

7. Swedish Lesbian Mothers Arrange Parental Leave: Idealising Equality, Sharing (More or Less) Evenly

Anna Malmquist

Lesbian couples divide both paid work and unpaid housework more evenly than other couples (Bauer, 2016; Brewster, 2017; Gotta et al., 2011; Kurdek, 2007; van der Vleuten et al., 2021). Moreover, lesbian couples with children also divide childcare more evenly than different-sex parenting couples, with both mothers generally spending more time with their children than fathers in different-sex couples (Bos & van Balen, 2010; Bos, van Balen & van den Boom, 2007; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Goldberg, Smith & Perry-Jenkins, 2012; Patterson, Sutfin & Fulcher, 2004; Perlesz et al., 2010). Lesbian women's highly equal relations have been explained by their more egalitarian values, and by the fact that they experience less impact from gender-stereotyped expectations about division of labour (Patterson et al., 2004). However, these studies only show that lesbian women are more egalitarian than the couples with whom they are compared. When compared to one another within the couple, birth mothers engage more with childcare, while non-birth mothers put in more work hours outside the home, in particular when the children are young (Bos et al., 2007; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Downing & Goldberg, 2011; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Van Rijn-Van Gelderen et al., 2020).

For families with young children, access to parental leave is central to how childcare is arranged (Borrell et al., 2014). The present work focuses on how lesbian women in Sweden have arranged their parental leave. Many Swedish lesbian women idealise equality in their relationships and joint parenthood (Malmquist, 2015a). The focus on parental leave arrangements articulates an everyday life practice, which may or may not correspond to such values. The study draws on discursive psychology, where participants' accounts of their arrangements are scrutinised in detail. The

analysis aims to answer the following research questions: How do the participants depict their arrangements of parental leave? How do they account for the parental leave for birth mothers and non-birth mothers, respectively? How are their descriptions of their arrangements related to notions of equality?

Previous studies on parental leave will be presented in the following section. Thereafter, the Swedish parental leave system will be described, in order to depict the specific context of the present study.

Studies on parental leave

Lesbian women's parental leave-taking is understudied, there is (to the author's knowledge) only a few statistical analyses on this topic (Evertsson & Boye, 2018; Moberg, 2016; Tegmyr, 2015), and an entire absence of qualitative studies. However, there is a body of research on parental leave in general, and its effects on equality in different-sex couples. Paid parental leave with job protection has been shown to increase women's labour market attachment in the long run (Lalive, Schlosser, Steinhauer & Zweimüller, 2014; Rønsen & Hege Kitterød, 2015). When parental leave is available to both parents, fathers' time spent with their children increases, particularly if part of the parental leave is reserved for fathers (Boll, Leppin & Reich, 2014). Fathers' share of parental leave also increases if the time home is paid and the benefit is high. Regulations on parental leave differ significantly between welfare states, and the length of paid leave is longer in most European countries than in the United States and Canada (Borrell et al., 2014). The Swedish welfare state has one of the most generous parental leave systems, and a number of studies have looked specifically at parental leave in Sweden. Before describing those studies, the Swedish parental leave system will be explained.

Sweden is often claimed to be at the forefront of gender equality and politics, with policies promoting a dual-earner/dual-care-provider model (Ahrne, Roman & Franzén, 2003; Björk Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Holli, Magnusson & Rönnblom, 2005; Magnusson, 2008; Ryan-Flood, 2009). Once a child has been born or adopted, the parents together have the right to 16 months of paid parental

leave: 13 months of 80% earnings' compensation (up to a ceiling) and additionally 3 months at a low flat rate (*Försäkringskassan*, 2013). The parents may share the parental leave equally or may transfer days from one parent to the other, if they want one parent to stay home more than the other. Three months are reserved for each parent and may not be transferred. If the parents desire a longer total parental leave than 16 months, they may utilise lower levels of compensation, over a longer period of time. It is also optional to work part time and take part-time parental leave. Swedish law grants access to parental leave to all parents with legal custody. Thus, the parent's employer may never deny parental leave and may not discriminate against a person in a hiring process, wage determination, or promotion due to parental leave, or expected future parental leave.

