

# The Division of Household Labour by Lesbian Families Residing in the Northeast of England

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this paper is to explore the household division of labour and childcare patterns in lesbian households and how this is influenced by economics, social class and family background. In doing this, data is drawn from ten sets of qualitative interviews with lesbian families located in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in the northeast of England. The research findings presented in this paper discuss a number of themes and areas of concern in relation to the undertaking of household chores. These include gender-negotiation and motherhood; 'childcare continuation', social class and 'class ambivalence', and the impact of family background/relatives and external community expectations. In concluding, the paper reveals the complex intersections of parenthood, gender, sexuality, geography, social class and heteronormative expectations in informing and structuring household labour and childcare patterns within the same-sex family unit.

**Key words:** lesbian families, household labour, childcare, sexuality, gender, social class

## Introduction

This paper seeks to further understandings of how lesbian families negotiate household labour, childcare and parental identification. In doing so, it contributes important knowledge to growing debates around household work that is undertaken by lesbian parents in a dominantly heteronormative society (Barret, 2015; Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, 2012; Goldberg, 2013). Previous studies such as Chan, Brooks, Raboy & Patterson (1998), Patterson, (2000a), and Patterson, Sutphin & Fulcher, (2004) have compared lesbian families to their heterosexual counterparts regarding how family members structure household labour. These theoretical discourses add to a significant and growing discussion around diverse family structures. For some writers, the indication is that lesbian parents have achieved “greater egalitarianism in their relationships than heterosexual couples regarding the household division of labour, parenting responsibility, and material income.” (Perlesz, Power, Brown, McNair, Schofield, Pitts, Barrett, & Bickerdike, 2010, p. 375) However, for the authors the ‘egalitarian ethic’ over-simplifies lesbian families, and segments the complex diversities and differences which may emerge within such families (Downing & Goldberg, 2011; Gabb, 2005; Goldberg, 2009; 2013). In doing so, it approaches lesbian families as separate and distinct to heterosexual family structures, acknowledging the diverse ways that lesbian families ‘do’ family, even if traditional and normative gendered roles and identities are present and drawn from.

Although the paper does not utilise the ‘egalitarian ethic’, it does share sentiments with Perlesz et al., (2010, p. 376) on grasping the “fundamental questions regarding the rationale underlying same-sex couples’ choices about the organisation of household and family responsibilities.” This paper’s aptitude and inclinations with Perlesz et al., (2010) lies within three key areas. Firstly, household labour has been covered extensively amongst heterosexual families (Chesters, Baxter, & Western, 2009; Evertson & Nermo, 2006; Grunow, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2012; Sutphin, 2010). Secondly, in the last three decades, there has been a growing international focus on household labour amongst same-sex families (Johnston, Moore & Judd, 2010; Oerton, 1997; Raes, Van Parys, Provoost, Ravelingien, Somers, Stuyver, Wyverkens, Buysse, De Sutter, & Pennings, 2015). Lastly, within the context of the northeast of England, studies on same-sex families have tended to concentrate on domestic abuse (Donovan & Hester, 2011), coming out (Casey, 2004a), and reproduction (Donovan, 2005). There is little focus on the organisation and structure

of 'mundane tasks' such as household labour or parental roles in lesbian families, allowing this paper to contribute to a new focus on lesbian families and household labour in the northeast of England.

This paper will add to and support current research on lesbian households and address existing gaps in the literature. In doing this the paper will reveal the interplay of the deeply entrenched and institutionalised notions of how people should 'do gender' and how this is reflected through the undertaking of household chores by lesbian women as seen in earlier work (see Kentlyn, 2008). Secondly, how lesbian families in the city of Newcastle renegotiate the dichotomous conception of ideas associated with both gender and sexuality in doing their household chores is visited. Lastly, the paper discusses the role of social class, family background and economics in informing taken for granted factors that may dictate the division of household labour in lesbian families, one in which income can be seen to predict a woman's role in domestic duties (see Goldberg et al., 2012). The overall research question driving this process is: How do lesbian parents structure household work and childcare?

### **Defining Family**

In a number of countries, same-sex families are able to challenge heteronormative understandings of family. This challenge is due to the growing rights of same-sex couples, along with lesbian and gay individuals, to become parents through adoption and fostering, stronger legal rights concerning children born through previous heterosexual relationships and increased access to assisted reproduction (Gabb, 2004; Lubbe, 2007). This paper employs Del Fabbro's, (2012, p. 5) definition of family as "a group of individuals who are biologically or otherwise related, and with whom one is involved in intimate, interactional relationship/s over time; and whom one subjectively recognises as playing a significant role in this regard." Because same-sex parents may adopt children, conceive through assisted reproduction or live with the children from previous relationships or other relatives, this understanding encapsulates the family diversities of same-sex couples (see Cote and Lovie, 2018). It is also useful to draw from Allen & Demo's, (1995, p. 113) definition of same-sex families as; "the presence of two or more people who share a homosexual orientation or by the presence of at least one lesbian or gay adult rearing a child." In utilising both Del Fabbro (2012) and Allen & Demo's (1995) understandings of 'family', it is possible to capture the complexities of same-sex families,

along with their quotidian normalities in the early twenty-first century as they undertake daily household chores.

