

Coparenting Among Lesbian and Gay Couples

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Parenting is highly valued by most American adults, regardless of whether they are heterosexual, lesbian, or gay (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007; Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Many adults find being a parent to be the most rewarding part of their adult lives, but parenting also brings with it many challenges. Coordinating successfully with another person to meet children's evolving social and emotional needs -- while, at the same time pursuing one's own individual goals, maintaining an adult romantic relationship, and providing economic and material support for a family -- is a tall order for any parent. Even the most well-prepared parents discover that they must make many unanticipated decisions when parenting together (here termed "coparenting") (Cowan & Cowan, 1988, 1990; McHale, Khazan, Erera, Rotman, DeCoursey, & McConnell, 2002).

In this chapter, our focus is on coparenting and family decisions made by lesbian and gay couples. We acknowledge that the study of coparenting is a broad and complex area. Given that relatively little research is available on other forms of coparenting among lesbian and gay couples, however, we focus here on decisions about how the couple will complete various family and household tasks. Thus, although we acknowledge the significance of other aspects of coparenting, our central focus here is on division of labor.

How are the tasks of parenting accomplished by couples who parent together? Heterosexual couples in the contemporary United States tend to employ patterns that involve gender-based specialization (Coltrane, 2000; Cowan & Cowan, 1992). As is well known, what is today called a "traditional" pattern of dividing labor is that the husband/father specializes in paid

employment, which he usually pursues outside the home, and that the wife/mother specializes in unpaid employment at home, such as household work and childcare. Although these particular specialized divisions of labor have not characterized families for much of history, cultural expectations about these patterns have become very strong.

This type of gendered specialization in division of labor, though well established, has been decreasing in frequency in recent years. It is most pronounced among families in which the wife/mother does not participate in the labor force, and it is least pronounced in families where both wife/mother and husband/father work full-time at professional careers (Demo & Acock, 1993). Since the numbers of families in which both parents are employed in the labor market has been growing, it is not surprising that specialization has decreased to some degree. Certainly, there are heterosexual couples in which non-traditional divisions of labor do occur (Deutsch, 1999; Ehrensaft, 1990). Overall, however, most heterosexual couples adhere, at least to some degree, to specialized divisions of labor (Grych, 2002; Hochschild, 1989; McHale et al., 2002).

The degree to which traditional, specialized divisions of labor occur in families may vary as a function of the family's position in the life course. Especially during the early years of marriage, before becoming parents, heterosexual couples may employ divisions of labor that are relatively non-specialized. The transition to parenthood, however, often involves a shift to more specialized divisions of labor (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). After the arrival of a baby, the wife/mother may be very involved in feeding and caring for the infant, while the husband/father may focus more intently on earning money to support the newly expanded family. With a preoccupied husband and more work at home, the heterosexual wife/mother may feel less satisfied than her husband by their new division of labor (Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Ruble, Fleming, Hackel & Stangor, 1988). Yet, for perceived lack of better alternatives, couples often

continue to use traditional gender-specialized divisions of labor.

Many observers seem to expect that even same-sex couples will show these traditional, gendered patterns of dividing labor. Same-sex parenting couples often report hearing questions such as “which one of you is the husband?”, “which of you is the mother?”, “how do you get the dishes done?”, and “how will your son ever learn to throw a football?” Such questions are based on conventional ideas about division of labor, and presume that even same-sex couples must somehow specialize, placing one member of the couple in the “husband/father role” and the other in the “wife/mother role”.

Data from empirical research suggest, however, that division of labor among lesbian and gay couples proceeds differently in many respects than it does among heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1993; Patterson, 2002; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Instead of specializing, same-sex couples have more often been found to share the labor involved in parenting and in maintaining other aspects of their lives together in a relatively equal fashion. In short, it appears that division of labor is often characterized by *specialized patterns* among heterosexual couples and by *shared patterns* among lesbian and gay couples.