For couples wishing to achieve equal engagement in their young children and equal career opportunities, Swedish policies offer a good head start. However, most couples utilise parental leave unevenly. When this study was conducted, mothers used 73% of the total paid parental leave, while fathers only 27% (*Försäkringskassan*, 2018, 21 March). Mothers' median time-off work was 12 months, and the vast majority had returned to work when the child reached two years (Evertsson & Duvander, 2011). Fathers often took out only the part of the parental leave they were not allowed to transfer to their partner (Duvander, 2014). Mothers generally explain their long parental leaves in terms of their family orientation, while fathers often give economic reasons for taking only short parental leaves (Duvander, 2014). Whereas men perceive parental leave as an option – accessible if they so desire – women are regarded as natural caregivers and are expected to take parental leave (Bekkengen, 2002). Division of parental leave has been somewhat more evenly spread in lesbian couples compared to different-sexed, with birth mothers taking 62% of paid parental leave and non-birth mothers the remaining 38% (Tegmyr, 2015). While no previous research has focused on lesbian women's ideals or thoughts on parental leave, they have focused on other aspects of lesbian women's family life in Sweden.

Lesbian parents in Sweden

For a lesbian couple in Sweden, the number of available paths to parenthood has increased since the turn of the millennium (Malmquist, 2015b). Since 2003, lesbian couples have been able to share legal parenthood through second-parent adoption, and in 2005 female couples were given access to insemination and IVF treatment at Swedish public fertility clinics. It was previously common for lesbian women to have children in shared parenting arrangements with gay men (Zetterqvist Nelson, 2007), but as options to become parents on their own have increased, many lesbian women today choose to have children within their intimate relationships only (Malmquist, 2015b). The author shows in another publication that Swedish lesbian parents commonly, though not always, idealise equality in their parenting roles (Malmquist, 2015a). Most couples want both women to form close parent-child relations and to share the role as primary caregiver. Still, most women also acknowledge a difference between themselves and their partner, which is tied to birth giving. They argue that the birth mother has an advantage in developing a close relationship to the child, while the non-birth mother initially has a secondary position. Some parents describe how they work hard on equalising their parental roles to overcome the early-established difference between them.

A lesbian couple with shared legal custody has the same access to 16 months of paid parental leave as any other couple, with all but three months being transferable between the parents (Försäkringskassan, 2013). In cases where the non-birth mother is not the custody holder already from birth, the birth mother may still transfer parental leave to her partner. Thus, it is fully possible for non-birth mothers to take parental leave as soon as the child is born.

Theoretical framework

Heterosexuality is generally privileged and construed as natural in hegemonic Western culture (Kitzinger, 2005; Land & Kitzinger, 2005). This heteronormativity is salient when it comes to expectations on family formation. Raising children is strongly associated with the nuclear heterosexual family, according to which a married

wife and husband jointly raise their children conceived through sexual intercourse (Smith, 1993; Weston, 1991). As shown in the overview of studies on parental leave above, mothers' and fathers' relative contributions to the parental responsibilities generally differ. Caregiving mothers and breadwinning fathers represents a heteronormative way of doing family (Ryan-Flood, 2009).

Despite the heteronormative family ideal, contemporary families show great variation, causing family theorists to speak of "family practices" rather than "the Family" (Morgan, 1996, 2011). It has been argued that a lesbian woman becoming a mother reinforces the gendered cultural expectancies on women to nurture (Kawash, 2011). Thus, lesbian women's motherhood could be discussed in relation to heteronormativity and cultural ideals of motherhood. On the other hand, lesbian parenting could also be said to challenge family ideals, because parenthood is performed in a non-heterosexual setting (Clarke, 2005). When finding their paths to parenthood, it is reasonable to believe that specific norms on parenting would develop among lesbian women. For example, a great emphasis on relationship equality characterises many lesbian families (Bos & van Balen, 2010; Bos et al., 2007; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Goldberg et al., 2012; Patterson et al., 2004; Perlesz et al., 2010).

