

## Division of Labor Among Lesbian and Heterosexual Parenting Couples: Correlates of Specialized Versus Shared Patterns

Charlotte J. Patterson,<sup>1,2</sup> Erin L. Sutfin,<sup>1</sup> and Megan Fulcher<sup>1</sup>

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One of the central tasks that couples face in coparenting is the division of labor. In this study, we explored division of family labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples who were parenting 4 to 6 year-old children. Sixty-six families, half headed by lesbian couples and half headed by heterosexual couples, participated in the study. Measures of parental attitudes, resources, demographics, and division of labor were collected. As expected, lesbian couples were more likely to divide paid and unpaid labor evenly, whereas heterosexual couples were more likely to show specialized patterns, with husbands investing more time in paid employment and wives devoting more time to unpaid family work. Structural variables (e.g., husband's hours in paid employment) were the best predictors of division of labor among heterosexual couples. Among lesbian couples, however, ideological variables (e.g., ideas about ideal divisions of labor) were the better predictors. Discrepancies in occupational prestige were greater among heterosexual than among lesbian couples. Discussion centers on the ways in which gender and sexual orientation may relate to couples' decisions about division of labor.

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**KEY WORDS:** division of labor; lesbian mother; parenting; families; sexual orientation.

One of the central tasks that couples face in coparenting is the division of labor (Acock & Demo, 1994; McHale et al., 2002). How much time should each member of the couple invest in paid employment to provide necessary financial support for the family? And how much time should each devote to unpaid but essential household and childcare tasks? In this study, we examine predictors of such decisions among lesbian and heterosexual couples who are the parents of young children.

Research with lesbian and heterosexual parenting couples has consistently revealed that lesbian and heterosexual couples tend to make different choices about division of labor (Patterson, 2000, 2002). Among heterosexual couples, mothers

are generally responsible for the bulk of childcare and household work, and fathers are likely to devote more time to paid employment. This pattern, in which one partner's efforts are centered on paid employment and the other partner's efforts are focused on unpaid family work, may be described as *specialized*. Among lesbian couples who have had children together, however, the two mothers are likely to share responsibilities for both paid employment and unpaid family labor more evenly (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Dunne, 2000; Patterson, 1995; Sullivan, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1998). In this pattern, where both partners' efforts are directed in roughly equal measure toward both paid and unpaid work, labor may be described as *shared*. Although there are couples who do things differently (Deutsch, 1999; Ehrensaft, 1990), existing research suggests that lesbian couples who have had children together are likely to show the *shared* pattern, whereas heterosexual couples who have had

<sup>1</sup>University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>2</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400400, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904; e-mail: cjp@virginia.edu.

children together are more likely to show the *specialized* pattern of division of labor (Patterson, 2000, 2002).

Why do lesbian and heterosexual couples generally choose to divide the labor involved in caring for their children and households in different ways? Empirical research addressing this question remains sparse. A number of hypotheses about determinants of the division of household and childcare labor have, however, been offered in the literature on heterosexual couples. In this paper, we evaluate four different ideas about the factors underlying division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples.

One idea, called the Relative Resources hypothesis, suggests that discrepancies in the resources of the two members of a couple are important influences over their division of labor. In our society, men usually have more resources (e.g., earn more money, have more prestigious jobs) than do women. In this context, the Relative Resources view predicts that the greater the discrepancy in resources (e.g., income) between husbands and wives, the less unpaid household and childcare work that husbands will do. Among lesbian couples, the view would predict that the partner who earns more money should do less unpaid family work. This view has received considerable support in studies of heterosexual couples (Shelton & John, 1993), including studies of heterosexual parenting couples (Deutsch, Lussier, & Servis, 1993). In their studies of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported anecdotal data that might be taken as support for this view among lesbian couples, but systematic studies of lesbian mothers have not yet appeared.

A second, Structural hypothesis (sometimes called the demand-response hypothesis) suggests that when there is greater availability or greater need, greater participation in unpaid family work can be expected. For instance, if fathers work fewer hours per week in paid employment (i.e., if they are more available) or if there are many children (i.e., if there is greater need), then fathers will be expected to do more unpaid family work, such as childcare. Among lesbian couples, this view would predict, for example, that the partner who works fewer hours in paid employment will do more unpaid family work. In support of this view, Cowan and Cowan (1992) reported that fathers who spent fewer hours in paid employment were more involved in childcare; and similar findings have been

reported by other investigators working with heterosexual couples (Blair & Litcher, 1991; Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; Kamo, 1991). Again, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported anecdotal data from lesbian couples that were consistent with predictions based on this view, but more formal study has been lacking.

