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Lesbian mothers' constructions of the division of paid and unpaid labor

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Abstract

Do lesbian couples resist the (re)gendering of divisions of paid and unpaid labor within the context of biological and nonbiological parenting? In this study we explore how primarily Caucasian, North American lesbian mothers of three-and-a-half-year-old children construct divisions of paid and unpaid labor. We analyze 30 lesbian couples' narrative constructions of their labor arrangements, examining the ways in which they both transgress and accept traditionally masculine and feminine gendering. At the same time that biological mothers and nonbiological mothers often described differences in their contributions to paid and unpaid labor, they rarely invoked biology as a salient factor in explaining their work/family roles. Our analysis suggests that the 'egalitarian ethic' of lesbian women is an over-simplification of the multiple ways that women develop their divisions of labor.

Keywords

biology, division of labor, gender, lesbian, mothers, qualitative, social construction

An emerging body of research explores how lesbian couples negotiate their parental roles and identities (e.g. Dunne, 2000; Gabb, 2005; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Patterson, 1995). Research pertaining to the division of labor in lesbian couples has tended to focus on the division of domestic labor, often highlighting lesbian women's 'egalitarian ethic' – that is, their tendency to value equality in their relationships and to share domestic labor more equally than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2007; Patterson, 1995). This study examines the larger work/family

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context that lesbian couples negotiate as they strive to create satisfying work/family arrangements.

Historically, research on the division of labor has focused on heterosexual couples, documenting that once they have children, their division of labor tends to become increasingly segregated into unequal work/family roles (e.g. Deutsch, 1999). Despite increases in women's paid employment over the last few decades, women continue to perform more domestic labor and to sacrifice more career opportunities than their husbands (e.g. Maume, 2006). Such inequalities continue despite the fact that many heterosexual couples claim to want more egalitarian roles and despite an increase in contemporary fathers' commitment to shared parenting (Nentwich, 2008).

Thus, the desire for an equal division of labor is not easily offset by the social pressures and structural inequalities that reinforce traditional gender roles. Further, the tendency for many heterosexual couples to 'default' to traditional roles may lead to the reification of gender norms and the essentializing of gender differences. When couples assume 'traditional' parental roles, the social construct of 'mother' becomes naturalized as an inherent outgrowth of women's maternal instincts. Similarly, the social construct of 'father' becomes equated with the idea that men naturally are more inclined to take on the role of family breadwinner (Carrington, 1999). Feminist scholars have long recognized the problems of reducing social phenomena to biological differences, and have pointed to the importance of examining how paid and unpaid labor are avenues through which individuals express, perform and substantiate their gendered identities (e.g. Kroska, 1997).

Comparative studies of heterosexual- and lesbian-parent families have highlighted similarities and differences in how heterosexual and lesbian parents construct family arrangements, often indicating that lesbian couples share childcare more equally (e.g. Patterson et al., 2004). For instance, Chan and colleagues' (1998) study of heterosexual and lesbian parents of children aged 5–11 found that both heterosexual and lesbian mothers desired equal divisions of childcare, but lesbians were more successful in enacting equality. Chan and colleagues' analysis suggests that equality is often preferred by women, and that a lesbian relationship may more easily allow for equal roles since both partners are of the same sex. Although all couples, regardless of sexual orientation (or sex), contend with the prevailing normative discourse of 'equal parenting' (Risman and Johnson-Sumerford, 1998), lesbians appear to be more effective in enacting this equality. Yet, in Chan and colleagues' analysis, sex differences are discussed as gender differences. They collapse any distinction between sex as a biological characteristic and gender as a constitutive process, thereby eclipsing how women may enact traditionally masculine and feminine gendering within a same-sex relationship.

Similar to comparative studies, research that focuses exclusively on lesbian couples has often emphasized lesbian women's 'egalitarian ethic' as strongly influencing equal divisions of domestic labor (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Patterson, 1995). However, although lesbian couples tend to share housework equally, in couples with children, where one partner conceived the child, biological

mothers often perform more childcare and nonbiological mothers often work longer hours in paid labor, at least when children are young (Bos et al., 2007; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Patterson, 1995). Being in a same-sex relationship, therefore, does not necessarily ensure egalitarianism (Carrington, 1999). Biological mothers experience far more validation in their roles as mothers than nonbiological mothers, and may do more childcare as they embody the traditional role of 'mother' (Short, 2007). Moreover, relinquishing job opportunities or reducing time in paid work may not be perceived as 'sacrifices', but rather intentional decisions to redistribute paid work and family arrangements that evoke little perceived stress. Indeed, some biological mothers may resist the notion that because of their genetic relationship to their child, they should be more involved in unpaid labor.

Sullivan (1996) studied 34 lesbian two-mother families and found that most reported sharing domestic labor equally. She reported that among the few couples who did not equally share domestic labor, such role differentiations were regulated by 'personal preferences' rather than beliefs about gender. Sullivan, thereby, suggests that personal preferences can be distinguished from gender differences. Such a perspective differs from a social constructionist perspective (Erickson, 2005), which regards gender construction as an ever-present process that is not a clearly identifiable *part* of personality, but rather entwined with the very construction of identity. Even if women do not perceive their roles as gendered, their behaviors (and preferences) may reflect and potentially reinforce gendered expectations for behavior because there are no such gender-neutral grounds. For instance, some lesbian women may engage in divisions of labor where one mother is consistently the primary caregiver, and through such involvement in domestic labor (and perhaps reduced involvement in paid labor), that mother ultimately embodies the more stereotypical maternal role. Femininity, childcare and motherhood thereby are intertwined at a symbolic level, reinforcing each other such that unequal distributions of domestic and paid labor may inadvertently create traditional masculine/feminine gender divides.

