
Organising Work and Home in Same-Sex Parented Families: Findings From the Work Love Play Study

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In this article we present findings from the Work, Love and Play (WLP) study: a survey completed by 445 same-sex attracted parents across Australia and New Zealand. Comparisons of household division of labour are made between a sub-sample of WLP participants, who were currently cohabiting with a same-sex partner ($n = 317$), and 958 cohabiting opposite-sex parents surveyed as part of a major Australian study, *Negotiating the Life Course*. This comparison showed that same-sex couples divided household labour significantly more equally than heterosexual parents, and lesbian couples also shared parenting tasks more equally. Qualitative findings from the WLP study indicate that, for many same-sex couples, major decisions around who gives up paid work and how many hours parents choose to work, as well as decisions around work/family balance, are negotiated on the basis of couple's preferences and circumstance rather than an assumption that one parent will be the primary child carer. It is speculated that this finding highlights an important point of difference between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples where the division of household labour is often based on the assumption that the mother will almost always be the primary child carer and homemaker. The research is a collaborative partnership between La Trobe University, Deakin University, The University of Melbourne, and Relationships Australia Victoria.

Keywords: lesbian and gay parenting, work–family balance

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This is an article about parents' choices underpinning household, parenting and paid work arrangements in everyday life — a favoured site for research and analysis by sociologists, but less so for family therapists. In fact, it is an area surprisingly neglected by family therapy. In the almost 30-year history of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, there has never been a paper published on domestic division of labour and/or work/family balance. This is a notable gap in scholarship on family therapy given that dissatisfaction with domestic division of labour arrangements is strongly related to relationship unhappiness and breakdown (Craig & Sawrikar, 2007; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Kurdek, 2007; Pocock, 2003) — the bread and butter of family counselling work.

There is a growing body of research that suggests same-sex couples achieve greater egalitarianism in their relationships than heterosexual couples in terms of household division of labour, parenting responsibilities (if they have children) and material income (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Dunne, 1999; Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2006; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004; Short, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1998; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003). Researchers have found that lesbian couples tend to have a strong ideological and ethical commitment to achieving egalitarianism in their relationships, including in terms of household division of labour (Patterson et al., 2004). Patterson et al. (2004) found that this ideological commitment is more likely to translate to equal sharing of household labour within lesbian couples than structural factors such as equal work hours. Lesbian couples are also inclined to share roles within the household rather than specialise in one set of tasks. That is, both members of the couple are likely to take responsibility for the full range of household tasks including those that are traditionally — or perhaps stereotypically — assigned to men, such as taking out the garbage, or to women, such as cooking and cleaning. Lesbian couples also tend to share responsibility for both income generation (paid work) and home care (Dunne, 1999; Patterson et al., 2004). Dunne (1999) suggests that this in itself has an impact on the way in which lesbian couples organise family tasks and responsibilities because sharing roles means each partner develops empathy for what the other is doing, and thus becomes more inclined to share the load in each area.

Decisions about paid work and family roles in lesbian couples usually occur through consensus and decision-making (Dunne, 1999; Gartrell et al., 2006). In heterosexual couples, prescribed norms about gender roles tend to influence the division of labour within households (Baxter, Hewitt, & Western, 2005; Baxter & Western, 2005; Ferree, 1990; Lipsitz Bem, 1993). However, in same-sex couples, where there is no biological basis to assigning roles, family responsibilities are generally negotiated. As such, when lesbian couples have children they don't necessarily fall neatly into the patterns common to many heterosexual parents of one primary homemaker and primary 'breadwinner'. Rather, as noted above, both partners tend to take responsibility for generating income as well as the full range of household tasks (Dunne, 1999; Patterson et al., 2004).

Most previous research on household division of labour among same-sex couples has been qualitative research, involving relatively small samples (Chan et al., 1998; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Dunne, 1999; Gartrell et al., 2006; Patterson

et al., 2004; Short, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1998; Vanfraussen et al., 2003). The current study builds on this research by exploring patterns in household division of labour in a large sample of same-sex couples — both female–female and male–male couples — who are parents, and comparing this to a sample of heterosexual parents. This comparative analysis enables exploration of the role of gender in household division of labour after taking into account other potential influences such as couples' work patterns and demographic variables, such as education level. The study also explores the decision-making of same-sex couples regarding role-delineation in terms of workforce participation and parenting/home-duties. The aim of this is to better understand some of the major factors influencing these decisions in same-sex parented families.