Method

The present study was conducted as part of a larger research project on lesbian parenthood in Sweden (e.g., Malmquist, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Participants were recruited through personal data (e.g., names, social security numbers, and addresses) on second-parent adoption protocols. Many lesbian couples go through a second-parent adoption in order to establish legal parenthood for the non-birth mother (Malmquist, 2015c). Protocols from such adoptions are publicly accessible in Sweden and could therefore be harnessed to identify potential participants. As a first step, in 2009, the author collected second-parent adoption protocols established during the six years second-parent adoption had been available for lesbian couples, from all district courts in Sweden. A

total of 185 unique lesbian families were found, with second-parent adoptions for 1–3 children in each family. After the exclusion of four families with whom the author had personal relations, parents in the remaining 181 families were invited by printed mail to take part in a study on lesbian parenting. The invitations included information about the study, and stated that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. This recruitment procedure was approved by the Regional Ethics Board at Linköping University in Sweden. Among the invited families, 109 families responded and gave their informed consent to participate. During 2009–2010, the author conducted interviews with 96 parents in 51 of these families, selected to ensure a geographical spread among them (i.e., the geographical spread among the interviewees correspond to the geographical spread of all the initially invited families). In 45 interviews, both partners participated and were interviewed together. In the remaining six interviews, only one parent participated either due to conflicting schedules, or because the parents had separated. Joint couple interviews differ in many respects from individual interviews (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014). This is because joint interviews enable the couple to co-create their narrative and build on each other's reflections. However, in such contexts conflicts and dissatisfaction in the relationship may be more difficult to verbalise and may be toned down.

The interviews were conducted at a time and place that suited the participants, mostly during weekends, in the participants' homes. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide, where the parents were encouraged to provide their family narrative, from the time when the parents had first met until the time of the interviews. The interviews covered reflections on several topics, e.g., encounters with fertility clinics, maternal health care, antenatal education, donor choice, second-parent adoption processes, equality, and parental leave. The interviews differed in their focus, while some interviewees talked extensively on some of these topics, others focused on other issues. This applies also to the matter of parental leave: some interviewees described their arrangements and thoughts on this in depth, while others gave short

responds and moved to other topics. Given the quite large data material, the total data on parental leave is rich, nonetheless. Parental leave was generally brought up by the interviewer using an open-ended question, such as “how did you arrange parental leave?” Each interview lasted between 41 and 101 minutes and was audio-recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, including both the interviewer’s and interviewees’ voices. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Participants

All 51 interviewed families were settled in southern and central Sweden, most of them in city areas and suburbs ($n=36$, 71%), while those remaining lived in middle size or small towns, or in rural areas. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees’ mean age was 36 years (age range 24–58 years). Most of the 96 interviewees were currently working or studying ($n=90$, 94%), with a minority currently on parental leave, unemployed, or on long-term sick leave. One third ($n=32$, 33%) had an upper-secondary-level education, while two thirds had university-level degrees. Most of the interviewees were born in Sweden ($n=86$, 90%), but a few had migrated from other European countries. Of the 51 couples, 25 (49%) had one child and 26 (51%) had two children together. Three families also included children from a previous relationship, resulting in a total of 29 families (57%) with more than one child. In 19 (66%) of these 29 families, both parents had given birth, in contrast to 10 families (34%) where one mother had given birth to all children. In families with two birth mothers, the older partner had given birth to the first child, and the younger to the second. In families where one mother had given birth to all children, reasons for not switching birth mother varied. In some cases, this was due to the non-birth mother’s infertility, in other cases the non-birth mother was not interested in becoming pregnant.

