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ROZZIE AND HARRIET?

Gender and Family Patterns of Lesbian Coparents

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In this article the author explores the ways in which lesbian coparents divide household, child care, and paid labor to learn whether, and the degree to which, they adopt egalitarian work and family arrangements. Informed by a brief overview of U.S. gay liberation and family politics, and the theoretical and empirical work on the household division of labor by gender, this qualitative analysis of 34 Northern California families suggests that equitable practices—a pattern of equal sharing—among these lesbian coparents are the norm. Less frequently, the Rozzie and Harriet pattern of primary breadwinner/primary caregiver emerges, apparently in relation to differences in parents' relative income and their desire to offer children a "sense of family." The experience of this minority of couples reveals a division of labor that mimics modern heterosexual expectations and highlights the powerful negative effect of economic dependency on women who are full-time caregivers.

In the midst of the contemporary rhetoric on "family values," a rhetoric that seeks to reinforce the primacy and superiority of the traditional nuclear family, American families that bear little resemblance to this "ideal" nuclear model go about their daily business. Families headed by lesbian coparents, in which one or both mothers are biological parents to children conceived through alternative insemination by donor (AID),¹ constitute a relatively new family form in the wide array of kinship arrangements in postindustrial U.S. society.

As distinct from lesbian-headed families with children first born and raised in the context of heterosexual marriage, lesbian families in which two women plan, conceive, and raise children together as committed, intimate partners constitute "a socio-cultural innovation that is specific to the present historical era" (Patterson 1992, 1026). With the increased availability of alternative insemination services for lesbians, and the allowance of second-parent adoptions by some county judges in several states, the number of lesbian coparent families is growing.²

Lesbian coparent families are similar to heterosexual nuclear families in structure, but because the parents are two women, rather than a woman and a man, they may develop practices that reflect a certain freedom from gender stratification. In

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traditional (heterosexual) nuclear families, the gendered division of household, child care, and paid labor has organized relations between parents such that women, historically, have been disadvantaged compared with their male partners. Because lesbian coparents are not necessarily compelled by tradition to divide labor according to these conventional gender norms—norms that specify roles and behavior for women (mother, homemaker, nurturer) and for men (father, breadwinner, decision maker)—they may establish new norms or reproduce or modify traditional gender norms. That divisions of labor modeled after the traditional family might persist in nuclear families even when both parents are women points either to the deeply institutionalized character of gender as a productive mechanism of inequality and/or to the power of economic dependency in the subordination of women.

In this article, I briefly trace the contours of gay and lesbian liberation politics and family discourse over the past three decades to provide some sociohistorical context for the emergence of lesbian coparent families. Following this I review the theoretical and lived problem of gendered divisions of labor—domestic and waged—and the implications for women and their families. Finally, drawing on field research I conducted over nine months in 1994, I analyze the ways in which lesbian coparents in these “innovative” nuclear families divide household, child care, and paid labor to learn whether, and the extent to which, they adopt or modify gendered divisions of labor, or alternatively, whether they pursue different, more egalitarian work and family arrangements.

GAY FAMILY DISCOURSE AND THE EMERGENCE OF LESBIAN COPARENT FAMILIES

The relatively recent appearance and growth of lesbian coparent families is tied not only to new reproductive technologies (and their increased availability to lesbians) and more progressive juridical attitudes among certain U.S. county judges, but also to political and cultural shifts within gay and lesbian family discourse itself. For lesbians and gay men struggling for liberation and equal civil rights during the 1960s and 1970s, families embodied some of the oppressive values from which they sought liberation. In particular, traditional families reinforced procreative sexuality as a social good and nonreproductive sexual practices outside of marriage as deviant, antisocial, and immoral. Gay and lesbian liberation politics coalesced around the separation of sexuality from procreation, asserting the primacy of pleasure, desire, and intimacy over marital love and reproductive duty in sexual practices. In this view, marriage and “the family” would always be the product and agent of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). As exclusive social institutions, their formation and reproduction have depended on the repression of queer sexualities, as Altman has noted: “The homosexual represents the most clear-cut rejection of the nuclear family that exists, and hence is persecuted because of the need to maintain the hegemony of that concept” (1979, 47).

While some lesbians and gay men continue to reject marriage and family as a conscious, political act of resistance to heteronormativity (Robson 1994), others, aware of the potentially assimilative political implications of their choices, have pursued marriage and parenting, but not without caution. For some lesbians in the 1980s, "choosing children" helped to destabilize the gayness = antifamily equation. Lewin (1993) has interpreted the narratives of single lesbian mothers whom she interviewed in the 1980s as highly self-conscious, reflexive negotiations of two identities—*lesbian* and *mother*—identities that an earlier gay politics had constructed as incompatible. In Lewin's account, these mothers often felt torn between their loyalties to their children and to the lesbian communities from which they had become increasingly estranged, but ultimately their experience as lesbian mothers served to positively reaffirm their gender *identity*: Motherhood reaffirmed their womanhood.

While their experiences may have destabilized the opposition of gayness to parenthood at a micro-interactional level, a similar depolarizing effect began to emerge in the larger arena of U.S. family politics. When members of the political and religious Right during the 1980s became strident in their efforts to restrict the definition of marriage and "the family" as heterosexual domains, gay demands for legal marriage and adoption appeared more transgressive than assimilationist. Still, the potential for reproducing traditional families was not lost on some gay and lesbian family critics. Polikoff, writing in the 1980s observed,

Having a child is a principal indicator of heterosexuality. [Lesbian mothering] . . . does not negate or transform the institution of motherhood. Motherhood, like marriage, is too loaded with this patriarchal history and function to be an entirely different phenomenon just because lesbians are doing it. (1987, 52, 54)

Despite considerable skepticism among many gay family scholars about the liberatory or progressive potential of gay marriage and families, by the 1990s a new gay equal-rights politics emerged that views marriage and family more positively. This perspective holds that all citizens should be entitled, if they so desire, to institutions that provide social and economic benefits. As a clear departure from the antifamily, sexual-revolution politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the current civil rights discourse frames legal marriage and family (with definitions of family expanded for purposes of social policy and benefits) as fundamental civil rights (Wolfson 1994-95).