The study raises fundamental questions regarding the rationale underlying same-sex couples' choices about the organisation of household and family responsibilities. By focusing our gaze on non-heterosexual couples who are parenting outside conventional gender and family structures, fresh insights can be generated around new ways of sharing the workload in everyday mainstream family life. Such analysis could be of particular relevance for those couples — and their attendant therapists — who seek counselling assistance when dissatisfaction lingers over their work and family balance.

Methodology

Work, Love, Play Study (Same-Sex Attracted Parents)

The data used for this article are from two separate research samples. The first was a large study of families parented by same-sex couples and same-sex attracted sole parents — the Work, Love, Play (WLP) study (Power et al., 2010). In 2008, same-sex attracted parents were invited to complete an online (electronic) self-report questionnaire. The survey was advertised through relevant email networks and online advertising, as well as through advertisements in lesbian and gay media. Notices were also sent to relevant community organisations. Participation in the WLP study was open to Australian and New Zealand residents who identified as same-sex attracted and who were currently actively engaged in parenting a child or children aged under 18 years.

The aim of the WLP study was to identify factors that affect resiliency in families parented by non-heterosexual parents, particularly in community contexts marked by legal and community heterosexism and discrimination towards same-sex attracted parents and their children. The questionnaire was designed to collect information about factors shown in previous studies to affect family resiliency, including socio-economic indicators, parental mental health and coping skills (Black & Lobo, 2008; Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Kalil, 2003; J. Patterson, 2002), communication and sharing within the parental relationships (Black & Lobo, 2008; Leitz, 2007), access to social and community networks and support (Black & Lobo, 2008; Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; J. Patterson, 2002) and, in the case of same-sex parented families, legal recognition and support for the couple and family unit (Oswald, 2002; Rawsthorne, 2009). The WLP questionnaire contained over 100

items and included both closed and open-ended questions and covered a range of topics including:

- general demographic information
- work and family roles and responsibilities
- mental health and wellbeing
- feelings about couple relationships
- access to family and community support
- use of childcare; experiences of discrimination related to sexuality
- positive and negative aspects of parenting and family life.

Full details of the study methodology have been published elsewhere (Power et al., 2010).

The current article reports on one aspect of family life measured by the WLP study: the division of labour between same-sex couples who are parents, and parents' decision making about their roles in relation to paid work and household labour/childcaring.

Negotiating the Life Course Study (Heterosexual Parents)

The second sample of participants was drawn from a major Australian study, 'Negotiating the Life Course' (NLC; McDonald, Evans, Baxter, & Gray, 2000). NLC was a longitudinal study in which computer-aided telephone interviews (CATI) were used to survey a randomly selected sample of approximately 1,500 Australian respondents every three years. The study commenced in 1997, with three subsequent waves being conducted in 2000, 2003 and 2006. Data were collected about participants' work, income, family, health and education (McDonald et al., 2000; Reimondos, 2009).

Measures

Both the WLP and NLC studies contained the same set of questions regarding division of household and parenting duties. The current WLP and NLC study comparison used Wave 4 of the NLC data, conducted in 2006, and compared responses from same-sex attracted WLP couples with heterosexual NLC couples.

All participants in the WLP study identified themselves as actively parenting at least one child aged under 18 years. 'Active parenting' was defined as making a significant contribution to the upbringing and day-to-day life of a child and included parents who did not have full time custody of their children. In the NLC study, questions about household division of labour were asked of all participants with at least one child aged under 18 years. However, questions about parenting tasks were asked only of parents with at least one child aged under 12 (the implications of this are discussed further in the discussion section of this paper). For both surveys, responses were limited to one respondent per family.

Questions about household division of labour used in both the NLC and WLP surveys related to the relative allocation of time by each partner to household and parenting jobs. Respondents were asked to indicate on Likert scales who in the couple usually undertook each of 17 household jobs (e.g., doing the dishes, repairing things

around the home, keeping in touch with relatives, and caring for pets). Respondents were also asked about six parenting activities or tasks: helping with homework, listening to problems, taking children to activities/appointments, playing with children, bathing and dressing and getting children to bed.

Quantitative Analysis

Principal components analysis indicated that housework items fell into four categories that were named *Indoor Tasks*, *Outdoor Tasks*, *Social Tasks*, and *Miscellaneous Tasks*. These were grouped together under the title *Total Household Labour*. Parenting items were grouped together in a separate category (named *Parenting Tasks*). Responses on items within each category were averaged for each respondent, creating a single, continuous numeric indicator of labour sharing equity for each type of labour (*Total Household Labour* and *Parenting Tasks*).