Parenting by two women refutes any differentiation of roles based on sex, illustrating the performative nature of gender (Butler, 1990). Research has tended to under-theorize the impact of gender processes impacting lesbian and gay parents' constructions of their family roles (Oerton, 1997). According to Oerton, this has led to an understanding of heterosexual relationships as 'gender-full' (1997: 421) and same-sex relationships as gender-absent. Lesbian mothers may enact gendered behavior that both instantiates the gender binary while at the same time discursively and materially exposing its artificiality. For instance, some mothers may engage in the traditional role of the masculine breadwinner at the same time that they shift what 'breadwinning' means to both their family and their personal identity, thereby challenging the presumed rigidity and 'naturalness' of gender stereotypes.

Researchers of lesbian mother-headed families have emphasized the radical potential of lesbian mothers in challenging heteronormative family practices.

Dunne (2000), for example, posits that because of lesbian parents' similarities as two women, they are in direct contradiction to the traditional gender practices of heterosexual couples. Likewise, Sullivan (2004) argues that lesbian- and gay-parent families are free of socially sanctioned gender norms, whereby gender is a (negative) regulating practice that prevents more egalitarian family practices. However, when Dunne argues that egalitarianism is in the best interest of lesbian partners as compared to heterosexual couples, she seems to deny that lesbian partners may find it beneficial to divide labor unequally (but not necessarily inequitably). For example, one partner may have the capacity to make more money and may therefore be perceived by both partners as more suited for paid labor.

Our study expands on the existing literature by examining how lesbians may not only challenge traditional notions of the family but may also reproduce heteronormative gendering. This study examines how women discursively construct the complexities of balancing work and family, paying particular attention to how divisions of unpaid labor are embedded within divisions of paid labor. Data collected from 30 primarily Caucasian middle-class lesbian couples (60 women) living in the USA were analyzed, and two research questions were posed: (1) How do couples negotiate the balancing of work and family (e.g. to what extent do they describe having given up paid work commitments or time with family)? (2) How do they describe (both implicitly and explicitly) their own efforts to transgress, resist, or accept traditional masculine and feminine gendering?

Theoretical perspective

This study is informed by a feminist, social constructionist perspective that resists biological determinism and attends to the symbolic and material conditions of living in a heteronormative society. A social constructionist perspective highlights the ways in which individuals are in a continual process of gender construction through the roles they create, modify and maintain in varying contexts (Erickson, 2005). Although we discuss how women embody roles in constructing divisions of labor, we use the term 'role' with a critical perspective. We recognize that an over-emphasis on 'roles' may suggest (1) that individuals voluntarily choose systems of behavior untethered by social structures; and (2) that such 'roles' are static enactments of behaviors that remain unchangeable temporally and situationally (Connell, 1987). This is not our position.

In addition to acknowledging that individuals are always engaged in the doing (and undoing) of gender (Butler, 1990; West and Zimmerman, 1987), we take a materialist feminist position that regards gender itself as a social structure that, like the economy, functions to stratify individuals into particular social positions (Risman, 2004). In a heteronormative society, the hierarchical relations ascribed to 'valuable' paid labor and the less valued domestic labor are deeply inscribed around stereotypes of male dominance and female submission. Even when personal perceptions change, basic presumptions about paid and domestic labor do not necessarily disappear. Because such inequalities are not products of nature or

biology, but rather complex social and historical constructions, they can indeed be modified and resisted. Such resistance, however, is always enacted within, and therefore limited by, the very rigidity of long-standing societal and historical constructions.

Given that the women in this sample are predominantly well-educated, Caucasian, North American and middle-class (which is consistent with previous research on lesbian mothers), our interpretation represents a limited category of analysis (McCall, 2005). In both the design of the study and the following analysis, we recognize that our sample has specific parameters with regards to race, class and education that situate these women within a particular social position of privilege. In defining our focus of analysis we are *constructing* that very category of analysis (i.e. well-educated, Caucasian, middle-class lesbian mothers), and in doing so, potentially eclipsing the ways in which these women stretch the bounds of those very categories. Yet, given that one of the aims of this project is to provide an in-depth analysis of a previously understudied group (lesbian mothers), we construct the specific category of analysis (of well-educated, Caucasian, North American lesbian women) in order to fully explore the diversity *within* the category (Cole, 2009; McCall, 2005). Further, our analysis seeks to unravel some previously held assumptions concerning the supposedly monolithic group of 'lesbian mothers' (e.g. they are 'gender free' or prevalingly egalitarian in their enactments of divisions of labor). In so doing, our analysis views their narratives as contextualized within specific (privileged) class, race and educational social positions while at the same time situated within a marginalized position, given their same-sex minority status.