Weston (1991) offers a different conception of how lesbians and gay men organize intimate and kin relations, a formulation of gay family discourse that has challenged the dualistic categories of resistance/accommodation, separatism/assimilation. Weston argues that lesbian and gay definitions of family need not be derived from a single position relative to the heterosexual norm. That is, they need not base notions of kinship in opposition to, nor in concert with, biological or legal definitions of family. Instead of definitions produced by and serving the interests of a heterosexist, patriarchal regime, Weston proposes that gay and lesbian families be understood as "chosen" families. By incorporating the element of choice, gay

and lesbian families may include any subset of a range of intimate, erotic, social, economic, and biological relations; and this subset is unbounded, fluid, and permeable. Weston's account of gay families shifts the focus from legal and institutional definitions to a more conceptual and practical level, which concentrates on the experiences and practices of gay families as members define them.

In the late twentieth century, New Right and increasingly more centrist political and academic "pro-family" discourses seek to reinstate the traditional heterosexual nuclear family as primary. At the same time, gay, lesbian, and antihomophobic political discourses negotiate a strategic terrain demanding more inclusive definitions of *family*. In this context, lesbian coparent families have emerged as a new social subject.

Because lesbian coparent families constitute an innovative family form, their everyday experiences and processes are often a matter of trial and error. They are similar to heterosexual nuclear families in structure, but not in gender composition; they are similar to single-mother families in gender composition, but not in structure, since they include two parents. Several studies have compared lesbian single-mother families and heterosexual single-mother families, mostly to ascertain the effects on children's psychological development when raised in a lesbian household (Golombok, Spencer, and Rutter 1983; Gottman 1990; Green et al. 1986; Hoeffer 1981; Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy 1981). Findings from these and other studies suggest that there are no marked differences in parenting practices or effects on children's psychological development, except that children in lesbian households are often described as having more positive, tolerant attitudes toward unconventional lifestyles and social differences.³ Rather than explicitly compare heterosexual and lesbian nuclear families, my focus concerns the experiences and practices of lesbian coparents and their families, in particular their division of labor, as this has remained one of the most intransigent problems for women and their families and, indeed, might very well underpin gender inequality as such (Chafetz 1991).

GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR AMONG HETEROSEXUALS

In nuclear families headed by heterosexual couples, the division of labor has been based on traditional—or, to be more historiographically precise, modern—gender conventions wherein men assume primary responsibility for breadwinning in the paid labor force and women assume primary responsibility for household maintenance and child care in the home. Feminists have argued convincingly that this division of labor by gender—influenced to a large degree by the separation of productive activity into the "public" sphere of market relations and reproductive activity into the "private" sphere of domestic caregiving—has profoundly diminished women's status both within the family and in society as a whole (Chafetz 1988). Marxist-feminists have suggested that because domestic and reproductive

labor remains largely unvalued in market terms, and therefore devalued in terms of social status (Hartmann 1981), women who have traditionally performed, and currently perform, this labor remain economically dependent on men for their material survival and that of their children. The disadvantage this arrangement holds for heterosexual women is meted out in its most severe form when married couples divorce and the "displaced housewife" must support her family financially after having acquired no occupational skills to "sell" in the labor market, thus severely limiting her options for earning even subsistence income (Weitzman 1985).

A strict gender division of labor in heterosexual nuclear families has also limited women's power to make or influence important decisions that affect themselves and their children. The partner who contributes the most material and financial resources, who often controls the distribution of valued goods both within and beyond the family, or who confers the highest social status on the family by virtue of his or her occupation and education typically exercises more power in family decision making (Hochschild 1989; Huber 1988; Kamo 1988). Men have had more power than women to influence major family decisions concerning, for instance, buying a home, moving, changing jobs, educating children, and even whether they will do housework (Baxter 1992; Coleman 1988).

Women in dual-income heterosexual families who work in the paid labor force now have greater autonomy and power to make important family decisions, but because women are paid on average 30 percent less than men, they still most often sacrifice personal and career interests to meet family needs, and they still do a significant majority of primary parenting and household work. Women's second shift (Hochschild 1989), while always prevalent for African American and working-class mothers, appears to be a relatively stable structural feature of modern heterosexual family life, even among couples who consciously attempt more egalitarian coparenting arrangements (Ehrensaft 1987).

DO TWO MOMS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Insofar as the gendered division of household, child care, and paid labor in heterosexual nuclear families has been shown by feminists to maintain inequality between parents, does the absence of this stratification in lesbian coparent families (Weston 1992, 130) result in more egalitarian divisions of labor? Do lesbian coparents divide labor and make family decisions more equitably, so that neither partner is disproportionately burdened or economically disadvantaged? If not, what structures relations of inequality in lesbian coparent families? Does the nuclear family model itself impose a particular arrangement that promotes inequality?