Earlier studies on same-sex families mainly focused on four distinct areas of concern (Patterson, 2000b), these have included; the differences in relationship satisfaction between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples, as shown by the writers advocating the family-systems approach (Chan, et al., 1998). Secondly, the role of biological linkages in the forming of household relationships within lesbian couples (Raes, et al., 2015). Thirdly, the concerns about the psychological health and well-being of divorced heterosexual mothers who were involved with gay men before coming out compared with that of divorced heterosexual mothers in heterosexual marriages (Patterson, 2000a). And lastly, the focus has been on the overall mental health of lesbian and gay parents and/or their children and ‘appropriate’ gender development (Patterson, 2006). These approaches often come from a viewpoint of approaching same-sex families as ‘othered’ and distinct from heterosexual family units. There has been only limited work that has addressed the more mundane realities of same-sex households and the role of economics and social class in informing domestic labour, an area which this paper contributes to.

During the 1990s, Oerton (1997, p. 426) introduced the concept of “gender-empty” families which was drawn from approaching same-sex households as consensually operating units, where everyone has an equitable access to and use of resources, including labour market entry, promotion prospects, and earnings. However, in viewing lesbian families as ‘gender-empty’ the internal performances of gender are ignored. Even within a household with two parents of the same gender, gendered roles *are* present, witnessed and performed and studies suggest that inequality amongst these roles do exist particularly as gender intersects with other identities (see Jackson, 2015). For Kurdek (2007, p. 132), irrespective of the gender composition of a family unit, “residing together means that meals need preparation, dishes and clothes need washing, and purchasing of groceries, and living spaces cleaned.” Through studying lesbian couples it enables us to understand the resultant effect of ‘doing gender’ in household labour, and how gender is performative (Butler, 1990), one where the fictions and false truths of ‘gendered norms’ as represented through the traditional family can be revealed and problematized.

## **Theoretical Background**

In response to limited non-heteronormative ideas around family, a range of writers have formulated different theoretical lenses or hypotheses in researching same-sex households (Allen & Demo, 1995; Chan et al., 1998; Patterson, 2000a/b; Sutphin, 2010). Chan et al., (1998) introduce the family-systems approach, suggesting this can view the family as a social system, enabling the researcher to grapple with the social inter-dynamics within same-sex families. Chan et al., (1998, p. 403) argue that “lesbian couples are likely to avoid traditional gendered divisions of household tasks and, instead, divide household labour according to personal factors, such as interests, ability, and time availability.” In turn, some studies that employed family-systems theory found that non-biological mothers in lesbian relationships tended to participate more in ‘paid-work’ while biological parents were actively involved in child-care (Demo & Allen, 1996; Potter, 2012; Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001). According to Ciano-Boyce and Shelley-Sireci (2003), this is because biological birthing may differentiate some women from their partners creating linkages between expected roles and identity/ies. Therefore, “the societal demand to have these dichotomous roles in relationships is so strong” that even for same-sex couples, there is a pressure to adopt traditional roles. (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2003, p. 9)

The question in social-exchange perspective relates to what degree can finance, economic background and educational level dictate who washes the dishes and who is the primary caregiver and who is more involved in ‘paid-labour’, which enables discussion of the potential power imbalances within these families (Heaphy, Donovan & Weeks, 1999; Sutphin, 2010). According to Patterson, (2000b), the ‘social-exchange perspective’ has received empirical support (Berger, 1996; Patterson et al., 2004) in explaining why the ‘principle of least interest’ plays a part in terms of who does what amongst same-sex families. It is crucial within the social-exchange approach to take into consideration the spatial location of families and the internal dynamics because “relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments” (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 875). In the survival of same-sex relations, for Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), partners must abide by certain rules of exchange and these rules of exchange will give a normative definition of a situation that may be enabled by the participants in relationships of exchange. These ‘exchanges’ are not only informed by the relationship itself, but are

geographically contingent. For example, although de-industrialisation and the rise of the service economy in the northeast of England has dramatically reshaped the position of women in the region, the regions strong working class identity means that the social class and economic income of the women in our research sample continues to inform how the women negotiate domestic labour and childcare. For Skeggs (1997) and Lawler (2014a), social class and economic capitals intersect with other identities such as gender and sexuality and are key in informing family relationships, access to resources and one's ability to navigate both personal and professional networks.