In order to compare the labour-sharing behaviour of same-sex and heterosexual couples, the mean scores on each of the types of labour were used as the outcome variables in a series of hierarchical linear regressions, with *Sexual Identity* (non-heterosexual or heterosexual) as the predictor variable of main interest. Significant differences were noted between same-sex couples (WLP participants) and heterosexual couples (NLC participants) on a number of demographic characteristics (see Table 1). Therefore, these demographic variables were included as Block 1 of each model using forced entry: *Education level*, use of *Paid domestic help*, *Number of children under 18 in the family*, *Age of youngest child*, *Work patterns within couples*, and the *Age* and *Gender* of respondents. The use of forced entry reflected the goal to account for the variance contributed to division of labour by factors other than sexual identity, rather than a detailed exploration of the relative influence of these variables. In other words, the influence of each of these variables on the division of labour within a couple was controlled for before *Sexual Identity* was entered in Block 2 as a predictor of labour sharing behaviour.

Categorical covariates with more than two categories (*Education level*, *Age of youngest child*, and *Work patterns*) were dummy coded. For *Age of youngest child*, each age band was compared with the mean of the subsequent age bands. For *Educational level* and *Work patterns*, the most populated category for each ('complete secondary school education', and 'both partners working full time') was used as the reference against which other categories were compared.

Patterns of full-time and part-time work among same-sex and heterosexual couples (*Work patterns*) were compared using chi-square analyses. These data were also compared (non-statistically) with data from the Australian population as a whole using the Australian Bureau of Statistics social trend data (ABS Social Trends, 2009).

Qualitative Analyses

There was a qualitative aspect to the research in which WLP participants were asked to answer two open-ended questions: 'Can you describe the way in which you organise paid work and childcare commitments in your family?' (426 valid responses); and 'Can you describe the reasons why your family organises work and childcare commitments in this way?' (408 valid responses). This analysis included WLP participants who were currently parenting as part of a same-sex couple as well as

single parents who identified as non-heterosexual. Survey respondents wrote short paragraphs in answer to these questions. These responses were hand-coded to determine the range of different reasons cited and numerically analysed in terms of how many respondents noted each reason. A detailed textual analysis of responses was also conducted to explore the theoretical hypothesis that gender norms or the biological status of parents would not be the primary basis on which same-sex couples made decisions about work and household division of labour. As responses to the question about 'the way' in which respondents organised their commitments was frequently combined with responses to the question about 'why', these responses were coded and inductively thematically analysed together.

Findings

Participants

The demographic characteristics of each sample are shown in Table 1. All couples in the WLP sample were same-sex (female-female or male-male) couples. All couples in the NLC sample were opposite-sex (male-female) couples. Only those WLP and NLC respondents who were cohabiting with a partner, and who were actively parenting at least one child under 18, were included in the quantitative analyses, yielding a sample size of 1277 (WLP = 317, NLC = 958).

Quantitative Analyses

Total Household Labour

A number of covariates predicted division of *Total household labour*, accounting for 13% of variance, $F(18, 1139) = 9.425, p < .001$. Having more children predicted less equal labour sharing within a couple. This was consistent across both heterosexual and same-sex couples. The use of paid household labour, and having tertiary level education was also associated with more equal labour sharing. Respondents who were part of a couple that were both working full time reported sharing labour more equally than those in couples where one partner worked full time and the other did no paid work. But respondents who were in a couple where both partners were working part time reported more equal sharing of tasks than those where both partners were working full time.

Sexual identity accounted for a further 12.3% of variance in division of *Total household labour*, $F(2, 1137) = 94.001, p < .001$. Both gay couples and lesbian couples reported sharing labour more equally than heterosexual parents. Regression weights are listed in Table 2.

Figure 1 shows the mean scores for household and parenting labour for lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. In this, household labour is broken down by the four subtypes: indoor, outdoor, social and miscellaneous tasks. Regression analyses revealed that, after covariates were controlled for, same-sex couples reported significantly more equal sharing of *Indoor Tasks* ($F(2, 1137) = 81.845, p < .001$) and *Outdoor Tasks* ($F(2, 1137) = 42.712, p < .001$) than heterosexual couples. The lesbian (but not gay) couples also reported sharing *Miscellaneous Tasks* ($F(2, 1136) = 28.936, p < .001$) and *Social Tasks* ($F(2, 1135) = 9.283, p < .001$) significantly more equally than the heterosexual couples.