A third, or Ideological hypothesis (sometimes called a sex-role attitude hypothesis) centers on attitudes about gender-related issues that are held by members of the couple. The Ideological hypothesis suggests that when spouses hold egalitarian views, fathers will generally participate more in unpaid family labor. For instance, fathers who endorse nontraditional gender roles are likely to do more childcare. Consistent with this view, Deutsch et al. (1993) found that fathers' feminist attitudes were a significant predictor of the amount of childcare that they did; feminist fathers did more childcare than did those with more traditional attitudes. Others have reported similar findings (Blair & Litcher, 1991; Kamo, 1988, 1994). Although lesbian women might be seen as more likely than heterosexual women or men to express feminist views, no research on lesbian parents has addressed the question of whether variations in such views might be related to decisions about division of labor. A fourth hypothesis can be termed the Family Systems hypothesis (Belsky & Volling, 1987; Cowan & Cowan, 1992). In this view, the quality and dynamics of the couple relationship are seen as important determinants of decisions about division of labor. As an example, when fathers are highly satisfied with their marriages, they are expected to participate more in unpaid family work. Consistent with this view, Cowan and Cowan (1992) found that degree of marital satisfaction was related to paternal involvement with their infants and toddlers. Again, no research has examined these possibilities among lesbian parenting couples.

In summary, each of the four hypotheses has received some support from research with heterosexual couples, but none has had a formal test with lesbian couples. In this study, we examined the ability of each of these four hypotheses to predict parental participation in unpaid family labor. We studied both lesbian and heterosexual couples, all of whom were parenting 4 to 6 year-old children. In this way, we set out not only to describe division of labor, but also to address questions about similarities and differences among the correlates of division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples.

**Table I.** Demographic Characteristics of Sample

|                                      | Lesbian     | Heterosexual | Lesbian vs. heterosexual |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| <b>First parent</b>                  |             |              |                          |
| Age in years                         | 42.1 (4.4)  | 38.9 (4.2)   | $F(1, 61) = 6.08^*$      |
| Race (percent White)                 | 97          | 97           | <i>ns</i>                |
| Income <sup>a</sup>                  | 4.6 (1.9)   | 2.9 (2.4)    | $F(1, 59) = 15.14^{***}$ |
| Occupational prestige                | 57.3 (20.0) | 40.3 (34.4)  | $F(1, 59) = 5.92^*$      |
| Education <sup>b</sup>               | 5.3 (1.1)   | 4.9 (1.2)    | <i>ns</i>                |
| <b>Second parent</b>                 |             |              |                          |
| Age in years                         | 42.7 (6.4)  | 40.8 (5.5)   | <i>ns</i>                |
| Race (percent White)                 | 94          | 97           | <i>ns</i>                |
| Income <sup>a</sup>                  | 4.8 (2.3)   | 5.4 (2.1)    | $F(1, 59) = 4.46^*$      |
| Occupational prestige                | 58.4 (22.0) | 63.6 (24.0)  | <i>ns</i>                |
| Education <sup>b</sup>               | 5.2 (1.1)   | 5.0 (1.3)    | <i>ns</i>                |
| <b>Household</b>                     |             |              |                          |
| Work hours per week                  | 69.0 (20.7) | 71.2 (22.8)  | <i>ns</i>                |
| Discrepancy in income                | 2.7 (2.0)   | 3.9 (2.2)    | <i>ns</i>                |
| Discrepancy in occupational prestige | 19.3 (19.0) | 37.3 (33.1)  | $F(1, 59) = 6.75^*$      |
| Discrepancy in education             | 0.7 (1.0)   | 1.0 (1.0)    | <i>ns</i>                |
| <b>Target child</b>                  |             |              |                          |
| Age in months                        | 61.9 (9.4)  | 62.4 (10.8)  | <i>ns</i>                |
| Gender (percent male)                | 30          | 45           | <i>ns</i>                |
| Race (percent White)                 | 51          | 94           | $\chi^2(1) = 15.54^{**}$ |
| Adoption (percent adopted)           | 51          | 15           | $\chi^2(1) = 9.82^{**}$  |
| Number of siblings                   | 0.8 (0.6)   | 1.1 (1.0)    | <i>ns</i>                |

Note. Except where noted, standard deviations are given in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>Total income: 0 = no income; 1 = less than \$10,000; 2 = \$10,000–\$20,000; 3 = \$20,000–\$30,000; 4 = \$30,000–\$40,000; 5 = \$40,000–\$50,000; 6 = \$50,000–\$60,000; 7 = more than \$60,000.