### **Method**

The research was undertaken in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, the 'regional capital' of the northeast of England. The city has a visible lesbian and gay population (Casey, 2004b, 2013), that can be witnessed through the city's annual pride events, its large commercial lesbian and gay scene, and it has numerous lesbian and gay services and groups provided in the city. The city experienced rapid de-industrialisation and economic decline in the 1980s, but since the late 1990s the city has experienced significant gentrification, growth in the new creative industries and the service economy, tied in with a growing and strikingly visible LGBT community (Chatterton & Hollands, 2001). However, since the recession of 2007/8 the city and wider area of the northeast has experienced growing unemployment and social deprivation.

### **Procedures**

The sample consisted of couples who mainly attended local LGBT organisations in the city, a major LGBT-oriented church and members of parent groups on social media. An advertisement was also placed on a regional social group for LGBT parents. The initial participants provided further access to other participants through snowballing. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was utilised, allowing participants to describe experiences, alongside discussing the meaning of events in their lives, whilst acknowledging the contextual basis of inquiry (see Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Jackson & Verberg, 2007). This approach contributes to exploring how meanings are attached, maintained and sustained and which elements are at play by these families in their lives. And as identified by Shaw, (1999, p. 60), it presents the opportunity to "penetrate their internal logic and interpret their subjective understanding of reality." This interpretation of reality, from the participants' perspective, is one of the primary goals of trying to

study the elements that shape/divide their household labour. This method, not only produces a full description capturing the respondents' own views but allows an exploration of the dynamic nature of the structuring of household labour.

Interviews were undertaken in the natural setting of the participants homes, with interviews recorded using a voice recorder and then transcribed. The interview questions were designed around three dominant themes emanating from the literature: household chores, child-care and decision-making. Within each theme, specific sub-themes informed or shaped the interview questions: household chores – personal interests and time availability; child-care – friends and familial influence; and decision-making – class, educational level, and financial contribution. The interviews became intimate dialogues showing comprehensive family structure and how the lives of participants link the macro-elements with micro-elements in the restructuring of their division of household labour (Flick, Von Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004).

Both researchers are male, one is black African and the other white European, with both coming from working class backgrounds. We feel that it is likely that our gender and social class in particular, may have informed the development of our focus, research questions and our interactions with the research sample. As the work of O'Reilly (2012) and Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) has shown, similarities and differences between participant and researcher can both hinder and enrich the research process, with participant and researcher reacting to one another's identities, body language and verbal cues.

### **Research Participants**

A total of twenty lesbian women participated (ten couples) with each interview lasting between two to three hours. Of the twenty women involved in the research twelve were working full time, three were working part-time, and five were not in paid employment. Between the ten couples, there was a total of twenty-two children in the families who were involved in the research, although no children were interviewed for this study. In interviewing both partners at the same time, this allowed general comparisons between how each of the partners felt regarding their household chores, whilst also allowing both partners to discuss topics as they emerged during the interviews. Sixteen participants identified as working class and four as middle class. In terms of race, eight of the couples identified as being white, the sample also consisted of one

couple where both participants identified themselves as black and the last couple was interracial (mixed-race and white).

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis was undertaken using an inductive thematic analysis approach with this allowing us to cut across data, find patterns and common themes emanating from the transcripts and analyse the frequency of similarities and differences of each theme/category (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). As we undertook our analysis, a number of key themes emerged across the interviews with no outliers, these included the division of labour, childcare, social class, gender and sexuality.

### **Whoever is at Home?**

When exploring the structure of household chores key questions asked included: *Do you discuss your day to day household chores? Are there tasks in the house which have tended in many instances to be done by one of you? What motivates each one of you to individually engage in the task without the other one's input? To what extent do you get someone to help you with your household work/childcare?* The processes of undertaking childcare and household chores often followed traditional notions framed within the context of one parent being the 'breadwinner'/full time paid worker, and the other working part-time and/or staying at home and looking after the child/ren, often understood in terms of '*how things evolved when the kids were younger*' as suggested by Lisa:

It's probably how it has evolved with the kids were tiny and Abbey was home... and was involved more in being a mother you know the washing and the cooking ended up being what you [points with head towards Abbey] will do. ...She spent time at home more... But you also really liked cooking. I didn't have to cook for the family... she is very good as well which is handy... [Laughs]... (Lisa)