Some researchers and lesbian feminist writers have suggested that lesbian couple relations, in general, are more egalitarian than heterosexual relations, both conceptually and experientially (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Chafetz 1974; Ettore 1980; Jay and Young 1979; Nichols 1987). Most forms of inequality or unequal

power are associated with differences in "relative resources" and involvement between partners (Caldwell and Peplau 1984), or with matters of intimacy (Lynch and Reilly 1986). Some suggest that lesbian couples (without children) share work and household responsibilities relatively equitably because of their strong beliefs in fairness, their expressed desirability of independence (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Clunis and Green 1988), and the relatively infrequent butch-femme role-playing by couples when deciding domestic responsibilities (Caldwell and Peplau 1984; Lynch and Reilly 1986). Kurdek (1993) found that compared with both gay male and heterosexual couples, partners in lesbian couples were equally likely to do household labor, following what he terms an "equality pattern," rather than a "balance pattern" (gay couples) and a "segregation pattern" (heterosexual couples). Whether these patterns of equality among lesbian couples persist when children enter the picture, when couples become coparents in nuclear-type families, has mostly remained a matter of utopian speculation, as Lewin suggests:

If the power dynamics of that [two-parent, nuclear, heterosexual] family form were largely responsible for the continuing devalued status of women, and for a variety of abusive practices, then a domestic arrangement based on presumably nongendered relations between two "equal" women partners would constitute a first step toward the better sort of world feminists dreamed of. (1994, 336)

METHOD

To explore the question of the division of labor among lesbian coparents, I conducted in-depth interviews with 34 couples, residing mostly in and around the San Francisco Bay Area, over a nine-month period in 1994. Seven couples in this study became participants through personal referrals and a quasi-"snowball" method of contacting participants. The other 27 couples became participants by responding to a letter I sent to an anonymous selection of clients of a San Francisco sperm bank and insemination clinic. The client names were selected by the clinic staff from those couples self-identified as lesbians who had used the services at any time and for whom a live birth resulted. Upon receiving the letter, potential participants contacted me if they wanted to participate in the study.

The problem of participant self-selection is often unavoidable when one attempts to study a social group with particular characteristics such as those represented in this study. It is compounded here in that these couples have taken conscious, determinate steps in planning their families, a process that involves at least one significant third party—be it a licensed medical establishment or a known sperm donor—and so the sample constitutes a specific subset of lesbian couples. While I believe the women in this study can tell us much about their family life as lesbian coparents, I do not claim that the present sample is representative of, or generalizable to, all lesbians or lesbian couples in the general population. Indeed, as I will discuss later, it is likely that this group of lesbians overrepresents high-income couples, in part, because the expense of starting families by way of

alternative, (often high-tech) medical, and legally protected reproductive services precludes couples who are not financially well-off.

All of the interviews were conducted in participants' homes, where I was able to meet their children and observe interactions among family members. Formal interviews lasted from two to three hours, and with some families I had the opportunity to spend more time, as I was invited to share meals with them. I joined one family on two different excursions to a small, local public playground in an agricultural community about 60 miles northeast of the Bay Area; I met 4 of the couples for the first time at a lesbian parent-child social outing in Golden Gate Park, where 10 couples and their children were enjoying their afternoon together.

All but two of the couples I interviewed had planned, conceived, and were currently coparenting children in a nuclear-type family arrangement.⁴ All of these couples considered themselves partners for life, although one-third of them said they either "would not" or "probably would not" get married if same-sex marriage were to be legalized in the United States. (This wariness toward *de jure* marriage suggests that even as contemporary gay and lesbian civil rights discourse attempts to divest marriage of heterosexual privilege, some still view it as irrelevant to their lives or as serving patriarchal interests.) Yet, when it comes to legal guardianship and custody of children, all of the lesbian mothers I interviewed were very clear that nonbirth mothers should be legally recognized as second parents. Thus, all of the couples residing in counties where second-parent adoptions have been granted to lesbian comothers had either thought about, initiated, or completed the adoption process at the time of our interview.

Forty-six of the mothers I interviewed were of Western European-Anglo descent; 13 claimed a Jewish ethnic heritage, 3 women identified as Japanese or Japanese American, 3 identified as Latina, 2 claimed Filipino roots, and 1 mother hailed from Australia. Fifteen families had a combined family income of \$100,000 or more per year, 14 had a combined income between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year, and 6 families made less than \$50,000 per year, with only 2 making less than the national median income for all families.⁵

Several factors are probably at work in accounting for the large proportion of high-earning couples in this study. Earlier studies of lesbians have noted higher income levels among their participants as compared with those of women in the general population of similar age and full-time work status. Lynch and Reilly (1986) note that the median income of their sample for 1981 (\$18,000) was substantially higher than the 1980 national median income (\$11,591) of women over 15 years of age who worked full-time, while 20 percent of their sample earned well over twice that amount. In a larger national (also nonrandom) sample, however, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983, 557) reported that 67 percent of lesbians between the ages of 26 and 40 had incomes below \$15,000, closer to the figure for all women older than 15 and working full-time. Badgett (1995, 737) analyzed General Social Survey (GSS) income data for the years 1989-91 and reported that lesbian/bisexual women actually earned anywhere from 12 percent to 30 percent less than heterosexual women, but the gap decreases "greatly" in size and statistical significance when

occupation and selection bias are taken into account. Taken together, the inconclusiveness of these studies suggests that whether lesbians make more or less than comparable women as a whole, these measures do not go very far in explaining the large proportion of higher-earning women in this study.

Other factors most likely bias this sample in favor of higher earners: Most of these families live in the wealthiest counties of California and the expense of the family planning process itself. First, families represented in this sample all live within a 200-mile radius of San Francisco, where medically certified and legally protected alternative reproductive services for lesbians are accessible. The client list of the sperm bank necessarily drew people from the wealthiest counties in California, where, for example, the average per capita income for San Francisco County in 1993 was \$32,777 (California State Department of Finance, Financial and Economic Research 1995). Second, when we consider the costs involved with the procurement of sperm, insemination services, consulting, and other related services before the prospective birth mother becomes pregnant, all of which is not, in any case, covered by insurance, lesbian couples are faced with preconception expenses running anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000, sometimes higher, depending on the number of attempts necessary to become pregnant and the difficulties encountered along the way. Even if couples are inseminating at home, if they wish to have donor semen screened for STDs (including HIV) and potency, they must still employ the services of a licensed physician, sperm bank, or medical laboratory. The implication is that lower-income lesbians may bypass these institutional routes altogether (as was the practice before professional alternative insemination services became available to lesbians) and assume some risks that are otherwise greatly ameliorated by reproductive service organizations. It may be the case, then, that the more institutionalized, high-tech, and commercialized these services become, the more economic resources—even cultural capital—are required for lesbian couples to legally and medically “protect” their family planning, and the less likely that lower-income couples will have access to them.

