each adult respondent. The instrument began with 13 items concerning the division of household labor (e.g., planning and preparing meals, cleaning up after meals, and taking out the garbage). Respondents were asked to decide for each item "how it is now" and "how I would like it to be," on a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 = *she does it all* and 9 = *I do it all*. These are referred to as the *real* and *ideal* divisions of labor, respectively. At the bottom of this page, each respondent was asked to indicate how satisfied overall she was with "the way you and your partner divide the family tasks" and with "the way you and your partner divide the work outside the family"; in each of these two cases, scores ranged from 1 = *very dissatisfied* to 5 = *very satisfied*.

The next page contained 12 items about family decision making (e.g., decisions about major expenses, deciding which friends and family to see, and deciding about religious practices). Respondents were asked to indicate the real and ideal division of labor, using 1-to-9 scales like the ones described in the previous paragraph. At the bottom of this second page, each respondent was asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how satisfied overall she was with "the way you and your partner divide family decisions."

The third page contained 20 items about child-care responsibilities (e.g., playing with the child, disciplining the child, and picking up after the child). Respondents were asked to indicate the real and ideal divisions of labor for each item, using 1-to-9 scales like the ones described earlier.

The fourth page contained four questions about overall evaluations of child-care responsibilities. Respondents were asked to rate their own and their partner's overall involvement with their child on a scale in which 1 = *no involvement*, 3 = *shared involvement*, and 5 = [the respondent was] *the child's sole caretaker*. Respondents were also asked to rate their satisfaction with their own and with their partner's involvement in child-care responsibilities, using a scale in which 1 = *very dissatisfied*, 3 = *neutral*, and 5 = *very satisfied*.

Cowan and Cowan (1990) reported both Cronbach alpha and Spearman-Brown split-half reliabilities for all subscales in the .92 to .99 range.

Marital Adjustment Test. For an assessment of satisfaction with couple relationships, the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) was administered to all adult respondents. The Marital Adjustment Test is a 16-item instrument designed to record in a standardized format the overall satisfaction of spouses with their heterosexual marriages. A handful of small changes in wording (e.g., substituting the word *partner* for the word *spouse*) made the instrument more suitable for use with lesbian couples. Scoring was accomplished by using the methods described by Locke and Wallace (1959), who also described psychometric properties of this instrument.

Child Behavior Checklist. For an assessment of child behavior prob-

lems and social competence, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) was administered to all adult respondents. The CBCL is designed to record in a standardized format parental perceptions of the competencies and behavior problems of children from 4 to 16 years of age. There are 118 behavior problem items, and each one is scored on a 3-point scale with 1 = *not true*, 2 = *somewhat or sometimes true*, and 3 = *very true or often true*. Answers were tabulated to create total behavior problems *T* scores. The 20 social competence items concern children's participation in sports, activities, hobbies, chores, friendships, and school functioning; from these, social competence *T* scores were calculated. In all cases, scores were tabulated according to the recommendations contained in Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983). Extensive information on the reliability and validity of the CBCL scales is available in Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983).

Children's Self-View Questionnaire. An assessment of children's self-reported sense of well-being was accomplished by using the Well-Being subscale of Eder's (1990) Children's Self-View Questionnaire (CSVQ). The CSVQ was designed especially to assess psychological concepts of self among children from 3 to 8 years of age. Descriptive results for five subscales of the CSVQ for the entire group of families from which this sample was drawn, reported in Patterson (1994), revealed that children's self-concepts were very similar to those of a same-age group of children studied by Eder (1990). The Well-Being subscale was used here to provide an overall assessment of children's self-reported adjustment. It contained items that assessed the degree to which children felt joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves (e.g., "I am usually happy"). Information on validity and test-retest reliability of the scales is provided in Eder (1990). Using handpuppets (rather than the large puppets and puppet stage described by Eder, 1990), I administered the CSVQ individually to participating children, and I tape-recorded their answers for later scoring.

Procedure

When I arrived at the family's home for the appointment, I explained the study, answered questions about it, and asked for written consent from all adults who were present; oral assent was also obtained from children. The visit began with a semistructured family interview, which involved a number of questions about family background (e.g., maternal education and occupation) and family history (e.g., circumstances surrounding the focal child's birth or adoption). This was followed by an individual interview with the focal child, during which the Eder (1990) CSVQ was administered. During the time that the interviewer was with the focal child (usually in his or her room), mothers were asked to fill out a number of questionnaires, among which were the Marital Adjustment Test, the Who Does What?, and the CBCL. Mothers completed the questionnaires independently. When both mothers and children had completed these materials, I thanked them for their assistance and answered any questions about the study. The visits lasted between 90 and 150 min per family.

