CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LESBIAN MOTHERS AND
THEIR CHILDREN

Findings from the Bay Area Families Study
Charlotte J. Patterson

A
lthough the heterosexual public has, for the most part, been introduced to
the notion of lesbian motherhood only recently, lesbian mothers have existed
for many years (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978; Hoeffler, 1981;
have borne children in the context of heterosexual relationships and later come
out as lesbians, often in the context of a divorce. Although some were denied cus-
tody by courts following separation from their male partners, other lesbians re-
tained custody of their children (Falk, 1989; Hitchens, 1979–1980; Ricketts &
Achtenberg, 1990). Despite psychological, judicial, and popular prejudices, a sub-
stantial body of research now attests to normal adjustment among mothers and
normal development among children in these families (Green & Bozett, 1991;
Patterson, 1992, 1995b; Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

In contrast to divorced lesbian mothers, those of the so-called lesbian baby
boom (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1992; Riley, 1988; Weston, 1991) came out as les-

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Lesbian Mothers and Their Children

bians first and only later bore or adopted children in the context of their preexisting lesbian identities. Relatively little research has been completed with such families, and there are few data as yet about adjustment among the mothers or development among the children of the lesbian baby boom. Apart from my own work, and in addition to contemporary anthropological research (for example, Lewin, 1993; Weston, 1991), there are only a few studies in the published literature that focus directly on the children of the lesbian baby boom (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; McCandlish, 1987; and Steckel, 1985, 1987). For instance, on the basis of extensive family interviews, McCandlish (1987) examined psychosocial development among seven young children born to five lesbian mother families and reported that the children’s development appeared normal in all respects.

Steckel (1985, 1987) studied the progress of separation-individuation among three-year-old children born to eleven lesbian and eleven heterosexual couples. Using parent interviews, parent and teacher Q-sorts, and structured doll-play techniques, Steckel compared independence, ego functions, and object relations among children in the two types of families. Like McCandlish, Steckel’s principal results documented the striking similarity in development of children in the two groups.

More recently, Flaks and his colleagues (1995) compared social and personal development among fifteen three- to nine-year-old children born to lesbian couples via donor insemination with that among fifteen children from matched, two-parent heterosexual families. Across a wide array of assessments of cognitive and behavioral functioning, there were notable similarities between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents. The only significant difference between the two groups was in the area of parenting skills and practices; lesbian couples revealed more parenting awareness skills than did heterosexual couples.

In this context, I designed the Bay Area Families Study to contribute to understanding the families of the lesbian baby boom. In this chapter, I describe the study itself and its principal results to date, which fall into four major areas. First, I describe demographic and other characteristics of the participating families. Next, I describe assessments of the adjustment of both mothers and children, relative to normative expectations based on large comparison samples drawn from the population at large. In families that were headed by lesbian couples, the study also examined certain key facets of couple functioning such as relationship satisfaction and division of labor, and I report normative findings in this area. Finally, the study also explored correlates of individual differences in children’s adjustment, and I present these also. Although I do not provide statistical details here, all findings described as statistically significant were at the $p < .05$ level. The methods and findings are summarized briefly below, but additional details and commentary are available elsewhere (Patterson, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Patterson &
Kosmitzki, 1995). In this study, there were no significant results pertaining to comparisons of girls' versus boys' adjustment, so I present results for the child sample as a whole.

Description of Participating Families

Families were eligible to participate in the Bay Area Families Study if they met each of three criteria. First, at least one child between four and nine years of age had to be present in the home. Second, the child had to have been born to or adopted by a lesbian mother or mothers. Third, only families who lived within the greater San Francisco Bay area (for example, San Francisco, Oakland, 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. In all, contact was made with thirty-nine eligible families, of whom thirty-seven participated in the study. Thus approximately 95 percent of the families who were contacted did take part. Participation involved a single home visit during which all data reported here were collected.

Twenty-six of the thirty-seven participating families (70 percent) were headed by a lesbian couple. Seven families (19 percent) were headed by a single mother living with her child. In four families (11 percent), the child had been born to a lesbian couple who had since separated, and the child was in de facto joint custody, that is, living part of the time with one mother and part of the time with the other. In the latter group of families, one mother was out of town during the period of testing and did not participate.

