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Division of Labor in Lesbian Households

Erin D. Thorn

Lesbian couples with children lack the prescribed model of “typical” familial arrangement that heterosexual couples have in the nuclear family. Previous research has established that lesbian couples arrange housework and child care in a manner that is substantially more egalitarian than their peers. How do lesbian couples come to such arrangements, and, do these patterns of egalitarianism extend to childcare and child rearing, and household planning?

Background

The controversy that has been created in the last ten years over same-sex couples' rights to wed cannot be over stated. Since the turn of the millennium, several states have asked their citizens to weigh in on this debate directly through ballot initiatives and indirectly through state legislature hearings and bills. Without equal rights being extended to same-sex couples in every facet of life, gay families with dependent children may lose out on basic custodial and adoption rights afforded even to unmarried heterosexual couples. While most of the current federal and state policies adhere strictly to a definition of a “family” as inherently a heterosexual one, many LGBT people have found themselves; for all intents and purposes save legally, parenting children of all ages. This issue is particularly prominent among lesbian couples. Since two of the three major ways in which lesbian couples become parents (one woman giving birth or the children are from a previous, presumably heterosexual, relationship) involve one woman having legal and cultural claims over a child. As her partner legally or culturally seldom does not, this parenting relationship can be founded within circumstances of significant inequality.

Counteracting this, whether intentionally or not, are the ways in which lesbian mothers negotiate their identities together as partners, workers and caregivers. Since the early 1980's, lesbian households have been studied as a familial group set apart from the normative pressure of the classic [heterosexual] parenting model: a male, masculine figure working full time and returning home to contribute little or nothing to the household and childcare while a female, feminine figure works full time inside the home occupied only with house and mother-work. Since these early studies, it has been observed that lesbian parents, significantly more so than gay male and heterosexual parents, are not following this culturally proscribed parenting model, however much heterosexual couples as a population are, or are not, turning away from it. In a 1983 study of heterosexual and homosexual couples with children, researchers who discovered

this pattern of significant egalitarianism in lesbian couples hypothesized that our understanding of masculinity and the power associated with it were responsible for such an outcome.¹

Regardless of how a particular study seeks to explain the phenomenon of significant egalitarianism within lesbian households, the pattern itself has been observed in several studies.

Because the image of the heterosexual “nuclear” family wields significant power within western culture, the status of almost all couples’ home-work dynamics are often framed by their similarity to and/or distance from this model, regardless of the gender make-up of the partners involved. Since the second wave of feminism, the “nuclear” family model has been met with significant challenge by heterosexual couples. Women are far more represented in the workforce and men are more frequently encouraged to participate in hands-on child and housework; such challenges have seen varying degrees of success, including truly egalitarian negotiations of parenthood between heterosexual partners.²

More recent attention to a possible trend of highly educated women choosing the role of stay-at-home mother over paid employment, including professional employment, has sustained a healthy debate about whether the financial dependence on another partner inherent in stay-at-home motherhood is a step away from feminist progress,³ or a truly feminist decision made by women who have weighed the consequences of being either a full time mother or worker.⁴ Alternative models have been devised by heterosexual couples, though the pattern of breadwinner/homemaker still impacts cultural understanding of parenting,⁵ Such dichotomized division of work has been observed in gay male couples⁶ when compared to lesbian couples parenting children.⁷

Given the dominance of the nuclear family model, lesbian families, by virtue of being headed by two women, are not conceptualized as the status quo, and do not qualify as a “traditional family” thus following “traditional roles.” Part of lesbian couples’ unique position as parents in this respect is their ability to “choose” motherhood rather than such a status simply

¹ Blumenstein, P. and P. Schwartz. (1983). *American Couples*. New York: William Morrow.

² Hochschild, A. (1989). *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon.

³ Bennettes, L. (2007). *The Feminine Mistake: Are We Giving Up Too Much?* Dallas: Voice.

⁴ Crittenden, A. (2002). *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued*. New York: Holt.

⁵ Belkin, L. (2008, June 15). When Mom and Dad Share It All. *The New York Times Online*.

⁶ Dalton, S.E., & Bielby, D.D. (2000). That's our kind of constellation: lesbian mothers negotiate institutionalized understandings of gender within the family. *Gender & Society*, 14(36), 41.

⁷ Dunne, G.A. (2000). Opting into motherhood: lesbians blurring the boundaries and transforming the meaning of parenthood and kinship. *Gender and Society*, 14(11), 31.

being prescribed to them⁸ -- as childless heterosexual women find themselves at odds with cultural expectations.⁹ For these couples, who are actively opting into motherhood, becoming parents can take years of emotional and physical participation in arduous processes like adoption and artificial insemination.¹⁰ This process further removes lesbian families from the “nuclear” model, because lesbian couples, unlike [fertile] heterosexual couples, need biological assistance from some person outside of the relationship. Whether that person is an anonymous sperm donor or an acquaintance, some person other than these women may have legal and cultural claims to the child involved. In particular, women with children from previous heterosexual relationships may share custody (and thus child-work) with a former partner. Some lesbian couples may also choose to have their sperm donors as active participants in the lives of their children.

After opting into motherhood, these couples must negotiate the myriad of new household responsibilities and often re-negotiate the previous responsibilities. Since the early 1980’s, lesbian households have been studied as a familial group set apart from the “heterosexual model” in which one partner is primarily responsible for household income and one partner is responsible for household chores and childwork. Researchers Pepper Schwartz and Philip Blumenstein compared the relationships of married and cohabiting heterosexual couples, gay male couples, and lesbian couples with children. This research focused on the employment arrangement, sexual relationship, and domestic arrangements of each of these four types of couples and compared them side by side. Each major type of arrangement (work, sex, home) was subjected to a different set of questions and hypotheses. Regarding home life, Schwartz and Blumenstein found that heterosexual couples were the most likely to rely on one partner (usually the female partner) to complete household responsibilities, while gay men followed a more egalitarian pattern and lesbian couples were the most egalitarian when it came to these duties.¹¹

Further empirical studies have found that lesbian families make such equal labour divisions a priority. Researcher Gillian A. Dunne conducted a survey of 37 cohabiting lesbians with young children. Like Blumenstein and Schwartz, she asked questions regarding several facets of lesbians’ cohabiting experience, but spent a greater amount of time on household negotiations. She found that without the presence of some kind of extenuating circumstance,

⁸ Dunne (2000), 12.