In what follows, we examine the evidence for shared patterns of division of labor among lesbian mothers. Next, we examine the newer and less extensive studies of division of labor among gay fathers. We then examine associations between child outcomes and modes of dividing labor in families. In the final two sections, we explore limitations of research to date, asking to what extent these should affect our conclusions, and then end with comments about future directions for research.

Division of Labor Among Lesbian Mothers

To highlight the nature of research on division of labor among couples who are also

lesbian mothers, we begin by describing in some detail one particular study, including its methodology and results (Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004). We then outline ways in which this investigation is representative of the research literature on division of labor among lesbian and gay parenting couples, and ways in which it differs from others. In so doing, we will extract some general conclusions about research on division of labor among lesbian couples who are parenting young children.

Atlantic Coast Families Study: Participants, Materials, and Procedure

The study we feature was based on data collected for the Atlantic Coast Families Study (Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008; Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008), in which Patterson and her colleagues (2004) studied division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual parenting couples. This was a study of 66 upper middle class families living in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, half headed by lesbian couples and half headed by heterosexual couples. All participants were parents of young children. All were intact families into which the children had been born or adopted at birth or early in infancy. On average, at the time of assessment, the parents were 41 years of age, and the children were 5 years old.

Families were recruited through churches, daycare centers, parenting support groups, and through word of mouth. When a parent expressed interest in participation, a researcher contacted the parents by telephone, described the study, reviewed criteria for eligibility, and answered any questions. Once a family agreed to participate, a date and time were set for two researchers to visit the family home. During the home visit, parents were interviewed about demographic information and asked to fill out questionnaires about division of labor and other matters; children were also interviewed, but these data are not featured here (see Fulcher et al, 2008; Sutfin et al., 2008 for more detailed information).

Parental division of labor was assessed using a version of the *Who Does What?* Instrument (Cowan & Cowan, 1990) appropriate for families of for preschoolers, with minor adjustments in wording made so that the instrument would be more appropriate for lesbian as well as for heterosexual parents. The *Who Does What?* was administered via paper and pencil to each member of every participating couple. Both parents reported the percentage of each of 13 household and 20 childcare tasks that they typically performed (“real” involvement scale) or would ideally perform (“ideal” involvement scale), on a scale ranging from 1 = *I do it all* to 9 = *my partner/spouse does it all*. A score of 5 on the real involvement scale meant “*we do it equally*”, and a score of 5 on the ideal involvement scale meant “*ideally, we would do it equally*”. Finally, partners reported how competent they felt performing each of the tasks, using a scale that ranged from 1 = *not very competent* to 9 = *very competent*. Items for household tasks included planning and preparing meals, house cleaning, paying bills, taking out the garbage, and doing laundry; those for childcare included feeding, dressing, bathing, choosing toys, and visiting playgrounds. Parents’ responses to the items were averaged to create real and ideal household work and childcare scores, as well as scores for competence on both household work and childcare.

To assess satisfaction with couple relationships, we used the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). This is a 15-item self-report instrument designed to measure marital adjustment of spouses in heterosexual marriages. Minor semantic adjustments were required to make this test suitable for use with lesbian as well as with heterosexual couples (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Patterson, 1995). Possible scores range from 2 to 158, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

We also collected demographic information about parental age, race, education,

employment status (including job titles and hours per week of work time), and individual and household income. In addition, we collected demographic information (e.g., age, sex, race) about children in each family (for further details, see Patterson et al., 2004).

Using information about each parent's occupation, we coded each occupation for prestige. Each occupation was assigned a prestige score, as indicated by the Duncan Socioeconomic Index Scale (Duncan, 1991). Possible scores on the scale ranged from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting greater occupational prestige.

Atlantic Coast Families Study: Results

Data from this investigation indicated that lesbian couples reported dividing childcare – tasks such as feeding, bathing, and dressing – more evenly than did heterosexual couples, and also that, on average, they were more likely to prefer this arrangement (Patterson et al., 2004). There were significant effects of parental sexual orientation on parents' reports of their real responsibilities and also on their ideal preferences for division of labor for childcare. While lesbian couples reported that they split childcare evenly, heterosexual couples reported that mothers did more childcare than fathers. In addition, lesbian parents reported that they ideally wanted an equal distribution of childcare with each parent doing about half of the work. Heterosexual mothers reported, however, that they would ideally do somewhat more than half of the childcare, and heterosexual fathers reported that they would ideally like to do somewhat less than half of the childcare.