<sup>b</sup>Parents' education: 1 = no high school; 2 = high school diploma; 3 = some college; 4 = college degree; 5 = some graduate school; 6 = graduate degree.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**METHOD**

**Participating Families**

The sample consisted of 66 families—33 headed by lesbian couples and 33 headed by heterosexual parents. On average, the 132 parents were 41 years of age at the time of testing, and had children who were 5-years old at time of testing. The children had all been born or adopted into their parents' relationship, which was intact at the time of the data collection. Thus, in both lesbian and heterosexual couples, both members of the couple had intended to become parents, and had parented their children since birth (or, in the case of adoptions, since early in life). The families were recruited through churches, daycare centers, parenting support groups, and word of mouth. They resided in urban or suburban areas in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Seventeen families (11 with lesbian parents and six with heterosexual parents) had only one child, 39 families (19 with lesbian parents and 20 with heterosexual parents) had two children, and 10 families (three

with lesbian parents and seven with heterosexual parents) had three or more children; the differences between groups in this regard were not significant (see Table I).

Overall, families headed by lesbian couples were well-matched with those headed by heterosexual couples (see Table I), but there were some demographic differences between the two groups. As can be seen in Table I, lesbian genetic/adoptive mothers were older (mean age, 42 years) than heterosexual mothers (mean age, 39 years). There were similar numbers of boys and girls in the lesbian-headed and heterosexual-headed homes. However, children of lesbian couples were more likely to be non-White (16 of 33 children with lesbian parents vs. only two of 33 children with heterosexual parents) and adopted (17 of 33 children with lesbian parents vs. only five of 33 with heterosexual parents). Lesbian mothers in this sample were more likely than heterosexual parents to have adopted children from abroad. Initial analyses revealed that child race and adoptive status were not related to parental division of labor, so our results are reported without consideration of this variable.

Differences between lesbian and heterosexual couples in income and occupational prestige are discussed below.

## Materials

We collected data about four constructs: parental attitudes concerning children's gender-related behavior, parental division of labor (including ideal as well as real division of labor), satisfaction with the couple relationship, and demographic information.

### *Parental Attitudes About Gender-Related Behavior*

Parental attitudes surrounding children's gender-related behaviors were assessed using the Parent Ideas Questionnaire (PIQ; Gervai, Turner, & Hinde, 1995). The subscale that we used consists of 18 statements that pertain to boys' and girls' sex-typed and cross sex-typed behavior. Parents are asked to rate each statement on a 4-point scale, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Sample items include, "It is more acceptable to me for a girl to cry than for a boy (excluding major injuries)" or "Boys are naturally more adventurous than girls." Scores range from 0 to 72, with higher scores revealing more conservative attitudes.

### *Parental Division of Labor*

Parents' division of labor was assessed using the *Who Does What?* (Cowan & Cowan, 1990), with minor adjustments in wording to make the instrument more appropriate for lesbian as well as heterosexual parents. Both parents reported the percentage of each of 13 household and 20 childcare tasks that they typically performed, on a scale ranging from 1 = *i do it all* to 9 = *my partner/spouse does it all*; these served as scores for their real involvement in unpaid family labor. Parents also reported their ideal involvement in the same childcare and household tasks, 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, parents 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, and choosing toys, and visiting parks or 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.

### *Satisfaction With Couple Relationships*

To provide a global assessment of relationship quality, we used the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959). The LWMAT is a 15-item self-report test designed to measure marital adjustment of spouses in heterosexual marriages. Minor semantic adjustments were required to make the LWMAT suitable for use with lesbian as well as heterosexual couples (Chan et al., 1998; Patterson, 1995). Possible scores on the LWMAT range from 2 to 158, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

### *Demographic Information*

We also collected demographic information about parental age, race, education, employment status (including precise job title, and hours per week of work time), individual and household income. In addition, we collected demographic information about children in each family, including sex, age, and race. These data are presented Table I.

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 (SEI; Duncan, 1991). Possible scores on the scale ranged from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting greater occupational prestige. These data are presented in Table I.

## Procedure

Each family was contacted via telephone or e-mail. Families were given a brief description of the study and an outline of what participation would involve. During these telephone calls, researchers assessed families' qualifications for the study. Prospective participants identified themselves as either

lesbian or heterosexual, verified the ages of their children, and confirmed that they had been in a relationship with their spouse or partner since before the target child's birth or the adoption of the child in early infancy.

Once a family agreed to participate, two researchers visited them in their home. Parents were asked to fill out questionnaires and self-report instruments, and interviews of children (not relevant to this report) were conducted at this time. If parents were unable to complete all instruments during this visit, they were given stamped, self-addressed envelopes and asked to return the remaining questionnaires through the mail. Follow-up telephone calls were used, as needed, to remind parents to return the forms.