⁹ Morell, C. (1994). *Unwomanly Conduct*. London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Miller, A.K. (2010). *She looks just like you: a memoir of (nonbiological lesbian) motherhood*. Boston: Beacon Press.

¹¹ Blumstein, P and P. Schwartz. (1983). *American Couples*. New York: William Morrow.

such one partner spending significantly more time at work, lesbian couples were very egalitarian, most coming to a consensus that their domestic tasks were split 60-40.¹²

By contrasting this dominant pattern of both women in both work and childcare roles and women who stuck to more traditional breadwinner/caregiver roles, even without the cultural pressure of a gender binary (much like their heterosexual counterparts), researcher Maureen Sullivan looked at why certain lesbian couples stuck more to the binary and those who divided this work evenly. She found that couples who achieved equality only did so when the subject was broached by the couple and a relationship of equality was valued and enacted by both women in the partnership. In contrast, many (but not all) couples who used the heterosexual script had little to no history of negotiating patterns in their domestic arrangement.¹³

Why lesbian couples are more prone to such equality in their home lives has been the subject of several studies. In their study of 14 lesbian couples and gender norms within the family, researchers Susan E. Daulton and Denise D. Bielby conclude that this pattern is deliberate. They claim that this pattern of equality has been described as a “deliberate effort to counter scripts. . .” and also that women must constantly renegotiate these relationships to keep them equal.¹⁴ Conversely, Dunne, who again used her investigation of 37 lesbian families, found that this pattern was a natural result of an extended kinship network that encourages such domestic arrangements.¹⁵

Questions and Hypothesis

Previous research has pointed to a pattern of equality in division of labor in lesbian households. This literature focuses nearly exclusively on the literal ways in which lesbian couples are dividing physical duties. But how these arrangements came to be is equally as important. Without studying the ways in which couples arrive at that division of labor and continually negotiate the sharing of their domestic responsibilities, accounts of these relationships are at least partially incomplete. This literature focuses largely on large decisions made from the outset of a partnership, such as cooking and cleaning. Largely absent is discussion on parenting. How couples come to negotiate who is responsible for day-to-day

¹² Dunne, G.A. (1998). “A Passion For ‘sameness’ Sexuality and gender accountability. In *The new family?* ed. E. Silva and C Smart. London: Sage, 57-59.

¹³ Sullivan, Maureen. 1996. Rozzie and Harriet? Gender and family patterns of lesbian co-parents. *Gender and Society* 10:747-67.

¹⁴ Dalton, S.E., & Bielby, D.D. (2000). That's our kind of constellation: lesbian mothers negotiate institutionalized understandings of gender within the family. *Gender & Society*, 14(36), 59.

¹⁵ Dunne (2000), 31.

childcare responsibilities, or who performs less tangible duties is left outside of these discussions. Who, for example, takes the role of the “planner,” the person who thinks about the weeks and months ahead in which appointments or shopping trips must be planned? This task fits squarely within household tasks, but does not garner much attention in previous research.

Additionally, certain factors are likely to affect this process. For example, the legal status of both partners in regards to the children being raised can be very relevant in this situation. There are many states in which lesbian and gay individuals are not afforded the legal right to adopt children with their partners. This dynamic between partners can have an impact on the way in which they negotiate their home lives. Partners could be affected by differing career opportunities between individuals. If one partner makes significantly more money than her partner, does her partner continue on her career path, or stay at home, opening up opportunities for her to perform a greater share of the household duties? What if there is one individual with a much stronger desire to perform household duties than her partner? The number and ages of dependent children can also have a significant impact on the household negotiations of a couple.

I would like to build on previous research in establishing whether or not lesbian couples negotiate child-work in a manner that is egalitarian. Set apart from the physical division of household labour is the negotiations and renegotiations (whether they be day-to-day or long term) that produce such outcomes. Are these women consciously making decisions about their everyday domestic duties in a way that can be labelled equal? Or are they not discussing these sorts of responsibilities and simply allowing an arrangement to become visible.

Nearly every distribution of duties must be established (verbally or non-verbally) by a couple at some point. Are lesbian couples beginning their relationships before children with an egalitarian arrangement that simply transfers over into a couples’ relationship when a child arrives? Is there simply an unspoken understanding that the women should split such duties equally, and thus some sort of mental tally being kept? If there is a particular pattern of negotiation used by these couples, does it extend to household duties that are far less quantifiable, such as child rearing? There are an enormous number of factors that go into a couple’s decisions about their domestic relationship. A couple’s domestic arrangement previous to their having children (if they were together before either had children) can shed light on a couple’s pattern of negotiation. Additionally, a woman’s status as the biological or non-

biological mother of her child may affect her feelings about her specific responsibilities regarding child rearing, as well as the feeling of responsibility of the biological mother.

By exploring the ways in which these women shape the totality of household responsibilities, what expectations they come into such discussions with, and what ways such responsibilities are re-negotiated over time, I hope to discover a pattern of common themes, concerns, and insights among lesbian families. These patterns may shed light on the difficulties and/or advantages of creating a parenting relationship without direct influence from a dominant cultural model or expectation. It seems logical that given the strong pattern of egalitarianism in household duties within these relationships, there should be common patterns in the way that these women negotiate with one another. If couples maintain a strong line of communication with one another, both partners should feel that the negotiation of household duties is egalitarian and fair. This is set apart from whether or not individuals or couples believe the outcomes of these negotiations to be egalitarian or fair.