Although they divided childcare differently, lesbian and heterosexual couples reported dividing household labor in similar ways, with each partner doing about half the work. In contrast to the findings concerning childcare, there were no differences between the groups in division of either real or ideal household work. Both lesbian and heterosexual couples described

themselves as sharing the tasks involved in household labor about evenly.

We also studied participants' feelings of competence in performing tasks associated with childcare. Results for both lesbian and heterosexual couples revealed no differences between lesbian and heterosexual couples, or between parents within couples, in this regard. Most parents described themselves as very competent in performing childcare tasks.

We calculated the number of hours per week that each adult participant spent, on average, in paid employment. We also added the work hours for both parents in each couple together, to yield a total amount of time spent on paid work per week by that couple. These data revealed that both lesbian and heterosexual couples spent roughly the same total amount of time on paid work each week. Interestingly, however, the hours were allocated differently in the two couple types. Among heterosexual couples, fathers worked more hours per week in paid employment than did mothers. Among lesbian couples, however, both mothers tended to work about equal numbers of hours. In short, lesbian mothers appeared to share the burdens of paid employment but heterosexual fathers worked longer hours than did heterosexual mothers.

We also studied income and occupational prestige among lesbian and heterosexual parents. On average, parents in this sample reported relatively high prestige occupations and substantial incomes. There were, however, some differences among the groups. Given that lesbian mothers worked more hours per week than did heterosexual mothers, and given that heterosexual fathers worked more hours per week than did lesbian mothers, it was not surprising that their incomes also differed. Heterosexual fathers earned more than lesbian mothers, and lesbian mothers earned more than heterosexual mothers. The prestige of occupations pursued by heterosexual fathers did not differ from that of occupations pursued by lesbian mothers. Heterosexual mothers, however, held jobs that were lower in prestige than those held by fathers

or by lesbian mothers. Thus, when we calculated discrepancies between occupational prestige scores within couples, there were greater discrepancies among heterosexual couples than among lesbian couples. In short, although educational attainment and household incomes were similar among lesbian and heterosexual couples, discrepancies between partners in occupational prestige were greater among heterosexual than among lesbian couples. This finding provided another example of greater specialization among heterosexual than among lesbian couples.

Discussion

It is not difficult to summarize the findings from the Atlantic Coast Families Study (Patterson et al., 2004) study. Among heterosexual couples, mothers reported doing more of the unpaid childcare than did fathers. Fathers, however, reported working longer hours at more prestigious jobs, and earning more money than did mothers. In short, heterosexual couples said that they divided labor by specializing — fathers in paid employment and mothers in unpaid childcare. They also said that this was the division of labor that they preferred. Among lesbian couples, on the other hand, mothers reported sharing both childcare and paid employment in a relatively equal fashion. Mothers in lesbian couples reported working in jobs that were similar in prestige, and earning similar incomes. They also said that this was the division of labor that they wanted. In short, the lesbian couples reported that they divided labor by sharing it. Although lesbian and heterosexual couples were attempting to divide the very same labor, they did it in different ways (Patterson et al., 2004).

How representative are the results from this study of the literature on division of labor among lesbian parenting couples? An important distinction to consider in this regard is that between *primary parenting couple families* and *step-parent families*. Primary parenting couple families are those with children who have been born or adopted in the context of the parenting

couple's current relationship (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). In the context of lesbian and gay parenting, these are families in which children have been born or adopted after the parent or parents have come out. Step-parent families are those with children who were born or adopted in the context of one partner's previous relationship. In the context of lesbian and gay parenting, these are families in which children have been born or adopted in the context of a previous relationship, usually before a parent has come out. The data collected by Patterson et al. (2004) were all from primary parenting couple families. This is a significant fact because divisions of labor in step-parent families may differ dramatically from those in primary parenting couple families, with the biological parent taking much more responsibility than the step-parent for care of children (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Hare & Richards, 1993; Moore, 2008).