Method

Sixty first-time lesbian parents (30 couples) were interviewed as part of a larger study on lesbian couples' transition to parenthood. Inclusion criteria for the original study were: (1) women must be becoming parents for the first time; and (2) they must be in a committed same-sex relationship. Couples initially participated in interviews during the prenatal period and three months postnatally. They were re-contacted when their children were three years old and asked to participate in a follow-up. Given the lack of research on lesbian mothers of toddler-aged children, we focus here on this third wave of data. Telephone interviews (approximately one hour) were conducted with each partner separately, and were recorded and transcribed. Telephone interviews allowed us to reach a geographically diverse sample and despite not having face-to-face contact, effective rapport was built through researchers staying attuned to the participants' responses and appropriately probing vague or unclear responses (Burke and Miller, 2001). Interviews were transcribed closely verbatim to the participants' speech. We deleted minor 'fillers' (e.g. 'um,' 'ah') once we determined that such fillers were not critical to the meanings of the narratives (e.g. they were not indicative of moments of meaningful hesitation). Ellipses indicate pauses in the narratives. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality. Individual interviews allowed us to elicit each participant's

unique construction of her experience (as opposed to a co-constructed narrative with her partner).

The sample resided in the USA and had all had children by means of one mother giving birth to a child (i.e. she conceived via alternative insemination). Biological and nonbiological mothers' average age was 38 and 41 years old, respectively. Most women (94%) identified as White. Regarding the legal status of the families, in 78% of the sample, both parents were the legal (adoptive) parents, whereas in 22% of families, the biological mother was the sole legal parent (i.e. the nonbiological mother had not obtained a second parent adoption, typically because it was not legal in the couple's state). The sample was well-educated. Among biological mothers, four (13%) had a high school diploma, one (3%) had an associate's degree (typically a two-year degree after high school received prior to a bachelor's degree), four (13%) had a bachelor's degree, 16 (53%) had a master's degree, and five (17%) had a PhD/MD/JD (doctorate in law). Among nonbiological mothers, one (3%) had a high school diploma, three (10%) had an associate's degree, seven (23%) had a bachelor's degree, 10 (33%) had a master's degree, and nine (30%) had a PHD/JD/MD. The sample was financially secure, with a mean family income of \$90,000. Biological mothers' mean income was \$41,093 ($SD = 44,217$; range \$0–170,000) and nonbiological mothers' mean income was \$78,721 ($SD = 113,321$; range \$12,000–\$650,000).

The qualitative portion of this article focuses on data from the following open-ended questions:

1. Do you think that you and your partner approach parenting any differently than heterosexual parents? How?
2. What are the most difficult challenges you face in attempting to maintain a balance between work and family life?
3. Do you feel you've given up certain opportunities at work for your family? What about sacrificing time with family for work? If so, how?
4. (*If division of domestic labor is unequal*): Why do you do more/why does your partner do more housework/childcare? How do you explain this?
5. Is the division of domestic labor a topic of discussion or conflict between you and your partner? If so, how?

We utilized a qualitatively driven mixed-methods analysis of the data (Mason, 2006). In line with other feminist researchers utilizing a non-positivistic mode of mixed-methods analysis (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Oswald and Suter, 2004), we present descriptive quantitative data in conjunction with the qualitative data to more fully illustrate the multidimensionality of human experience. Both modes of analysis are understood as capturing different facets of women's perceptions and providing a more thorough understanding of women's constructions of divisions of labor. A constructionist version of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) analysis was applied to the qualitative data. Framed by our feminist perspective, our analysis explores the various meaning-making processes that women invoke to

represent their experiences, paying particular attention to unintentional and intentional gendered interpretations of their behavior. Although emphasis is given to the emergence of themes, we understand all such articulations and their theoretical implications as resulting from the researchers' constructed interpretations of the participants' discourse (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, our analysis is in accord with Charmaz's (2006) critique of the positivistic roots of grounded theory as a method of analysis that works to 'discover' reality. In this way, our study emphasizes how women discursively construct their lives, and how their narratives are linked to the material conditions within which they negotiate divisions of labor.

Applying grounded theory, we focused on patterns within the data, highlighting similarities and differences that emerged throughout the coding process (Charmaz, 2006). After applying line-by-line coding to the transcripts, Jordan Downing began to broadly categorize initial themes. This led to further differentiation of codes and refinement of categories. Abbie Goldberg reviewed the emerging coding scheme against the data at various points during the coding process. After numerous revisions to the initial coding scheme, transcripts were re-read and organized within the final schematic framework. In the presentation of our analysis, we differentiate between biological and nonbiological mothers. We also identify the number of individuals and couples within each category in order to illuminate levels of within couple agreement.

Several quantitative measures of the division of labor were administered to assess mean differences between biological and nonbiological mothers:

- *Household tasks: Who does what?* (Atkinson and Huston, 1984): Women were asked to rate their proportional involvement in 15 household tasks using a five-point scale, where 1 = 'usually or always my partner' (0%–20% contribution), 3 = 'shared about equally', and 5 = 'usually or always myself' (80%–100% contribution). This scale is comprised of two subscales: 'feminine' tasks (eight items, including cooking and cleaning) and 'masculine' tasks (six items, including taking out the garbage and outdoor work). 'Feminine' tasks are those chores that women typically want more help with and are considered to be more repetitive and time consuming; 'masculine' tasks tend to be performed more quickly and less routinely (Dempsey, 1997).
- *Division of childcare chores* (Deutsch, 1999): Women reported on their contribution to 28 childcare tasks, including planning the child's activities, playing with the child and feeding the child. Women rated their proportional involvement in each task using the same scale as above.
- *Perceptions of satisfaction*: Two single-item questions were used to assess women's satisfaction with the division of unpaid labor: 'How satisfied are you with the division of household tasks? How satisfied are you with the division of childcare tasks?' Women rated their satisfaction using a five-point scale where 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4 = somewhat satisfied, and 5 = very satisfied.