Research Design

Given the nature of the questions involved, this research is best carried out through qualitative interviews with each partner individually. Previous studies have also used a qualitative method. Though it would be possible to create a survey asking questions aimed at these discussions and the impacts that they have on family life in lesbian couples, the realm of possibilities for answers almost completely rules out creating effective categories for answer choices, and most of the answers would have to be long open-ended questions full of elaboration that would have to be coded anyway. Qualitative interviewing will give subjects the opportunity to engage the questions and ensure that they are giving a full answer, and also provide an opportunity to showcase nuances in the relationship or unique arrangements of domestic duties that may be ruled out by a simple survey.

Qualitative interviewing will be the most effective way to reach full answers regarding these arrangements. Allowing for a two-way dialogue between interviewer and interviewee rules out many useful aspects of using a survey. By nature of the commitment for couples and researcher as well as time constraints for the completion of the study, the number of women that can provide information for the research will be limited. Given the amount of time that scheduling, conducting and transcribing each interview would take, it is simply not feasible to

interview large numbers of women. This in turn will limit the generalisability of the results of the study, regardless of the strength of the patterns involved.

Operationalization

There are several concepts in this research that would be most critical to operationalize: equality/egalitarian and negotiate. Equality/egalitarian may be the most difficult to conceptualize because the concept could take on many different forms in reality. Does this mean dividing everything directly in half (half of the cooking/half of the cleaning)? Or does this mean dividing half of the duties (one person cooking/the other person cleaning)? This concept would be best operationalized in discussions about fairness, whether someone does “their part,” and whether individuals feel as though they could do more or less regarding the housework. It would be useful to ask each subject what they believe equality/egalitarianism looked like.

Negotiation, on the other hand, would be an equally as important concept to discuss -- though it may seem on the surface self explanatory. Is a negotiation a long talk where each partner sits down to discuss what they expect out of the other? Or is it an instantaneous event, where one person decides to do a chore, taking out the trash, for example, and a pattern is set. To see this concept at work, it would be important to discuss with subjects whether or not they spoke with their partners about any given number of household duties and childcare, or ask them how they got to the arrangement that they are in currently. Questions about whether or not their domestic arrangement is flexible or more or less set in stone would also illuminate how much negotiation may be taking place.

Terms such as “housework,” “childcare,” and “planner” may also be difficult because they can be comprised as many different things. For the purposes of this research, housework will be described as cooking responsibilities, doing the laundry and cleaning. Cleaning itself can be further described as vacuuming, dusting, and taking out the trash. Childcare will be described as daily responsibilities associated with having a child, such as bathing a child and putting them to bed, taking them to appointments and watching the child on a daily basis. This will be set away from childcare such as entertaining. Household planner will be described as someone who thinks ahead into the near or extended future to duties that may be coming up, such as doctor’s appointments, shopping trips, and play dates.

Internal Review Board

The project was submitted to the Internal Review Board at Lehigh University in mid-March. A few weeks after being submitted, the project was sent back for minor revisions. It was then edited for clarity and consistency with guidelines set forth by the University. The review process was very useful. It allowed for individuals who were experienced in research but unfamiliar to the project to give unbiased feedback regarding the project design, questions, and consent form. Corrections to the phrasing of the risks posed to participants, for example, allowed for participants to better understand the consequences of the project. Once these adjustments were made, the project was approved.

Sampling

The sample, which was compiled through convenience, consists of five separate families. This included ten women in total, as no family had a single mother heading the household, and no family had more than two women heading the household. All families were found through referral by individuals or through Lehigh University LGBTQIA Services. None of these women referred one another: however, multiple families were found through the same source. Because of this, two sets of partners knew each other in passing, but were not social with one another.

Participants were contacted via email. They were given a small description of the research and the questions being considered. This email also explained the responsibilities of interviewees. These couples were informed that relatively short interviews could be conducted wherever and whenever they were available, if they chose to participate. All couples who were contacted volunteered to participate, though a few couples could not be interviewed due to time constraints. Each participant was interviewed separately from her partner. Interviews were conducted via Skype, an online video messaging system, as well as in person and over the telephone. Interviews lasted anywhere between 15 minutes to one hour, with the average interview lasting about 25 minutes.

All five couples who participated live on the east coast of the United States, all but one live in the state of Pennsylvania, and most live in the Lehigh Valley. Each partnership consists of two white, middle-class women. These women come from varying educational backgrounds, though all have at least some post-secondary education. Interviewees represented varying career tracks: some women were employed as full time professionals, some were still in school or going back to school, some were working part time in their chosen field, while others were

working part time but not in their chosen field. They fell into a consistent age range, anywhere from early thirties to late forties. Additionally, because of the varying status of gay marriage rights, even among northeastern states, these couples represented several different types of legally classified relationships, including domestic partnerships and civil unions to marriages recognized or unrecognized within the state that they reside. Because of this, couples were living under laws with differing degrees of protection from discrimination in employment, employment benefits and housing. These laws are all administered at the state and local level.

Results

The sample includes five couples and all names of interviewees have been changed:

Erica and Rachel: both women are working full time after taking turns staying at home with their now 6 year old daughter.

Lauren and Isabelle: Isabelle works full time as a professional, while Lauren works freelance occasionally while taking care of the couples' 4 year old son.

Nancy and Ellen: both women work full time, save the time which Nancy took off to give birth to the couples' 16 month old son.

Nicole and Tara: Nicole currently works full time. Part of her employment time is spent at home, enabling her to stay home with the couples' two children, 5 and 2 ½ years old. Tara works full time outside of the home.