For Lisa, '*being a mother*' involves traditional and normative roles such as '*washing and cooking*', non-paid domestic tasks that are traditionally assumed to be 'what women do' (Donovan, 2000). Although it is possible to argue that Lisa's claims are presented within a normative framework and language that

associates paid employment as something that excuses her from '*the washing and the cooking*', we think it is possible to understand it as presenting the complexities of lesbian motherhood. In doing so, practical needs (an income, every day caring responsibilities etc.) can be theorised as intersecting with normative understandings of parental roles, challenging everyday assumptions about how same-sex women headed families 'do gender'. In some instances, because one partner is in full-time paid work and the other partner works part-time or is a stay at home mum, the partner who is at home more of the time takes 'ownership' of domestic chores and childcare, as illustrated by Chan et al., (1998) in family-systems approach. Take for instance the experiences of Alex and Aileen, both are in their late 30s with two boys aged three and two. Aileen is the non-biological mother of the boys and works two jobs, with Alex, the biological mother being a stay-at-home mother:

I am really domestic-minded because of the kids, you know what I mean? Because I stay at home and sometimes all I do actually is domestic tasks because I have got nothing else done with other things... Other than that, things will not get done, other things will not get done and it will not matter. They are getting done now because I look at something every day and I go ... 'the backyard it really needs sorting...'

(Alex)

The same experiences were shared by Chloe and Connie (who are in their mid-50s), both are non-biological mothers with an adopted son who was 17 years old during the interview. Chloe decided to leave work and stay at home while their son was still young. Below Chloe explains their household labour, with Connie interjecting to explain what the context was like before the adoption of their son:

...since we adopted James, I have cooked every day since then. He will eat properly and that continued on really, we never buy processed food ... But I actually don't like cooking that much...She [Connie] might not know this but she is a much better cook than me. But she still doesn't do a lot of it. You know what I mean. Because I am at home, I feel like ... Oh... and sometimes she's late I feel like we don't have to eat at midnight, you know what I mean?...and I would say those times [before James] Connie cooked more

than me and I might have done more washing. It was much more down the middle. Now it is much less than that. Because now I am here and I do, I know I go [Looks at Connie] ... “do more housework, you don’t do any!!”. But it’s not fair. (Chloe)

...and I think when you were out working in [omitted], it was [before James] very different because we were both working all day and will come home and there are things that will need to be done and will get down and do them, and quite often will say... okay while you're cooking I will do the washing. So I think sometimes it looks different based on the situation and I know that sometimes Chloe does much more of the household work than I am because you are here all day. You can’t sit and ignore it. You are not going to sit and go ‘the carpet needs hoovering but I am not going to do it until Connie comes home’ that will not make sense, you know what I mean? (Connie)

For both Chloe and Connie the practical realities of who was at home more often informed who took responsibility for cooking and feeding their boy, alongside other domestic chores. As with Lisa and Abbey and Alex and Aileen, for the parent who is at home, there is a ‘childcare continuation’, in that their domestic life is shaped through the demands of childcare, which continues onto and into other domestic chores across the working day. For Chloe and Connie, the decision about who does specific domestic tasks is not simply down to prioritising paid employment, but through the practicalities of how the women wish to and need to utilise both their skills and time, alongside the demands of their children. However in a number of the interviews, normative ideas concerning gender and reproduction positioned the biological mothers of children as those who were expected to invest more time and energy into domestic chores, as Jen suggests, “People do expect me to do a lot more with the children than you (Angela).”

Jen’s sentiments as the biological mother reflect Ciano-Boyce and Shelley-Sireci’s (2003) claim that normative assumptions based upon distinct roles for men and women in conception and birth are mapped onto lesbian couples informing views that there can only be *one* true mother. The findings in this paper echo those of Coleman and Waiters (1989) who concluded that although there are multiple ways in which lesbians and gay men arrive at unbalanced divisions of labour, it is possible to argue that “same-

sex(uality) households, whether lesbian or gay, do not seem to fare much better than heterosexual households in their attempts to divide domestic tasks.” (Oerton, 1997, p. 423) In the more recent work of Raes, et al., (2015) child participants from same-sex families held strong ideas around the roles their mothers should have, including describing biological mothers as having “the caring element in the sense that the biological mother was someone who takes care of you, prepares food, buys clothes and watches over you.” (Raes, et al., 2015, p. 86) These beliefs and values were also experienced by some of the research participants who are biological mothers themselves, for example Agnes suggested that ‘...as a biological mother [the belief is] that it will work its way down to me.’ With Janice also claiming:

There was the biggest expectation as a biological mother I had to do everything. And you used to get so frustrated at the hospital because they used to say "Well whose mum?" ... "Well, we are!!" ... [Laughs] (Janice)