Analysis

Before conducting any detailed analysis of the interviews, the author read through the entire material and made an index of the content. This procedure ensured that the author gained an over-

view of the entire, quite extensive, data set. Thereafter, sequences that concerned parental leave were sorted into a separate document. Parental leave was discussed in 50 of the 51 interviews. Thus, the present findings are based on 50 interviews with 94 parents. At this point the author sorted the interview data into three different groups, based on how the parents had arranged parental leave. A discourse analysis was thereafter conducted on each data set (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Wetherell & Potter 1992). This process started with a detailed coding of each data set, where keywords and phrases were marked and copied into a separate document. Thereafter the codes were sorted thematically. Such thematisation provided a detailed and structured overview of the data.

In discursive psychology, close attention is paid to the details of the participants' rhetoric. The analysis aims to show how the mothers framed, argued for, and reflected on their parental leave arrangements, and these arrangements' benefits or deficiencies. When focusing on the details of a specific interview sequence, there is a risk that the analyst will lose the overall picture of the patterns in the data. The analysis therefore involved a cyclical process, where the author moved back and forth between the thematic overview and the detailed rhetoric. The author also carefully scrutinised how the depicted parental leave arrangements were accounted for in relation to ideals and values, principally the idea of equality. Excerpts were selected to clearly visualise the findings of the analysis, and detailed analyses of those excerpts are presented in the results section.

Results

After the interview data had been scrutinised, three substantially different ways of arranging parental leave could be identified among the interviewees. First, parents in 9 of the 50 families (18%) described an arrangement where the birth mother had taken a long parental leave (9–18 months), while the non-birth mother took either no or a very short parental leave (0–4 months). This arrangement is reminiscent of how parents in different-sex couples typically divide parental leave (Duvander, 2014; Ekberg et al., 2013;

Evertsson & Duvander, 2011), and (as will be shown in the following) when accounting for this arrangement, the participants drew on arguments similar to those generally made by different-sex couples (Bekkengen, 2002; Duvander, 2014).

Second, parents in 35 families (70%) described an approach that was by far the most common, namely, that both parents had taken long or fairly long parental leaves (5–18 months), arranged so that the birth mother stayed home for the first period, and the non-birth mother took over when the former ended her parental leave. In most of these families, both partners had taken equally long, or roughly equal, parental leave. Not only was this arrangement the most common among participants, but (as will be shown) it was also presented as the ideal or natural arrangement for lesbian couples.

Third, 10 families (20%) described a variety of arrangements where both parents stayed home for a long period (6–13 months) early on in the baby's life, either full- or part-time. These approaches were depicted by the interviewees as something novel and as challenging norms on parental leave, since they question the idea that the birth mother necessarily must stay home on a full-time basis while the non-birth mother must wait for her turn to come.

This, in total, amounts to more than 50 families. This is because four of the couples with two children had had different arrangements for each child. A more detailed analysis of the interviewees' accounts will be presented in the following.

Birth mother stays at home,
non-birth mother continues working

Interviewees in 9 families (18%) described the most uneven division of parental leave, where the birth mother stayed home for a long period, while the non-birth mother took no or only short parental leave. Birth mothers in those families generally stayed home for between 1 year and eighteen months (only one of these birth mothers had stayed home for less than a year). A few of the non-birth mothers took no parental leave at all, while others stayed home for combined vacations and parental leave during the summer, and still others for a period worked part-time. Some of these

non-birth mothers took their parental leave when their partner also was at home.

Non-birth mother's work is demanding

When these interviewees described how they had organised parental leave, they mainly focused on the non-birth mother's employed work. Some of them described her work as demanding, while others depicted her work as beneficial, with some highlighting both these aspects. A few also depicted the birth mother's work as being less demanding or less fun. Malin and Rakel had a 19-month-old son. One birth mother had Malin stay home for 16 months, while her partner Rakel stayed home for three months during the summer. Both partners had the same employer, and argued that their different positions at work had been crucial in determining their arrangement:

Malin: Well you chose to, you wanted to have it during the summer too, so you could do as much as possible.

Rakel: But I probably could have been home another month, maybe, then I knew that my being away would be a big problem at work, I shouldn't be away too long, so I also felt some pressure there, then it was easier for Malin to be home because I'm the safety representative, so they didn't want me to be gone so long, so that's how it turned out.