The main outlines of the Patterson et al. (2004) findings have been reported many times by researchers working with lesbian and heterosexual primary parenting couple families. For example, among researchers using quantitative methods, similar results have been reported by Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Hall, and Golombok (1997), Chan, Brooks, Raboy, and Patterson (1998), Ciano-Boyce and Shelly-Sireci (2002), Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007), Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam (2005), and Tasker and Golombok (1998). Among those who have used qualitative methods, similar results have been reported by Bennett (2003), Dunne (2000), Reimann (1997), and Sullivan (1996). When primary parenting couples were asked about their divisions of labor, heterosexual couples were likely to report specializing and lesbian couples were likely to report sharing in a relatively equal fashion. This difference was most pronounced in the comparisons of divisions of labor for childcare, on the one hand, and paid employment, on the other.

One aspect of the findings that has varied from one study to another is the extent to which lesbian mothers have reported that division of labor involved in childcare is exactly equal versus

slightly skewed toward the biological mother doing more childcare than the non-biological mother. One early report found that biological mothers were described as doing more childcare than their partners (Patterson, 1995). In another study, Ciano-Boyce and Shelley-Sireci (2002) found that lesbian adoptive couples reported more egalitarian divisions of labor than did lesbian couples with biological children. Biological mothers reported doing more childcare than non-biological mothers, and heterosexual adoptive couples had the most traditional or specialized divisions of labor (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002).

More recently, Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) have also reported that, in primary parenting couples, the biological mother was described as doing more childcare than the non-biological mother. It may be relevant to note that Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) collected data within a few months of the child's birth, and many biological mothers were breastfeeding their infants. This fact suggests that the age of children should be considered in discussions of division of labor, since the care that infants need (e.g., breastfeeding) often differs from that needed by children and adolescents (e.g., help with homework). The characteristics of labor to be divided clearly change over the course of child development. Whether biological mothers in lesbian parenting couples do or do not perform, on average, somewhat more childcare than nonbiological mothers does not obscure the clear finding that most lesbian parenting couples report sharing childcare to a greater degree than do heterosexual couples.

Of course, all the findings represent average figures derived from groups of families. Thus, comparisons of average levels of sharing or specializing between groups may obscure the degree of within-group variability that may also exist. It is probably the case that, within every sample, there are some lesbian couples who specialize and some heterosexual couples who do not. Thus, even though average figures may differ between groups, there may be individuals

within each group who diverge from the central tendency. The extent of such within-group variability is, as yet, unknown.

An intriguing feature of Patterson and her colleagues' (2004) study, not shared by many other studies, is that these authors collected information about actual paid work hours per week for each adult, and also about the prestige of occupations pursued by each adult in each household. Estimates about the amount of time spent by each parent in paid employment seem somewhat more immune from reporting biases than do some other items. Similarly, parents were asked to give the name and a brief description of their occupation, and these were later coded to yield estimates of occupational prestige; these scores also seem to be less susceptible than some to biases in reporting. Thus, the use of multiple methods by Patterson and her colleagues (2004) would seem to strengthen confidence in their findings.

Division of Labor Among Gay Fathers

The clear generalization emerging from research with lesbian and heterosexual couples is that lesbian couples are more likely to report that they divide childcare by sharing it equally and heterosexual couples are more likely to report that one of them specializes in childcare. To what extent is this true also of gay male couples with children? Much less research has focused on this question (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999), but the available data suggest that relatively equal patterns of sharing characterize not only lesbian couples who are parenting young children but also gay male parenting couples (Patterson, 2004).

