

**Abstract** This article argues that there is an important blind spot in accounts of gender inequality which is the result of a heterosexual bias in research on work and family life. The absence of comparative reference points from non-heterosexual experience obscures the significance of heterosexuality itself for reproducing the status quo. The article provides a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the relevance of lesbian experience for illuminating processes which reproduce the gender order and those which facilitate change. It draws on two research projects to illustrate how the gender dynamics of lesbian relationships, with and without children, may support a different, less distorted relationship to paid employment.

**Keywords** attitudes to work, divisions of labour, gender inequality, institutional heterosexuality, lesbian parents

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## Lesbians as Authentic Workers? Institutional Heterosexuality and the Reproduction of Gender Inequalities

I suppose because our relationship doesn't fit into a social norm, there are no pre-set indications about how our relationship should work. We have to work it out for ourselves. We've no role models in terms of how we divide our duties, so we've got to work it out afresh as to what suits us . . . We try very hard to be just to each other and . . . not exploit the other person.

[Dolly, in 19-year partnership with Meg]

### Introduction

For a number of reasons there has been an unfortunate division of labour within sociology between those interested in sexuality and those interested in gender inequalities. Insights gained in both areas of enquiry often pass like ships in the night. For example, in an important study of divisions of labour, Berk (1985: 199) explains the persistence of

inequalities by concluding that gendered patterns of task allocation are so ingrained that they 'hamper our ability to imagine other ways of organizing work'. This leads her to suggest, in a footnote, that science fiction may represent a medium for the exploration of alternative arrangements. This flight into the realms of fantasy reflects a significant epistemological blind spot in thinking about gender and the organization of work and family life. Theorizing is informed by empirical research which almost exclusively considers the circumstances of individuals and partnerships who are, or are presumed to be, heterosexual (see Blumstein and Schwartz, 1985 and Van Every, 1995 for rare exceptions). Despite theoretical signposts which include sexuality in the reproduction of gender inequality (for example Hartmann, 1981; Walby, 1990), how this might actually happen has received scant empirical attention. Methodologies, sample frames and research questions are simply not geared to providing comparative reference points for exploring the significance of sexual identity for mediating gendered experience and for shaping life-chances. By restricting our imagination to the achievements of partnerships structured by gender difference, or by divorcing lesbian experience from its wider social and material context (Butler, 1990), we miss the opportunity to learn from the reflexivity of ordinary women like Dolly and Meg, who, in a structural context of gender similarity, 'have to work things out' for themselves.

The absence of lesbian experience in mainstream feminist accounts of gender, work and family life reflects their position as other, as exotic, and thus irrelevant for furthering contemporary understandings in this area. While there is a general recognition that sexuality is socially constructed, we have abruptly pulled back from developing the implications of this. I think we need to examine the implicit assumptions about heterosexuality and about lesbianism which underpin this conservatism which could be characterized as theoretical heterosexism: that heterosexuality is natural/desirable, or that lesbians replicate heterosexual (male/female) practices, or that a too vocal critique of heterosexuality undermines the popularity of feminism (like the New Labour view that socialism loses votes). Another important factor is that we underestimate the power of the social: because we experience our sexuality as 'real' this personal interpretation simply conflicts with theory. Social processes are deeply implicated in shaping our desires and emotions as evidenced by the existence of historical and cultural diversity. Thus, what is social becomes individualized and *embodied*: social processes reach those parts which we perceive to be the most natural and deeply unique aspects of ourselves. Because the notion of the natural is so powerful it is difficult to truly acknowledge a social constructionist understanding of sexuality, whether one is straight or not. In this way our sexual and emotional worlds remain private: the problematic nature of

their production only partially explored, their implications left mostly unexamined in feminist analysis.

My irritation with the lack of curiosity about lesbian and gay experience in mainstream feminist sociology is not simply about political correctness. It is about enabling more intellectually rigorous accounts of how the gender order is reproduced, sustained and importantly of how it can be changed. Research which conflates woman with heterosexual woman, and man with heterosexual man, is not dissimilar to the earlier tendency to conflate the category 'worker' with 'man' – it distorts and obscures understanding by ignoring the significance of institutional heterosexuality itself in constructing and justifying the very inequalities examined.