Results

Results are presented under three main headings. The first section presents findings on parental division of labor. The second section presents results on satisfaction with division of labor and with the couple relationship. The third section presents findings on the links among parental division of labor, satisfac-

¹ Data analyses were completed twice, once with and once without the information collected from this family. The results of the two sets of analyses were essentially identical. The presentation here includes data for all participating families.

Table 1
Parent Reports of Actual and Ideal Division of Family Labor

Division of labor	Parent report		<i>t</i> (25)
	Biological mother	Nonbiological mother	
Actual			
Household tasks			
<i>M</i>	5.33	4.80	2.52
<i>SD</i>	0.59	0.66	
Child-care tasks			
<i>M</i>	5.70	4.35	3.92**
<i>SD</i>	0.90	0.92	
Decision making			
<i>M</i>	5.14	4.94	1.05
<i>SD</i>	0.65	0.42	
Ideal			
Household tasks			
<i>M</i>	5.10	4.86	1.55
<i>SD</i>	0.56	0.52	
Child-care tasks			
<i>M</i>	5.20	4.75	2.42
<i>SD</i>	0.63	0.42	
Decision making			
<i>M</i>	5.02	4.97	<1
<i>SD</i>	0.25	0.23	

Note. Scores of 1 = she does it all, scores of 5 = we both do this about equally, and scores of 9 = I do it all. The Bonferroni correction has been applied to all *t* tests to protect alpha levels against inflation caused by multiple comparisons.

** $p < .01$.

tion, and children's adjustment. Preliminary analyses had revealed no significant effects of age or gender, so the results are presented without reference to these variables.

Parental Division of Labor

Mean scores for actual and ideal division of labor across tasks, as reported by biological and nonbiological mothers, are shown in Table 1. Scores of 5 indicate that tasks are shared equally, with larger numbers indicating that the respondent reported that she does more than her partner. Scores were clustered around 5, indicating that, whether reporting actual or ideal allocation of responsibilities, lesbian mothers for the most part reported egalitarian divisions of family labor.

The actual and ideal reported participation of biological and nonbiological mothers in each of three domains of family work were compared using *t* tests. The Bonferroni correction was applied to each set of analyses to control for the inflation of alpha levels. As can be seen in Table 1, biological and nonbiological mothers did not differ in their evaluations of ideal distributions of labor in the three domains; most believed that tasks should be shared relatively evenly in all domains. In terms of the actual division of labor, biological mothers reported doing somewhat more household labor, but this difference did not reach statistical significance. Biological and nonbiological mothers did not differ in their reported participation in family decision making. In the area of child care, however, biological mothers reported themselves as responsible for more of the work than nonbiolog-

ical mothers, $t(25) = 3.92$, $p < .01$. Thus, although lesbian mothers agreed that ideally child care should be evenly shared, they reported that in their families, the biological mother was actually more responsible than the nonbiological mother for child care.

To assess satisfaction with division of labor, I compared actual and ideal divisions of labor. Difference scores between ideal and actual division of labor in each domain were also calculated, and the means of these difference scores are shown in Figure 1. These discrepancy scores are positive (i.e., greater than zero) when a respondent indicates that ideally she should do more than she actually does in a given domain, and they are negative (i.e., less than zero) when a respondent indicates that she would prefer to do less. Results showed that biological mothers reported that ideally they would do fewer household tasks, $t(25) = 4.82$, $p < .01$, and less child care, $t(25) = 3.21$, $p < .05$. Nonbiological mothers did not report feeling that they should be significantly more involved in household tasks but did agree that an ideal allocation of labor would result in them doing more child care, $t(25) = 2.86$, $p = .05$. Difference scores for family decision making were not significant. The main result of the difference score analyses was thus that both mothers felt that an ideal allocation of labor would involve a more equal sharing of child-care tasks between them.