TABLE 1

Demographics of Negotiating the Life Course (NLC) sample compared to the Work, Love, Play (WLP) sample

	NLC (n = 958)	WLP (n = 317)	Significance of difference
Gender of respondent			
Male	334 (35%)	34 (11%)	$\chi^2(1) = 67.60, p < .001$
Female ^a	624 (65%)	283 (89%)	
Sexual identity of respondent*			
Lesbian	0	253 (82%)	N/A
Gay	0	34 (11%)	
Bisexual	0	21 (7%)	
Heterosexual	958 (100%)	0	
Age of respondent (at time of questionnaire)			
Range	19–60	22–59	$t(1271) = 5.72, p < .001$
Mean (SD)	41 (7.7)	39 (6.2)	
Age of respondents' youngest child**			
0–1	143 (15%)	97 (33%)	$\chi^2(4) = 70.3, p < .001$
2–4	167 (17%)	75 (25%)	
5–9	266 (28%)	53 (18%)	
10–14	237 (25%)	49 (17%)	
15–18	145 (15%)	22 (7%)	
Number of children***			
1	324 (34%)	167 (53%)	$t(1269) = 5.32, p < .001$
2	417 (43%)	102 (33%)	
3+	217 (23%)	44 (14%)	
Mean (SD)	1.96 (.91)	1.65 (.84)	
Highest educational qualification****			
Postgraduate qualification	96 (10%)	133 (42%)	$\chi^2(5) = 314.08, p < .001$
Undergraduate qualification	94 (10%)	90 (28%)	
Certificate/diploma	171 (18%)	55 (17%)	
Complete secondary	322 (34%)	21 (7%)	
Incomplete secondary	206 (21%)	10 (3%)	
Other	68 (7%)	7 (2%)	
Employment (respondent and partner)*****			
Both full time	305 (35%)	99 (31%)	$\chi^2(5) = 76.92, p < .001$
Full time and part time	278 (32%)	82 (26%)	
Full time and not working	232 (27%)	71 (22%)	
Both part time	10 (1%)	36 (11%)	
Part time and not working	21 (2%)	19 (6%)	
Both not working	24 (3%)	10 (3%)	
Use of paid domestic labour			
Yes	155 (16%)	122 (38%)	$\chi^2(1) = 69.69, p < .001$
No	803 (84%)	195 (62%)	

Note: ^aThis includes two participants from the WLP study who described their gender as 'other' but who have been grouped with 'females' for the purposes of this analysis because they also described themselves as lesbians currently cohabiting with a female partner.

*missing cases = 99 (from WLP data); **Missing cases = 21 (from WLP data); ***Missing cases = 4 (from WLP data); ****Missing cases = 2 (WLP = 1, NLC = 1); *****Missing cases = 88 (from NLC data).

TABLE 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Predicting Division of Household Labour From Demographic Covariates and Sexual Identity

Model	R	R ²	Adj R ²	SE	R ² Δ	F	df1	df2	p
1 [†]	.360	.130	.116	.367	.130	9.425	18	1139	.000
2 [‡]	.503	.253	.240	.340	.123	94.001	2	1137	.000

Model 2	B	SE	β	t	p
Number of children	-.039	.013	-.090	-3.009	.003
Paid household help (yes vs. no)	.063	.027	.068	2.324	.020
Bachelor degree vs. complete secondary	.159	.035	.144	4.481	.000
Postgraduate degree vs. complete secondary	.188	.035	.187	5.454	.000
Both full time vs. full time and not working	-.116	.030	-.130	-3.835	.000
Both full time vs. both part-time	.253	.062	.121	4.103	.000
Lesbian vs. heterosexual	.421	.031	.451	13.647	.000
Gay vs. heterosexual	.215	.069	.086	3.109	.002

Note: [†]Includes education level, use of paid domestic help, number of children under 18 in the family, age of youngest child, work patterns within couples, and the age and gender of respondents; [‡]Adds sexual identity.
 *All beta weights given are from Model 2. For ease of interpretation, only those variables and categories contributing significantly to overall variance are included.