In my research I hope to show how interesting a more inclusive perspective might be, by providing alternative reference points from lesbian and gay experience of work and family life. My strategy in this respect is to highlight the gender dynamics of sexuality by considering the *social relations* of sexuality rather than simply the *practice*.

In this article I summarize some of the more interesting themes and ideas that have developed over the course of the 10 years that I have been researching lesbian experience of work and family life. I begin with the conceptual framework which shapes my understanding of the relevance of lesbian experience for wider debates in sociology. I then draw on two research projects to illustrate why an attentiveness to sexuality can extend sociological understandings.

## A conceptual framework

By drawing together four important feminist insights from across a range of perspectives we can begin to appreciate why the mapping of lesbian experience of work and family life can tell us as much about the workings of gender in the mainstream.

1. *The social construction of sexuality* (see extended discussion in Dunne, 1997). The diversity of sexual meanings that exist across time and space fly in the face of common-sense understandings of heterosexuality as the expression of some essential sexual nature. Instead, we have to recognize how we give voice to and act upon our sexual and emotional feelings is powerfully shaped by our cultural, social and economic environments. This insight allows us to critically examine the processes that construct and police sexual identities (Rubin, 1975; Steinberg et al., 1997) just as we have been doing so successfully for gender. Key questions include how is heterosexuality reproduced and whose interests are served by its dominance.

2. *The critique of the separate nature of the public and private spheres* (for example, Patemen, 1988). We cannot understand gender inequalities in the labour market without reference to the organization of work in the home and vice versa. Concepts of work are structured on the basis of a 'traditional masculine model of employment' (Bradley, 1989). Thus to be 'successful' or simply committed, workers must be (or appear to be) free from the time demands of their domestic and family lives.

While it is important to focus on 'Public Patriarchy/Gender Regimes' (Walby, 1990), we must be careful not to lose sight of the overlapping and mutually reinforcing nature of constraints on women's lives. So long as women perform the bulk of work in the home, women and men do not compete in the labour market on the same basis. Despite significant changes in women's paid working lives over the past 30 years (Walby, 1997), it has been well documented that men have not made a corresponding shift into women's traditional realm of domestic and caring work. Consequently the gender of the person with whom women form or intend to form relationships with matters.

3. *The interconnection between gender and sexuality*. Sexuality and gender connect in a variety of powerful overlapping ways. Together they interact to: (i) police the content of masculinity and femininity and (ii) shape gender relations by constructing the conditions by which people relate across gender boundaries.

In the first place to have a sexual *preference* requires the social production of gender as a meaningful category. In contemporary western societies sexuality is strongly bound to processes of gender differentiation. We do not select partners simply on the basis of their anatomical sex, we are drawn to them as bearers of the social and cultural meanings that are attached to being the possessors of male or female bodies. The likelihood that people will form heterosexual partnerships rests on the social construction of dichotomous and hierarchical gender categories and practices (Rubin, 1975: 178; Butler, 1990: 17). As differences become *eroticized*, heterosexuality becomes the attraction of opposites (Connell, 1987: 246).

Interconnections between gender and sexuality become clearer when one moves away from seeing gender as a thing/possession to more active, fluid conceptions of gender as an ongoing accomplishment – something that we do and have done to us (Connell, 1987). We can extend this thinking by recognizing that gender accomplishments can be mediated by sexuality: the gender of the person that one does gender for/to and who does it to us, makes a difference (Dunne, 1999a). Another way that sexuality and gender relate is that the boundaries around appropriate gendered action/identities are policed through the mobilization of the label homosexual (Connell,

1987; Steinberg et al., 1997). All of these connections have implications for our occupational ‘choices’, how we work, and how we care.