Malin claimed that Rakel preferred staying home during the summer, so that she "could do as much as possible." This framing gives the impression that Rakel's parental leave was a prolonged vacation, a leisure time rather than a responsibility. Rakel herself objected to this interpretation, claiming that she could have stayed home for another month. Instead, she brought up work demands and claimed that her absence from work was problematic for her employer. Rakel's account sounds defensive; she claims she felt pressure at work, where "they" did not want her to stay home too long. The uneven division of parental leave was in this light depicted as necessary, "so that's how it turned out." Rakel's account

gives the impression that the uneven sharing was both undesirable and out of her personal control.

Non-birth mother's work is beneficial

While Rakel highlighted her work as demanding and hard to leave, Victoria and Karolina argued that Victoria's work had the benefit of long vacations, so she did not take parental leave. Both non-birth mother Victoria and her partner Karolina were teachers, with long vacations during the summer. In the excerpt below they talked about the parental leave for their first child, who was four years old at the time of the interview.

Victoria: But it never felt like I sacrificed it [parental leave] because he was born in May, and I work as a teacher, so I worked there a week, then I was off for three months and then you were and home and then... [...]

Karolina: I was home for a year and then we had the whole summer again, we were together...

Victoria: ...I feel like I was home a lot with Ludvig anyway. And at that time you weren't at all happy with your job and I really liked my job.

Working as a teacher was depicted as an advantage, on account of the long vacations. Victoria's picture of having three months off work every summer is likely an exaggeration, however; teachers in Swedish schools usually have less than two months off work each summer, covering July, and parts of both June and August. The exaggeration is rhetorically effective, as it serves to provide a picture of Victoria being home a lot. Karolina contributed to this picture by adding that another summer soon arrived, when they were home together again. Time spent with the child was depicted as ideal in their accounts, as Victoria claimed that she never "sacrificed" parental leave, and that she had stayed home "a lot [...]" anyway." First thereafter she added another dimension, namely that she liked her work, while her partner did not.

Talk about work benefits and demands dominated the line of argumentation among the couples with the most uneven share of parental leave. Still, it was the time spent with children that was depicted as desirable. Uneven sharing of parental leave was seldom merely reported by the interviewees, rather it was justified through their accounts of their specific situation. Uneven sharing was rhetorically depicted as having been caused by work demands or benefits, not by disinterest in staying home with the children. None of these parents spoke directly of inequality or depicted their division as unfair. Rather, ideals of equality were visible through more subtle statements, such as when the arrangement was depicted as an unfortunate consequence of work demands.

It is worth noting that it was only the non-birth mothers' work situation that was rhetorically depicted as hindering parental leave. Birth mothers' parental leave-taking was generally depicted as self-evident. In a few cases, the birth mothers' work situation was depicted as obstructive, but in those cases the participants described how they had made efforts to enable her to take parental leave anyway.

Birth mother stays home first,
non-birth mother waits for her turn

By far the most common arrangement among the interviewees was that both parents took long, or fairly long, parental leaves. The time off work was arranged so that the birth mother stayed home when the child was newborn, and the non-birth mother took over when the birth mother returned to work. Parents in 35 families (70%) described this arrangement. In most cases, both mothers had taken equally long (or roughly equal) parental leaves, e.g., each staying home for nine months. In other families, one mother had taken a significantly longer period off than her partner, but both had nonetheless been on parental leave for at least five months. In those cases, it was most common for the birth mother to stay home for the first year, and the non-birth mother for the following six months.