**RESULTS**

We present the results in three sections. In the first section, we present means and standard deviations for division of labor for childcare and household tasks, for lesbian and heterosexual couples. In the second section, we present the zero-order correlations of predictor variables with participation of the father or nonbiological/adoptive lesbian mother in childcare and housework. In the third section, we present composite models of participation in childcare and household, for heterosexual fathers and for lesbian nonbiological/adoptive mothers.

For clarity of presentation, we sometimes refer to the heterosexual mother or to the biological/adoptive lesbian mother in each family as the first parent; and to the heterosexual father or to the nonbiological/adoptive lesbian mother in each family

as the second parent. This is viewed simply as a labeling technique, intended to increase the clarity of presentation, and not as a statement about the relative value or importance of any particular parent or parents.

**Division of Labor Among Lesbian and Heterosexual Parenting Couples**

As expected, our results showed that lesbian couples reported dividing childcare more evenly than did heterosexual couples, and also that they were more likely to prefer this arrangement. There was a significant effect of parental sexual orientation on parents' reports of their real responsibilities,  $F(64) = 9.14, p < .01$ , and ideal preferences for childcare,  $F(64) = 6.13, p < .05$ . Lesbian couples were likely to divide labor relatively evenly, with each mother doing about half of the childcare. Heterosexual couples, on the other hand, reported that mothers did more childcare ( $M = 6.1, SD = 1.0$ ) than did fathers ( $M = 4.1, SD = 0.8$ ),  $t(26) = 6.23, p < .01$ . In addition, lesbian parents reported that they ideally wanted an equal distribution of childcare with each parent doing about half of the work. Heterosexual couples, on the other hand, reported having different ideal amounts of childcare. Heterosexual mothers reported that they would ideally do somewhat more than half of the childcare ( $M = 5.4, SD = 0.6$ ), whereas heterosexual fathers reported that they would ideally like to do somewhat less than half of the childcare ( $M = 4.4, SD = 0.6$ ),  $t(25) = 4.59, p < .01$  (see Table II).

In terms of household work, lesbian and heterosexual couples reported dividing labor in similar

**Table II.** Parental Division of Labor as a Function of Sexual Orientation

| Variable              | Lesbian parents |               |                                | Heterosexual parents |               |                                | First parent             | Second parent            |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|                       | First parent    | Second parent | First parent vs. second parent | First parent         | Second parent | First parent vs. second parent | Lesbian vs. heterosexual | Lesbian vs. heterosexual |
| Division of childcare |                 |               |                                |                      |               |                                |                          |                          |
| Real                  | 5.3 (1.0)       | 5.0 (0.9)     | $t(30) < 1$                    | 6.1 (1.0)            | 4.1 (0.8)     | $t(26) = 6.23^{**}$            | $F(1, 63) = 5.01^*$      | $F(1, 56) = 7.68^*$      |
| Ideal                 | 5.1 (0.6)       | 5.0 (0.6)     | $t(28) < 1$                    | 5.4 (0.6)            | 4.4 (0.6)     | $t(25) = 4.59^{**}$            | $F(1, 63) = 2.45$        | $F(1, 56) = 6.55^*$      |
| Competency            | 8.3 (0.9)       | 8.1 (0.8)     | $t(30) < 1$                    | 8.4 (0.6)            | 7.6 (1.1)     | $t(25) = 2.61$                 | $F(1, 63) < 1$           | $F(1, 56) = 3.11$        |
| Household work        |                 |               |                                |                      |               |                                |                          |                          |
| Real                  | 5.1 (0.6)       | 5.1 (0.8)     | $t(31) < 1$                    | 5.3 (0.8)            | 5.0 (0.7)     | $t(26) < 1$                    | $F(1, 64) = 1.4$         | $F(1, 57) < 1$           |
| Ideal                 | 4.9 (0.5)       | 5.1 (0.7)     | $t(31) = -1.21, ns$            | 4.8 (0.6)            | 5.2 (0.6)     | $t(25) = -2.09, ns$            | $F(1, 64) < 1$           | $F(1, 57) < 1$           |

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses. Bonferroni corrections were applied to all *t* tests to protect alpha levels against inflation caused by multiple comparisons. Given that there were eight comparisons per reporter, results were considered statistically significant at the .05 level only when  $p < .006$  (.05/6).

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

ways, with each partner doing about half of the work. There were no differences between the groups in division of either real or ideal household work (see Table II).

We also studied participants' feelings of competence in performing tasks associated with childcare. Results for both lesbian and heterosexual couples (see Table II) revealed no differences between lesbian and heterosexual couples, or between first and second parents in this regard. Most parents reported that they felt very competent in performing childcare tasks.