4. *Heterosexuality is a social institution which is central to the reproduction of gender inequality* (Rubin, 1975; Rich, 1984). This insight is fairly underdeveloped in contemporary academic feminism. By either de-contextualizing sexuality from the material world (see critique of queer theory, and postmodern approaches to gender and sexuality in Jackson (1995)), or becoming embroiled in a critique and defence (Segal, 1994) of heterosexual *practice*, recent thinking tends to remain at the level of the individual at the expense of the more unifying project of developing a sophisticated critique of heterosexuality as social institution (Jackson, 1995). This alternative conception of heterosexuality is particularly useful for theorizing work and family life. If men’s ability to retain their labour market advantage rests largely on their capacity to appropriate the unwaged labour of women (Pateman, 1988), then we need to recognize the centrality of heterosexuality for providing the logic that translates women’s labour into men’s material advantage. Linking institutional heterosexuality with the reproduction of inequality somewhat contradicts the accusations of privilege that are often levelled at heterosexual feminists (Kitzinger et al., 1992). Further, it suggests that a preoccupation with problem-oriented research on lesbians could be balanced with consideration of their advantages experienced.

By combining these four insights a new series of questions are opened up which are best explored through the lives of lesbian women. With such a sample we can ask, what is the nature of the social processes that enable them to be different and, importantly, what difference does this difference make?

## Work and the Politics of Sexuality

I began to explore these questions in my book *Lesbian Lifestyles: Women’s Work and the Politics of Sexuality*. This was based on a life-history study of continuity and change in the lives of 60 non-heterosexual women (see discussion of methodology and sample characteristics in Dunne, 1997). In interviews, respondents were encouraged to speak of their journey through heterosexuality, possibly marriage, and beyond. Woven into this were their remembrances of childhood, of schooling, and information about their employment and domestic lives. Within all the complexity of respondents’ autobiographies, commonalities could be identified – one of the most striking being the relationship between lesbianism and empowerment. I shall

now briefly illustrate this by focusing on paid employment and income generation – themes which are explored in much greater detail in Dunne (1997).

### *Lesbian lifestyle as economic achievement*

There is an important but neglected material dimension to sexuality. Respondents' accounts revealed that a lesbian lifestyle both *necessitates* and *facilitates* lifelong financial self-reliance. In contrast to heterosexual experience, they described their relationships with women as being based on notions of co-independence. Respondents often spoke of the realization of their lifelong need to be self-sufficient, in terms of both empowerment and struggle. A common view is summarized by Fiona, aged 25, who is training to enter a male-dominated profession:

I don't think [my sexuality] actually encourages [independence], it necessitates it – which is not an encouragement really, it's just an added pressure. . . . The woman that I would be if I wasn't a lesbian would have the option not to work whereas I don't feel I have an option not to work because I won't have a husband to support me . . . There is always the need for me to go out to work.

Similar views come from Helen, aged 26, another university-educated woman:

*Do you see yourself as a lifelong worker?* Initially, I guess that was one of the things that frightened me greatly. Because I had grown up with this myth . . . that I would have a partner when I was 23, and a kid when I was 28. *What do you see your sexuality meaning in terms of living?* I see it as meaning that I have to, I have actual financial need for survival, to be financially independent.

The economic dimension of moving beyond heterosexuality poses particular problems for women from working-class backgrounds or those who are educationally disadvantaged. Rather than following their peers into traditional low-paid female work, many respondents who had entered male-dominated craft occupations, or returned to education on 'coming out', spoke of the practicalities of sexuality influencing that decision. This is evident in the following examples from women from manual working-class backgrounds. Petra, aged 17, left school at 15 with no qualifications and entered factory work. She 'came out' aged 16. She explains her motives for returning to education:

I know I have to be independent and not to rely on a man. *Does that influence your approach to work?* Yes, I know that I've actually got to work. *Could you tell me a bit more about your thoughts on that?* I'm at college at the moment and I'm hoping that will get me into a good job when I leave, that will keep me going. *Could you get any job?* No! I'd want something that I'd know I'm going to enjoy and that.