Sixty-six lesbian mothers took part in the study. Their ages ranged from twenty-eight to fifty-three years, with a mean age of 39.6. Sixty-one (92 percent) described themselves as White or non-Hispanic Caucasian, two (3 percent) as African American or Black, and three (4 percent) as coming from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Most were well-educated; 74 percent had received college degrees, and 48 percent had received graduate degrees.

The great majority of mothers (94 percent) were employed on a regular basis outside the home, and about half said that they worked forty hours or more per week. Most (62 percent) of the women were in professional occupations such as law or nursing, but others were in technical or mechanical occupations such as car repair (9 percent), business or sales such as real estate (9 percent), or in other occupations such as artist (14 percent). Only four mothers were not employed out-
side the home. Thirty-four families reported family incomes above $30,000 per year, and seventeen families reported incomes above $60,000 per year.

In each family, the focal child was between four and nine years of age (average age, six years and two months); there were nineteen girls and eighteen boys. Thirty-four of the children were born to lesbian mothers, and three had been adopted. Thirty of the children were described by their mothers as White or non-Hispanic Caucasian, three as Hispanic, and four as of some other racial or ethnic heritage.

Some additional descriptive information also was collected. Mothers were asked to explain the circumstances surrounding the child's conception, birth, and/or adoption. Mothers also were asked about the child's biological father or sperm donor, the degree to which the mothers had knowledge of or contact with him, and the degree to which the focal child had knowledge of his identity or contact with him. In addition, mothers were asked to give the child's last name and to explain how the child had been given that name.

The mothers' accounts of the conception, birth, and/or adoption of their children made clear that, in general, the focal children were very much wanted. The average amount of time it took for biological mothers to conceive focal children after they began to attempt to become pregnant was ten months. Adoptive mothers reported that, on average, the adoption process took approximately twelve months. In the great majority of cases, then, these lesbian mothers had devoted considerable time and effort to making the birth or adoption of their children possible.

There was tremendous variability in the amount of information that families had about the donor or biological father of the focal child. In seventeen families (46 percent), the child had been conceived via donor insemination (DI) with sperm from an anonymous donor (sperm that had been provided by a sperm bank or clinic). In these cases, families had only limited information (for example, race, height, weight, and hair color) about the donor, and none knew the donor's name. In ten families (27 percent), the child was conceived via DI, with sperm provided by a known donor such as a family friend. In four families (11 percent), children were conceived when the biological mother had intercourse with a man. In three families (8 percent), the child was adopted. In the three remaining families, some other set of circumstances applied or the parents acknowledged that the child had been born to one of the mothers but preferred not to disclose any additional information about their child's conception.

Mothers reported relatively little contact with biological fathers or donors. Twenty-three out of the thirty-seven (62 percent) of the families reported no contact at all with the biological father or donor during the previous year. Only ten families (27 percent) had two or more contacts with the biological father or sperm donor during the previous year.
Given that a majority of families did not know the identity of the child’s sperm donor or biological father (46 percent donor insemination and 8 percent adopted) and that most currently had little or no contact with him, it is not surprising that the donor or biological father’s role with the child was seen by mothers as being quite limited. In 22 families (60 percent), mothers reported that the donor or biological father had no special role vis à vis the child; this figure includes the families in which the sperm donor had been anonymous. In thirteen families (35 percent), the biological father’s identity was known to parents and children, but he took the role of a family friend rather than that of a father. There were only two families in which the biological father was acknowledged as such and in which he was described as assuming a father’s role.

In the families of the lesbian baby boom, questions about selection of the child’s last name are of particular interest. In this sample, the largest number of children—26 children (70 percent)—bore the last names of their biological or adoptive mothers: this figure includes children in four families in which all family members (both mothers and all children) shared the same last name. In seven families, children had been given hyphenated last names, created from the two mothers’ last names. Finally, in four families, children had some other last name.