Similar to the distribution of occupations in Lynch and Reilly's (1986) study, about half of the women I interviewed said they worked in upper management or professional positions; one-third worked in semiprofessional, administrative, sales, or social service positions; with the remainder working in skilled, unskilled, and service labor positions. Four mothers were seeking full-time employment at the time of our interview. The high levels of education attained by the women I interviewed were also consistent with those noted by Lynch and Reilly: All of the women were high school graduates; approximately 15 percent had completed “some college” courses or had graduated from technical or certificate-granting schools; 35 percent had earned baccalaureate degrees; 30 held a master's degree; and 18 percent had obtained a medical, law, or other doctoral degree.

Seven families had two children and the remainder, thus far, had one. In only 1 of the 7 families with two children were both parents birth mothers. Twenty-one of the couples in families with single children were either thinking about or planning their second child. In 12 of these families, the partner who had not given birth the

first time was planning to become pregnant with the second child, using the same donor as the first. Seven were planning for the birth mother of the first child to have their second child as well, and 2 families were considering adopting a second child. In all of the families, male children outnumbered female children by three to two, and at the time of the interview, the children ranged in age from three months to eight years.

LESBIAN COPARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

During the interviews, I asked mothers to tell me about their lives at the time that they met their partners; how they planned their families; how they decided who would be the biological mother; and how their lives had changed after their children were born. With delight, humor, and oftentimes concern, birth mothers and comothers alike recounted their search for an anonymous sperm donor, likening it to shopping in a Sears catalog. Some couples claimed to have wanted only that the donor be healthy. Others, like Nora Duncan and Jill Collins,⁶ indicated that they were mostly interested in physical features:

We did look at the ethnic background you know because we're both real Irish. We wanted a redheaded kid. She [Nora] looked at some guy with green eyes and it was "forget the green eyes, we want red hair." That's what it came down to was the red hair. As long as he didn't have anything like Parkinson's or anything in his family, that was fine with us. But in the end we went with the red hair.

Some mothers suggested that they tried to discern more subjective qualities in the donor's personality from the limited information provided by the sperm bank, and they based their decisions on whether the donor was "somebody I would like to have coffee with" or "somebody nice whom our daughter would be happy to meet when or if she decides to meet him." All but 5 of the couples used sperm bank donors who would remain anonymous until the child turned 18 years old. Mothers referred to these donors as "yes" donors, meaning that the donor's identity would be released to the child at 18 if the child so desired; for many of the mothers, this identity release was their most important requirement in a donor. Four of the couples used known donors, and 1 couple used a donor who would remain completely anonymous. Even among the 29 couples with "yes" donors, however, 24 of them talked about the sperm donor as a donor rather than as their children's biological father or someone whom their children would refer to as dad. Most made it clear that a donor, whether anonymous or known, was not a coparent.

Equal-Opportunity Work and Parenting

During the interviews, mothers talked about their paid work, about cooking, feeding and bathing children, maintaining cars, paying bills, making child care arrangements, shopping, lawn mowing, pet care, getting up in the middle of the night to lull an infant back to sleep, and other such exigencies in their daily lives.

From the start of this research, I expected that birth mothers, rather than comothers, would take on more of the domestic and primary parenting responsibilities, conforming to a traditional gender ideology. Adherence to a gender-based division of labor, in turn, would tilt the balance of power away from birth mothers as they engaged in more unremunerated work relative to their partners. This does not, however, appear to be the case for the vast majority of the lesbian coparents I interviewed. Twenty-nine couples viewed parenting and domestic work as an equally shared responsibility and actively sought ways to ensure that both partners were involved and responsible such that neither partner took on a disproportionate share for any length of time. This was consistent across income levels.

Moreover, when a partner in a given family did take on more of the caregiving and housework responsibilities, she was no more likely to be the birth mother than the comother. Five couples did describe their division of labor as adhering to a full-time breadwinner/full-time caregiver arrangement, in which stay-at-home caregivers depended heavily, if not completely, on their partners' income. This latter "Rozzie and Harriet" pattern may not necessarily constitute inequality in terms of the distribution of rewards to partners who happen to value full-time parenting and domesticity, as many clearly do. Yet, to the degree that these "Harriets" are engaged in full-time domestic work that is socially devalued and economically unrewarded, the balance of power within these couples is likely to shift in favor of the "Rozzies," as I observed (and discuss below) for two couples whose work and family arrangements had been organized this way for a longer period of time than the others.

In contrast, both partners in 19 of the 29 equal-sharing couples said that they work full-time and pay for some form of day care. Eight of the equal-sharing couples claimed that the partner with the more flexible work schedule does more child care during the week, while the other partner contributes more in the way of housework and weekend parenting. In the remaining 2 equal-sharing families, the mothers said that they had consciously reduced their work hours proportionately, so that neither parent was assuming an unequal share of responsibilities relative to her partner. The mothers in one of these couples alternate taking Fridays off from work each week, and their 12-month-old daughter stays at home with a caregiver for the remainder of the week.