We also studied income and occupational prestige among lesbian and heterosexual parents. On average, both individuals and households reported relatively high prestige occupations, and substantial incomes (see Table I). 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 varied also. Heterosexual fathers earned more than lesbian mothers, and lesbian mothers earned more than heterosexual mothers. More interesting, however, were the findings for occupational prestige. 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 within heterosexual couples than among lesbian couples,  $F(1, 59) = 6.75, p < .05$ . 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 is another example of the greater specialization in division of labor among heterosexual than among lesbian couples.

### Correlations of Predictors With Second Parents' Participation in Childcare and Housework

To examine variables that might account for the ways in which couples divided childcare and housework, we explored four alternative models. As a first step, we grouped variables under the hypotheses of interest, and computed Pearson correlations between predictor variables and outcomes representing the second parent's participation in childcare and household tasks. Results are shown in Table III.

**Table III.** Predictor Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations With Second Parent's Contributions to Childcare and Housework

|                                      | Lesbian couples |           |           |           | Heterosexual couples |           |           |           |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|                                      | <i>M</i>        | <i>SD</i> | Childcare | Housework | <i>M</i>             | <i>SD</i> | Childcare | Housework |
| Relative resource hypothesis         |                 |           |           |           |                      |           |           |           |
| Discrepancy in income                | 2.7             | 2.0       | .30       | -.08      | 3.9                  | 2.2       | -.04      | -.09      |
| Discrepancy in occup. prestige       | 19.3            | 19.0      | .41*      | -.08      | 37.3                 | 33.0      | .15       | .14       |
| Discrepancy in education             | 0.7             | 1.0       | .36       | .23       | 1.0                  | 1.0       | .01       | -.22      |
| Structural hypothesis                |                 |           |           |           |                      |           |           |           |
| First parent's hours of work         | 34.6            | 12.2      | -.23      | -.03      | 23.9                 | 21.2      | .38       | .20       |
| Second parent's hours of work        | 34.4            | 17.3      | -.49**    | .03       | 47.3                 | 16.1      | -.68**    | -.32      |
| Age of child (in months)             | 62.0            | 9.4       | -.33      | .00       | 62.4                 | 10.8      | -.20      | -.21      |
| Number of children in family         | 1.8             | 0.6       | .19       | .00       | 2.2                  | 1.0       | -.22      | .00       |
| Ideological hypothesis               |                 |           |           |           |                      |           |           |           |
| First parent's PIQ score             | 10.2            | 8.3       | -.22      | .10       | 18.9                 | 10.5      | -.03      | .03       |
| First parent's ideal DOL, childcare  | 5.1             | 0.7       | -.84**    | -.12      | 5.6                  | 0.6       | -.65**    | -.18      |
| First parent's ideal DOL, housework  | 4.9             | 0.5       | -.05      | -.49**    | 4.8                  | 0.6       | -.32      | -.58**    |
| Second parent's PIQ score            | 15.7            | 9.0       | -.41*     | .05       | 25.8                 | 11.7      | .12       | .14       |
| Second Parent's ideal DOL, childcare | 5.0             | 0.6       | .80**     | .18       | 4.4                  | 0.6       | .63**     | .23       |
| Second parent's ideal DOL, housework | 5.1             | 0.6       | -.32      | .22       | 5.2                  | 0.6       | .54**     | .52**     |
| Family systems                       |                 |           |           |           |                      |           |           |           |
| First parent's LWMAT score           | 110.3           | 25.1      | .16       | -.10      | 110.5                | 23.0      | -.05      | -.05      |
| Second parent's LWMAT score          | 112.6           | 24.7      | .05       | -.11      | 112.3                | 22.7      | -.22      | -.07      |

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

These results lent more support to some hypotheses than to others. Our findings were least consistent with the Family Systems hypothesis. There were no significant associations between couples' relationship satisfaction and second parent's participation in childcare or household work. Our findings lent some support to the Relative Resource hypothesis, with discrepancies in occupational prestige within couples significantly associated with second parent's participation in childcare among lesbian couples. The results were most consistent with the Structural and Ideological hypotheses. The number of hours spent in paid employment each week by the second parent was associated with that parent's participation in childcare for both lesbian and heterosexual couples. Many variables that had been grouped under the Ideological hypothesis—most notably, second parent's ideal distribution of labor for childcare—were strongly associated with the second parent's participation in childcare for both lesbian and heterosexual couples.

#### **Determinants of Participation in Childcare and Housework**

To evaluate the success of each of the four hypotheses in accounting for the participation of the second parent in childcare and household work, a series of separate regression analyses were run independently for lesbian and for heterosexual couples, with second parent's participation in childcare and housework as dependent variables. None of the regression models for housework were significant, so they will not be discussed further (see Table IV).