Likewise June, aged 44, explains her reasons for entering a degree course as a mature student:

Then I decided to be a student. *Why?* To give me options to do other things, to get out of my awful job structure [nursing]. I've wanted to be economically independent, which I am. I hadn't had a proper education until I got it myself . . . It hasn't seemed hard for me to have achieved that independence, it just seems to have been the natural thing for me to do.

Given the existence of inequalities in earnings and employment circumstances of women and men in Britain, I argue that the financial self-reliance associated with a lesbian lifestyle should be recognized as an economic achievement. Janet Siltanen's (1994) research, for example, shows just how unusual it is for women to earn living wages. By devising a method for relating salaries to the cost of living she makes a distinction between *full* and *component* wages. Full wages enable a person to support a household of one or more persons, while component wages do not. When overtime is taken into account, 85 per cent of male and only 53 per cent of female *full-time* workers earn a full wage. If we include the part-time female workforce, it is safe to say that the great majority of *employed* British women are financially dependent on a partner or the State. While respondents' incomes tended not to be particularly high, it was striking that 86 per cent earned full wages.

Additionally, women's relationships with women were usually reported as *facilitating* their engagement with paid employment, through the more egalitarian domestic arrangements negotiated, the recognition of their right to work, and the encouragement they often experienced from partners. For example, Mary-Jane, aged 25 and from a manual working-class background, is in a junior management position in agriculture:

[My sexuality has] enabled me to do the job I do . . . I guess because of the amount of time the job consumes you almost have to be gay. I couldn't hold down a marriage . . . I couldn't run a house, a family and do the job that I do . . . *How does it help being in a gay relationship?* My partner has her career and she is very definite about what she wants to do. She actually knows I have to work . . . We don't have a conflict with jobs really, she has a job that's very demanding. In the heterosexual relationships that I know, the man wants to be looked after, come home, dinner there.

This view is confirmed by her partner, Mary-Rose, aged 35 and from a manual working-class background, who runs a successful business. Like many respondents who had been married, her ex-husband felt threatened by her attempts to develop interests beyond the home. She had worked in low-paid 'women's' work while married and her horizons expanded on 'coming-out':

Straight career women say I am lucky not to have the restrictions of a man, and envy me. *They see men holding them back?* Yes, yes, but a necessary thing in their lives. They say I have the support of someone but not the restrictions. *What gets in the way?* The role playing. The male should be, in the world's opinion, a breadwinner; the woman can be successful provided the male is more successful.

The need to earn a living wage together with these other factors help explain respondents' occupational diversity – they were much less likely to be concentrated into female-dominated occupations/positions in an occupational hierarchy than female full-time employees more generally.

A case can be made to suggest that lesbians may represent a different kind of worker for sociological analysis as their relationship to employment opportunities is less distorted by gender processes than heterosexual women and men. Their engagement with paid work is unlikely to be *constrained* by ideologies and practices which construct women as secondary workers nor is it likely to be *inflated* by those that enable men to prioritize paid employment. This was dramatically illustrated in the way that the average wages for the sample fell between those found for women and men in full-time employment.

## The Lesbian Household Project

The Lesbian Household Project takes up this issue of empowerment in lesbian women's domestic and employment lives by exploring whether such factors hold for lesbian couples with dependent children. We know that in heterosexual partnerships the transition into parenthood heralds the emergence or entrenchment of inequality. As divisions of labour in lesbian partnerships are negotiated by actors who occupy the same position in the gender hierarchy, they present a marvellous opportunity to see what is achievable when gender polarization as a major structuring principle of arrangements is minimal. Their experience may provide fresh insights on the sources and consequences of gender divisions of labour, without recourse to science fiction.

### *Methods*

The study was designed to investigate in depth whether or to what extent lesbian partners actually manage to operationalize egalitarian ideals when faced with the demands and pressures of parenting. It draws on the experience of 37 cohabiting lesbian couples with dependent children.