Shared parental leave creates equality

While families with a highly uneven arrangement generally highlighted work demands and benefits when accounting for their arrangement, the parents with more equal shares talked less about work and more about the benefits of staying home. They argued that shared parental leave gave both parents a close relation to the child. Interviewee Kim claimed: "It really helps in bonding with the child. You don't have the same contact if you haven't had parental leave." Besides close parent-child relations, several interviewees also claimed that shared parental leave gave them a balance and equality in their relationships to each other. Nina and Alexandra have both given birth to one child (four and one years old, respectively, at the time of the interview) and both parental leaves were shared equally. Nina explained:

We're like that for the most part, we're very similar. It's important to have the same amount of time off, for both of us to get to, just the same. It shouldn't all be on one person, and we've appreciated that a lot and think it's actually really important, when you look back, that you get to understand each other, because I mean it's not, just being at home isn't easy and working isn't easy when you have a family at home. Also it's not the case that the person who's at home is just fantastic and the one who's working is just trying to escape, because it's not fun at all to work in the beginning, you don't suffice for either place, not at home and not at work, but then it's the same for both of you and you understand each other a bit better even though there are conflicts, there's a common ground that's really good.

Nina's account is replete with arguments about the benefits of equally sharing parental leave, arguments that draw on the importance of understanding each other's situation and sharing a common ground. Both the stay-at-home period and the time at work were depicted as demanding. It is worth noting how Nina initiated her account, by stating that "We're like that for the most part, we're very similar." Equal sharing was not depicted as a topic of negotiation, rather equality was depicted as a point of departure, an

important characteristic of their relationship. Unlike the couples with an uneven share, where employment was claimed to have caused the uneven division of leave-taking, parents with an even share presented their arrangement as an important active choice.

Birth mother stays home first

Although these parents drew heavily on a rhetoric of equality and balance, their arrangements were also characterised by a difference between them, in that the birth mother stayed home for the first period with the non-birth mother taking over the parental leave thereafter. The order in which they took parental leave was generally simply reported in the interviews, but not argued for. When the interviewer asked how this was decided, several interviewees appeared surprised, and their answers tended to be short statements. They referred to breastfeeding and/or a need to recover after the delivery. In the interview with Nina and Alexandra, Alexandra gave a short and simple answer to the question of why the birth mother stayed home first: "It's the breastfeeding that decided it."

Such short and clear statements give the impression that who should stay home first is natural and self-evident. However, some parents expanded on this topic as a response to direct questions, and these responses tended to challenge the idea that it is only a matter of breastfeeding or recovery. Jessica and Ellen had one child together, 17-month-old Sixten, to whom Jessica had given birth. At the time of the interview, Ellen was pregnant with their second child. In the interview, the parents displayed their disagreement on how to arrange the up-coming parental leave. Jessica said that Ellen was considering returning to work when the baby would be six months, something that Jessica claimed she would not have done as a birth mother. Jessica had stayed home for a year with Sixten, and claimed that going back to work at that time gave her "a lot of anxiety," because "I wanted to stay home with Sixten, you know, keep being at home with Sixten." At this point in the interview, the interviewer asked the interviewees about the arrangement where the birth mother stays home first.

Interviewer: Is it important that the person who gives birth is home with the child during the first period?

Ellen: I don't think there's really any alternative because the person who gives birth to the child does the breastfeeding and those kinds of things, and that's just part of it.

Jessica: Actually, I think you could solve the breastfeeding somehow [Ellen: yes, somehow] but, no, I guess I think it's important. Like, I can't imagine if I'd have started working and that Ellen would've been home with Sixten. But then there's the part about bonding. Of course, we're both parents, but you notice with Sixten that I was home first because he, he's actually a real mommy's boy [Ellen: yeah, yeah, yeah]. [...] it would've been difficult for me if Sixten went to Ellen and not to me.

Ellen's response to the interviewer's question, that breastfeeding sets the limits, is a familiar theme in the interview data. Jessica disagreed with this picture when she claimed that breastfeeding is not the issue, rather, she argued it is the bonding that is at stake. She argued that the child is primarily attached to the parent who is at home, and from her perspective this is desirable for a birth mother. Jessica's account sets focus on the difference between the mothers. Although equality is often presented as the advantage of sharing parental leave, the arrangement where birth mother stays home first gives the partners unequal starts as parents.