In being the biological mothers to their children, both Janice and Agnes experience other people’s expectations that they are to undertake ‘real mother’ duties. From the moment of birth, some biological and non-biological mothers experience normative assumptions through the defining of the ‘mother’ in terms of who gave birth. As a result, this leaves those non-biological mothers effected as having to negotiate a terrain that creates a binary between the ‘real mother’ and the ‘less real mother’ as found by Raes, et al. (2015). This terrain did not only shape interactions within the home and domestic responsibilities but interactions within the wider community:

...at the school as well. I remember when I went to pick them up at some event and one of the teachers made a point of coming to me and says “You have really nice boys and you, YOU!! Should be proud of the way you have raised them”. I was like... “OK...!” ... “Do you think? (Abbey)

Well I think is because the kids are grown up so there is less of that... “Go ask your “mum” if you can do such and such”. They would literally say that while I was right there like I wasn’t able to make those

decisions... It had to be their biological mother, but I think it was “go ask your mother” rather than this other person... [laughing sarcastically] (Ada)

Through the analysis of the interviews, it was clear how non-biological mothers have to ‘negotiate’ their way in encounters with others as mothers. This ‘negotiation’ exists not only in the communities in which they live, but also during hospital visitation, with relatives, and at school with other parents. This became distinguishable as recalled by Angela and Lisa below in how as non-biological mothers they have to ‘negotiate’ some of the interactions:

Some people presume that because I didn't give birth to them [the children], then I am not a proper parent. It's more than an annoyance than an expectation. Despite the fact that our middle child was asking me what he should make for his lunch. Calling me not you [Refers to Jen] (Angela)

...you know neighbours and friends of ours will say to the kids go ask Abbey [biological mother] this, and I would be standing right there, so I did feel I was invisible, slightly invisible parent... [laughs]... But now it does happen less. What I think is because the kids are grown up, so there is less reason for me to be asked certain things... as if I wasn't able to make those decisions. ... It had to be their BIOLOGICAL MOTHER! (Lisa)

These reactions experienced by non-biological mothers reflect work by Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) concerning how people expect the biological mother to have a stronger bond with her children, alongside carrying out the household chores. This belief may also develop into an understanding that the biological mother in a lesbian relationship is the main parent that children should seek permission from when wanting to do something. The non-biological mother may not be seen to have sufficient investment in the children or authority to make parental decisions over their actions or behaviour. Such beliefs suggest that to be a ‘real woman’ and a ‘true mother’ a woman has to have given birth to her own children, underpinning the centrality of heterosexuality to reproduction and ideas of family, alongside the limited gendered roles of

parents which inform growing understandings of non-heterosexual parenthood (Chan, et al., 1998; Goldberg, 2013).

### **Class and Class-Ambivalence**

Participants were asked a number of questions in determining the extent to which social class has a role in how they structure their everyday household chores (see Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 2004, 2014a), these included: *Does finance impact how you organise household chores? Can you discuss your class background? How would you describe your social class today?* and *Do you think your class/class background has an impact on how you organise your household chores?* In a number of interviews, interviewees were able to discuss their own class position and how they understood their relationship to this, as can be seen in the discussions between the couples Jen and Angela and Agnes and Ada.

[Whispers]... Working class? [Making an unsure face and directs it to Angela] (Jen)

I don't like it [working class]. I think being teachers will presume to be in the middle-class but... I don't like class system; I wouldn't describe myself as any particular class...I wouldn't class myself as anything. (Angela)

We both come from middle-class families... I think...we are middle class. I went to boarding school... and I did come from a relatively wealthy background... So we did come across as posh in a way. I think it does make us look more relaxed... not bothered by it, we are not so bothered by what people think or what you supposed to be doing... Both our parents, all are kind of educated to a high level really. (Agnes)

I think it has to do with a mixture of what our parents did as jobs and a mixture of income also education and world kind of view, I suppose I don't know... Private education mostly plays a big thing. Especially around here... Where I am from it is more on what books show [points at a shelf full of books]... what we are about in life rather than a clean house. (Ada)

Most of the respondent's defined class as a concept based upon individual educational level, parental background, 'how they lived' day to day and/or career prospects, and in echoing Warren (2003) and Gonalons-Pons (2015) understood it as informing, to a degree, how they run their households. For example Agnes and Ada, both identified as coming from middle-class families, with their parents class and their own educational opportunities allowing them to make claims to be middle class themselves. However, for those who identified as working class, there was a wider debate and discussion concerning what it was to be working class. As Jones (2012) and Lawler (2014b) suggests, understandings of what it is to be working-class are often much more complex and problematized in late modernity than understandings of middle-classness. For example, for Janice and Jen it was not necessarily only about their own classed identities, that of their parents or employment, but was positioned in wider terms relating to the communities that they lived in, it was a collective working class identity; *'I can say we are a very white working class village'*. (Janice), and as Jen suggests, *'I lived in a working man's village where the men went up to the social club on a Sunday while women stayed home and cooked their lunches because it was very a working-class village.'* (Jen)