The first study of this question was conducted by McPherson (1993), whose dissertation explored division of labor, satisfaction with division of labor, and satisfaction with couple relationships among 28 gay and 27 heterosexual couples who were parenting young children. Consistent with the findings from lesbian parenting couples, McPherson found that gay primary

parenting couples reported a more even division of responsibilities for childcare than did heterosexual couples. Gay couples also reported greater satisfaction with their division of childcare tasks than did heterosexual couples. Finally, gay couples also reported greater satisfaction with their couple relationships than did heterosexual couples, especially in the areas of cohesion and expression of affection. This latter finding has not always been replicated in other studies; for example, Kurdek (2005) found that gay and heterosexual couples reported relatively equal levels of satisfaction with their romantic relationships.

Johnson and O'Connor (2002) also studied division of labor among gay male as well as lesbian parenting couples in planned gay and lesbian parent families. In this study, 19 gay couples and 66 lesbian couples responded to questions about division of labor. Gay couples reported sharing childcare but not housework. Lesbian couples, on the other hand, shared housework but tended to specialize when it came to childcare. Lesbian women reported that mothers who were biologically related to their children were more likely to do the tasks involved in childcare. This study included children who represented a wide range of ages.

More recently, Farr, Forssell, and Patterson (2009) studied 29 gay, 27 lesbian, and 50 heterosexual adoptive parenting couples, each of whom was rearing at least one young child. This study was distinguished by its use of a systematic sampling frame to recruit families from participating adoption agencies. Using the Cowans' *Who Does What?*, these authors studied division of labor among each of the three couple types. They found that heterosexual couples reported specialized patterns of childcare, but both gay and lesbian couples reported shared patterns of childcare. Thus, results from this group of families are new in that they are drawn from adoptive families, and they are also consistent with those from earlier research in identifying more egalitarian divisions of labor for childcare among gay and lesbian couples than

among heterosexual couples.

Overall, the scant data on division of labor among gay fathers have yielded converging results. Much like lesbian couples, gay men who are involved in primary parenting couples have reported sharing childcare labor. Moreover, gay fathers also expressed a preference for equal sharing of childcare, just as lesbian mothers have (Farr et al, 2009). These results raise intriguing questions about the implications of equal sharing for children.

Farr and her colleagues (2009) also considered within-group variation in the division of childcare among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual adoptive parenting couples. These authors calculated an absolute difference score between partners for each item on the “*Who Does What?*”. For example, if one partner listed a “9” (*we do this equally*) on an item and the other partner listed a “1” (*we do this equally*) on the same item, this was an absolute difference score of 8. If one partner listed a “5” (*I do it all*) and the other listed a “4” (*My partner/spouse does it all*), this was an absolute difference score of 1. An average of the absolute difference scores for all childcare items was calculated to create a score for overall degree of specialization in each couple. As expected, Farr et al (2009) found that lesbian and gay couples reported little overall specialization (i.e., their overall specialization scores were small) but heterosexual couples reported considerably more specialization.

Division of Labor and Child Outcomes in Families Headed by Same-Sex Couples

Given the overall clarity of findings with regard to reports about division of labor for childcare among same-sex versus heterosexual couples, it is worth asking what implications these findings may have for children growing up in these homes. To what extent are children’s adjustment and development linked to aspects of coparenting such as division of labor? To date, there have been only three studies of this issue among lesbian and gay parents and their children.

In the first of these studies, Patterson (1995) evaluated the links between division of labor among 26 lesbian primary parenting couple families and adjustment among their children. Most children in this sample had been conceived using donor insemination. The children were between four and nine years, with a mean of six years of age. Results showed that parents were more satisfied with their divisions of labor and that children were more well-adjusted when childcare was more evenly divided between the mothers. These findings raised the possibility that shared divisions of labor for childcare might, in themselves, be beneficial for children. It is, however, worth noting that, in this study both mothers reported that sharing childcare was also their preferred or “ideal” mode of dividing this work. Since the mothers were both sharing childcare and achieving their ideal pattern, it was unclear which was more important, or whether a third variable might be involved.