Among these equal-sharing couples, few partners expressed overt dissatisfaction with the arrangement or with each other,⁷ but most talked about how having a child had drastically changed their lives in unexpected ways, even with all the prenatal planning and preparation they had meticulously undertaken. For Eliza Cohen, 30, a graduate student and part-time social worker, and her partner, Gisella Zarandosa, 38, a university registrar, becoming the proud parents of baby daughter Rita added new types of pressures to their busy lives. It also seemed to strengthen their commitment to each other, as birth mother Eliza reflects:

You have to remember it is really stressful to have a young child. It definitely has been a stress on our relationship. But I also think it's brought us closer, in some ways. I mean, it's made our commitment stronger for sure. There's a whole different element to it now. We used to threaten to break up in the old days, you know, [but] we don't

do that anymore with any kind of meaning behind it. You know, because it's a different kind of thing now. I mean, we're both her parents, she [Rita] needs us both, and we share this responsibility.

While equal-sharing parents in the more affluent families in this study have greater financial latitude to negotiate their work-family-leisure tradeoffs and do so fully aware of the benefits and options available to them, some expressed concerns over the costs to the quality of their family life of living in a socially progressive, gay-friendly, but expensive urban center. Kathleen Peterson, 33, a labor union public relations consultant and comother of daughter Sophie who had just celebrated her first birthday, agreed with birth mother Sharon Carlton, 45, a self-employed personnel consultant, that raising a family in San Francisco not only requires two incomes but for lesbian/gay families, it constitutes a "queer tax":

Sharon: This last year it's been really hard for me to not have Kathleen come home [from work] when she says she's going to or when I'm expecting her to. Most of the time she can't help it, the job demands it, but this is part of the problem. Which makes us all wonder why we shouldn't just, you know, move to South Dakota where they're not income machines. But we'd probably be shot and run out of town.

Kathleen: It's a queer tax. One salary, we'd be able to afford to live on one salary. I never thought I'd make this much money in my life. I mean, there's Gay Pride that we're volunteers for and our kids can be exposed to that, but it's expensive to live here. If we weren't gay and didn't need to live in an environment where we'd be safe, we wouldn't need to afford [all of this].

Kathleen earns roughly \$55,000 per year, while Sharon's annual income, which fluctuates month to month depending on client billings and collected accounts, approximates that same amount.

For other dual-career parents, particularly those living in suburbs, negotiating egalitarian work and family arrangements seemed less fraught with quality-of-family-life concerns. Indeed, for one family—in which both parents work full-time in a county parks-and-recreation department, earn nearly identical annual salaries, and deliver their young son together to day care every morning and pick him up each afternoon—the comfort of their San Mateo County suburban community and tri-level home exemplifies the upper-middle-class American Dream. There are neither "queer taxes" nor any other market forces strong enough to penetrate this idyllic, *Better Homes and Gardens* family nest.

But for most mothers in these equal-sharing families, across income levels, their process for deciding how their paid work, domestic and family responsibilities would be divided appears to have followed an egalitarian principle of self-conscious, mutual understanding and sharing of both rewards and responsibilities—an egalitarianism similar to that reported by Kurdek's (1993) and Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) lesbian couples who did not have children. Even with substantial income gaps between partners—which could have tilted the distribution of rewards and status in favor of the higher-earning partner, as I believe is true for two of the "Rozzie and Harriet" families discussed below—these equal-sharing parents still

managed to divide up the second shift into "quarter shifts." For example, in one family residing in Berkeley, birth mother Karen, a highly specialized emergency room nurse, earns \$90,000 per year compared with her partner Arlene's \$15,000 part-time, computer technician salary. Arlene has provided part-time, stay-at-home care for their five-year-old son, Bobby, throughout the period following Karen's return to her intense, full-time work. This child care arrangement has been supplemented recently with care provided by a Chinese family provider, whom the couple actively sought since their son has some Chinese ancestry and whom the parents hope to use on a more permanent, flexible basis as Arlene steps up her search for full-time employment. Arlene manages all of the family's financial accounts, does the ongoing bookkeeping and pays the bills, takes care of the home and yard (or hires help as the need arises), and cooks dinner during the week, allowing Karen to return from her emotionally and physically exhausting days at the hospital to enjoy "quality" time with Bobby. Quality time for Karen means reading and playing with Bobby, bathing him, and tucking him into bed. The "quarter shift" becomes leisurely and relaxing when the other parent does her quarter shift.

Still other equal-sharing parents, particularly those who cannot afford household help and pay small amounts to friends for daily child care, do engage in mutually determined needs reduction as they struggle to maintain some domestic standards and equity between partners. Reduction of needs, as Hochschild (1989) explained it, is a household strategy whereby partners who are unwilling or unable to maintain the home according to certain standards simply lower household expectations by denying that work needs to be done. In Hochschild's research, husbands tended to use this against wives as a way of exempting themselves from housework. Nora and Jill, the couple who selected their sperm donor for his red hair, appear to sacrifice some household standards, but this seems to be accomplished by mutual agreement.

As I talked with Nora, 40, a supervisor in a city government department, and Jill, 35, a computer technician, in their home—one that they hope to sell and move from in the near future since it is in a neighborhood in Oakland they consider unsafe—I was struck by the mothers' different but congruous parenting styles. Jill, who has boundless energy, continually jumped up from the sofa to help three-year-old Dennis with his clothes, to check on him while he was playing in the backyard, to deposit him in the bathtub when he came in from outside, and to retrieve file folders that contained his legal and medical documents. It was Jill whose lap Dennis sat on to be towed off and cuddled following his bath. Nora, on the other hand, evoked a calm, mature figure in the thick commotion of human and animal bodies in their household. It was Nora whose lap was always soothing when playtime was over, whose words were spoken gently and with care to her son, whom she called "Sweetie" often. It was Nora who doled out crackers and cheese and money for sodas at the picnic when I first met them.

Jill and Nora, both in full-time, paid employment, expressed no complaints about the division of household tasks and responsibilities, but they hinted at a certain

amount of needs reduction. When I asked who did the majority of the housework, they responded jovially:

Jill: Well, look around . . . Dennis!