**Mental Health of Mothers**

The two principal measures of mothers’ adjustment were the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979); and the Derogatis Symptom Checklist SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1983. For purposes of presentation, the biological or legal adoptive mother in each family will be referred to as the “biological mother,” and the other mother, if any, will be called the “nonbiological mother.”

*Maternal self-esteem* was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). This scale consists of ten statements, with four response alternatives, indicating the respondent’s degree of agreement with each statement. Data analyses showed that the average scores for both biological and nonbiological mothers were almost identical, and both were well within the range of normal functioning. These results indicate that lesbian mothers who took part in this research reported generally positive views about themselves. Their scores were similar to the normative scores of the general population on this questionnaire.

*Maternal adjustment* was assessed using the Derogatis Symptom Checklist, Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1983), which consists of ninety items addressing a variety of psychological and somatic symptoms. Each respondent rated the extent to which she had been distressed by each symptom during the past week (0 = not at all, 4 = extremely). Nine subscales (anger/hostility, anxiety, depression, in-
terpersonal sensitivity, obsessive/compulsiveness, paranoid ideation, phobic anxiety, psychoticism, and somatization) were scored, as well as a Global Severity Index that summarized the respondent's overall level of distress.

Average scores for biological and nonbiological mothers were virtually identical for most subscales as well as for the GSI, and all of these average scores were well within the normative range. None of the average T-scores deviated substantially from the expected mean, indicating that lesbian mothers' reports of symptoms are no greater and no smaller than those expected for other women of the same age. Thus the results for maternal adjustment revealed that lesbian mothers who took part in this study reported few symptoms and good self-esteem.

Mental Health of Children

The three principal assessments of children's adjustment were the Achenbach and Edelbrock Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983), the Eder Children's Self-View Questionnaire (Eder, 1990), and a standard interview relating to sex-role identity (Green, 1978). In what follows, I describe first the assessment procedures and then the results for children's adjustment.

Assessment of Child Adjustment

To assess levels of child social competence and child behavior problems, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) was administered. The CBCL was selected because it discriminates children in the clinical from those in the normative range of functioning for both internalizing (inhibited, overcontrolled behavior) and externalizing (aggressive, antisocial, or undercontrolled behavior) problems, as well as for social competence. It is designed to be completed by parents. In the present study, all participating mothers completed this instrument.

Norms for the CBCL (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) were obtained from heterogeneous normal samples of 200 four- to five-year-olds, and 600 six- to eleven-year-olds, as well as from equivalent numbers of children at each age who were drawn from clinical populations, that is, children receiving services from community mental health centers, private psychological and psychiatric clinics or practices, and so on. For purposes of the present research, mean scores reported by Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983, pp. 210–214) were averaged across four- to five-year and six- to eleven-year age levels to provide estimates of average scores for social competence, internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems among normative and clinical populations at the ages studied here. To assess the
extent of their resemblance to normal and clinical populations, then, scores for children in the current sample were compared with these figures.

Assessment of children's self-concepts was accomplished using five scales from Eder's Children's Self-View Questionnaire (CSVQ; Eder, 1990). These scales, designed especially to assess psychological concepts of self among children from three to eight years of age, assess five different dimensions of children's views of themselves. The Aggression scale assessed the degree to which children saw themselves as likely to hurt or frighten others. The Social Closeness scale assessed the degree to which children enjoy being with people and prefer to be around others. The Social Potency scale assessed the degree to which children like to stand out or to be the center of attention. The Stress Reaction scale assessed the extent to which children said they often felt scared, upset, or angry. Finally, the Well-Being scale assessed the degree to which children felt joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves. Using hand puppets, the CSVQ was administered individually to participating children, and their answers were tape-recorded for later scoring.

Children's sex-role behavior preferences were assessed in a standard, open-ended interview format, such as that employed in earlier research on children of divorced lesbian mothers (Golombok et al., 1983; Green, 1978; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986). The interviewer explained to each child that she was interested in learning more about the friends and other children that the child liked to play with and about the child's favorite toys and other things. She then asked each child to name the friends and other children he or she liked to play with. Following this, each child was asked to name favorite toys, favorite games, and favorite characters on television, in movies, or in books. The interviewer wrote down each of the child's responses. Children's responses were also tape-recorded, and the interviewer's notes were later checked for accuracy against the audiotapes.