The study differs from previous research on divisions of labour in a number of ways:

1. its focus on lesbian partners with dependent children;

2. in the range of household dynamics explored (it extends beyond domestic and caring work to include paid employment);
3. in the diversity of methods used to illuminate their arrangements (see details in 1999b);
4. in the high proportion who viewed parenting as a joint responsibility (80 per cent) – they had often planned and become parents in their lesbian partnership via donor insemination (75 per cent) (see Dunne, 2000).

Additionally, as donor insemination (DI) is a relatively recent option, households with pre-school aged children are well represented in the study. By considering this early period in family formation when balanced arrangements are most difficult to achieve/sustain, the study provides an alternative reference point for distinguishing between those factors which hinder and those which support egalitarian relationships.

Again, the relatively small size of the sample means that we must be cautious about the conclusions drawn, particularly as comparisons are difficult because of the many ways that our parents differ from the norm. Nonetheless, they face many dilemmas familiar to other parents, for example, reconciling the contradictions between the time demands of earning a living and the desire to be available to participate in the work and pleasures of home-life and parenting.

## Balancing parenting and employment responsibilities

When faced with the contradiction between time for children and time to earn a living, the strategies of British married couples are fairly predictable (see Dunne, 1998). Despite shifts in contemporary definitions of fatherhood, the employment hours of British fathers are amongst the longest in Europe and very few work part-time (Ferri and Smith, 1996). Although mothers are more likely to be employed (and, if they are well qualified, to be employed full-time), now than in the past (Walby, 1997), it is still women who adjust their employment situation to incorporate childcare and the demands of managing a household. Paradoxically, the polarized employment circumstances for most married couples with children does little to contradict the view of many mothers and fathers that parenting responsibilities are equally shared (see Ferri and Smith, 1996).

In contrast, analysis of respondents' employment circumstances revealed a range of creative approaches to balancing the demands of employment and home-life (see extended discussion in Dunne, 1998). Importantly, biological motherhood was a poor predictor of partner differences in employment hours: 36 per cent of co-parents (social mothers) had shorter

employment hours than their partners. In addition, their work histories revealed the interchangeability of partner employment strategies – it was not unusual for birth mothers and co-parents to take turns in being the main carer of the child/ren. Because flexibility often characterized the approaches of both parents, a common situation in 19 per cent of households was for each partner to reduce her employment hours to part time, and this was the ideal for most respondents.

With persistent regularity respondents spoke of seeking balanced lives. Informing their thinking was their desire to have time for nurturing, particularly when their children were young, as well as an identity from the formal workplace and the opportunity to contribute financially. Maggie's (social mother of five-year old Paul) views are not uncommon:

Neither Helen nor I wanted to be either the one that was at work or the one that was at home all the time . . . I think the original reason for working part time was to share Paul. But actually I'm not sure now even if I'd want to go back to full time – probably not back to being a totally work person, which would be stressful and horrible . . . The motivation behind it was to do with Paul, and to make sure that he was equally cared for.

### *Income*

Like women in the earlier study, respondents usually described their relationships as operating on the basis of financial co-independence. Their gender and, importantly, the lack of anticipation and experience of a conventional division of labour meant that income differentials in partnerships were much less pronounced than we would expect to find in heterosexual households. For example, analysis of income distribution for married couples with dependent children in the National Childhood Development Study (Joshi et al., 1995) shows that in only 17 per cent of households mothers contribute half or more to total household income, compared with 50 per cent of our birth-mothers.

Of course heterosexual couples seeking more egalitarian arrangements are often constrained by men's higher earning capacity. However, respondents' thinking about and practice in relation to earning differentials was often insightful and casts new light on the 'rationality' underpinning the logic of economic models. It was not unusual for higher earners in lesbian partnerships to reduce their hours of employment to care for children. They described this decision as based on a combination of factors, including the notion that higher earners often had more power over their careers. Within reason respondents were prepared to experience a lower standard of living when children were young to enable both partners to integrate childcare with paid employment. Patsy, co-parent of two pre-school aged girls makes this point:

I think we go about things in our own way, we don't have the role definition. We get the best of both worlds really. We get to continue along the road with our careers and also to spend time as a family and to enjoy the time with the children. Disadvantages? We could earn more money I suppose if we worked full time, but then it takes away the point of having children I would say.