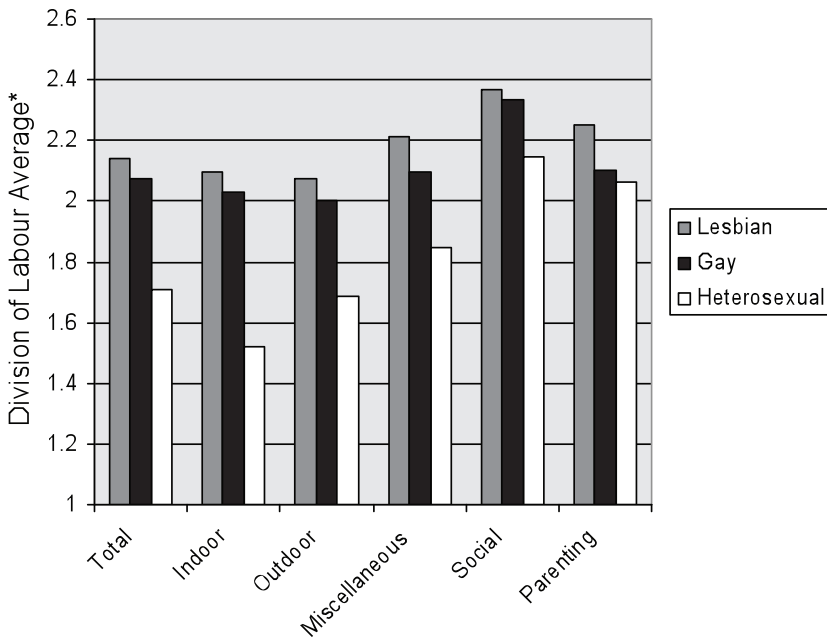


FIGURE 1

Mean division of household and parenting labour scores for lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples.

Note: * Higher scores indicate more equal division of labour.

Parenting Tasks

Covariates accounted for 5.2% of variance in division of *Parenting Tasks*, $F(18, 904) = 2.770$, $p < .001$. Male respondents, including those in same-sex couples as well as opposite-sex couples, reported that *Parenting Tasks* were shared more equally than females did. Those with undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications also reported sharing *Parenting Tasks* more equally than those with secondary school as their highest level of education. Further, couples who were both working full time reported sharing *Parenting Tasks* less equally than couples who both worked part time.

Sexual identity accounted for a further 3.8% of variance, $F(2,902) = 18.927$, $p < .001$. While lesbian couples reported sharing *Parenting Tasks* more equally than heterosexual couples, at a trend level, gay couples reported less equal sharing of *Parenting Tasks* than heterosexual couples. This finding should be treated with caution however as the sample size for gay couples was too small for meaningful comparison with the heterosexual sample, and the outcome of the regression is not consistent with the pattern of sharing indicated by the *Parenting Tasks* means (see Figure 1). Regression weights are shown in Table 3.

Work Patterns

Table 4 shows the working patterns of same-sex couples in the WLP sample. The most common work pattern was both partners working full time (22%), with slightly fewer reporting one partner working full time and the other part time (19%). When compared to the NLC data, lesbian couples were significantly more likely than heterosexual couples to have both partners working part time, or have one partner working part time and one not working, $\chi^2(10) = 93.005$, $p < .001$.

The pattern of part-time work seen in the WLP sample also appears to differ considerably to current working patterns in mainstream Australian family life. Table 2 shows a (non-statistical) comparison between an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

TABLE 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Predicting Division of Parenting Tasks From Demographic Variables and Sexual Identity

Model	R	R ²	Adj R ²	SE	R ² Δ	F	df1	df2	p
1 [†]	.229	.052	.033	.520	.052	2.770	18	904	.000
2 [*]	.301	.090	.070	.510	.038	18.927	2	902	.000
Model 2				B	SE	β	t	p	
Gender				-.152	.041	-.126	-3.705	.000	
Bachelor degree vs. complete secondary				.133	.055	.093	2.403	.016	
Postgraduate degree vs. complete secondary				.116	.054	.089	2.163	.031	
Both full time vs. both part-time				.297	.091	.114	3.262	.001	
Gay vs. heterosexual				-.206	.107	-.068	-1.934	.053	
Lesbian vs. heterosexual				.276	.050	.234	5.478	.000	

Note: [†]Includes education level, use of paid domestic help, number of children under 18 in the family, age of youngest child, work patterns within couples, and the age and gender of respondents; ^{*}Adds sexual identity.
^{*}All beta weights given are from Model 2. For ease of interpretation, only those variables and categories contributing significantly to overall variance are included.

TABLE 4

Work Pattern of Cohabiting Couples With Children Under 15 Years of Age

Working arrangements	ABS 2007 Couples (<i>n</i> = 1,547,100) (%)	NLC heterosexual couples (<i>n</i> = 745) (%)	WLP Lesbian couples (<i>n</i> = 247)* (%)	WLP Gay male couples (<i>n</i> = 27)* (%)**
Full-time and full-time	21	33	25	48
Full-time and part-time	39	33	28	19
Full-time and not working	34	28	24	29
Part-time and part-time	2	1	12	4
Part-time and not working	0	3	8	0
Not working and not working	4	2	3***	0***

Note: *Total number of respondents in the WLP sample who are cohabiting with their partner and have children aged under 15.