Irene and Regina: Both women work full time outside of the home. However, Irene also attends school in the evening. They have boy-girl twins who are 2 years old.

Demographic

The couples in the study had been in a relationship ranging from 7-13 years. None of the women in the sample had a child before they were in their current relationship. Therefore, all women who participated in the study were either the biological mother of their child, or had adopted their child or children. Four out of the five couples consisted of one woman who carried the child(ren) while the other adopted, while one consisted of a closed adoption by both partners. All couples had either one or two children, and one couple had fostered children in the past. Though one couple was legally married in the state in which they resided, the other four reside in a state that does not perform or recognize same-sex civil unions or marriages performed in other states. Despite this, a few couples had had commitment ceremonies, and all were protected through living wills and powers of attorney. No couples had a sperm donor that had a desire to

keep his legal rights to the children. Two couples used a sperm bank, and while one couple had closed off their children's right to contact the donor, other had left that opportunity open.

Legal Status

Every woman in the study had legal rights to the child, whether it is through being the biological parent, a second parent adoption, or a closed adoption by both partners. This is particularly important given the legal status of same-sex second parent adoption. Because there are very few states in which same-sex couples can apply for partnerships that include marriage rights, parental rights for both partners may be the some of the only types of legal protections a couple can enjoy, but this is not universal. Specifically, the sample included four couples in which one partner carried a child via sperm donor, and the other partner adopted the child at birth (second parent adoption). Though this is legal in the states of Pennsylvania and Vermont, where the interviewees are residents, this is not a national right. This type of arrangement is only legally possible in nine states and the District of Columbia (hrc.org). This was not lost on interviewees, who expressed a strong understanding of the importance of the second parent adoption itself, as well as the importance of living in a state that provided such a right. When asked about the legal aspect of her birth process, Nancy, the biological mother of a 16-month old son commented:

“You’d be surprised how many legal firms don’t know how to [process second parent adoptions]. We called around to all the big family law firms and they had no idea. . .it was a little nerve-wracking. . .By county you will find very different experiences, I have friends [from another county] who had to go through much more stringent reviews. . .We were glad to get out of there unscathed.”

Like Nancy, several couples expressed an understanding that second parent adoptions for same sex couples could be a less than desirable experience, but all couples (including the fifth couple, in which both partners adopted their child simultaneously) made mention of how important it was. Tara was more explicit in her description of this process,

...I am officially their second parent...because [our state] has done these adoptions so long, they do treat them like step parent adoptions...on one level, the process of having to adopt my child was humiliating...it was annoying to have to jump through these hoops... but I can't imagine having [no custody rights] to my children.

Without couples in the sample who live in one of the many states that do not support second parent adoptions, it is difficult to say for sure how differing legal rights to children may affect a relationship. This is worth mentioning in regards to egalitarianism within the couples in the sample. These relationships, at the very least, are legally egalitarian. Both women have obligations to the children within the family, and no one must face the situation of raising a child to whom they have no legal rights. Though it may be intangible, this situation provides equal footing in at least some respect.

Employment

Equally as important as the legal status of each parent, though also indirectly related, was the employment status of each partner. The amount of time that the couple as a whole spent at a workplace obviously has an impact on the amount of time that a couple and each individual partner is able to give to household duties, in particular, child care. Each couple in the sample had a different arrangement with regards to employment, and several mentioned that their employment arrangement was subject to change. Nancy and Ellen both worked full time jobs and put their son in day care. Nicole stayed at home with her two children while her partner Tara worked in a full time position outside of their home. Both were certain that their employment arrangement would change in the near future, as Nicole had a strong desire to return to school as the couple's two children got older.

Other couples had made employment decisions specifically with children involved. Lauren, who admitted that she had always had a strong desire for children, said that even before she had her son, she structured her work life in preparation:

I am someone who went to [an Ivy League institution], had won a lot of awards...was kind of on a "pushed" track...I was one of these people who other people put their stakes in, and here I am, I find myself making a household run...it's not like I was raring to go, and all of a sudden he came along and mixed everything up. I don't use him as an excuse to keep [from] advancing...but the past year and a half I haven't been working...

Her partner Isabelle worked as a professional in a lucrative field, and her profession and her commute frequently keep her away from the home – creating a significant difference in the amount of time each woman had to spend on duties at home in general.

Conversely, another couple, Erica and Rachel, who adopted their daughter, were both extremely flexible with their employment relationship. Both partners took significant time off

from work at different times to stay at home while their child was pre-school aged, while the other partner worked. Currently, as their child is in school full time, both women are working. Erica works part of her day at home. This was the only arrangement of its type in the sample. Both women were very happy with being able to have the opportunity to have spent time both at home and then having worked full time. Rachel recounted her feelings about this arrangement:

I'm lucky that [my partner] is super supportive and she says, you know, 'You can go, you can stay, you can do whatever makes you happy.' We're in a financial situation where I have that choice. I know a lot of other couples where [financially both women must work] and you just have to go. I'm just super lucky.

This arrangement in particular seems to be designed in order to accommodate two people who have a very strong desire to be hands-on mothers but also have a strong desire to maintain a career. Though both of these women were happy with the arrangement, Rachel continued on to articulate some of the conflicting thoughts behind their decision:

I think it was time [for me to go to work]. I think you lose a sense of self when you're in "mommy" mode. You go on play dates and you talk to other parents and it's not the same...so I think it was just time for me to go back. But then it's been a year and something and I'm thinking I shouldn't have gone back...so it's a no-win situation.

This working arrangement seemed to allow both women equality in the sense that they had taken turns being the person responsible for the majority of the household duties, at least for some stretch of time in the past. The flexibility of this situation is also indicative of partners' desires being discussed (Rachel mentioned that her partner told her that she work or stay at home several times). This particular couple had renegotiated their arrangement several times, often to align with Rachel's desires. In response, though Erica's employment situation did not shift, her daily responsibilities did.