Each respondent had also been asked to provide a global rating of each mother's overall involvement in child-care activities. Higher scores indicate greater involvement with child care, with a score of 3 indicating that responsibilities are shared equally between the two mothers. Examination of the results revealed that all of the mean scores were clustered around 3, indicating that mothers reported substantial sharing of these tasks. Biological mothers reported, however, that they themselves were more involved than nonbiological mothers (biological mother $M = 3.23$, nonbiological mother $M = 2.69$), paired $t(25) = 3.20$, $p < .01$. Reports of the nonbiological mothers were in the same direction (biological mother $M = 3.19$, nonbiological mother $M = 2.85$) and approached but did not reach statistical significance, paired $t(25) = 1.98$, $.05 < p < .10$. Global judgments thus confirmed the more detailed reports described earlier in

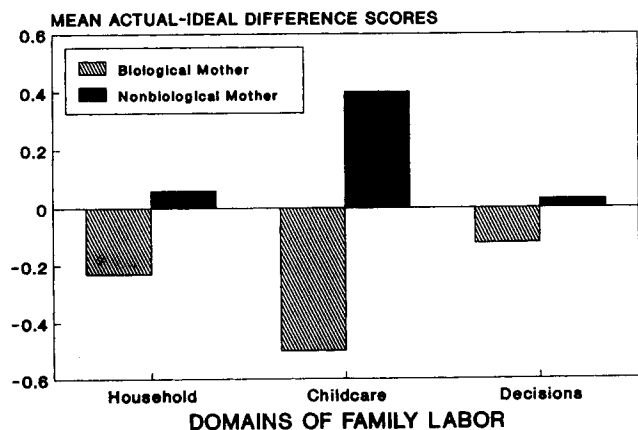


Figure 1. Mean differences between parent reports of actual versus ideal division of labor.

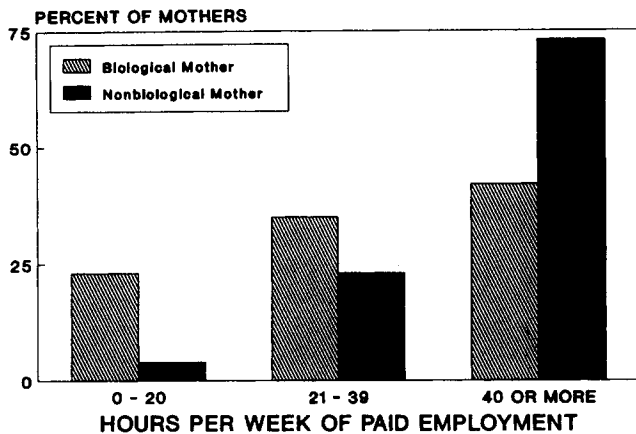


Figure 2. Time (hours per week) spent in paid employment by biological and nonbiological mothers.

showing that, to the extent that differences emerge at all, it is the biological mother who takes more responsibility for child care.

In interviews, parents had also been asked to give estimates of the average number of hours both biological and nonbiological mothers spent in paid employment each week. Percentages of biological and nonbiological mothers working fewer than 20 hr per week, between 21 and 39 hr per week, and 40 hr or more per week are shown in Figure 2. As can be seen in the figure, biological mothers were less likely than nonbiological mothers to be working 40 hr per week or more in paid employment, $\chi^2(1, N = 26) = 6.02, p < .02$. Thus, whereas biological mothers reported greater responsibility for child care, nonbiological mothers reported spending more time in paid employment.

Satisfaction With Relationships and With Division of Labor

Biological and nonbiological mothers' reports of satisfaction with their couple relationships and with their division of family labor are shown in Table 2. There were no differences between relationship satisfaction reported by biological and nonbiological mothers. In comparison with an expected average score of about 100 on the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), lesbian mothers in the present study reported feeling very satisfied in their couple relationships. Similarly, overall satisfaction with division of family labor was relatively high, and there were no significant differences between biological and nonbiological mothers in this regard.

Parental Division of Labor, Satisfaction, and Children's Adjustment

Correlations of biological and nonbiological mothers' overall involvement with child care, satisfaction with involvement, and measures of children's adjustment are shown in Table 3. Preliminary analyses revealed that relationship satisfaction scores were not significantly related to any of the other variables and that there were no significant predictors of social competence ratings, so these variables were dropped from further analyses.

The three measures of children's adjustment examined here were *T* scores for biological and nonbiological mothers' ratings of total behavior problems drawn from the CBCL (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) and scale scores for Well-Being from the CSVQ (Eder, 1990).