Analysis

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for women's childcare involvement, household task involvement, hours worked in paid labor and perceived satisfaction with unpaid labor. Paired *t*-tests revealed that biological mothers perceived themselves as performing more childcare than their partners perceived themselves as doing, $t(29) = 3.90$, $p < .001$, as well as more traditionally defined feminine tasks, $t(29) = 2.53$, $p < .05$. Nonbiological mothers worked more hours in paid employment, $t(29) = -4.71$, $p < .001$. No significant differences were found between biological and nonbiological mothers in their satisfaction with the division of housework and childcare; mean satisfaction levels for both groups of women were somewhat below 'somewhat satisfied'.

The quantitative data would seem to confirm stereotypical gender presumptions about the significance of biological mothering, but it does not shed light on the nuances of participants' experiences. Further, the fact that women in this study reported being relatively satisfied with divisions of domestic labor that were not always equal, as indicated by the quantitative data, is discrepant with what might be expected given research suggesting that lesbian couples strongly value equally shared parenting (Kurdek, 2007). The qualitative phase of this project aims to try to make sense of such discrepancies and explore a diversity of perspectives on the division of paid and domestic labor.

We first discuss those couples that reportedly divided paid labor equally, followed by those couples who divided paid labor unequally. Within each category of paid labor, we analyze how individuals (within couples) discursively constructed the division of domestic labor. The last two sections traverse all categories of labor divisions, focusing on women who presented discrepant perspectives with their partners, and those women who perceived themselves as challenging

Table 1. Descriptive data for biological and nonbiological mothers ($N = 60$)

	Biological mothers ($n = 30$)	Nonbiological mothers ($n = 30$)	
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> -test
Childcare chores	3.43 (.58)	2.76 (.44)	3.90***
Household tasks	3.33 (.59)	2.95 (.58)	-1.80
Masculine tasks	3.19 (.98)	3.26 (1.05)	-.20
Feminine tasks	3.44 (.75)	2.80 (.76)	2.53*
Hours/week in paid work	22.84 (16.17)	45.16 (12.42)	-4.71***
Satisfaction – household tasks	3.37 (1.21)	3.89 (1.19)	-1.73
Satisfaction – childcare tasks	3.82 (1.06)	3.71 (1.18)	.33

* = $p < .05$. ** = $p < .01$. *** = $p < .00$.

heteronormative stereotypes of work/family arrangements. We highlight how women's constructions of their work/family arrangements are explicitly or implicitly gendered in ways that embody or resist traditional gender categories.

Paid labor equally divided

Eight of the 30 couples divided paid labor relatively equally. Six of these couples consisted of partners who both worked over 40 hours a week, and two couples divided paid labor by having each partner work between 24 and 32 hours a week. The six couples who worked 40 hours a week or more tended to have strong work commitments, and they primarily worked high-skilled, professional jobs such as directors of programs and professors, whereas the two couples in which both women worked part-time had somewhat lower status jobs, such as social worker and sports trainer. Of the eight couples who divided paid work relatively equally, women acknowledged having to give up family time rather than time in paid employment, which sometimes caused stress. One biological mother, Lori, a journalist, was planning on quitting her job to stay home full-time:

[It's] not that I have these delusions of grandeur that when I do quit, I'll have all the time in the world, because I know I won't. But I do think that between work and family time, it's hard to find enough time to do everything I want to do and find time for myself.

Such efforts to create less equal roles contrast with previous research indicating that lesbian women prefer equality within the domestic realm (e.g. Patterson, 1995). Not all women expressed this tension around not having enough time with family. Despite working full-time, four women discussed having to give up opportunities in paid work that they otherwise would have pursued if they did not have family commitments. Yet, women generally accepted these choices as worthwhile contributions to their family lives. As one biological mother, Patricia, stated:

There are definitely choices that I make [at work] that I could be doing more and I know I don't do it. I consciously don't do some things that I know would help me to move along a little more quickly or maybe a little bit more...substantially. And I chose not to so we can spend time together.

Only one nonbiological mother expressed concern over being passed up for promotions as a result of family demands. However, she reported that she felt little regret about her decision to prioritize family.

Women's accounts indicate that equally divided paid labor did not necessarily determine equally divided domestic labor. Within reportedly equal paid labor arrangements, a few women (one biological mother, one couple) described creating *unequal* divisions of domestic labor. They described different attributions for the source of this inequality, discussing it as a function of hours in paid work or as

a 'natural' result of 'personality' differences, thereby viewing this inequality as nevertheless equitable. Robyn, a nonbiological mother, believed that her partner 'sees' the dirt more readily, and she contended that their roles had developed from such personality differences:

I think, having been married to a man before, it's really personality type. I don't think it's as much gender as it is personality. If you look at Maria and my relationship, if you saw us today, you would automatically assume Maria was more masculine and I was more feminine. But if you look at our sensitivities and our way of relating to the world, I'm more masculine and she's more feminine. So, we say, I'm the 'daddy' because I'm the one...that's how I am...It's just kind of how it works. I'm more of the rough-housin', you know, more likely to say: 'Hey, pick that up.' Just what you might see a stereotypical thing in terms of parenting. In terms of housework, Maria...I don't know, she does most of it – she does all of the outside stuff. I don't do any of the outside stuff. You would think maybe a male would mow the lawn and I'd be more likely to do the deep cleaning types of stuff.