After testing had been completed, each child's answers for each of four topics (peer friendships, favorite toys, favorite games, and favorite characters) were coded into one of four categories with regard to their sex-role relevant qualities. The four categories were "mainly same-sex" (for example, a boy reports having mostly or entirely male friends), "mixed sexes" (for example, an even or almost-even mix of sexes in the friends mentioned by a child), "opposite sex" (for example, a girl reports having mostly or entirely male friends), and "can't tell" (an answer was unscorable or not clearly sex-typed, for instance, children said that playing Chutes and Ladders was one of their favorite games). Because children's play groups are known to be highly sex-segregated at this age, children were expected to give mainly "same-sex" answers to these questions.
Results for Children’s Adjustment

As expected, social competence among children with lesbian mothers was rated as normal. Scores for children of lesbian mothers were significantly higher than those for Achenbach and Edelbrock’s (1983) clinical sample but were not different from those for the normal sample. This was true for reports given by both mothers in the lesbian mother families.

Results for behavior problems revealed the same pattern. For internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems, scores for children of lesbian mothers were significantly lower than those for children in the clinical sample but did not differ from those in the normal sample. This was true for reports given by both mothers in the lesbian mother families. Overall, then, the behavior problems of lesbian mothers’ children were rated as significantly smaller in magnitude than those of children in a clinical sample and as no different from those of children in the normal sample.

On three scales of the Eder Children’s Self-View Questionnaire, there were no significant differences between the self-reports of children of lesbian mothers as compared to those of Eder’s (1990) heterosexual mothers. Specifically, there were no significant differences between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers on self-concepts relevant to Aggression, Social Closeness, and Social Potency. Children of lesbian mothers in the present sample did not see themselves as either more or less aggressive, sociable, or likely to enjoy being the center of attention than did children of heterosexual mothers in Eder’s sample.

On two scales, however, differences did emerge between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers. Specifically, children of lesbian mothers reported greater reactions to stress than did children of heterosexual mothers, and they also reported a greater overall sense of well-being than did children of heterosexual mothers. In other words, children of lesbian mothers said they more often felt angry, scared, or upset but also said they more often felt joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves than did children of heterosexual mothers.

The aspect of children’s sexual identity studied here was that of preferences for sex-role behavior. As expected, most children reported preferences for sex-role behaviors that are considered to be normative at this age (Green, 1978). For instance, every child reported that his or her group of friends was mainly or entirely made up of same-sex children. The great majority of children also reported favorite toys and favorite characters (from books, movies, or television) that were of the same sex. In the case of favorite games, a number of children mentioned games that were not clearly sex-typed, such as board games like Chutes and Ladders and hence were not categorizable; however, the great majority mentioned games
that are generally associated with their own rather than with the opposite sex. In short, preferences for sex-role behavior among the children of lesbian mothers studied here appeared to be quite typical for children of these ages.

**Couple Functioning**

The principal assessments of couple functioning were accomplished using an adaptation of Cowan and Cowan's (1990) *Who Does What?* (which assesses division of labor across a number of domains) and an adaptation of Locke and Wallace's (1959) Marital Adjustment Test (which assesses the quality of couple relationships). In this section, the assessment instruments are described first, followed by results for the couples who took part in the study. Although there were thirty-seven families who participated in the study, some were headed by single lesbian mothers. Results are presented here for the twenty-six families that were headed by a lesbian couple.

**Assessment of Couple Functioning**

To assess division of labor as well as satisfaction with role arrangements in each family, an adapted form of the *Who Does What?* for parents of five-year-olds (Cowan & Cowan, 1990) was administered to each adult respondent.