Nora: Dennis does the housework!

Jill: Dennis does the majority of the housework!

Nora: Actually, we shop together, we don't cook that much.

Jill: The breakdown of the cooking is supposed to be, she cooks and I do the dishes, except for breakfast on the weekends, I do the breakfast, cook breakfast. I always have. We don't really cook other than that so I do everything! I don't know I would say it's a pretty even split as far as the housework goes because she does all the inside stuff because I'm allergic to dust.

Nora: Jill does the dishes and she does the garbage and she does probably like half of the cooking that's done, and the other half of the cooking that's done I do and I do the vacuuming.

Jill: She gets positively vicious if I touch her laundry.

Nora: But the work outside of the house, Jill does a lot of that.

Jill: I'm in charge of the cars. I do most of the oil changes and stuff like that. Last weekend I was out here with the push mower, I'll do the push mower, but I don't like the gas mower.

Even while it appears that there is an inside/outside split in this couple's division of domestic tasks, not only does this split appear to be determined by personal preferences rather than by gender norms but it is also not a pure split in that Jill does much of the inside work as well.

For Nora and Jill, birth mother and comother respectively in a nuclear-type family, gender norms are absent in their division of labor. In contrast to interactionist theories of gender and production-of-gender theories that view the domestic practices of couples—usually heterosexual couples—as producing and maintaining gender distinctions, most of the equal-sharing parents in this study, like Nora and Jill, actually demonstrate a certain freedom from gendered expectations about who does what chores.⁸ A birth mother who works full-time and whose partner works full-time does not view her partner's involved coparenting as a "gift" to her nor as a threat to her gender identity. The expectation is that each partner does her share of the total work-family load. Rather than "doing gender," these parents, some more consciously than others, appear to be "undoing" gender in their division of work and family responsibilities.

The contrast between these equal-sharing parents, and those who chose a more traditionally gendered division of paid and domestic labor, becomes readily apparent as the effects of this latter "Rozzie and Harriet" pattern bear the mark of modern patriarchy.

The Rozzie and Harriet Pattern

The work and family arrangements of the five "Rozzie and Harriet" families, whose pattern fits the 1950s white, middle-class model of full-time breadwinner/

stay-at-home caregiver, appears to produce the same types of problems for lesbian coparents who do this as for the heterosexual wives whose "problem without a name" was articulated by Betty Friedan 33 years ago. The lesbian version of Rozzie and Harriet assumes many of its predicates—a family wage earned by one adult, usually the higher-status adult; a stay-at-home caregiver and domestic worker who provides unremunerated emotional, material, and reproductive support to the breadwinner; and children who are the charge of the homemaker 24 hours per day except for those rare occasions when the entire family participates in group activities. In contrast to the egalitarian practices of equal-sharing parents, not only are the Rozzie and Harriet arrangements structurally disadvantageous for the full-time homemaker/parent depending on the length of time involved, but, in this study, stay-at-home partners themselves were much more likely to express dissatisfaction, concern, and anxiety with their arrangements. Of the five couples in this study who had adopted a primary caregiver/primary breadwinner arrangement, two had been following this pattern for a greater length of time (approximately six months and four years respectively) than the other three, who had only recently initiated this arrangement. But the primary caregivers in the former two couples—who will be the focus of this section—offered profoundly dispirited accounts of their daily lives. The character of the grievances described so gravely by these full-time caregiver partners suggests to me that their work and time is substantially less valued and/or rewarded relative to those of their breadwinning partners.

For Clara Mueller and Madeline Lovadas, whose 14-year relationship began when they were in college, the decision to start a family was not completely mutual—nor was the path obvious to them. Madeline had always wanted children, and Clara was deeply committed to Madeline. Madeline and Clara now have two blond, blue-eyed children to whom Madeline gave birth and of whom Clara now speaks proudly (and publicly). But it is Madeline who knows and describes every detail of the children's lives, for she is a full-time homemaker and mother, who organizes children's activities at the church the family attends, but whose work is completely voluntary and uncompensated. Madeline described her decision to stay home with the children simply as reflecting her desire to mother them in the fullest way possible. Over time she began to feel a "lack of support" from Clara. For Clara, being the sole provider of the family's income as an agricultural public relations specialist meant that home and children were strictly Madeline's domains. But Madeline's domains comprised 24-hour days with no time off. During one of my interviews with Madeline, she recalled her painful feelings about the "lack of support" from Clara:

This was a very difficult time for us because I thought that even though I was the one who wanted the kids, when you care about someone, when you are in a relationship with someone, you support them. You are supposed to help the other person, encourage them and support them in what they are doing. I felt so devalued by her. Nothing I did was of any value. The most value I had to Clara was as an object that could keep the kids quiet. I was an object. I couldn't do anything to please her. Whenever I wanted to do anything else *other than work, anything that took me out*

of the house, this was too much for Clara. I couldn't go anywhere without feeling like I was neglecting Andrea [their first child]. I couldn't leave her with Clara. Clara would complain to me when I came home that all Andrea did was cry and need constant attention. I couldn't do anything right. The most important thing I could do was to keep Andrea quiet while Clara was home. If Andrea cried, no matter what I was doing, it was my responsibility to quiet her down so that she wouldn't disturb Clara. [Emphasis added.]

Clearly Madeline's "domains" represent work for her; when she is at home with the children, she is "at work." But because this work occurs in the home, is not structured by shifts, and has no monetary—nor even social—value, it becomes coded for Clara as that from which she is exempted as part of her status and privilege as breadwinner. It is her "right" to be literally relieved of it.