Robyn draws on gender stereotypes about what constitutes masculine and feminine roles. However, her narrative indicates a tension in accepting gendered interpretations of their lives at the same time that she articulates a resistance to a gendered lens that fails to capture the multidimensionality of their relationship, individual personalities and divisions of labor. In challenging the adequacy of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity to define their roles, Robyn also suggests that differences in 'sensitivities' may remain hidden under the more overt behavioral activities that carry gendered meanings. In this way, she may be 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in ways that may mis-signify her more ingrained sense of self, which she views as 'more masculine' than what others might superficially perceive.

These women's narratives demonstrate that equality of paid work did not always interpellate into egalitarian divisions of domestic labor. Some women discussed how they desired greater equality, while others were striving for *less* equality. Further, some refuted the societal expectation that women must relinquish time spent in paid work in order to fulfill their parental duties. Others more thoroughly described a tension between paid work and family, involving themselves in activities more closely associated with stereotypical notions of the motherhood ideal.

Paid labor unequally divided

Almost half of the sample (14 couples; 28 women) reportedly divided paid labor by having one partner work full-time and the other work part-time. In all but two of these couples, the biological mother was the one to cut back on paid work. Women described a variety of ways that they rationalized, accepted or resisted the obvious structural inequality. Unlike the couples that had relatively equal divisions of paid labor, solid patterns were evident, differentiating biological from nonbiological

mothers. However, in only a few cases did women discuss how biology may have influenced their divisions of labor.

Women reported that in balancing paid work and family they either: (1) primarily relinquished involvement in paid labor; (2) primarily relinquished family time; or (3) relinquished both family and paid work. The first group, four biological mothers (all working part-time), discussed primarily giving up opportunities in paid work, although they did not describe these relinquishments as stressful. One biological mother perceived little stress around not investing time in her job because she was only 'temporarily' putting her job on hold. Another biological mother, Jeanne, who was employed as a part-time receptionist, stated: 'I really enjoy staying home with the kids, and I think that is really what I'm supposed to be doing.' Jeanne and three other biological mothers, who described decreasing their involvement in paid work and 'prioritizing' family time, indicated that embodying the traditional role of mother was not problematic despite inequalities in divisions of labor. Alternatively, two nonbiological mothers described primarily giving up a certain level of family involvement because of full-time jobs, thereby 'missing out' on family time. However, they did not describe feeling like their jobs overly encroached on their work/family balance as to cause personal or relational conflict. Lastly, three women (all biological mothers) discussed having to give up both time spent in paid work as well as time with their family. All three women worked part-time and described tensions between paid work and family involvement.

Of the 14 couples who divided paid labor by having one partner work full-time while the other partner worked part-time, only nine women (four biological, five nonbiological; three couples) stated that they were able to achieve equal divisions of domestic labor. One nonbiological mother described creating equal divisions by having one partner take the 'morning shift' with the children while the other took the 'evening shift.' For these couples, unequal involvement in paid labor was not perceived as threatening equality within the domestic realm. As Deborah explained, she and her partner drew on their 'strengths,' such that 'this is my responsibility and that's her responsibility.' These women may have perceived themselves as having differentiated roles in terms of the *kinds* of tasks they did, but they contended that the amount of work they did was equal. Thus, they viewed their roles as unequal, but nevertheless equitable – a common argument made by both heterosexual couples who may emphasize equitability over inequality (Nentwich, 2008) and gay and lesbian couples who are invested in representing their lives as egalitarian even if this is not always the case (Carrington, 1999).

Many of these women (10 biological, 10 nonbiological; nine couples) discussed having unequal divisions of domestic labor. Some of these women (six biological, six nonbiological; four couples) viewed their differences in paid work as causing unequal divisions of domestic labor. As Brooke, a nonbiological mother, stated: 'Samantha has been doing much more because she's home, and that's kind of the deal that we got right now. She has been the one who's expected to do the housework.' A few women also stated that personality differences, in conjunction with

different amounts of involvement in paid work, led to unequal divisions of domestic labor. As Erin, a biological mother, stated: '[It's] more me taking care of things partially because I'm at home and partially because Sarah hates household stuff.' Narratives such as this suggest a conceptual separation between personality and the social construction of gender. That is, women discussed 'personality' differences as driving differences in division of labor. They did not view these daily enactments of differences as symbolically gendered (or gendering) behaviors. Only three women drew on biological explanations for understanding inequalities within the domestic realm. Nina stated:

I kind of got the last say on things, and that's indicative of our relationship with [child], but I think that gets amplified by the fact that I'm the birth mom and that I've put probably quite a bit more time [in] than Joanne, and so I have a higher level of comfort in decision making about how to raise children, and kind of insider intuition about how it should be.

As a result of her biological 'connection', Nina perceived herself as having more decision-making power in the family.