The instrument began with thirteen items concerning the division of household labor (for example, planning and preparing meals and cleaning up after meals). 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 meant “she does it all” and 9 meant “I do it all.” These are referred to as the “real” and “ideal” divisions of labor, respectively. At the bottom of that 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 twelve items about family decision making, such as making decisions about major expenses and deciding which friends and family to see. Respondents were again asked to indicate the real and ideal division of labor. 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 twenty items about child-care responsibilities (for example, playing with our child, disciplining our child, or picking up after our child). Respondents were again asked to indicate the real and ideal divisions of labor for each item.
The fourth page contained four questions about overall evaluations of childcare responsibilities. Respondents were asked to rate their own and their partner's overall involvement with their child on a scale ranging from "no involvement," to "shared involvement," to "sole responsibility." Respondents also were asked to rate their satisfaction with their own and with their partner's involvement in childcare responsibilities from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied."

To assess satisfaction with couple relationships, the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) was administered to all adult respondents. The Marital Adjustment Test is a sixteen-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 (for example, substituting the word "partner" for the word "spouse") made the instrument more suitable for use with lesbian couples. Scoring was accomplished using the methods described by the authors (Locke & Wallace, 1959).

Results for Couple Functioning

The "actual" and "ideal" reported participation of biological and nonbiological mothers in each of three domains of family work were compared. Results showed that 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 and nonbiological mothers did not differ in their reported participation in household labor or family decision making. In the area of child care, however, biological mothers reported themselves as responsible for more of the work than nonbiological mothers. 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, comparisons between actual and ideal divisions of labor were made. Results showed that biological mothers reported that ideally they would do fewer household tasks and less child care. 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 their doing more child care. There were no effects for family decision making. Thus the main result was that both mothers felt that an ideal allocation of labor would involve a more equal sharing of child-care tasks between them.

Each respondent also was asked to provide a global rating of each mother's overall involvement in child-care activities. Biological mothers reported on this measure that they were more involved than nonbiological mothers. Reports of the
nonbiological mothers were in the same direction but did not reach statistical significance. Global judgments thus confirmed the more detailed reports described above in showing that, if there is a difference, it is the biological mother who takes more responsibility for child care.

In interviews, parents were asked to give estimates of the average number of hours both biological and nonbiological mothers spent in paid employment each week. Results showed that biological mothers were less likely than nonbiological mothers to be working forty hours per week or more in paid employment. Thus whereas biological mothers reported greater responsibility for child care, nonbiological mothers reported spending more time in paid employment.

There were no differences between relationship satisfaction reported by biological and nonbiological mothers. Consistent with expectations based on earlier findings with lesbian mothers (Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992), lesbian mothers 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**

The study also assessed the strength of 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. Results showed a significant association between the two sets of variables. Parents' reports of division of labor, satisfaction with division of labor, and the measures of child adjustment were 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.

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**

The Bay Area Families Study was designed to examine child development and family functioning among families of the lesbian baby boom. Although findings from this
study should be regarded as preliminary in a number of respects, three principal results have emerged to date. The first major finding was that, according to the standardized assessment techniques used here, both mothers' and children's adjustment fell clearly within the normative range. Considering that this result is consistent with the findings of other research on lesbian women in general (Gonsiorek, 1991), lesbian mothers in particular (Falk, 1989; Patterson, 1992), children of divorced lesbian and gay parents (Patterson, 1992), and children born to lesbian mothers (Flaks et al., 1995; McCandlish, 1987; Steckel, 1985, 1987), this outcome was not surprising. Particularly in light of judicial and popular prejudices against lesbian and gay families that still exist in many if not most parts of the country, however, the result is worthy of attention. The present data show not only that lesbian mothers' adjustment and self-esteem were within the normative range but also that social and personal development among their children were quite normal as well.

Although psychosocial development among children of lesbian versus heterosexual parents was generally quite similar, there were nevertheless some differences among children in the two groups, most notably in the area of self-concept. Even while their answers were well within the normal range, children of lesbian mothers reported that they experienced more reactions to stress (for example, feeling angry, scared, or upset) and also a greater sense of well-being (for example, feeling joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves) than did the children of heterosexual parents studied by Eder (1990).