As Patsy's discussion suggests, sharing the social penalties attached to raising children in Britain (by either both working half time, or by taking it in turns to be main carers), may make much better long-term economic sense than the specialization which often shapes heterosexual practice and supports women's downward occupational mobility. Patsy's comments remind us that lesbians are forced to think creatively – as two women together it is difficult to follow the gender scripts that inform heterosexual practice. This, together with their positioning outside conventionality, was interpreted as providing the opportunity to reflect on how they really wanted to experience parenting (see Dunne, 1999a).

### *Domestic arrangements*

Finally, we cannot understand the organization of employment opportunities without reference to how routine domestic work is accomplished. Analysis of respondents' perceptions of their division of domestic labour together with what they noted in their time-use diaries revealed fairly even contributions for most partnerships, with little of the specialization found for married couples (Berk, 1985; Baxter and Western, 1998). Again, respondents generally felt advantaged by the absence of gender scripts to guide who did what. Dolly's comments at the beginning of the article are typical of women interviewed in both studies. Respondents felt that their similarities as women greatly facilitated the construction of more flexible but equitable domestic arrangements (see Dunne, 1999a); they usually saw themselves and their partners as being in tune with the rhythm of the household.

The more balanced approaches to the allocation of waged work and unwaged work found for the sample contrasted dramatically with the time-use patterns of married couples with children where waged work dominates the working lives of fathers, and unwaged work the working lives of most mothers (see Dunne, 1998). Importantly, this comparative analysis provides useful reference points for the critique of conventional divisions of labour. For example, respondents' more equitable allocation of routine domestic tasks enabled each partner to devote considerably more single-minded time to the pleasures and labour of childcare than appeared possible for most married mothers (Dunne, 1998).

## Discussion

While a relatively small study, the findings are suggestive and echoed in other studies – for example, an important US longitudinal study of lesbian DI couples noted a tendency for both partners to reduce their hours of employment (Gartrell et al., forthcoming). I argue that a focus on women parenting together provides an alternative sense of what is achievable in relation to negotiating the competing demands of nurturing children and managing and financing a home. The extent to which their experience differs from the norm illustrates the importance of the gender context within which parenting is negotiated. Like women who parent alone, women together are encouraged to extend the boundaries of motherhood to a more integrative middle ground (Dunne, 2000). Respondents who had been married were particularly aware of this. For example, two working-class divorced mothers, Joel and Trudy, had been full-time carers when married and have now started a small business together. Joel reflects on their current situation:

We've taken on a male role here between us, being joint breadwinners and taking on a lot of the physical chores [that] we've never had to do . . . Now I am having to learn . . . I get more out of my day, it's hard work, but . . . it's not just the work, it's just that I do things for myself and I get a lot of satisfaction. I have to deal with things . . . that I didn't ever think I could do, I can do now. I surprise myself.

Crucially, one constructs and experiences gender identity in relation to others (Dunne, 1999a). Creativity for women parenting with men is constrained by a range of mutually reinforcing factors both material and ideological. The dictates of contemporary consumption justify the prioritization of market work over caring, men's advantaged market position justifies the prioritization of men's 'careers'. Women are still negotiating the content of motherhood against powerful ideologies of fatherhood which facilitate fathers to see themselves and be seen as involved, caring and equal parents while absent from the home for 40, 50 or more hours a week (see Ferri and Smith, 1996). Gender difference shapes evaluative criteria with respect to domestic work, so that women can express high levels of satisfaction with extremely unequal contributions (Baxter and Western, 1998). For women in partnerships with women, egalitarianism is aided by their capacity to put themselves in the place of the other, which enables greater transparency in evaluating the fairness of contributions. When arrangements become unbalanced, I have found lesbians to be most vocal in raising concerns.