Some women (one biological, three nonbiological; one couple) also discussed one mother – always the biological mother – as the 'primary caregiver' in explaining their unequal divisions of paid and unpaid labor. They thereby described an implicitly gendered understanding of their work/family roles. One nonbiological mother, Kari, stated:

I've had to take a couple of sick days to take care of him when Rosanne was gone or something, but that's it. It hasn't been a problem. But I'm not the primary in-home caregiver and so when issues come up, I'm not the one who gets called out of work to go home, and so it hasn't been a problem.

Despite research indicating that lesbian women are invested in embodying an 'egalitarian ethic' (Patterson, 1995), such perceptions of primary parenthood suggest that they may also intentionally create inequalities (without necessarily challenging an investment in *egalitarianism*). These women may construct primary parenthood as a temporary role, which the biological mother takes on only in the beginning stages of raising their child. For example, Gertrude, a biological mother stated: '[My child]'s and my relationship was primary during that [early] period, and breast-feeding was both cause and symbol of that.' Significantly, none of the women explicitly viewed primary parenthood as linked to their status as biological mothers.

In eight couples (16 women) one partner worked in paid employment full-time while the other partner was not employed. In all eight couples, the non-employed parent was the biological mother. These couples most directly confront the heteronormative stereotype of the traditional (male) breadwinner who leaves all the domestic chores to the domestic (female) housewife. Despite the social pressures of these stereotypes and the tendency for parental roles to develop along

biological lines, these women mostly discussed divisions of labor without mentioning biological status. Instead, women often talked about inequalities as developing out of 'natural' personality differences or out of different levels of investment in, or time allotted to, paid labor.

Within this group, biological mothers generally described feeling positively about taking on more of the childcare and not being employed. They embraced their roles as primary caretakers, and they did not describe their unequal divisions in paid labor as particularly stressful or non-egalitarian. Nonbiological mothers expressed greater tension around work/family balance. As one woman, Ann, stated: 'My biggest problem is that I love both responsibilities, so sometimes it's hard to be away from one or the other. I love what I do at work, but it makes me sad to leave my kids in the morning. And then it makes me sad to leave my job at night because I love what I do.' Although four nonbiological mothers described their jobs as encroaching on family time, they did not typically experience this as stressful. Despite working full-time, three nonbiological mothers described their perception that they nevertheless had to primarily give up involvement in paid work as a result of parenting demands. For these women, work provided a respite from the stressful demands of parenting.

Within this context of unequal divisions of paid labor, nine women (six biological, three nonbiological; three couples) described unequal divisions of domestic labor. These women similarly discussed the division of domestic labor as resulting from 'personality' differences, time spent at home, and gender differences. Women's interpretations of divisions of labor at times confronted the traditional roles that they might otherwise represent given these structural inequalities of paid labor differences. Delores, a non-employed biological mother, compared her experience with her partner to her marriage with her ex-husband: 'My wife seems to help me out a lot more than my first husband helped; she spends more time with the kids.' By turning to the particularities of her personal history, she implicitly suggested that she may receive more help now precisely because she has a *female* partner. Delores further described: 'our friends tease us and say we are like the most heterosexual couple in the world. We live the typical straight life style. She's like the guy that goes to work and makes money, and I take care of the kids. People don't even look at us like we're gay.' Her partner, Faye, shared a similar perspective: 'she's definitely the mom, I'm kinda the dad. It's not a bad thing, it's just what it is.' For this couple, their differentiated roles were perceived as non-problematic, and they both expressed their comfort with embodying traditional gendered behaviors. Further, even though they are in a same-sex relationship, their enactment of gender norms within this context effectively extracted them, on a symbolic level, from their sexual minority status.

Discrepant perspectives between partners

Although there was generally high within-couple agreement amongst all women's descriptions of divisions of labor, six couples held discrepant perspectives. In all

but one of these couples, the biological mothers described unequal divisions of domestic labor while the nonbiological mothers described relative equality. The biological mothers often emphasized either their satisfaction with being primary caregivers or the inevitabilities of doing more domestic work given that they spent less time in paid work. Women reported that these divergent perspectives did not usually cause relational conflict. Such satisfaction with unequal roles suggests that for some women the solidity of the relationship or healthy functioning of the family was not dependent on congruent perspectives. Perhaps similarly perceiving equal divisions of labor was less salient for these women than feeling that their individual needs and desires in the family and paid work domains were being met.

Resisting heteronormative stereotypes

In all work/family arrangements, many women described resisting heteronormative stereotypes of the traditional family. Many women, particularly women with unequal divisions of paid labor, resisted an interpretation of their divisions of labor as being defined as either 'feminine' or 'masculine.' Fourteen women described altering heteronormative expectations for how they enacted divisions of labor, thus challenging the notion that inequalities in paid labor necessarily lead to inequalities in domestic labor. Some women (three biological, three nonbiological, no couples) described attempts to create equality despite unequal divisions of labor, explicitly constructing their relationships as not replicating traditional gender roles. As Joanne, a nonbiological mother, stated:

I mow the lawn not because I'm butch necessarily, but because I like mowing the lawn, or not because I'm trying to be the man as much as, I like mowing the lawn. [These roles] get redefined for me... I try and have language to be able to share with other people, but I'm much more traditional dad about work and all that stuff than most people would think of a woman being, but what I've also realized is, I totally get to redefine what that feels like... it doesn't have to have all these other assumptions about not being home or not being engaged, or not being an active parent... it sort of triggers what are the assumptions and stereotypes about what it means as a parent to be a dad.