For the Relative Resource model, income disparity, occupational prestige disparity, and educational disparity were all entered into the regression equation simultaneously. The overall model was significant only for lesbian couples and accounted for 27% of the variance. Both the disparities between occupational prestige and educational attainment were significant predictors in this equation (see Table IV). The results showed that when disparities between occupational prestige and educational attainment were greater within lesbian couples, the second mother participated more in childcare.

Next, we tested the Structural hypothesis by including in the model both the first and second parent's work hours, the age of the target child, and the number of children in the family. In both types of families, the model was significant, accounting for

30% of the variance for lesbian couples and 39% of the variance for heterosexual couples. In both family types, the best predictor was number of hours spent in paid employment by the second parent (see Table IV). When second parents spent more time at work, they reported doing less childcare.

We also tested the Ideological hypothesis by including in the regression model as predictors both parents' responses to the PIQ, and their reports about ideal division of labor of childcare and housework. This model was significant for both family types. It accounted for 77% of the variance among lesbian couples, and for 40% of the variance among heterosexual couples. For lesbian couples, the second parents' ideal division of childcare and housework were both significant predictors of their actual amount of childcare. The more that the second parent wanted to be responsible for childcare, the more they actually participated in it. When second parents ideally wanted to be responsible for less housework, they tended to perform more childcare. For heterosexual couples, although the model was significant, no individual predictor was strong enough to emerge as significant.

Finally, we tested the Family Systems model by including both parents' relationship satisfaction, as measured by their responses to the LWMAT. The model was not significant in either heterosexual-parented families or lesbian-parented families. Summary statistics for all of the regression models can be found in Table IV.

In summary, these results were consistent with the Structural hypothesis for both family types, and also show some support for the Relative Resource and the Ideological hypotheses for lesbian couples. There was, however, no support for the Family Systems model in either family type.

#### **Composite Models of Childcare**

Because there was support for more than one of the models, we also wanted to test the relative power of the models in accounting for the second parent's participation in childcare. The five individual variables that were previously related to the second parents' participation in childcare were entered into a simultaneous regression, separately for lesbian and for heterosexual couples.

Results are shown in Table V, and they revealed significant models for both family types. In the two family types, different predictors emerged

**Table IV.** Regression Analyses With Second Parents' Contributions to Childcare and Housework

| Hypothesis               | Childcare       |          |                      |          | Housework       |          |                       |          |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------|----------------------|----------|-----------------|----------|-----------------------|----------|
|                          | Lesbian couples |          | Heterosexual couples |          | Lesbian couples |          | Heterosexual families |          |
|                          | <i>B</i>        | <i>t</i> | <i>B</i>             | <i>t</i> | <i>B</i>        | <i>t</i> | <i>B</i>              | <i>t</i> |
| <b>Relative resource</b> |                 |          |                      |          |                 |          |                       |          |
| Income disparity         | .10             | < 1      | -.80                 | -1.87    | -.09            | < 1      | -.63                  | 1.46     |
| Prestige disparity       | .41             | 2.13*    | .84                  | 1.96     | -.01            | < 1      | .81                   | 1.91     |
| Education disparity      | .41             | 2.48*    | .01                  | < 1      | .22             | 1.13     | -.26                  | 1.07     |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>    | .27             |          | .05                  |          | -.05            |          | .06                   |          |
| <i>F</i> (3, 25) (3, 18) | 4.52*           |          | 1.35                 |          | < 1             |          | 1.45                  |          |
| <b>Structural</b>        |                 |          |                      |          |                 |          |                       |          |
| P1 work hours            | -.15            | < 1      | .12                  | < 1      | -.04            | < 1      | .11                   | < 1      |
| P2 work hours            | -.46            | -2.76*   | -.63                 | -3.78**  | .04             | < 1      | -.30                  | -1.41    |
| Child age                | -.22            | -1.40    | -.08                 | < 1      | -.01            | < 1      | -.20                  | < 1      |
| Number of children       | .31             | 1.96     | .05                  | < 1      | .00             | < 1      | .21                   | < 1      |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>    | .30             |          | .39                  |          | -.15            |          | .01                   |          |
| <i>F</i> (4, 30) (4, 26) | 4.17*           |          | 5.18**               |          | .02             |          | 1.05                  |          |
| <b>Ideological</b>       |                 |          |                      |          |                 |          |                       |          |
| P1 PIQ                   | .03             | < 1      | -.19                 | < 1      | -.17            | < 1      | -.13                  | < 1      |
| P1 ideal childcare       | -.15            | < 1      | -.41                 | -1.79    | .50             | 1.12     | .01                   | < 1      |
| P1 ideal housework       | -.03            | < 1      | -.12                 | < 1      | -.53            | -2.52*   | -.43                  | -1.80    |
| P2 PIQ                   | -.18            | -1.55    | .25                  | 1.04     | -.06            | < 1      | .26                   | < 1      |
| P2 ideal childcare       | .64             | 3.23**   | .25                  | < 1      | .50             | 1.27     | -.17                  | < 1      |
| P2 ideal housework       | -.31            | -2.37*   | .07                  | < 1      | -.04            | < 1      | .39                   | 1.16     |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>    | .77             |          | .39                  |          | .10             |          | .27                   |          |
| <i>F</i> (6, 28) (6, 25) | 16.74***        |          | 3.63*                |          | 1.50            |          | 2.54                  |          |
| <b>Family systems</b>    |                 |          |                      |          |                 |          |                       |          |
| P1 LWMAT                 | .24             | < 1      | .20                  | < 1      | -.05            | < 1      | .00                   | < 1      |
| P2 LWMAT                 | -.12            | < 1      | -.36                 | -1.33    | -.09            | < 1      | -.07                  | < 1      |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>    | -.04            |          | -.01                 |          | -.05            |          | -.08                  |          |
| <i>F</i> (2, 28) (2, 24) | .48             |          | .91                  |          | .21             |          | .06                   |          |