For Irene, employment and career were a dominating force. Not only did she (and her partner Regina) work, but Irene was continuing her education. She expressed an understanding that she often took on a lot in her professional life:

She does the bulk of the childcare and I do extra jobs...I think sometimes she can be maybe a little...it gets on her nerves sometimes. I think sometimes she gets a little overwhelmed because she is the one who is doing a lot of the bulk of the work taking care of our children, even though that is what she's good at.

Though her partner did not mention being upset by this explicitly, this certainly afforded Irene less time in the home. Employment inside and outside of the home still remains a very important factor in the ability of couples to delegate household chores to different people. With the sheer amount of time it takes to complete household duties (i.e. cooking, cleaning, childcare), the amount of time individuals are home may be a critical factor in the negotiations around housework.

Household Negotiations

For each of the couples involved, a typical day of household responsibilities looked somewhat different. Easily influenced by the number of hours each partner was available to complete such duties because of her employment responsibilities, women split up the typical responsibilities of laundry, cooking and cleaning along two distinct lines: time and preference. For Nicole and Tara, chores were divided up most practically because of time constraints: Tara worked a full time job which took her away from the home for most of the day, and because of that, most of the domestic chores fell to Nicole. This arrangement, which was temporary, came about because Nicole was pregnant, and therefore needed significant time at home. With this came the expectation that she would take on a greater share of both the housework and childwork. Lauren and Isabelle divided such responsibilities the same, given the fact that Isabelle spent a significant amount of time outside of the home, and Lauren therefore had more time at home. Because of this, Lauren completed more of the household chores. Both couples stated that they had not sat down to explicitly discuss who would do the housework. However, there was a very clear understanding that as Lauren and Nicole were at home for significantly more time than their partners, that they performed significantly more household duties.

Erica and Rachel also shared these responsibilities based on time. Because both women had taken time to stay at home while the other worked full time outside of the home, Rachel was more explicit about the arrangement being time-based:

When you're home and you're taking care of the house...I did everything...it's not like 'earning your keep' but I was doing everything, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry...But now, I'm at work full time and she's home [working] and she has more opportunities to do [the housework].

Following Rachel's sentiment about "opportunity" being the biggest reason for a given person completing a given task, Erica, who currently spends more time at home, commented, "I really

don't like to clean, but if she leaves me enough notes I'll do it." Very similar to the first two couples, Erica and Rachel were illustrative of time-based delegation of these responsibilities. As one was more frequently out of the house, the other took on the bulk of the domestic activities. As that dynamic shifted, so did the amount of work each took on at home. Furthermore, Erica and Rachel seemed to work the negotiation of these responsibilities on a day to day basis. Both women mentioned Rachel's leaving notes as the most important way in which they decided who completed household duties.

For the other two couples, Irene and Regina and Nancy and Ellen, household divisions tended to be negotiated on a much different level – one of preference. Neither partner in either couple saw explicitly an inequality in division of household duties, though both seemed to be in agreement that both partners tended to stick to the household duties which they preferred (or could manage) to do. For Irene and Regina, the rigidity of this dynamic was clear. Irene made mention of this while discussing whether or not the couples' general arrangement could be altered in anyway, saying, "If she could not or did not want to cook, we'd be ordering out. I really cannot cook; there really isn't any flexibility in that. I do the laundry, but I stay away from the cooking. I hate it." Both women admitted that they had not re-negotiated this arrangement after the arrival of their twins. In this sense, the conversation regarding these duties was dominated by Regina's ability, and Irene's performing duties that she could complete.

This situation was very much discussed along the lines of time and opportunity. Regina was particularly confident that these duties were not discussed along the lines of personal preference, saying that "the "enjoyment' factor of cooking and cleaning is not there." But made it clear that she was responsible for these duties at least partly because she had the time to do it, explaining further, "A lot of times I'm forced to do it because she's in school...but over the summer we do divide those responsibilities more evenly." Her partner expressed much of the situation. This couple had not sat down and discussed this arrangement. But it was clear that the decision to divide these responsibilities this way came out of discussions about both skill and preference.

For Nancy and Ellen, both partners took an active role in certain areas of household responsibilities, but a clear preference not to participate in certain activities informed the decision to hire outside help, "[Nancy] hates [cleaning]. She really is allergic to it. I do straighten up when I can, but she doesn't like to do any of it. We do have a house keeper who

does most of the housework.” Nancy echoed this sentiment “when it comes to household [cleaning] [Ellen] definitely takes care of all of that...I hate house cleaning...she resents the fact that I don’t clean, we hired a cleaning lady to address that.” Nancy did have the time and the opportunity to engage in cleaning, but their negotiation of this duty was focused on her preference, not her opportunity.

Coming to an impasse about this duty, the couple decided to hire outside help, and resolve a significant debate in their relationship. Nancy summed this up, saying “The [cleaning] issue was definitely a big thing in our relationship that we had to get through.” Here, for instance, the dialogue could have gone a bit more like Irene and Regina, where Regina performed duties because she “had to.” Preference intersecting with a certain level of economic status dominated in this instance. More specifically, the fact that Nancy and Ellen were able and willing to consider hiring outside help to relieve this situation was allowed for them to discuss this issue on a preference basis and not on another. If they had been financially unable to hire someone to perform these duties, discussions would have been along opportunity or skill.

Childcare Negotiation

Interestingly enough, childcare (i.e. bathing, play time, putting a child to bed) seemed to follow a pattern that was distinctly removed from the couples’ arrangements around housework. Focusing on a workday (in which employment of each partner would be significant), interviewees discussed divisions of basic responsibilities in their households. Each couple discussed housework as one particular responsibility, while daily care for a child was always discussed as something somehow separate.