For some scholars (Allen & Demo, 1995; Black, Sanders, & Taylor, 2007) the social class background of partners will impact how same-sex couples structure their household chores and domestic labour. For example, when asking participants who identified as working-class about the possibility of getting paid help with household chores and child-care, most of the respondents suggested that it would be a 'waste of money and time':

No!.. Because I will probably clean before someone came around, [Laughs] It will be totally a waste of time. We couldn't possibly allow someone to see the house messy even if there is a cleaner coming to clean it. I don't like it when people just drop-it-in because that's how it is, I like the house to be tidy. I don't like when someone just pops around even if it's for a cup of tea. Give us a ring first then I will run around making sure it's tidy up before someone comes in. (Janice)

I would like a cleaner... but we had a discussion about getting a cleaner to actually clean... Which we had before while the kids were small... Yes when the kids were small we had one but, ... but then a lot of it it's tidying and then we had to tidy for the cleaner, which becomes... it was quite a lot of money. (Jen)

For both Janice and Jen there is discomfort concerning a cleaner seeing their homes in a mess, which they understand as a form of social shame. As working-class women, part of their capital comes from having a clean and tidy house, even if it is only for limited periods of time when they have visitors. Their comments echo the work of Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) on the role of housework and clean homes in the lives of working-class women. In contrast to Janice and Jen, Agnes and Ada in their earlier discussion do not understand their social or cultural capital as being informed through the cleanliness of their house. For example, Agnes goes on to suggest that '*I am not saying that cleaning houses is a working-class thing, but there is an element to that in that your house shows who you are*'. This claim by Agnes is supported in the work of Skeggs (1997) and Lawler (2004) in the role of homemaking in defining key values and capitals in working-class women's lives. In contrast for Agnes and Ada, their display of books on their shelves is understood as key in informing visitor's perceptions of their social class and their social and cultural capitals. Participants who grew up in a household that employed domestic help held positive opinions as adults regarding employing their own domestic help, with this being in contrast to those participants whose mothers did all the household chores. Respondents' narratives revealed the impact of family background/relatives, social class and external (community) expectation upon how they now related to domestic chores in their own households. Social class is not just about 'external markers', but it can be used to place value onto a person's identity to allow them and their roles to be given value and to be judged (Lawler, 2014a).

### **The Impact of Family Background/Relatives and External (Community) Expectation**

When exploring the impact of family members and/or community upon the families involved in this research, questions that were asked of them included: *In terms of family background, how was/is the structure of household work in your extended family (e.g. parents/siblings)? How do your family relatives feel about your current structure of household work? From your individual family interactions is there*

*anything in the past that makes you now think about your household work? Do you think your family and/or friends have influenced how you structure your household work?* Many respondents expressed the influence of their parents, but especially their mothers' role in household labour when growing up as acting to influence their current ways of doing household labour. Furthermore, within most of the respondent's childhood households, normative gender relations were experienced, through having both a female and male parent, but also through the normative expectations and involvement in household labour for women/mothers in comparison to men/fathers. The role of the respondents' mothers while growing up became a salient point from one couple to the next, but correspondingly the narratives reveal the intersection of class and social background

I will say my mother did pretty much everything, but she was not a housewife either. She was much different, you know what I mean... We did our own ironing as girls, sewing and quite often we would have cooked as well, if home and tea was at 17:30 and if you were not there you will not get tea. My mother was a bit like ... "It's not a café. (Agnes)

Dad didn't clean, he used to cook, but he was a chef so he will cook and it tended to be quite elaborate. Yes, he did cook at home, but my mum did dinner, and she certainly did all the cleaning, he didn't clean..... and I was involved more in the household ... you know the washing and the cooking... ended up being what I do. (Rachel)

For both Rachel and Agnes their mother's held principal roles in undertaking the majority of domestic chores in the family home. For Sullivan (1996), parents may perpetuate the superiority of hetero-normative gender roles that position women as the key 'homemaker' in a heterosexual relationship. However, both respondents clearly show the complexities of their parents' commitments to domestic labour. For example, Agnes is keen to emphasise that her mother was '*not a housewife*' even though she did '*pretty much everything*' around the home. Her insistence that she was not a housewife may be classed-based, with Agnes being and coming from a middle-class family, but may also be an attempt to reject limited gender-normative

roles as assigned to women. For Rachel, although her father did most of the cooking, it was her mother who did the cleaning and other domestic duties. As a child, Rachel was involved in the wider domestic chores of her childhood home, which she credits as informing her role today in her own household. This behaviour by respondents' mothers which in some couples became prevalent in respondents own behaviour during visits to their homes for this research, could be seen as an attempt to engage same-sex families within the heteronormalisation of household labour - one in which 'motherhood' is confirmed in the doing of housework. The underlying theme becomes one which reflects the "deeply institutionalised character of gender as a productive mechanism of inequality and/or the power of economic dependency in the [subordination] of women." (Sullivan, 1996, p. 748).