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

as significant. For heterosexual parents, the only significant predictor was fathers' work hours. Fathers who spent more time in paid employment participated less in childcare. For lesbian parents, three predictors emerged as significant—disparity between partners in educational attainment, and the second parents' ideal division of labor for childcare and for housework. For lesbian parents, ideal division of

childcare was the most significant predictor. When the second lesbian mother reported wanting to be very involved in childcare, she was likely to be very involved. In addition, when disparities in educational attainment between the members of a lesbian couple were larger, the second mother was more likely to participate extensively in childcare. Overall, the model for heterosexual parents accounted for 50%

**Table V.** Regression Analyses of Composite Models of Second Parent's Participation in Childcare

| Composite model                 | Lesbian couples |          | Heterosexual couples |          |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|----------|----------------------|----------|
|                                 | <i>B</i>        | <i>t</i> | <i>B</i>             | <i>t</i> |
| Occupational prestige disparity | .16             | 1.81     | .14                  | < 1      |
| Educational disparity           | .18             | 2.29*    | -.08                 | < 1      |
| P2 work hours                   | -.15            | -1.69    | -.93                 | -3.21**  |
| P2 ideal childcare              | .72             | 9.12***  | .31                  | 1.29     |
| P2 ideal housework              | -.31            | -4.09*** | -.52                 | -1.71    |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>           | .85             |          | .50                  |          |
| <i>F</i>                        | 33.32***        |          | 5.00**               |          |

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



of the variance, and the model for lesbian parents accounted for 85% of the variance in second parents' participation in childcare.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples who were parenting young children. Findings revealed that, whereas heterosexual couples were likely to specialize, lesbian couples were likely to share responsibilities for paid employment and for unpaid family work. We also found that different variables were associated with varying arrangements in the two groups. For heterosexual parents, Structural variables were most clearly associated with decisions about division of labor, but for lesbian parents, the best predictors were Ideological variables. These results contribute in several ways to understanding of coparenting patterns among lesbian and heterosexual couples.

Our first finding was that, as expected, lesbian couples were likely to share paid employment and unpaid family work more evenly than were heterosexual couples. This result is consistent with findings of earlier research on lesbian and heterosexual couples (Chan et al., 1998; Dunne, 2000; Kurdek, 1993; Patterson, 1995; Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996; Sullivan, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1998). Whereas heterosexual couples are likely to divide labor by specializing, lesbian couples are more likely to split both paid employment and unpaid family work evenly.

These differences were most prominent in the contrast between hours spent in paid employment, on the one hand, and in childcare, on the other. The total number of hours spent in paid employment (i.e., the total of both parents = work hours) did not differ between the two family types, but lesbian and heterosexual couples allocated these hours differently. Lesbian mothers each spent about the same number of hours per week in paid employment, but heterosexual fathers spent twice as many hours per week in paid employment as did their wives. Lesbian mothers were about equally involved in childcare, but heterosexual mothers were much more involved in childcare than were their husbands. Thus, lesbian and heterosexual couples made different choices about division of labor, both at home and at work.

One hypothesis about fathers' relative lack of involvement in childcare is that they are less skilled and feel less competent than their wives in this do-

main. Although we did not have access to objective measures of parental skill in childcare, we did collect information about parents' subjective feelings of competence in the tasks that are involved in childcare. We found that fathers described themselves as being just as competent as did mothers in this regard. Thus, fathers' lower involvement in childcare, relative to mothers, cannot be attributed to feelings of incompetence. We note that target children in our study were 4 to 6 years of age, and that parental feelings of competence may diverge more at other ages. Thus, although fathers' relative lack of involvement in childcare cannot be explained by perceived incompetence in the present sample, a different result might be obtained for fathers of infants.