In a subsequent study, Chan, Brooks, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) also evaluated associations between division of labor among 30 lesbian and 16 heterosexual primary parenting couple families, and among their 5 to 11 year old children. All families had been clients of a single sperm bank, so that, in both lesbian and heterosexual parent families, one parent was biologically related to the child and one was not. Among lesbian nonbiological mothers, those who were more satisfied with division of labor were also more satisfied with their couple relationships, and their children had fewer behavior problems (i.e., were more well-adjusted). Importantly, the effect of division of labor on children’s adjustment was mediated by parental relationship satisfaction. Thus, in the Chan et al. (1998) study, it was clearly the impact of division of labor on relationship satisfaction, rather than division of labor in itself, that was related to child behavior.

Farr, Forssell, and Patterson (2009) also studied associations between child adjustment

and parents' divisions of labor in adoptive families led by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. These authors reported no association between children's behavioral adjustment and the degree to which couples reported specializing in terms of childcare. However, there were significant associations between children's adjustment and couples' reported levels of satisfaction with their divisions of childcare labor, such that parents who reported greater discrepancies between their real and preferred arrangements also described their children as having more behavior problems. Parents who reported less favorable couple relationship adjustment also described their children as having more behavior problems. It was also the case that parents who reported more specialization and greater discrepancies between their real and ideal divisions of labor also reported less couple relationship satisfaction. Thus, as Chan et al. (1998) found, couples' relationship satisfaction and their satisfaction with their divisions of labor were more clearly linked with child outcomes than were the ways in which couples divided daily tasks.

Overall, then, existing research has begun to explore possible links between division of labor and child adjustment, but much remains to be learned. The information that is available suggests that it is parents' feelings about their arrangements rather than the specifics of their actual divisions of labor that are most closely associated with outcomes for children. Further research is needed to clarify any associations between division of labor and child adjustment, and to examine any pathways through which such associations may be established. Indeed, there are a variety of other important coparenting dynamics beyond division of labor, yet to be studied in gay and lesbian families, that may be important mediators in such pathways.

Issues in Research on Division of Labor Among Same-Sex Couples

Many researchers have asked couples to describe their divisions of labor, and most have reported that, on average, lesbian and gay couples describe relatively egalitarian or shared

patterns while heterosexual couples, on average, describe more specialized arrangements. There is also consensus that heterosexual couples prefer more specialized arrangements overall, while lesbian and gay couples express preferences for more egalitarian patterns overall. Fewer researchers have inquired about the implications, if any, of these decisions for children who are growing up in different types of households, and the findings about children are less clear. This work has all been conducted in the tradition of quantitative research that has dominated academic research in psychology for many years.

A challenge to these conclusions about division of labor among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples has arisen from sociological research in the qualitative tradition. Most notably, Carrington (1999) has argued that lesbian and gay couples often go to considerable lengths to describe their divisions of labor as egalitarian, even when there is clear evidence to the contrary. In making this argument, Carrington draws on Hochschild's concept of "family myths" (Hochschild, 1989, page 19). These are family stories designed to preserve a socially acceptable view of the family, even in the absence of supporting evidence. In these terms, Carrington has argued that an egalitarian division of labor is a family myth among many lesbian and gay couples. Although they want to be seen as egalitarian in their divisions of labor, Carrington argues, lesbian and gay couples are "neither as egalitarian as they would like to believe nor as we would prefer that others believe" (Carrington, 1999, p. 11). In short, Carrington (1999) suggested, quantitative researchers have mistaken family myths about lesbian and gay couples' divisions of labor for true stories.

Working in a qualitative tradition, Carrington conducted lengthy interviews with 26 lesbian couples and 26 gay couples, and conducted week-long field observations with 8 of these families (Carrington, 1999). Of the full group of 52 families, only five reported having children

at home, and some of these were in joint custody arrangements (i.e., were in the focal home only part of the time). Only three of the children were described as old enough to talk with the researcher (Carrington, 1999, p. 251). It is therefore understandable that questions about division of labor for childcare in this study were both few in number and limited in nature (Carrington, 1999, page 240). Thus, it is clear that no firm conclusions about division of labor in childcare can be reached on the basis of information collected by Carrington (1999).