## Conclusion

This has been a very brief sketch of findings from two detailed studies. However, I hope to have conveyed some sense of the importance of their implications for feminist thinking about work and the relationship between gender and sexuality. The relationship between a lesbian lifestyle and material empowerment, illuminated in the earlier study, seriously undermines notions of sexuality as an individual choice or 'private' issue. In the current social, ideological and material context, women who lead a lesbian lifestyle represent only the tip of the iceberg. The persistence of representations of lesbianism as perverted, manly, disgusting and sad, together with processes which alienate women from the wonder and beauty of the ordinary female body, mean that it is hard for women to conceptualize their love for other women as anything other than friendship. Additionally, most women are not in a financial position to translate this love into a framework for living. Under these conditions, the dominance of heterosexual outcomes is understandable. I argue that as more women become educationally and financially empowered they will increasingly come into conflict with the social relations of heterosexuality, and as the appeal of the 'other' diminishes, the possibility for evaluating and moving beyond heterosexuality will grow (see Dunne, 1999a).

Furthermore there is reason to believe that women who have moved beyond the confines of heterosexuality engage with the 'public' and 'private' under far more favourable conditions than heterosexual women (Dunne, 1997). Thus, much of what has been conceptualized as simply gender constraints in the abstract are likely to relate to the heterosexual context which frames most women's gendered experience (see Dunne, 1999a). For example, the attachment of high value to caring for children is a source of disadvantage for women parenting with men and usually leads to the introduction or entrenchment of inequalities. This is less of a problem when women parent together as reflected in their greater tendency to share the employment penalties attached to this crucial aspect of human creativity.

The creative solutions found by many couples with dependent children in this study make sense when we move beyond a focus on sexuality as practice to one that recognizes sexuality as a social relationship which is forged in a gender context. They emerge in a context whereby the individuals concerned share a similar position in the gender hierarchy, desire a measure of financial independence, and recognize a woman's right to an employment identity as well as the importance of nurturing (and, if they have become parents via DI, have greater control over the timing and conditions of reproduction). In addition, by not having anticipated or experienced a gender division of labour prior to the arrival of children, and

because their sexuality tends to necessitate economic self-reliance, their decisions about how to divide employment responsibilities are less likely to have been foreclosed by earlier decisions in the way that is often the case for heterosexual mothers. Consequently, the conventional solutions found in heterosexual contexts simply do not make sense when women get together to raise children.

Lesbian experience may provide new insights about the work process and feminist aims in relation to improving women's life chances. Like respondents in the earlier study, I argue that women bringing up children together may have a more authentic relationship to paid employment because it is less constrained/enhanced by gender differentiated ideologies and practices. Their experience underscores the inherent problems of the masculine model of employment. Because the dictates of this model demand that a worker be, or appear to be, free from the time demands of managing a home and caring for children, it is both undesirable and, for many, unattainable. Compliance comes with great personal expense in terms of stress or, more usually, depends on the appropriation of the work of others with less power, namely female partners or working-class women (see Gregson and Lowe, 1995). The masculine model of employment is an historical artifact, produced by past and present gender inequalities and lies in contradiction with egalitarianism. As I mentioned earlier, because heterosexuality is deeply implicated in justifying the process of appropriation, it is no accident that lesbian experience should reveal this so poignantly. Rather than wondering why women have been so unsuccessful in achieving parity with men, feminism needs to seriously critique dominant frameworks for measuring success in the labour market. Failure to do this simply reinforces the privileging of production and consumption over other forms of necessary human activity, many of which have traditionally been associated with women. Respondents' experience shows that there are viable integrative alternatives to specialization which may actually make better long-term financial sense. Their solutions suggest the need for a radical redefinition of fatherhood, to include hands on everyday practical care. We will know that this has truly been achieved when we find few financial and career penalties attached to part-time employment, and that it is likely to be occupied by either gender.

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