The respondents' family background showcases the impact of the family members' views and perspectives regarding household chores and child-care ideas on how they perform housework as indicated by various scholars through the response-demand approach on how gender-related issues can be incorporated by each couple in their lives as a result of various interactions with family members (Black et al., 2007; Allen & Demo, 1995). This slightly differed in participants who came from middle-class families, however, even so, their own mothers tended to have a greater investment and involvement in the running of the household chores when in comparison to the father:

My father and mother always had a cleaner... She didn't do very much in terms of household chores but she always cooked but my dad... was a freelance writer...when I was little he didn't do anything really he just went to work but from the age of eight, he then started to do more [chores] while my mum was working as well. So I think it was quite even in a way from about at the age of eight. But as I said they had other people doing stuff as well. (Ada)

I lived with my mother and she was obsessive, she was an obsessive cleaner and tidy. So I will get woken up by a Hoover against the door, she will get up at six o'clock in the morning to clean and every morning... My mother tended to do a bit more, but it was just me and my mom. (Connie)

Both Ada and Connie reflect upon the complexity of multiple identities and demands as experienced by their parents as informing who undertakes household chores. For Ada, her family's wealth allowed them to employ staff to undertake some household labour, alongside her father beginning to work at home when Ada turned eight. In contrast, it appears that Connie comes from a single parent household where the domestic labour is shared between her and her mother, it is very much a gendered and classed experience.

The respondents elaborated on how their own relatives were entrenched within normative gendered roles regarding household chores, and as a result, respondents were expected by some family members to conform to certain prescribed social roles regarding the delivery of their household chores. As an addition respondents felt that people from the wider community such as neighbours or other parents at their children's schools had an assumption that it would be more difficult to be a lesbian parent, than a heterosexual parent, without actually discussing this with the lesbian parents directly. In more than one occasion when neighbours came to visit or when engaging in friendly talks at school, the respondents sensed that they were questioned and/or scrutinised about the way they did things within their own families:

I think what Lisa is saying is about relatives who you know... basically, people are looking at the way you are doing [household chores] than when you were straight, not questioning everything but you feel a little bit more scrutinised and we just get on with it in a way that we do, handle them or what we introduce them to ... we feel a little bit more scrutinised. (Abbey)

Respondents have to grapple with the idea that there might be more attention placed on how they run their household because of gendered assumptions concerning two women living together and assumptions based around lesbian sexuality. This intersection of gender and sexuality reflects how "participating in something defined as 'family' requires a social group's members to enact gender in ways that are built into the meanings of family life. [Thus,] gender structures endure in families because of the way their interactional contexts are arranged" (Moore, 2008, p. 339). Although respondents may not invoke or structure their household chores based on their gender themselves, external expectations and judgements will be based on their gender as women. Consequently, for some this social behaviour will make them on many occasions

feel like they are being watched, tested and marked because they are lesbian parents both at home and in school.

I did feel that we were getting more tested and watched and marked because of what we are and how we reacted to certain things I suppose. And I think people quite often expected that there will be a huge amount of issues around being a gay parent. So when people have that... "Oh, how do you find that? That must be difficult"...and like in school. And you know what? You just get on with parenting whether you are a gay parent is such a small part of it. We just get on with parenting. But people have expectations that it's harder for us. Whether it is or not. (Janice)

The noticeable point that came out of the narratives based on the impact of family background/relatives and external community expectation was twofold: firstly, some of the respondents indirectly continued to engage more on household chores that resulted from how they grew up; secondly, some of the participants avoided participating more in household chores as a way to boycott the deeply entrenched gender stereotypes that reinforce womanhood and femininity as a by-product of engaging in household chores (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2003; Gabb, 2005). Overall, within the social interaction of negotiating the household chores with family members but also having to explain oneself with neighbours or at school, non-biological mothers find themselves experiencing more negotiations than their partners not only on household chores but in raising their children. Thus, the respondents who were non-biological mothers expressed not only the pressure but also the adjustment they have to go through during encounters in their local communities.