The couple has since worked through some of these difficulties with the help of their church pastor, a woman who is also a family counselor. While many of these difficulties may have arisen from the original, nonmutual decision to become parents, they may also be artifacts of the Rozzie and Harriet arrangement that instituted the home as "Madeline's domain" in the first place. Madeline's position of total economic dependence on Clara and her diminished capacity to negotiate for her needs, especially as they relate to the children, are reminiscent of the status of full-time mothers in heterosexual nuclear families. Madeline described her lack of power in their relationship in this way:

Before, when the kids were younger, she [Clara] really resented it when I asked her to do anything or help out with anything. So, it was like I would have to do everything. I didn't know what to do. I really couldn't talk to her about what I wanted. I was good for nothing since I had the kids.

Madeline's devalued status appears to have arisen out of both Clara's lack of interest in parenting at the outset and Madeline's economic dependence, which resulted directly from their primary caregiver/primary breadwinner division of labor.

Besides ambivalence on the part of one partner to become a parent, another factor that may both influence and result from a traditionally gendered division of labor among lesbian coparents is the greater earning power of one partner relative to that of the other. The full-time caregiver in all five families with a primary Rozzie and Harriet arrangement reported a lower income and wage history as compared to that reported by their breadwinning partners. Income disparities between partners do not necessarily point to or lead to inequity between partners—as we saw with one of the equal-sharing couples whose sizable income gap was handled by having Arlene maintain considerable control of the *distribution* of Karen's nearly six-digit salary. But when lower-earning partners completely forego or defer indefinitely their own earnings to assume primary responsibility for the household and child care, it is more likely they will not have an equal say in how the breadwinner's salary will be distributed or whether they will be granted "time off" from their 24-hour domestic responsibilities.

For one upper-income couple, Marilyn Weiss, a senior-level corporate manager and birth mother of six-month-old Max, and Brenda Jacobson, full-time mom to

Max and owner of a retail clothing store (which she used to manage herself before taking on full-time domestic responsibilities), the diminishment of Brenda's economic status negatively affected her ability to negotiate time off from mothering, time to herself, and even whether Max would have her last name included somewhere in his. Brenda's account of some of these instances reflects a desire to support her partner, but her "cover-up" fails as her distress resounds forcefully through her words. In effect, the arrangement has reduced her capacity both to produce and control material and financial resources, and to advocate for her own physical and emotional needs. When I asked Brenda how the arrangement was working out for her financially, she responded,

I'm definitely sacrificing income. But Marilyn is *subsidizing me*. She pays more of the mortgage on the house, and then the trade-off is that I'm staying home with Max. We don't really have any problems monetarily, although *I do* because I'm not making as much as I would, you know, so it's harder for me to accept the fact that . . . yeah, I can't do what I . . . I'm watching my money more. I'm not spending like I used to. Who knows what's going to happen to my business, the business is very volatile. [Emphasis added.]

Brenda describes her once thriving and personally gratifying retail business as "volatile," now that almost all of her time and attention are devoted to caring for Max. Her occupational status has shifted from independent retail owner to domestic; her economic position now requires "subsidization."

The daily work that Brenda accomplishes as the traditional housewife in a nontraditional family leaves her physically and emotionally exhausted by the end of the day. But her day usually does not end when Marilyn comes home from her 10-hour day on the job. While Brenda speaks of "her shift being over" and "turning Max over" to Marilyn, she still feels responsible for Max and recounts being unable to steal away for a precious single hour that she needs alone, without feeling the need to keep a watchful eye on him—even while Max is in the care of his biological mother.

When she [Marilyn] gets home at night, I'm at the door with Max after like 10 or 11 hours, and I'm ready to turn him over. I say, "My shift's over." And I need like an hour, you know, to take a bath, read the paper, whatever, and that's why I say you really need two people to do this. Marilyn's very good, she's really good. She has a lot on her agenda when she gets home, she wants to do her bookwork, she wants to talk on the phone to the East Coast. The other day she came in . . . it was one of those days when I really knew that I needed an hour, you know, and that's not always . . . but I knew I needed some space since he was at that time cranky all day. And she comes in here and she's on the phone and I'm reading my paper and she leaves Max on the floor and walks out there and I said, "Would you get that kid in here!" [Marilyn says,] "I'm on the phone to the East Coast." I say, "Take the child with you to the other room to talk on the phone." But . . . I've got a long day, I've got 10-, 11-hour days with him and he doesn't nap a whole lot and, you know, I take care of the house, I do the food shopping, I do errands, and I still manage my business, I drive him up there with me about once a week.

Brenda talks about "needing an hour" or "needing space" in the same hungry way that Hochschild's working heterosexual mothers talked about sleep. The similarity

between Brenda's account of her days and the daily lives of working heterosexual mothers points to the ways in which this division of labor not only compounds income gaps between partners but produces leisure gaps as well.

A final factor associated with these couples' traditionally gendered divisions of labor relates to their ideas about what "family" means. Couples with full-time caregiver arrangements talked about how "parent-child bonding" was important in their decision to have a full-time parent in the home. One couple who was planning for the comother to quit her full-time work as a driving instructor to care for their 18-month-old son suggested simply that what their son needs most is a "sense of family." Some mothers suggested that offering their children a "strong sense of family" would provide the children with emotional and psychological strength for dealing with homophobic oppression, which they would inevitably face. Paradoxically, the family arrangement that best helps children deal with the stigma of homosexual difference, according to these mothers, also replicates heterosexual family norms. But these mothers believe that this arrangement may also be the best for preparing children for all types of life uncertainties, not just those associated with intolerance or homophobia.