Another interviewee, Linn, problematised this inequality. Linn had stayed at home with their son since his birth, while non-birth mother Kristin continued to work. Linn described that she had wanted Kristin to reduce her working hours to part time when their son was a newborn, but Kristin had insisted on continuing her full-time work, and planned on taking full-time parental leave when Linn returned to her occupation. The child was nine months old at the time of the interview, and the parents were about to switch stay-at-home-parent.

Linn: This is how we did it, you know, and now his attachment to me is stronger, or now he's started choosing me, or he's attached to both of us, absolutely, but when things get difficult

he wants me, that's how it is now. [...] I had some kind of dream that we could do this being parents in a completely equal way. But that's not how it turned out, I guess you could say. It's not wrong either or like, well....

Kristin: But I think I only saw it from a traditional perspective, you know, that one parent is at home while the other works, that's what you do. I can't stop working, you're the one who's home now. I'll stay at home later, then I'll be home full time and you'll do something else. [...] But then it was really hard, you know, to start full time and leave him the whole day. That wasn't fun at all.

Linn depicted her dissatisfaction with their arrangement, and explained that their son had been primarily attached to her as a result of her being at home. Unlike Jessica (in the previous excerpt) Linn depicted equality as an ideal, and claimed that she has had “some kind of dream” about having equal parental roles. Kristin argued, self-critically, that her choice to continue working full-time had been “traditional.” Kristin depicted their arrangement as a normative way of sharing parental leave when she claims, “that's what you do”. Despite this, Kristin acknowledged that she learned that it was “really hard” for her to leave the baby at home. The benefits and equality of this common arrangement were thereby challenged.

There is, however, a group of families who have found ways to arrange parental leave so that the non-birth mothers could stay home much earlier in the children's lives. These arrangements will be presented in the following.

Both mothers alternate work and parental leave,
or they stay home together

Parents in 10 families (20%) had an arrangement where both mothers stayed home early on in the child's life, full time or part time. In four of those families, both partners had stayed home full time from the child's birth, because one of them was on long-term sick leave or unemployed, while the other took parental leave.

Benefits of staying home together

Most of these parents depicted the situation of staying home together as advantageous. Katri and Darja had stayed home when their five-year-old daughter was newborn, as Katri was on long-term sick leave when Darja took parental leave.

Katri: It's been good.

Darja: It wasn't so nice that you didn't feel well.

Katri: No no, but if we look at the positive side of it all, then it's been good that we were home a lot together.

Rather than pitying herself and her situation, Katri stated that staying home together was positive. In these interviewees' accounts, what is depicted as an unfortunate situation of illness or unemployment is also claimed to have advantageous features. In this sense, the interviewees adhere to the previously shown idealisation of spending time with children. Such a value rhetorically compensates for the negative consequences of being sick or unemployed.

Alternating caretaking enables equal parental roles early on
While four of the families described how they had stayed home together due to one partner's sick leave or unemployment, six other families depicted how they had chosen an arrangement where both parents worked part time and alternated care taking of the baby. Maja and Desiree had two children, aged two years and four months, respectively. They stayed home from work every other week.

Maja: It works great. Both with work and at home.

Desiree: At home, I think it's good for both the children and parents. The children don't differentiate, it works with either one of us, and we understand each other much better, when both of us have tried being home and tried working.

[...]

Maja: Yes. It's really good because you get to be home with the children and bond with them, but you can still get away and work. We both think working is pretty fun, so. You think it's fun wherever you are. If you work full time, you get tired of that, if you're home all the time, you get tired of that too.