### **Synthesis**

Many of the families and their day to day activities were informed by the same demands faced by heterosexual family units, one in which the 'male breadwinner model' continues to create a distinct binary between the value and place of paid employment against the devaluing of unpaid domestic work (see Irving, 2015). For many of the couples in this research the need to have an income, alongside a need for everyday childcare, create a binary of sorts between non/biological mothers. The non-biological mother in our

families was often the partner who was in employment, whilst the biological mother to the child/ren stayed at home to undertake childcare and wider domestic chores. Although this can be positioned as mirroring some elements of heterosexual families, one in which there may be an unequal distribution of resources or power within some lesbian families, the sharing of many roles and responsibilities by both the female parents does offer alternative ways of approaching family, home, gender and the world of paid employment post-childbirth. These findings mirror earlier work on family, social class and domestic work in the lesbian family (Kentlyn, 2008; Skeggs, 2010; Sullivan, 1996; Sutphin, 2010) and reflect the complex intersecting and negotiation couples undertake concerning each other's roles, identities and contributions to the family unit in a wider world in which families are increasingly seen as "less stable than they once were, as more fluid and more diverse" (Jackson, 2015: 169).

The splitting of roles within the same-sex families, between domestic labour and childcare, alongside paid employment can be seen to be based on quotidian realities informed by the unique financial position of each family, the social class of family members and the practical uses of time, resources and labour management that are seen to benefit both mothers and children in each family unit. Although the women in this research approach their own roles in their family structures as mothers who said that they felt equal in their investment to each other and their children, it is clear from some of their discussion that heteronormative values and understandings of 'motherhood' inform how neighbours, teachers, friends and family differentiate between the two mothers in defining who can be understood as the 'real' biological mother. Such understandings challenge the structures and values of the same-sex families we interviewed and their desire to move beyond the confines of limited heteronormative understandings of what family and/or motherhood is.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

The respondents' narratives reveal the complex intersections of parenthood, gender, sexuality, social class and expectations around household labour within the same-sex family unit. For these lesbian families in the northeast of England the specifics of historical regional expectations concerning family and gender roles, alongside the growing difficult economic climate in the region, can be seen to inform some of the

discussions the women in this research held during the interviews. However, findings in the study echo similar findings in other areas of the UK, and the world, on lesbian families and the quotidian realities of lesbian parents. As such, the various demands faced by lesbian families across the world may often position them as separate to heterosexual ways of ‘doing family’, but also indicate that many of the daily demands faced such as finance, child care, the running of a home, paid employment and so on, are mundane daily realities across and between multiple cultures, and ones that both lesbian and heterosexual families encounter. Although challenging, the data in this research show the women in these families engaging with complex demands of everyday life and limited heteronormative understandings of ‘family’ to produce and maintain a loving, equal and inspiring family unit, one that allows witness to the many ways that family can be performed and presented in contemporary society.

Given the relatively small sample size on this project it is difficult to generalise to a wider population from the research, although our findings do support similar research findings focused upon lesbian families, their domestic labour and the splitting of child care and paid employment responsibilities, as has been discussed earlier in this paper. Although geography and culture can shape sexualities, gender and how people ‘do’ family, in witnessing the shared commonalities of this research with other similar studies, it is possible to see how the shared experiences of lesbian families may transcend some cultural differences.

It would be interesting for future research to include lesbian families who had conceived their children via assisted reproduction, along with the inclusion of more middle-class participants and women from more varied ethnic backgrounds. Such an approach could allow richer data, more informed discussion and a greater representation of the varied ways that same-sex couples ‘do’ family. Finally, the importance concerning the impact of economic income and the social class background of those families in which lesbian women are raised could be explored in further detail in future research. Although the research follows in the traditions of other important writers who have focused upon social class, gender and sexuality such as Skeggs (1997), Lawler (2004, 2014a/b) and Formby (2017), we are aware of the limits within our approach. It is possible to understand some of our questioning concerning class, as outlined earlier in this paper, as potentially limiting respondents own agency in exploring and discussing their social class, along with unintentionally reinforcing the oppressive nature of social class within and outside of the research

setting. And in doing this, our own understandings or position on social class may have informed discussions produced by respondents to 'fit' with a particular or expected narrative around class. For Taylor (2009: 191) the intersections between class, sexuality and everyday life are 'often gestured towards but not fully unpacked'. In the framing of some of our questions concerning social class, the potential intersections that class has with other identities, along with how other identities structure classed experiences, and in turn how they intersect with class in informing everyday mundane tasks, may have been lost. In addressing the potential limits concerning how social class was explored within the interviews, the complex intersecting of social, cultural and economic capitals with sexuality, gender and family could be explored, allowing a greater insight into the ways in which lesbians 'do' and 'perform' family and the influence of one's own upbringing and the diverse cultural, social and economic capitals each partner brings to the family.

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