A few couples also negotiated this work based on time, particularly if one partner was staying at home, or if one particular partner happened to be available to perform basic childcare. Ellen explained her arrangement by saying:

While one of us [cooks] the other will entertain [our son]...We kind of take turns helping him get ready for bed, take a bath, read a story. If I had to do something for work, [my partner] will put him to bed, and if she had to do something for work that night, then I will do the typical nighttime routine with him by myself.

Ellen indicated that the couple decided who would perform this duty almost always along the lines of time and opportunity. Describing nighttime childcare as something that simply “just got done,” Ellen saw this as a non-verbal negotiation and as a duty that both were willing to perform.

This is significantly different from the way in which this particular couple delegated their household chores, where preference of activity seemed to be very influential.

Irene, who was impacted by unequal time at home with her partner, emphasized both partners' responsibilities in daily child care as time allowed:

We both take a baby, get them dressed...three nights a week I am unavailable, either teaching or taking a class, so she does most of the child care on the days where I can't make it home and the kids are in bed by the time I'm home. Two nights a week I am able to go home, and on those nights we do share any childcare.

Couples who were not under such time constraints reported nearly complete equity in division of childcare. Rachel, who was home during weeknights, was an equal participant in nighttime childcare:

We'll clean up after dinner, [our daughter] will take a bath, or [she and I] will read, or we'll color, I'm not a big TV person, so I'd prefer that she didn't sit in front of a TV. Then she'll go to bed.

Isabelle, who worked full time during the week while her partner was mostly at home, also had a hand in occasional everyday childcare saying, "Sometimes, I wake up with [our son] and give him breakfast, pack his lunch, and take him to school." Here, the negotiation was subject to time and opportunity, and as Isabelle did have time, she found childcare an important activity.

Tara, who was also home less than her partner, took an active role, explaining a typical day saying that "we'll both get up, get ourselves ready, get the kids ready...we both get the kids dressed, get them in the car...we both drop them off at daycare." This "teamwork" style of childcare was reported by all couples, and like housework, no couple expected one person to complete the entirety of this work. Whether this indicated that all women involved preferred to engage in this activity is unclear, but all women indicated at least minimal involvement in childcare.

No individuals described any type of social pressure to perform daily childcare (or household duties). There was never mention that one person was expected to complete some kind of duty because of some outside expectation. This included childcare being performed by both biological and non-biological mothers, sometimes with non-biological mothers performing significant portions of childcare. Regina, whose partner carried the couples' twins, did a significant amount of childcare. Irene, her partner, commented, "Even though she didn't carry

[our children], she is very good with them. She's with them for the day-to-day stuff, and she's really good at [those duties]." This, and the arrangement Erica and Rachel were able to negotiate may have been partly due to the fact that there was less pressure on these couples to stick to some sort of pre-determined arrangement or expectation of certain partners completing certain duties because of their gender.

Planning

The negotiation of responsibilities such as childcare and housework are important because they are the most easily observable of any responsibilities to be established. Equally as important, but far less tangible was the assigning of further tasks and roles. One of these roles is that of the household planner. Expected to schedule doctor's appointments, play dates, or make household to-do lists, the planner seems to think further into the future. Despite the absence of an academic or cultural term for this, each interviewee easily identified this role as one that was indeed present in their household. For all couples, this person was easily identifiable. Isabelle commented:

As far as planning, [my partner] definitely does that more...for most things, does [our son] have the right clothes, does he need to bring something to school, Doctor's appointments, Dentist's appointments, who's coming over for dinner, she's the one who thinks about what all needs to get done.

Isabelle's partner spent most of her time at home. This couple had never particularly discussed this role, and it may have been plausible that this too was a responsibility being performed because she had the time.

For other couples, however, this role was not necessarily performed by a partner with a significant amount of time. Regina named her partner, who spent a significant amount of time away from the home, as the planner, saying, "Definitely more [her] than me. [My partner] loves scheduling and doing all of that stuff." Her partner Irene spent a lot of time away from the home, and probably planned many things that she herself could not perform, such as doctor's appointments. There was an understanding between these two women that Irene would plan, and Regina would execute. Whether this arrangement had been explicitly discussed or simply evolved over time, these daily negotiations of responsibilities were described by both women.

Rachel, who had stayed at home with her child in the past, but was at present employed outside of the home while her partner worked from home, discussed her tendency to manage her household from afar:

I live by a book, it's like, I can't be without it...when it comes to appointments, she's the one who obviously has to take her, but I'm probably the one who has to write everything down, I'm the one who always has to be in the know. It's hard; too, because I was the one who always did it...when you're so used to running kids to all of these things it's completely different.

All couples attributed this role to one person, who felt as though she had better organizational skills or more forethought than her partner. This did not seem to be a disputed role between partners. No couples had both partners performing this task. Therefore, it seems that this task was not negotiated along the times of time and opportunity, or preference, but almost solely on skill.

Fairness

With the amount of responsibilities to be divided in a household, it may be easy for one person to feel that someone within the relationship is doing more work. It is clear that no couples divided this work 50/50. With the sometimes complex relationship between work/finance and home/family, such an arrangement may not be feasible for a couple. Instead, interviewees were asked to discuss whether or not they felt that their domestic arrangement was "fair." Several interviewees pointed to their strong communication skills as indicative of some sort of fairness. Lauren commented that she and her partner, "...have really, really good communication...In terms of communication, we're really able to work things out in terms of growth and support." Nancy echoed this sentiment, saying, "We really do communicate well with each other. We don't simply let things go. And in that respect, each one of us knows what we've got to do in the relationship."