Even though Carrington's (1999) study does not allow clear conclusions about how couples divide the tasks involved in caring for children, it nevertheless presents many interesting ideas about the nature of unpaid family and household labor, as well as about the ways in which couples divide labor and describe their arrangements. One such idea is that couples tend to think too narrowly about what constitutes family labor, and in this way, often render invisible many important contributions that are made by one or the other of them. For instance, Carrington (1999) wrote extensively about the character of work involved in feeding a couple or family. In addition to the common definition of this work that involves planning, shopping, cooking, and cleaning, Carrington (1999) emphasized additional "hidden" forms of work, such as finding new recipes, learning new food preparation techniques, and remembering family members' food preferences. Most couples do not notice the work involved in hidden forms of feeding work, he argued, so they do not include these when they describe their divisions of labor. Similarly, a couple or family must somehow accomplish tasks that Carrington (1999) described under the heading of "kin work", such as making telephone calls, purchasing gifts, and keeping the family calendar. Though often overlooked, these tasks require attention and effort. Despite the importance of such tasks, Carrington (1999) argued that they were rarely included in couples' descriptions of their arrangements. Thus, Carrington suggested that prevailing views of what is

included under the heading of “family labor” should be enlarged.

Carrington’s point is an important one. If many “invisible” or “hidden” tasks are overlooked in a couple’s accounts of their activities, then descriptions of their division of labor may be inaccurate. If couples are motivated to overlook certain kinds of labor (e.g., “remembering family food preferences is not really work”), then inaccuracies are more likely, especially when information is collected using quantitative survey assessments. A superficial story that “we split housework about equally” may thus persist “even in the face of obvious empirical observations to the contrary” (Carrington, 1999, page 177).

Carrington (1999) thus raised the possibility that earlier quantitative research on couples’ divisions of labor has relied too heavily on data that may be misleading and superficial. Lacking in the thick description and detailed elaboration that is characteristic of qualitative work, quantitative research on same-sex couples’ divisions of labor may therefore be seen as providing only a partial look at the complex realities of family lives. For instance, if much family work goes unacknowledged, this could leave one member of a couple feeling unappreciated, and could ultimately work against the creation and maintenance of an effective parenting alliance. Exploration of this and other possibilities is a task for future research.

Some reservations about the work of Carrington (1999) in this context should, however, be considered. Carrington’s study did not involve many families with children, and for this reason, could not address questions about the division of responsibilities for childcare. The families interviewed were mostly from the middle and upper middle classes, and they all lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. The interviews were all conducted by a single researcher. Moreover, the processes under study may be affected in important ways by the presence or absence of children in a household. No heterosexual couples were involved in the study, so no

comparisons between lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples could be offered. In short, Carrington (1999) raised many intriguing questions about division of labor among lesbian and gay couples that should be considered in future studies of lesbian and gay parenting, but his own research did not resolve them.

Directions for Further Research

Research on coparenting in families headed by lesbian and gay parents has begun, but many important directions for further research can be identified. For the most part, the research to date has focused on issues related to division of labor. Even in this area, questions have emerged about the best interpretation of existing findings. In addition to clarifying issues relevant to division of labor, future research is needed to explore a wider array of coparenting concerns.

In the area of division of labor, an important direction for future research is to employ a wider array of research methodologies in the study of lesbian and gay parents and their children. The Cowan and Cowan (1990) *Who Does What?* has been widely used, and it continues to provide valuable information. The use of other methods, such as observational and diary methods, could also be appropriate in this area, as would the use of qualitative interview methods like those championed by Carrington (1999). By bringing to bear a wider array of methodological tools, a more comprehensive understanding of division of labor among lesbian and gay parents will be obtained.

Another important direction for research is to investigate a broader array of topics within the broad field of coparenting. For example, one creative line of research in studies of coparenting in heterosexual families has focused on the emotional dynamics of the mother-father-child triangle (see Frascarolo, Fivaz-Depeursinge & Favez, this volume). The degree of

cooperation between parents, the overall level of cohesion in the family, and the degree of engagement in family activities by both parents have all proven to be important features of coparenting relationships in heterosexual parenting families that would be valuable topics for study in understanding the interpersonal dynamics of gay and lesbian families (McHale et al., 2002). There would be great value in undertaking such work, especially since lesbian and gay parenting couples may be especially likely to enjoy one another's company and find it easy to cooperate with one another in the context of activities with their child (McPherson, 1993). More complex approaches to assessment could be successful in highlighting the special strengths of lesbian and gay parent families, as well as revealing their limitations.