In addition to differences in time spent in paid employment and in responsibility for childcare, we also found differences between lesbian and heterosexual couples in income and occupational prestige. Educational levels were, however, similar among all the parents who participated in this study. Given that they worked different numbers of hours per week, it was not surprising that lesbian mothers earned more money, on average, than did heterosexual mothers, or that heterosexual fathers earned more, on average, than did lesbian or heterosexual mothers. More interesting was our finding that occupational prestige differed more within heterosexual couples than it did within lesbian couples. Despite similar educational opportunities, heterosexual mothers were engaged in less prestigious occupations than were lesbian mothers or heterosexual fathers. Thus, the discrepancy between the prestige of partners' occupations was significantly greater for heterosexual than for lesbian parents. This finding provides further evidence that while heterosexual parents are likely to specialize, with fathers investing more in paid employment and mothers emphasizing unpaid family work, lesbian mothers are likely to share both paid employment and unpaid family work in an equal manner.

Besides their relevance to between-group differences, our findings are also relevant to questions about within-group variation. For instance, why do some heterosexual fathers participate more in childcare than others? In this sample, the most important predictor of fathers' participation in childcare was the number of hours that they spent in paid employment each week. Fathers who spent more hours at work were less involved in childcare at home. Thus, our findings for heterosexual parents did not provide evidence for Relative Resources, Ideological, or Family Systems hypotheses, but they were

consistent with Structural hypotheses about division of labor (Blair & Litcher, 1991; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992). Interestingly, the correlates of parental participation in childcare among lesbian mothers were different than those among heterosexual couples. For lesbian couples, we studied correlates of the second mother's participation in childcare. Although a number of variables were significant in individual analyses, the majority became nonsignificant when evaluated in composite models. The most powerful predictor of the second mother's participation in childcare was her own ideas about division of labor. When the second mother wanted to be very involved in childcare, she almost always was very involved. Thus, for lesbian mothers, results did not provide strong evidence for Structural or Family Systems hypotheses about the determinants of division of labor, but they did provide support for the Relative Resource hypothesis, and for the Ideological hypothesis (Blair & Litcher, 1991; Deutsch et al., 1993).

Although lesbian mothers' ideas about division of labor were powerful predictors of their actual division of childcare responsibilities, other measures of gender-related ideologies were unrelated to division of labor. Specific ideas about division of labor, but not general attitudes about gender-related behavior were related to actual arrangements made by lesbian mothers. For example, parental attitudes about children's gender-related behavior (e.g., Is it as acceptable for a boy to cry as for a girl? or Are boys more adventurous than girls?) were unrelated to lesbian mothers' division of labor. Thus, our findings provided support for the Ideological hypothesis only insofar as they revealed specific ideas about division of labor to be related to the actual division of labor among lesbian (but not heterosexual) parents.

How are we to account for the differences between lesbian and heterosexual couples? We found differences in amounts of paid and unpaid labor performed by partners and also different correlates of decision-making in the two groups. Some (e.g., Dunne, 2000) have suggested that lesbian couples prioritize egalitarian ideals to a greater degree than do heterosexual couples, and our data are consistent with this view. Others (e.g., Badgett, 2001) have suggested that lesbians' lack of access to the economic benefits of legal marriage may be an important factor in couples' decisions about allocation of labor. These and other possible explanations for differences in decision-making about division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples await em-

pirical evaluation in future studies. Our study was characterized by certain limitations, and our findings must be evaluated in light of them. We studied a relatively homogeneous sample of predominantly White, upper-middle class parents; data from a more diverse array of families would be valuable. Our study was cross-sectional in nature; data from multiple assessments over time would also be helpful. Our data were drawn from the responses of parents to questionnaires about division of labor; data from multiple measures of different kinds would enhance our understanding. Despite limitations, however, our study has contributed valuable information to the study of coparenting among lesbian and heterosexual couples.

In summary, our results are consistent with earlier findings on division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples (Chan et al., 1998; Dunne, 2000; Kurdek, 1993; Patterson, 1995; Peplau et al., 1996; Sullivan, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1998), and they also add to existing knowledge. Like other investigators, we found lesbian mothers to be more likely than heterosexual parents to share responsibilities for childcare and paid employment equally. In our study of factors related to these arrangements, we found that different variables were associated with division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples. Overall, Structural variables were the best predictors of shared childcare for heterosexual parents, but Ideological variables were the best predictors for lesbian parents. These results add to understanding of shared versus specialized divisions of labor among lesbian and heterosexual parents.

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