**The small sample size of gay male couples who are cohabiting should be noted as a limitation of this analysis.

*** Excludes people who are unemployed and searching for work.

2007 survey of over 1.5 million Australian families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009), the NLC study, and cohabiting couples in the WLP study with children aged under 15 (*n* = 274). The ABS showed that only 6% of Australian couples with children aged under 15 had neither parent working full time, compared to 23% of lesbian-parented couples in the WLP study.

Qualitative Analyses

Along with household division of labour and parenting tasks, WLP participants were asked to explain why they, as a couple or single parent, organised household and paid work responsibilities the way they did. Responses to these questions focused on the delineation of paid work and home-carer roles within the couples and decision-making about managing work and family responsibilities for single parents. There were 760 different responses to these questions, with most participants citing more than one reason. The responses are shown in Table 5.

Organising Work and Family Responsibilities

The wish to maximise one or both parents' time with children was the foundational motivation for around half (382, 50.3%) of all 760 explanations for work/family arrangements. This desire was more commonly cited than practical reasons such as the financial imperative to work, the greater earning power of one partner, the intrinsic value of work, the practical needs of parenting arrangements, or the identified self-care needs of the parents themselves and their own adult relationship.

Most respondents did not elaborate on why they wanted to maximise the time they spent with their children — it was just taken as given that this was best for both themselves and their children. However, some respondents indicated that they wanted to minimise their use of formal childcare or after school care (*n* = 29, 6% total sample), while 30 (7%) reported they needed to maximise time with children due to breastfeeding. There was a suggestion in some comments that the *extraordinary effort*

TABLE 5
Reasons for Choosing Current Work and Family Arrangements*

Categories of reasons	No. of responses**
Wanting to maximise time with children	
One parent working full-time and one working part-time to maximise time with children	51
One or both working part-time to balance work/family	49
At least one parent full time at home with children	31
At least one parent breastfeeding and needing to maximise time with children	30
Wanting to avoid or minimise use of external childcare	29
Wanting to be more available to the children	25
Finding flexible jobs with flexible hours to maximise time with children	25
One parent full-time at work and the other full-time at home to maximise time with children	23
Choosing to work from home to allow more time with children	23
Combining study with work to allow more time with children	20
Wanting to share parenting more equitably to maximise both parents' time with children	17
Combining study with home duties to maximise time with children	13
Fitting work around parenting needs to minimise childcare time and maximise parent time	13
Making professional/financial sacrifices by working part-time to be with children	11
Swapping parenting/work roles between partners	9
Working shift and night work to be with children	8
Choosing to work in school hours	3
Working close to home to minimise commute and be available to children	2
	Subtotal = 382 (50.3% of responses)
Financial reasons	
Need the money	83
One partner has greater earning capacity	66
Tax advantage or government benefits	21
Wanting to maximise education/resources for children	5
	Subtotal = 175 (23% of responses)
Intrinsic value of work	
Really enjoy work	37
Enjoy and value working full-time	34
Career driven	14
Value the competence, independence, variety	12
To model a work ethic for the children	7
Wanting to stay in touch with workforce	4
	Subtotal = 108 (14.2% of responses)
Childcare choices	
Grandparents and extended family involved	30
Childcare provides socialisation opportunities	15
Friends wanting to help out occasionally	13
Can't afford childcare	3
	Subtotal = 61 (8% of responses)

continued over

TABLE 5 CONTINUED

Reasons for Choosing Current Work and Family Arrangements*

Categories of reasons	No. of responses**
Time for self and time for partner	
Need time for self	6
Want time with partner	3
	Subtotal = 9 (1.2% of responses)
Other	
Issues between biological/ non-biological parents	8
One parent unwell	7
Disabled child	3
Court orders	2
Conflict between ex-partners	2
Wanting more work	1
Caring for elderly parents	1
Transitioning between households	1
	Subtotal = 25 (3.3% of responses)
	Total = 760 different responses

Note: *Only non-heterosexual parents from the WLP study were asked questions about reasons for delineating work and family responsibilities. This table does not include information about this from the NLC study of opposite-sex parents.

**Most respondents gave several reasons for their choices so may have been tallied more than once in each subcategory.

many gay men and lesbians have to go through to have children made spending time with those children a major priority.

It wasn't an easy process for us to have children and we feel that we owe it to them to be there for them as they grow. (Mother, 41 years)

We decided that we wouldn't go to all the extraordinary effort to have a family and then not have one of us at home with the kids. (Father, aged 41)

Respondents cited a variety of means by which they limit one or both parents' formal work hours in order to maximise time spent with children. This included: at least one parent working part time ($n = 100$, 23%); at least one parent home full time with children ($n = 54$, 12%); working flexible hours ($n = 25$, 6%); working from home ($n = 23$, 5%); or working shift/night work ($n = 8$, 2%).