Joanne highlights the difficulty in giving meaning through language to her experience – one that she constructs as stretching the very bounds of how society conceptualizes parental roles and the gendered meanings attached to those roles.

Some women (six biological, three nonbiological, one couple) also described being less constrained by normative notions of family and gender norms than heterosexual couples. One biological mother, Nancy, stated:

I think that we have more fluidity in our roles and there is no obvious role that each of us is supposed to take on or resist. So that gives us some freedom. I mean I've seen the upside [positive aspect] of [having that kind of freedom]. When they were tiny, I really

wished that we had this, like, male–female difference in career expectations, career advancement, money.

Nancy points to how she and her partner were able to construct roles that were not confined by masculine/feminine divisions of labor. Yet, this perceived ‘fluidity’ had caused tension because there was no easy solution for how to split up tasks in the absence of prescribed roles. Another biological mother, Nicole, had experienced distress over how much time her job required of her, leaving her to do less of the childcare. However, she emphasized how being in a same-sex relationship had allowed her a level of egalitarianism that she believed she would not have if she was in a heterosexual relationship. When asked about balancing her job with family, she explained: ‘It’s very hard. I don’t think I could do it if I were married to a man. I think it makes a huge difference that I’m married to a woman.’

Consistent with some researchers’ depictions of lesbians as challenging the traditional heteronormative family form (Dunne, 2000), almost half of the women constructed their work/family arrangements as challenging heteronormative masculine/feminine assumptions about family practices. When looking at biological and nonbiological mothers, our analysis suggests a tension, not typically discussed by participants, between the reported material inequalities of their divisions of labor (in ways that often mirror the heteronormative divisions of labor) and their personal constructions of these divisions. Such constructions expand the *meanings* attached to these inequalities. Thus, their narratives may be very similar to contemporary heterosexual parents who find themselves establishing unequal divisions of labor within the traditional gender divide, but who continually assert their contention that each partner is equally involved in parenting (Nentwich, 2008).

Discussion

Interpreting women’s perceptions of their divisions of labor within a structural framework of how they divided paid labor instantiates the theoretical and practical goal of examining subjective constructions of lived experiences as inherently imbedded within larger structural stratifications. The women’s narratives in this sample suggest that they may construct symbolically gendered (and unequal) divisions of labor while challenging the salience of gendered interpretations of their roles. Thus, some of the women’s narratives indicated daily activities in the work and family realm that carry gendered meanings, but were resisted at the level of identity (i.e. ‘I may engage in more typical male behavior such as paid labor involvement, but I do not identify with the stereotyped male/father role’) (Kroska, 1997).

For those couples who reportedly had equal divisions of paid labor, there was significant discussion of how their roles were egalitarian, suggesting the importance of perceptions of egalitarianism. Yet, women nevertheless discussed experiencing varying degrees of tension when both mothers worked in full-time or part-time employment. Thus, equality in paid labor did not necessarily lead to entirely

satisfying roles, as different women were more or less desiring or striving for (even minor) shifts in labor arrangements. Further, women were constructing their work/family arrangements within the context of prevailing heteronormative discourses and norms concerning divisions of labor and the salience of egalitarian parenting (Deutsch, 1999). As a result of such tensions, some of the women who had what could be considered an egalitarian division of labor were actually trying to establish less equal roles given one partner's greater desire to be the primary caregiver. Their narratives suggest that the 'egalitarian ethic' of lesbian women is an oversimplification of the kinds of choices lesbian women actually reportedly enact. The women in this study challenge any singular interpretation of their roles and identities as essentially egalitarian. At the same time, they stretch the confines of the traditional (heterosexual) nuclear family. Even in the context of unequal divisions of labor, lesbian mothers reshape meanings tied to 'mothering' and 'fathering' (Dunne, 2000), and in so doing deconstruct any singular relationship between biological sex and gender enactments (Butler, 1990). Inequalities in labor arrangements within lesbian mother-headed families exist outside of male/female divisions, despite the reality that they must still contend with normative discourses concerning egalitarian parenting (Risman and Johnson-Sumerford, 1998). Thus, lesbian mothers can view inequalities in their relationships as nevertheless more egalitarian than inequalities in heterosexual relationships – where symbolic and material power (of paid labor) is more directly associated with systemic male privilege (Goldberg, 2009).

Equal divisions of paid and unpaid labor were not always constructed as satisfying arrangements. This does not mean that the women who divided labor relatively equally did not value egalitarianism. Rather, it may be that these women's discourses point to the complexities and struggles that are required in trying to create equal work/family arrangements. 'Equality' may not always feel so equal or fair if each partner has differing levels of personal investment in paid work or family life (Erickson, 2005).

Significantly, 22 of 30 couples reported unequal divisions of paid labor. Although greater education may account for the equal divisions of labor that some women discussed (e.g. Davis and Greenstein, 2004), women in this sample demonstrate more complex interpretations than can be explained by education levels alone. Most women who had cut back in paid work described little stress around this choice and few fears of long-term job consequences. Women, and typically biological mothers, were less concerned with supposed 'inequalities' of unequal divisions of labor, as they tended to more thoroughly embody traditional notions of intensive mothering (Nentwich, 2008). Women often described more concern over meeting the needs of each partner with regards to work/family roles, rather than arbitrarily creating equal divisions of labor. In this way, discourses of individualism (e.g. 'I prefer staying home given my personality') at times trumped discourses of equality. Many women did not thereby equate equality of labor with equality of needs. Thus, women may be invested in a perception of egalitarianism despite inequalities (Carrington, 1999). Unequal divisions of paid

labor have often not been studied given the prevailing emphasis on divisions of domestic labor in lesbian mother families (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Patterson, 1995).