To assess the strength of any overall association between the three measures of child adjustment on the one hand and the four measures of parents' division of labor and satisfaction with division of labor on the other, I computed a canonical correlation. Results showed a significant association between the two sets of variables, $F(12, 48) = 2.72, p < .01$. Only the first canonical correlation yielded an eigenvalue greater than one. The value of this correlation was .76, accounting for approximately 57% of the variance. Parent reports of division of labor, satisfaction with division of labor, and the measures of child adjustment were thus significantly associated with one another. When biological mothers did less child care and when nonbiological mothers did more and were more satisfied, children's adjustment was rated as being more favorable.

To explore the associations of parent variables with child adjustment, I computed individual multiple regressions for each of the child adjustment variables. For each dependent variable, one significant predictor emerged (see Table 3); in no case did the addition of other predictors result in a significant addition to predictive power. For the biological mothers' reports of behavior problems, the best predictor was nonbiological mothers' reports of their own involvement in child care; when nonbiological mothers reported being more involved, biological mothers reported their children as having fewer behavior problems. For nonbiological mothers' reports of behavior problems, the best predictor was biological mothers' reports of their own involvement in child care; when biological mothers reported being less involved (i.e., when they reported sharing responsibilities more evenly with the other mother), nonbiological mothers described their children as having fewer behavior problems. Finally, the best predictor of children's self-reports of well-being was nonbiological mothers' reports of satisfaction with their involvement in child care; the more satisfaction expressed by nonbiological mothers with their participation in child care, the greater the sense of well-being reported by their children.

In this study, then, both children and mothers reported more positive adjustment in families in which the nonbiological mother was described as a relatively equal participant in child care, and in which the biological mother was not described as bearing an unequal burden of child-care duties. In other words, the most positive outcomes for children occurred in families that reported sharing child-care tasks relatively evenly between parents.

Discussion

Do lesbian couples with children follow egalitarian principles in division of family labor, as do most lesbian couples without children, or do they accommodate to the tasks of child rearing by specialization, as do most heterosexual couples with children? Results of the present study suggest that, to some extent, lesbian parents do both. The lesbian couples who took part in this study reported sharing household tasks and family decision making equally, but biological mothers reported greater in-

Table 2
Parent Reports of Satisfaction With Division of Labor and With Couple Relationships

Satisfaction with	Parent report		<i>t</i> (25)
	Biological mother	Nonbiological mother	
Division of household tasks			
<i>M</i>	3.96	3.88	<1
<i>SD</i>	0.72	0.86	
Division of work outside family			
<i>M</i>	3.69	3.88	<1
<i>SD</i>	1.05	0.91	
Division of family decisions			
<i>M</i>	4.15	4.12	<1
<i>SD</i>	0.78	0.71	
Own involvement with child			
<i>M</i>	4.38	4.08	1.28
<i>SD</i>	0.98	1.06	
Partner's involvement with child			
<i>M</i>	4.58	4.38	1.22
<i>SD</i>	0.50	0.85	
Locke-Wallace relationship satisfaction score			
<i>M</i>	118.46	117.42	<1
<i>SD</i>	15.70	15.18	

Note. Except for the Locke-Wallace (1959) relationship satisfaction score, all scores are on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. None of the comparisons between satisfaction among biological and nonbiological mothers were significant.

involvement in child care, and nonbiological mothers reported spending longer hours in paid employment. When lesbian couples shared child care more evenly, mothers were more satisfied and children were more well-adjusted. Thus, even within the context of largely egalitarian arrangements, more equal sharing of child care was associated with positive outcomes among both lesbian mothers and their children.

The fact that lesbian couples with children reported sharing many household and family tasks is consistent with, and expands on, earlier findings on the division of household labor among lesbian couples. For instance, Kurdek's (1993) study of

lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples without children found that lesbian couples were the most likely to share household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. In the present study, results showed that lesbian couples with children not only reported sharing such household tasks but also reported enjoying equal influence in family decision making. Thus, even under pressure of child-rearing responsibilities, lesbian couples seemed to maintain relatively egalitarian division of household responsibilities in a number of areas. In this way, lesbian couples with children resembled lesbian couples without children.