Regina, whose partner was in school, discussed "fairness" more generally, placing household negotiations within the larger frame of her relationship, "Right now it's me supporting her and her schooling...I hope that when she's done school, [household duties] will be [fairer]. I think eventually we'll be more equal, and that will definitely be [fairer]."

Nicole felt similarly, "Right now, it's just the intensity of parenting that I have a problem with, I am really looking forward to [going back to school]...then I think it will be a bit [fairer]."

This “suspension of fairness” seemed to take the place of tangible “fairness.” It was clear that this suspension of fairness had be negotiated at least in some sense, because both of these women were very clear as to when “fairer” arrangements would be enacted. For them, this was not a continued state of affairs.

Discussion & Conclusions

Limitations of Study

First Person/Qualitative Interviewing

Subjects were asked about their personal views on their household negotiations and child care arrangements. Both partners were interviewed separately, and were asked the same set of questions. By asking not one but both partners about their negotiations and observing what views in particular both partners hold about this topic (and, by extension, which stand in direct conflict with one another) , this allows for a more well rounded view of a particular relationship than if only one partner were to be interviewed. Additionally, interviewing partners separately instead of together may increase reliability since it decreases partners’ abilities to influence each others’ answers, whether that is verbally or non-verbally.

This can also limit the study, however, because each partner is reporting on the state of their relationship. For a researcher, being able to observe couples negotiation would remove the interference of individuals (or couples’) potential bias regarding the reality of their household arrangement and what actually happens. In other words, any time in which couples are being asked to discuss their lives, regardless of the topic, answers may in some way be exaggerated, or perhaps even untrue. This can also be limited by interviewing both partners separately, and looking for certain things observed by both partners to be important.

Size

Because this sample is so small in size, the patterns observed and the conclusions derived from it can be very limited in scope. There are only five lesbian families in this sample, but potentially hundreds of thousands whom they represent. The contours of lesbian co-parenting are incredibly subtle, and a sample much larger than this would be needed to make definitive conclusions regarding the parenting patterns of the lesbian community as a whole.

Homogeneity

Though there are certainly differences between participants as far as careers, and in some cases, general location, the sample is mostly homogeneous. With the entire sample consisting of white,

middle aged, lesbian-identified women with post secondary education and between 1-2 children, the conclusions will certainly be limited to this particular subset of the population. Any differences that may be able to be attributed to race, self identification, class, or region cannot be observed in this small sample.

Conclusions on Research Questions and Hypotheses

To review, the questions being explored in this research concern not only which partner in same-sex couples is doing which domestic chores, but how this came to be. More specifically, along what lines are partners in these relationships negotiating these tasks. This study also includes a look at more general household responsibility, such as household planning, less emphasized by others, as important indicators of negotiation patterns within couples. It was hypothesized that if a couple has expressly discussed household negotiations as an important part of their relationship, then the division of this labor will be clear, and such couples would be much more likely to equally distribute domestic responsibilities and to observe these relationships as fair. This sample shows that non-verbal and verbal negotiations themselves are described as egalitarian and fair to both partners. These negotiations may produce arrangements that are not egalitarian, but considered either “fair” or “unfair” even if “unfair” arrangements are temporary.

As stated above, it is difficult to make any certain conclusions about a sample that is so small and very homogeneous. To be able to speak for certain about the patterns of negotiation between lesbian mothers, a very extensive survey of couples from many different backgrounds would have to be done, and then repeated, to verify. Regardless of how strong patterns may appear in this sample, further research would be the only way in which conclusions could be said to be relevant.

That being said, this sample by itself yields interesting patterns that may point to a larger pattern within lesbian couples. What stands out in this sample is that some duties were certainly up for negotiation and re-negotiation. The clearest example of this was housework, in which there were a number of different arrangements present. Here, couples were very much able to express what they did or did not want to be responsible for. More specifically, it seemed to be acceptable for individuals to express a great dislike for certain chores. This is observable in the case of in the case of Nancy, who had a great disdain for cleaning, but then negotiated for a portion of these duties to be relegated to a person outside of the relationship or in the case of

Irene, who did not share in the responsibility of cooking within her household, but relied on a partner to do this instead.

Discussions of how these and other general household responsibilities were delegated tended to follow three specific patterns as interviewees discussed how they negotiated their arrangement: time or opportunity, preference, or skill. For household negotiations in particular, the last two seemed to go hand-in-hand, in that most women obviously preferred what they were good at -- Nancy, who hated cleaning, was skilled at cooking, and happy to take on this responsibility. Absent from any dialogue about preference or skill in any serious sense was the idea of any gender role being filled by a specific partner. In other words, no couples discussed in any serious fashion the idea that an individual preferred to cook, clean, or do the laundry because, as “the more feminine” of the two, or the more “motherly” of the two, this was the particular skill set that this person brought to a relationship. No person mentioned a feeling that domestic responsibility was hers and hers alone. Similarly, no participant expressed a desire to use the traditional binary model to fashion their arrangement.

Time or opportunity to perform household duties was particularly salient in negotiations of these duties. Some couples chose to take advantage of a deliberately structured work/home relationship that gave one person more time at home than her partner, thus giving her the time to perform a greater amount of domestic tasks, and household duties specifically. This seemed to drive women’s discussions of the breakdown of these negotiations. The creation of this unequal time or opportunity model had many different justifications. Several couples were composed of one person whose career was more financially lucrative than her partner’s. As the second partner was then not financially obligated to work, she may have worked from home, or part time, or free lance, naturally giving her more time at home. This arrangement did come with a strong expectation from both partners that this individual would be completing more household tasks. Effectively, this came from a very equal understanding and agreement to create an unequal arrangement regarding housework.