The best interpretation of this difference is not yet clear. One possibility is that children of lesbian mothers report greater reactions to stress because they actually experience more stress than do other children. In other words, children of lesbian mothers may actually encounter more stressful events and conditions than do children with heterosexual parents (Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; O'Connell, 1993). If so, then their more frequent reports of emotional responses to stress might simply reflect the more stressful nature of their experience. From this viewpoint, however, it is difficult to account for the greater sense of well-being also reported by children of lesbian mothers.

Another possibility is that, regardless of actual stress levels, children of lesbian mothers may be more conscious of their affective states in general or more willing to report their experiences of negative emotional states. If, as some have suggested (Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Rafkin, 1990), children raised by two women have more experience with the naming of feelings and with verbal discussion of feelings in general, then they might exhibit increased openness to the expression of negative as well as positive feelings. In this view, the greater tendency of lesbian mothers' children to admit feeling angry, upset, or scared might be attributed not as much to differences in experiences of stress as to a greater awareness and expression of emotional experience of all kinds.
Consistent with this latter interpretation, children of lesbian mothers in the present study reported greater feelings of joy, contentedness, and comfort with themselves than did children of heterosexual mothers in Eder's (1990) sample. Although these findings do not rule out the possibility that children of lesbian women do indeed experience greater stress, they suggest that these children may be more willing than other children to report a variety of intense emotional experiences, whether positive or negative. Because this study was not designed to evaluate alternative interpretations of these differences, however, clarification of these issues must await the results of future research.

A second main finding was that lesbian couples who took part in this study reported that they divide various aspects of the labor involved in household upkeep and child care in a relatively even manner. The fact that lesbian mothers in this sample reported sharing many household and family tasks is consistent with, and expands upon, earlier findings on the division of household labor among lesbian and gay 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 seem to maintain egalitarian divisions of household responsibilities (Hand, 1991; Osterweil, 1991). In this way, lesbian couples with children resembled lesbian couples without children.

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 more time in paid employment. In accommodating themselves to the demands of child rearing, it would appear that 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 is important, however, not to overemphasize the similarities in division of labor in lesbian versus heterosexual families. In an unpublished dissertation, Hand (1991) compared division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples with children under the age of two years. Consistent with the present findings, she 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 in-
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 matched group of heterosexual families studied by Hand (1991). The imbalance in division of the labor involved in child care was more pronounced between partners in heterosexual than in lesbian couples.

The third major result documented significant associations between division of labor among lesbian couples and psychosocial outcomes for mothers and their children. 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 more positive outcomes among both lesbian mothers and their children.

Mothers’ ratings of their children’s behavior problems were significantly associated with assessments of equality in 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 childcare arrangements was associated with children’s self-reports of well-being. Even within this well-adjusted nonclinical sample, 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 (for example, Hochschild, 1989; Okin, 1989). These writers 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. Although 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. Contrary to expectations (Belsky, 1984), however, no consistent association emerged among relationship satisfaction and the other study variables. In retrospect, this may have been due to the global nature of the assessments of relationship satisfaction used here. Ruble and her colleagues (1988) have reported that some aspects of marital satisfaction are more tied to division of labor than
others. Future research employing 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, one should keep in mind 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? The present study was not designed to examine such possibilities, and the present data do not allow for their evaluation. Future work employing 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, assessments of children’s adjustment completed by independent observers would have been a valuable addition to the study. 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 acknowledged. 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. The reliability and generalizability of findings would likely be enhanced by the participation of more diverse samples of lesbian families over longer periods of time.

Conclusion

The Bay Area Families Study was designed to study child development, maternal mental health, and family functioning among the families of the lesbian baby boom. Results to date suggest that maternal mental health is good and that child development is proceeding normally. Lesbian couples described equal sharing of many household and decision-making tasks involved in their lives together, but they also reported that child care and paid employment were specialized to some degree. The more evenly they shared child care, the more satisfied mothers reported feeling, and the better adjusted were their children. If confirmed by fu-
uture research, these results will have far-reaching social, psychological, and legal implications.

References