Table 3
Correlations Among Measures of Parents' Division of Labor, Satisfaction With Division of Labor, and Children's Adjustment

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Biological mother's overall involvement in child care	—	-.18	-.68**	-.33	.45*	.68**	.18
2. Biological mother's satisfaction with own involvement in child care		—	-.21	.28	-.12	-.22	-.05
3. Nonbiological mother's overall involvement in child care			—	.19	-.47*	-.48*	-.01
4. Nonbiological mother's satisfaction with own involvement in child care				—	-.32	-.52**	.43*
5. Total behavior problems <i>T</i> score (report of biological mother)					—	.61**	-.24
6. Total behavior problems <i>T</i> score (report of nonbiological mother)						—	.04
7. Child's self-reported well-being score							—

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

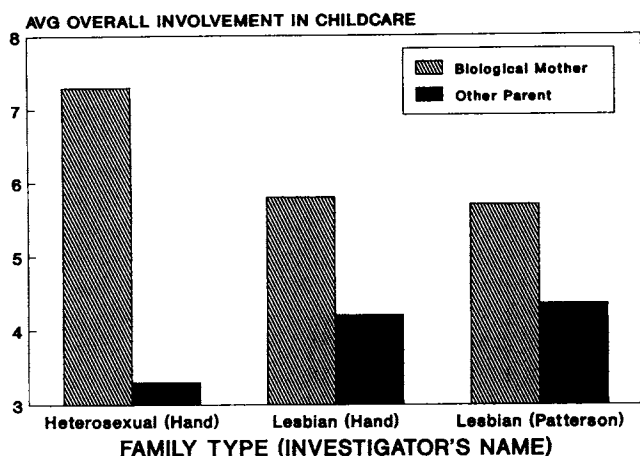


Figure 3. Average (AVG) overall involvement in child care among parents in heterosexual and lesbian families studied by Hand (1991) and in the present study.

On the other hand, there were also some indications of specialization in the allocation of labor among lesbian couples who participated in this study. Consistent with patterns of specialization in heterosexual families (Cowan & Cowan, 1992), biological mothers reported greater involvement with child care, and nonbiological mothers reported spending longer hours in paid employment. In accommodating to the demands of child rearing, it would appear that the lesbian couples who took part in this research specialized to some degree with regard to their engagement in child care versus paid work. In this way, lesbian couples with children resembled heterosexual couples with children.

It would not be difficult, however, to overestimate the similarities between division of labor in lesbian and heterosexual families. In an unpublished dissertation, Hand (1991) compared division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples with children under the age of 2 years. As was true for the present sample, the majority of both heterosexual and lesbian couples in Hand's study were White, well-educated, and had been in their early 30s when their children were born. Consistent with the present findings, Hand found that household tasks and decision making were shared evenly by both lesbian and heterosexual couples with children and that biological lesbian mothers reported greater involvement in child care than did nonbiological mothers. She also found, however, that both biological and nonbiological lesbian mothers were more involved in child care than were heterosexual fathers. Thus, even though differences between biological and nonbiological lesbian mothers were significant, both in the present study and in the study by Hand (1991), they were much less pronounced than the differences between husbands and wives in the heterosexual families studied by Hand (1991). This is shown in Figure 3, which compares involvement in child care among lesbian and heterosexual couples studied by Hand (1991) and among lesbian couples in the present study. As can be seen in Figure 3, division of the labor involved in child care was more pronounced among heterosexual than among lesbian couples.

Consistent with other recent reports of relationship satisfac-

tion among lesbian couples with children (Koepeke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Osterweil, 1991), most lesbian couples in the present study reported relatively high satisfaction with their couple relationships. Given that heterosexual wives' marital satisfaction has generally been found to be related to husbands' involvement in child care (Cowan & Cowan, 1987, 1988; Fish et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 1985), it is perhaps surprising that relationship satisfaction was unrelated to involvement in child care or satisfaction with involvement in child care among the lesbian couples studied here. Because the scores from the present sample were above average, however, the failure to find associations with other variables may have been related to restriction of range.

Another interpretation of the generally high relationship satisfaction reported by lesbian mothers in this sample is, however, available. Research by a number of investigators has identified connections between violation of expectations concerning division of labor and dissatisfaction about some aspects of the marital relationship among mothers following the birth of their first child (Belsky, 1985; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Ruble et al., 1988), such that first-time mothers find themselves doing more child care and feeling more dissatisfied than they had expected. One interesting possibility, then, is that lesbian mothers in the present sample were generally very satisfied with their relationships in part because their expectations about parenthood had been confirmed rather than violated. Because the present research was not designed to evaluate this idea, however, it included no assessments of mothers' expectations. Evaluations of this and related interpretations of the results for relationship satisfaction thus await the results of more detailed longitudinal research.