Deciding Who Works and Who Stays Home

Responses indicated that couples in the study tended to negotiate paid work and family roles based on their personal circumstances, taking into account issues such as family finances, career-interest of each partner or the desire of one or both partners to have time at home with children. Responses indicated a willingness among couples to renegotiate their arrangements over time as their children grew older, income levels changed, or to give each partner an opportunity both to care for the children and to work. In cases where couples had more fixed, specialised roles (i.e., one partner taking on the 'breadwinner' role while the other stays home long term), roles tended to be based on the fact that one partner enjoyed work more or was more career-driven than the other.

At present I work full time and my partner works part time. Next year I will take long service leave and will return to work part time. My partner will increase her hours but still remain part time. Initially my partner had time at home and then started to work part time as she carried our child. I also had a higher earning potential, (Mother, aged 39).

My partner returned to work this year because of a great job opening and because more than five years out of a profession severely hinders a return. I took the year off to be with our kids and because we could afford it. Both our children were breastfed and my partner certainly wanted to be at home with them whereas I was content to continue with full time work. We've simply swapped places this year and are both happy in this new arrangement. (Mother, aged 49)

Thirty respondents indicated that one parent had arranged their work time to accommodate breastfeeding. However, those in couples did not assume that the breastfeeding parent (or biological mother) would remain the child's primary carer over the longer term or that she was the more 'natural' carer. Rather, family roles were subject to ongoing negotiation and change.

[Our arrangement] has varied over the seven years that we have been parents, no year being the same. We made a commitment that from the birth of the first child we would not ever both work full time, and that the children would not attend childcare until they were at least 18 months old, and that two days childcare per week would be the most they would ever have. We also made a commitment that it made no difference who the biological or non-biological parent was ... so we have varied who has been home and who has been at work. Sometimes both of us have been at home. Currently my partner works full-time and I work part-time and care for the children, last year it was the opposite. (Mother, aged 46)

I work full time because I love my job and I earn much more than my partner and although I love my children, when they were small I could only cope with them in small doses. My partner although she is the non-biological mother is a more natural mother. (Mother, 48 years)

Discussion

The results from the WLP study support findings from previous research: that same-sex couples who are parents achieve greater levels of egalitarianism in their household division of labour than heterosexual parents (Chan et al., 1998; Tasker & Golombok, 1998; Dunne, 1999; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Vanfraussen et al., 2003; Patterson et al., 2004; Gartrell et al., 2006; Short, 2007). Perhaps one of the most obvious theoretical explanations for this difference is that there is no basis in same-sex relationships to assign household and work roles along traditional gender lines. Same-sex couples therefore share household responsibilities on the basis of skills, inclination and time availability, often within the framework of a mutual ethic of egalitarianism in partnership (Peplau, Venigas et al. 1996; Dunne 1999; Heaphy, Donovan et al. 1999; Weeks, Heaphy et al. 2001; Patterson et al. 2004).

Along with an apparent greater egalitarianism in household and parenting division of labour, the findings from this study suggest that, within same-sex couples, the roles of primary carer or primary 'breadwinner' are often shared, with both partners working part-time or changing roles over time. Responses to questions about how and

why same-sex couples made decisions about role-delineation suggested financial circumstances, career-interest and personal preferences of each member of the couple determined how roles were organised — along with, in many cases, an ideological commitment to maximising both partners' time with the children. In lesbian couples, these decisions were made irrespective of which partner carried the children in pregnancy. Even where one mother was breastfeeding, it was not assumed that this mother would be the primary child carer, certainly in the longer term.

This is an interesting finding in that it highlights that the biological role of each parent in same-sex couples does not necessarily determine their role in the family. Biology tends to be at the forefront of many explanations, or justifications, for gender inequity within heterosexual households and the workplace. Despite several decades of feminist critique on these issues, it is not uncommon for the biological or presumed 'natural' capacity of mothers – childbearing, breastfeeding, nurturing – to be used as the rationale for women's more limited participation in the workforce and their primary role as homemaker (Lipsitz Bem, 1993). In families parented by lesbian couples, generally both women in the couple seek to take on a mothering role, regardless of which mother carried or breastfed the children. Both women, therefore, also tend to take on both work and caring roles (Dunne 1999; Shechory & Ziv, 2007).