Childcare negotiations, though subject to the time or opportunity model of participation, were still discussed as a different issue all together. No women discussed daily child care as a duty that they disdained, would not do, could not do, or preferred that their partner did. This duty was discussed almost exclusively as one performed because a certain individual had the time or opportunity to do so. It was also the duty that was often up for renegotiation on a daily

basis. Several couples referred to this duty as being completed by whoever had the time, even if that changed day-by-day. Even partners who were employed outside of the home for significant amounts of time mentioned their participation in childcare. Each of these women described a situation in which she was actively participating in childcare. This may point to the importance, above housework that these women put on this particular duty. Even parts of childcare which may be analogous to housework such as bathing and clothing children were seen as a duty shared – even if the ratio of each partner’s participation was unequal.

Conversely, household planning seemed to be delegated as a responsibility to one partner who possessed the organizational skills that were needed. Above any other household responsibility which the women discussed having to divide amongst themselves, none took a more polarizing pattern than that of household organizer. For most of the couples, there was one person who took hold of the planning side of the household, not always because of time or opportunity -- Rachel worked full time, while her partner worked from home, but admitted that she lived “out of a book” and organized most of the household activity. This did not seem to be a duty that was shared between partners; couples often mentioned that one person was simply more skilled than the other. This may be true, but it may also be a duty that is difficult to share. Working off of one schedule may simply be more feasible. Like household negotiations, no couples mentioned that this responsibility, usually categorized as a motherly duty, was delegated to a more “feminine” or “motherly” partner.

Many individuals made mention of the strong line of communication that they had with their partner, including the times in which they needed to discuss house- and childwork. These individuals came to a vast array of different household arrangements. This included Erica, who at the time worked from home and performed a significant portion of the household duties; Lauren, who worked free lance and also performed a significant portion of her household responsibilities, and Ellen, who worked full time, and did light cleaning but hired a cleaning service to resolve her and her partner’s conflicts about cleaning duties. All of these women were communicating about these issues frequently and creating arrangements that were not necessarily egalitarian. This is contrary to the hypothesis that open communication between partners results in egalitarian and fair domestic arrangements.

This does not, however, rule out the discussion of these arrangements as egalitarian. As it was discussed above, there are a number of different situations in which a couple may choose

to have one partner completing more of the domestic tasks, as one partner may take over greater responsibility in employment, or spending significant amounts of time elsewhere (Irene, for example, spent significant amounts of time in a graduate school program). At no time, however, did interviewees express the feeling that they had been coerced into a domestic arrangement, or even that an arrangement had been made without both partners in agreement. This “agreement” may have meant that the situation was the best at the present time, but subject to change; the best situation that the couple could devise with their given careers and outside responsibilities; or simply that a situation was continuously being altered. In this aspect, negotiation between partners was very egalitarian.

The number of interviewees who mentioned that they and their partners had very “good communication” is a testament to this. This sentiment comes out of discussion about whether or not interviewees’ negotiations were “fair.” The report from several interviewees that they felt that their household arrangements were at least “fair” because they had such strong communication within their relationship is indicative of how important this basic mode of negotiation and renegotiation is to an arrangement in which each partner feels that they have had a say. A majority of interviewees were quick to mention that the inherent fairness in the situation came out of mutual importance placed on communication between both parties, even if this was simply leaving a note regarding tasks to be completed.

Further Research

Within this topic, there is a vast amount of additional research that can be and should be conducted. As was previously stated, this sample is very homogeneous. One of the aspects of a relationship that may impact domestic negotiations that is far beyond this study is that of culture. Internationally, how would this study have looked if it had been done in a European, an Asian, or an African country? Even within countries, different regions and cities have differing levels of religious, political, legal, and social acceptance of same-sex couples. To differing degrees, each of these particular situations may affect the ways in which a same-sex couple and their children can be integrated into a community or society, and that in turn may have an impact on domestic negotiations between same-sex partners. Partners in South Africa, for example, where same-sex marriage is legal, may be under much less pressure from outside society than partners in Sudan, where same-sex sexual activity can be punishable by death. Even these outside cultural

traditions can affect the ways in which partners may go about negotiating household responsibilities.

By extension, regional cultures or individual couples that treasure traditional gender roles displayed by certain heterosexual couples may have a very strong influence on the ways in which same-sex couples negotiate their household responsibilities. Particularly for same-sex couples, location and cultural background of not only the area in which a couple lives but additionally where they come from may impact the ways in which they expect a household to be run. This study did not include women who were particularly close with or active in a group or community of same-sex parents. Had these women been highly integrated into a community of same-sex parents, would there have been a notable uniformity to the discussions that they were having regarding household duties? There are certainly places where such high integration is easily accessible, and observing the role of peer pressure on these conversations could be telling.

There is an enormous amount of information to be studied regarding lesbian couples and the ways in which they discuss their domestic negotiations. Similar research into the ways in which gay male or other queer couples and heterosexual couples discuss these arrangements may offer a lot of relevant information regarding these couples and how they compare to the patterns used by lesbian couples to solve these questions while running a household.

Further Discussion

Further research into this topic will allow for stronger conclusions to be made about the ways in which lesbian couples negotiate domestic responsibilities. This information can prove very useful to the study of gender and the family. Particularly, the study of lesbian couples' solutions to the question of running a household can provide an avenue for salient discussion about assigning traditional gender roles within heterosexual couples. Such discussions can open up a healthy debate about whether or not certain patterns of negotiation (and therefore the arrangements stemming from them) may or may not be healthy for a relationship.

The study of this topic also has a place in the general study of family. Each of these families has dependent children, and their presence is incredibly impactful. The presence of children dictates how and what kind of work is being negotiated. Depending on the age of the child, one partner in a couple can be highly involved, while one is less so, and as children grow up, such arrangements must evolve. Because of this, negotiations of such duties are heavily

influenced by children. How they are impacted by negotiation styles of parents, same-sex or different, can certainly be informed by this and further research.