Despite patterns delineating biological and nonbiological mothers in terms of how they constructed giving up time in paid work or family, their discourses also resist a dualistic interpretation of essential differences between biological and nonbiological mothers. Women rarely reported that they perceived their greater time spent performing domestic labor as related to their biological status. Biological mothers often embodied traditional notions of intensive mothering, a similar finding by other researchers concerning the greater involvement of biological mothers in childcare (e.g. Gabb, 2004; Patterson, 1995), indicated by their greater reported involvement in family life. Yet, they also challenged understandings of their roles as assimilating to heteronormative expectations of behavior (Weston, 1991). Thus, although biological connections appear to be salient in regulating divisions of labor, these women were often involved in processes that *both* reiterated traditional roles and subverted them.

Although some lesbian women described challenging heteronormative assumptions, their reportedly unequal divisions of labor suggest a more complex story. The discourse of egalitarianism (e.g. Dalton and Bielby, 2000; Ussher and Perz, 2008) often remained salient despite structural inequalities. Yet, in the realm of discursive constructions of practiced behaviors, the biological mothers described taking on more domestic labor and cutting back paid work. Thus, they may 'buy into' the assumed salience of biological motherhood, without overtly or consciously perceiving their roles as predicated on biology. Biology remained a 'silent marker' of difference that most women did not discuss as influencing their work/family arrangements. This remained the case even when biological mothers described less equality than their partners in the division of domestic labor. The silence of biology may also speak to the fact that these women were all mothers of toddlers and were no longer breastfeeding. Given most women's apparent desire to perceive themselves as equally invested in parenting, and the absence of a distinct behavior related to biology (i.e. breastfeeding), the importance of biology may have seemed irrelevant in understanding their current roles – *even if* breastfeeding may have initially led to a sequence of employment/family choices that increasingly set in motion unequal divisions of labor (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins, 2007).

Women may not have mentioned biology as an important factor influencing divisions of labor precisely because they were invested in constructing their equal statuses as 'mothers' regardless of biological connection. Thus, in constructing their work/family arrangements, lesbian mothers may discursively resist the notion that biology is a salient aspect to their identities or mothering practices. Women may desire fitting into normative notions of egalitarian parenting whereby biology 'should not' differentiate parental roles. However, biological relatedness (particularly after termination of breastfeeding) may indeed have little personal significance to how lesbian mothers construct their personal and familial identities. Importantly, lesbian adoptive mothers may most fully succeed in the practice of

egalitarian parenting precisely because there is no biological relationship between the child and either mother (Ciano-Boyce and Shelley-Sireci, 2002).

Even when couples described equal divisions of labor, some women's discussion of one mother as the 'primary parent' indicates that women could embrace both the notion of equality *and* primacy in parenthood. Despite differences in levels of 'primacy,' some couples interpreted various material inequalities as nevertheless symbolically egalitarian, thereby resisting readings of their work/family arrangements as either egalitarian or non-egalitarian. Their narratives contend that their divisions of labor do not necessarily fit within the gendered binary of the masculine breadwinner and the feminine housewife. Rather, gender is a contested terrain that many lesbian mothers challenged as an adequate interpretive lens for understanding the meanings and significance of their work/family roles. Some lesbian mothers were in the process of undoing gender at a subjective level at the same time that they were doing gender through reportedly enacting persistently unequal roles. While paid and unpaid labor continue to carry gendered meanings at a societal level, at a personal level these connotations may be constructed as irrelevant to lesbian mothers in their daily lives.

Thus, our analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data indicates a dual process of enacting and subverting gender norms. The quantitative data suggest that biology may remain a significant factor in delineating divisions of labor; yet, the qualitative data elucidate women's diverse constructions of divisions of labor that extend far beyond biological determinism. This overlay of both analyses demonstrates the significance of biology, but challenges a reified dichotomy of biological and nonbiological parenting. Indeed, women's narratives demonstrate a range of interpretations for how they create divisions of labor. As they contend with the dominant discourses around egalitarianism/equality and masculinity/femininity in constructing divisions of labor, they may at times nevertheless find themselves engaging in traditionally masculine and feminine roles. Our analysis suggests a variety of constructions in how women rationalized, accepted, or refuted normative gendering, as they personally defined the importance of equality and egalitarianism to their individual lives, relationships and families.

This study extends previous research by providing an in-depth analysis of middle-class Caucasian North American lesbian mothers' perceptions of divisions of paid and unpaid labor. The women in this study contest narrowly defined understandings of how living and mothering in a same-sex relationship may or may not challenge normative gender ideologies. Their narratives suggest that lesbian mothers are continually involved in the doing and undoing of gender through their material enactments of the divisions of labor as well as through their symbolic interpretations of such divisions. This study demonstrates that the 'egalitarian ethic' is an over-simplification of the kinds of divisions of labor that lesbian women construct; biological kinship relations did not strictly determine lesbian women's interpretations of work/family roles; and lesbian women may both challenge and enact heteronormative constructions of the division of labor across a variety of paid and unpaid labor arrangements.

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