Another important direction for research with lesbian-mother and gay-father families could focus on transformations in coparenting after separation of the primary parenting couple. Although some of the issues and dynamics involved in heterosexual couples' parenting together after divorce have been studied (Pruett & Donsky, this volume), attention has not yet been devoted to the study of such matters in the families of same-sex couples. As a result, little is known about how same-sex couples attempt to provide for the needs of their children upon the dissolution of their couple relationships. What are the special issues for same-sex couples and their children, whose familial relationships may not enjoy protection of law (Patterson, 2009b), and how do parents ensure the continuity of significant family ties for children, even in the face of discontinuity in adult relationships? How are new same-sex partners integrated into caregiving routines and emotional support systems for children? These and many other questions about coparenting under stressful circumstances remain to be addressed in future research.

In future work, it could be valuable to distinguish more carefully than in previous

research between those who conceived or adopted children in the context of heterosexual marriages, on the one hand, and those who had children in the context of pre-existing lesbian or gay identities. The coparenting issues are certainly not the same in the two cases. If a gay couple is parenting a child who was born to one of the men in the context of an earlier heterosexual relationship, then the other man in the couple might be in an informal stepfather role; in these cases, the bulk of the childcare can be expected to fall on the shoulders of the original father. If a child was adopted by a gay couple after they had been together for a few years, however, then the issue of division of labor may be quite different. In this case, the two fathers are likely to share childcare more evenly (Farr et al., 2009). Similar arguments could be made for families formed by lesbian women before coming out versus after coming out, in the context of pre-existing sexual minority identities. Modes of family formation may be very much linked with divisions of labor, as well as other coparenting dynamics, and research should acknowledge these possibilities (Moore, 2008).

Another direction for future work is to investigate more closely the adaptations of lesbian and gay parented families in different contexts. As yet, we know little about the impact of socioeconomic, religious, racial or political factors on coparenting in sexual minority communities. By the same token, we know little about how urban versus rural variations in employment and social networks may affect coparenting strategies in sexual minority communities. Cross-cultural studies are also as yet very rare (for an exception, see Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser & Sandfort, 2008).

Another important avenue for exploration is the ways in which coparenting may be structured or channeled by the legal or policy environments in which same-sex couples live (Herek, 2006; Patterson, 2009). For example, the freedom to give up paid employment and

specialize in unpaid family work may be more available to parents whose relationships have the legal protections afforded by marriage (see Patterson et al., 2004). In order to protect the interests of all, should the couple's relationship dissolve, same-sex couples may sometimes be forced by legal and policy environments that do not recognize their relationships to share both paid and unpaid labor. If legal and policy environments are critical in this way, then different divisions of labor should be observed for same-sex couples living in jurisdictions that vary in their recognition of same-sex couples. These and related questions could be intriguing subjects of future research.

Finally, another important direction for research in this area is to explore the associations between variations in coparenting, on the one hand, and in child adjustment, on the other. To what degree is children's development affected by variations in coparenting strategies, or by parents' emotional responses to such variations? To what degree does the impact of coparenting on children depend upon children's developmental level and circumstances? And to what extent is any impact of actual coparenting strategies dependent upon other variables, such as couples' overall relationship quality? All these are important questions for further research.

As more and more lesbian and gay couples set out to have children in the context of already-established non-heterosexual identities (Tornello & Patterson, 2010), the topic of coparenting among same-sex couples gains both in interest and in importance. The results of this work will be significant for debates about both gender and sexual orientation in parenting (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). The data that are available thus far suggest that this will prove to be a rich and interesting terrain for study. Indeed, as more and more lesbian and gay adults become parents, it will be more and more important to understand their distinctive approaches to the tasks that are involved.

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