Like wives in heterosexual families, lesbian mothers were generally more satisfied with their allocation of child-care responsibilities when these were shared in a more equal fashion. In the present study, on average, biological mothers reported undertaking greater shares of the child-care responsibilities. As one might expect on the basis of the egalitarian ethic reflected in their descriptions of ideal divisions of child-care responsibilities, biological mothers were more satisfied when they did less, and nonbiological mothers were more satisfied when they did more than the average amount of child care. Similar results for lesbian couples with children were also reported by Osterweil (1991). Thus, although no evidence was available concerning preexisting expectations, mothers were generally more satisfied when they perceived a good match between real and ideal divisions of labor in their current lives.

In this study, assessments of children's adjustment were also more favorable when child care was more evenly shared between the two mothers. Mothers' ratings of their children's behavior problems were significantly associated with assessments of the parents' division of labor as well as with the nonbiological mother's satisfaction with the allocation of tasks. Especially striking was the extent to which the nonbiological mother's satisfaction with child-care arrangements was associated with children's self-reports of well-being. Even within this well-adjusted nonclinical sample (Patterson, 1994), children with mothers who shared child-care tasks evenly and who expressed satisfaction with this arrangement appeared to enjoy the most favorable adjustment.

That equal sharing of child care was associated with favorable

adjustment among children is a result very much in concert with ideas proposed by Okin and by other scholars working from a feminist perspective (e.g., Hochschild, 1989; Okin, 1989). These researchers have suggested that models of fairness in division of labor at home are important influences on children's development and that children who observe equal division of responsibilities between their parents may enjoy developmental advantages. Though this is by no means the only possible interpretation of the present findings, these results are certainly consistent with such a view.

One possible pathway through which benefits of equality in parents' division of labor might accrue to children involves parental satisfaction with their couple relationships. Given the egalitarian ideals expressed so clearly by lesbian couples who took part in this research, higher relationship satisfaction was expected among those who succeeded—by equal division of labor—in putting these ideals into action. Whether by its association with the relative absence of conflict between parents or with other aspects of parenting behavior (Belsky, 1984), satisfaction was expected to mediate connections between division of labor and child adjustment. Contrary to expectations, however, no significant association emerged among relationship satisfaction and the other study variables. In retrospect, this may have been because of the global nature of the assessments of relationship satisfaction used here. Ruble and her colleagues (Ruble et al., 1988) have reported that some aspects of marital satisfaction are more tied to division of labor than others. Future research using more detailed measures of potential mediators will, it is hoped, explicate more clearly pathways that link parental division of labor and child adjustment.

Although questions about causal linkages are of great interest, it must be acknowledged that the present data are correlational in nature and cannot support causal inferences. Are happy, well-adjusted lesbian families more likely to divide labor evenly? Or does the equal division of labor among lesbian couples with children lead to better adjustment and satisfaction with domestic arrangements? Or both? This study was not designed to examine such possibilities, and the present data do not allow for their evaluation. Future work using other kinds of research designs will be needed to disentangle causes and consequences in these domains.

This research also relied on mothers' and children's reports as sources of data. The study included no observational assessments, and so the correspondence between parental reports about division of labor and the actual division of labor cannot be determined. Likewise, it would have been valuable to have assessments of children's adjustment completed by observers who were unaware of the family background of participating children. Because such assessments were beyond the scope of this study, the degree to which children's self-reports of well-being and their mothers' reports of behavior problems and social competence would mesh with the assessments of individuals from outside the families is not known. On the other hand, the use of well-known and widely used instruments such as the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test and the Achenbach and Edelbrock Child Behavior Checklist enhances the degree to which the present results can be compared with those of other researchers.

Some concerns relevant to sampling issues should also be ac-

knowledged. Most of the families who took part in the Bay Area Families Study were headed by lesbian mothers who were White, well-educated, relatively affluent, and living in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. For these reasons, no claims about representativeness of the present sample can be made.

In summary, questions about division of labor in lesbian mother families often involve the extent to which—like lesbian couples without children—they do this in an egalitarian manner by sharing tasks versus the extent to which—like heterosexual couples with children—they accomplish the various tasks by splitting them up and specializing. Results of the present study suggest that although many tasks are shared, child care and paid employment tend to be specialized to some degree among lesbian couples with children. The results also suggest that mothers are more satisfied and children are more well-adjusted when lesbian mothers divide child-care responsibilities in an equal fashion.

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