This does not mean, of course, that gender scripts are not present in families led by same-sex attracted women, or that lesbian couples are somehow immune to the operation of gender at a structural level. Indeed, this study demonstrates quite the opposite: same-sex attracted women in the WLP sample appear to be doing exactly what is expected of mothers in modern households — finding ways to take primary responsibility for household and family care while also earning income (Baxter & Western, 2005; Ferree, 1990; Greig, Lewins, & White, 2003; Probert, 2002; Rawsthorne & Costello, 2010). In the WLP study, couples indicated they achieved this by having both partners working part time or by switching roles so both partners have an opportunity to experience full-time work and full-time caring. It is perhaps indicative of the tendency for lesbian couples to elect to work part time when they have children that the comparison of the WLP sample to samples of heterosexual couples in Australia showed lesbian couples were much more likely to have two partners working part time and less likely to have one partner working full time while the other was not in work.

Several factors should be taken into account when interpreting the findings from this study. First, there were a low number of gay fathers in the sample, limiting the confidence with which the comparative data could be interpreted. This is unfortunate, as the way in which two men negotiate both household responsibilities and expectations of them as male workers would make for an interesting point of comparison to both lesbian and heterosexual couples. However, the WLP study is ongoing, and recruitment is currently being targeted to increase participation of gay fathers.¹

The administration of parenting items differed between the two samples. In the NLC study, questions about parenting were asked only of parents with at least one child aged under 12. In the WLP study, the age of respondents' children was reported in categories, including a category for ages 10 to 14, but not for under-12. This means that in the comparison between WLP and NLC families on parenting items, it was not possible to limit WLP families to those with children below 12. However,

overall the children of the gay and lesbian sample tended to be younger than those of the heterosexual sample, $\chi^2(4) = 70.3, p < .001$ (see Table 1). The age of children was included as a covariate in regression models, further limiting any impact of this difference between the samples on the findings regarding division of parenting.

There were differences in the demographic characteristics of the same-sex attracted (WLP) and heterosexual (NLC) samples. Although both samples contained more female than male respondents, this was more marked in the WLP sample. The WLP participants were on average slightly younger, and had fewer and younger children than the NLC participants. However, the most dramatic difference between the samples was in level of education. The modal level of education for WLP respondents was post-graduate, compared with secondary school level educational achievement for the NLC respondents. There was not a large enough pool of potential respondents to match the samples on these differing demographic characteristics, which is why each of these was included as a covariate in the regression models. In doing this, the influence of each covariate on the outcome variable (division of labour) is accounted for before the influence on sexual identity on the outcome is measured. The relationships between sexual identity and division of labour were consistent and unambiguous in their direction, and sexual identity accounted for substantial amounts of variance above and beyond that contributed by education and other demographic variables. However, the systematic differences between the two samples in education levels should be noted, particularly as previous research has shown that people with higher levels of education tend to have more egalitarian attitudes toward household division of labour and child rearing tasks (Holton, Fisher, & Rowe, 2009; Sullivan, 1996).

That being said, a high level of education is a common characteristic of Australian samples of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) populations (de Vaus, 2004; Pitts, Smith, Mitchell, & Patel, 2006; Power, McNair, & Carr, 2009). Data from the 2001 Australian census also indicated people who identified as GLBT had higher levels of education than the mainstream population (de Vaus 2004). It is not clear why this is the case. It may be that those with lower levels of education do not access surveys or choose not to disclose their sexuality in surveys. But this is an area that warrants further research, as it may also be the case that people become exposed to greater educational opportunities if they openly identify as GLBT. Furthermore, in parenting studies, it is possible that same-sex couples with higher levels of education are more likely to become parents. If this is the case, a high level of education may in fact reflect the 'normal' pattern in this population.

For both heterosexual couples in the NLC study and same-sex couples in the WLP study, only one member of each couple reported on the division of labour. As such, responses rely on the reports of one individual to assess the way in which tasks are allocated. It is possible a more objective measure of division of labour would yield different results, although the validity of self-report surveys of household labour has been demonstrated in previous studies (McDonald et al., 2000; Starrels, 1994).

In conclusion, a significant challenge for family therapists is how to engage in conversations with clients to better understand the rationale underlying their choices around division of labour and work-family balance, and if they have a more egalitarian ideal as by far the majority of couples do (gay, lesbian *and* heterosexual)

what constrains them from reaching this ideal? Findings from the WLP study offer opportunities for clinicians to apply practical insights into the way in which the day-to-day lives of couples and families can be organised outside the traditional expectations placed on us as women or men. Notions of 'natural' roles and patterns of behaviour that are often not questioned (or even noticed) in heterosexual families are open for consideration and change.

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Endnote

- 1 Further Australian Research Council (ARC) funding (LP0990440) has been secured to, amongst other things, increase the number of gay male parents in the study, and follow up this cohort of same-sex attracted parents for a further five years.

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