In the increasingly more conservative political climate of the 1990s, where the "breakdown" of the two-parent (heterosexual) nuclear family is blamed for a host of social pathologies, it makes sense that some lesbian coparents would choose the 1950s heterosexual model because it enables them to demonstrate their commitment to, and competence at, parenting. That is, by implementing the "ideal" arrangement for children (as the "family values" rhetoric asserts), they can achieve a standard according to which most heterosexual parents cannot and do not live (Baca Zinn 1990). In a hegemonic family system—wherein the hegemony of the patriarchal family model is maintained by way of a cultural code that, according to Smith (1993, 52), operates discursively like a genetic code replicating its organization in multiple social sites—certain family patterns and practices can compensate for "structural" deviations from the code. Lacking legal marriage and other social supports, gay- and lesbian-headed families may overcome their deviation from the hegemonic code through practices (such as having a full-time parent in the home) that allow them to be "more normal than the norm."

CONCLUSIONS

Lesbian coparent families are a relatively new social phenomenon. In the midst of political and academic conflict over what the American family "is" and what it "ought to do" in society, they are struggling through their own public and private dilemmas. Because feminists have shown that gender-based divisions of labor within heterosexual nuclear families maintain the inequality in women's and men's economic and social status, studying the ways in which lesbian coparents divide labor helps us to understand, in the words of Lesser Blumberg, "the conditions

under which women do not do a disproportionate share of the household tasks" (Blumberg 1991, 27). The conditions imagined by Blumberg do not include the possibility of women with female partners, but it is precisely when we look at families where parents are not stratified by gender that we begin to see women who do not do a disproportionate share of household tasks relative to their partners.

Although the findings of this study of 34 lesbian coparent families should be taken as suggestive, since the study's limitations prohibit drawing any definitive conclusions, they do indicate that the majority of lesbian parents in this sample have apportioned their paid work and family responsibilities such that neither parent assumes a disproportionate share of the total work-family load nor is one rendered economically dependent on her partner. This egalitarianism among 29 of the 34 lesbian couples with children suggests that gender—as a mechanism for allocating domestic, caregiving, and paid work that historically has disadvantaged the primary caregiver—is not especially salient for lesbian coparents in nuclear families. Similar to the egalitarian divisions of housework among lesbian couples without children in other studies, the parenting practices combined with paid and unpaid domestic work of these lesbian coparents reflect explicit, self-conscious commitments to equity.

It is very likely that for many of the higher-income families in this sample, their considerable economic resources have enabled them to "purchase equality" by contracting out their unpaid domestic work. However, because high- and low-income families were equally distributed among the equal-sharing couples and those who had instituted more traditionally gendered divisions of labor, the capacity for a couple to buy their way out of unpaid domestic work does not always mean they will do it, especially when it comes to child care.

For those five couples who did follow a primary breadwinner/primary caregiver arrangement, the Rozzie and Harriet couples, not only were stay-at-home moms rendered economically vulnerable, as most had severed their ties to substantial paid employment or were planning to do so, but their capacity to negotiate with their partners about their own needs was diminished as well. For the five Rozzie and Harriet couples, their adherence to a traditionally gendered division of labor diminished the status of the full-time caregiver relative to that of her partner, but the assignment of responsibilities was not made on the basis of gender nor on the biological relationship of the parent to the child. In other words, the *form* their division of labor took mimics a traditional gender-based division of labor and produces the same effects for the stay-at-home partner, but the inequality may not be understood as structured by gender. Rather, these couples' decisions were based on a complex of factors involving relative income and earning potential, and the desire of parents to provide children with a full-time parent and a "sense of family." That the Harriets still experienced a noticeable decline in their status, and in their capacity to influence family decisions and negotiate with their partners for their own needs, strongly indicates the negative effects of economic dependency and the degree to which domestic and child care work remain stubbornly devalued at macro social and economic levels, even when parents claim to value them highly.

The majority of the lesbian coparents in this study, however, maintained a high degree of equity in their practices, suggesting, for now, that there may be some truth to one child's claim that "two moms are better than one." It is a claim that seems worth paying attention to as these families of the postmodern frontier become more prevalent.

NOTES

1. I use the term *alternative* rather than *artificial* in reference to donor insemination as it seems to be preferred by most lesbians involved in the process.

2. Although researchers have estimated the total number of lesbian mothers in the United States as ranging from 1 to 5 million, 1990 estimates of the number of lesbians who have given birth to children after "coming out" place the number somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 (Patterson 1992, 1026). These estimates include only those women who have given birth to children and have identified themselves as lesbian. These figures are underestimates of the actual number as many lesbians may not disclose their sexual identity to hospital staff and/or are presumed to be heterosexual (Pies 1985; Pollack and Vaughn 1987).

3. For excellent reviews of these and other studies see Patterson (1992) and Tasker and Golombok (1995).

4. One couple whom I interviewed but did not include in this analysis had separated and were no longer living together as partners. Another couple, whom I have included here, came together after one of the partners had already had twins from a previous lesbian relationship, but they both consider themselves mutual coparents to the twins and the nonbirth mother plans on having a child in the near future.

5. The most current national statistic for annual median income for all family types is \$36,812; the annual median income for families with two earners is \$45,779. Both figures are 1992 estimates (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992).

6. All names of participants are pseudonyms.

7. Because of budget constraints, I was unable to interview partners separately in all but three couples. The question invariably arises as to whether the mothers were telling a happier story than I might have heard had I talked with each partner individually. Knowing that I would be limited methodologically to interviewing and observing parents together, in the interviews I included questions requiring factual answers. Partners could affirm or correct their responses to questions concerning time spent on the job, feeding children, shopping, and so forth, in each other's presence.

8. See Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman (1991) for interactionist theories of "gender accomplishment," and Fenstermaker Berk (1985) for her conceptualization and study of "the family" as a factory that produces gender. Using a similar Goffmanian framework, Carrington (1995) found that same-sex couples in his study tended to "do gender" in their feeding and entertaining practices. It is difficult to say whether these patterns would continue were the couples involved with parenting and raising children.

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