Maja and Desiree depicted the benefits of their arrangement, which are very similar to those described earlier by parents who had taken evenly periods of full-time parental leave. Maja and Desiree too emphasised close bonds with the children and a shared understanding for one another as parents. Maja also highlighted another aspect, namely that work is (also) “fun”. Rather than work being depicted as demanding, as seen previously, Maja argued for the importance of balance in everyday life, where you “get tired of” too much work or too much parental leave. Maja thereby drew on a rhetoric where neither work nor staying home is idealised, but where balance is put forward as the ideal. The birth mother, Desiree, also comments on recovery after childbirth: “Of course you need a little time, a month or two or maybe three, to recover. But then it's pretty boring being at home, I mean there isn't that much to do.” While Desiree did argue for the need to recover, her account also focused on full-time staying at home as tiresome. Desiree described as well how she continued providing breast milk for the baby during her working weeks: “I took a cooler and a pump with me to work, so I pumped and took it home.” Desiree's claims were in sharp contrast to how other interviewees depicted breastfeeding as setting natural limits for how parental leave could be arranged. Thus, their non-normative arrangement challenges norms on parental leave-taking and offers alternative ways of negotiating the parental role of the birth mother.

Discussion

Current Swedish parental leave regulations offer a plethora of possible arrangements for new parents. While official politics promote equal sharing of leave between parents (Carlson, 2013; Duvander, 2014), the couples are able to transfer most of their

assigned parental leave between themselves, and may arrange child caretaking unevenly (Försäkringskassan, 2013). Previous studies on parental leave in Sweden focus on different-sex couples and show that mothers take the lion's share of parental leave, while most fathers continue working full time when the children are young and often use only their non-transferable share of parental leave, not seldom arranged as a prolonged vacation during summer (Duvander, 2014; Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Ekberg et al., 2013; Evertsson & Duvander, 2011). Only in 2 out of 10 couples is parental leave shared equally. Thus, despite Sweden's reputation as a gender-equal society, caregiving mothers and breadwinning fathers constitute a normative way of organising family life during the children's infancy.

In the present study of lesbian women's parental leave, only a small group of families arranged parental leave in a way that is reminiscent of different-sex couples' typical arrangement, i.e., where the birth mothers took parental leave like the average Swedish mother, and the non-birth mothers like the average Swedish father. Instead, most couples shared parental leave far more evenly. Equally shared parental leave was depicted as an advantageous solution, where equal parental roles and an equal relationship between the partners were visible as ideals in the parents' accounts. As most parents shared parental leave evenly, their arrangements corresponded to the presented ideal. This result echoes findings in previous research showing that lesbian couples often share egalitarian values, and arrange both domestic and employment tasks more evenly than other couples do (Bauer, 2016; Bos & van Balen, 2010; Bos, van Balen & van den Boom, 2007; Brewster, 2017; ; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Goldberg, Smith & Perry-Jenkins, 2012; Gotta et al., 2011; Kurdek, 2007; Patterson et al., 2004; Perlesz et al., 2010; van der Vleuten et al., 2021). When parental leave had been unevenly arranged, this was defended or excused as being the result of work benefits or demands, i.e., external factors rather than personal preferences were used as explanations for the arrangement.

Despite the fact that equality was generally highlighted as a benefit of splitting parental leave in equal periods, some parents

pointed at the inequality built into the situation, namely the fixed order in which parents stayed home. This shows that equality is a complex notion. Sharing parental leave evenly does not automatically imply that the time spent at home gives the parents equal preconditions when it comes to bonding with the child. While many parents depicted it as natural that the birth mother stayed home first – for recovery and breastfeeding – some parents challenged the necessity of this particular order. Arrangements where both mothers stayed home from early on and alternated caretaking and employment tasks were not common among participants, but the few examples challenged normative presumptions that birth mothers must stay home with newborns while non-birth mothers must wait their turn.

Most previous research on parental leave-taking has been conducted on different-sex couples. In the heteronormative family, the birth parent is a woman, while the non-birth parent is a man. In lesbian families, both the birth parent and the non-birth parent are women. The lesbian non-birth mother's unique situation of being a woman and a non-birth parent offers a possibility to theoretically separate female gender from birth giving in the context of parental leave. The present study shows that, in most lesbian families, non-birth mothers took fairly long parental leaves. Thus, in terms of length, non-birth mothers' parental leaves are somewhat shorter than the average Swedish mother, but far longer than the average father (see Duvander, 2014). Being two women in a parenting couple may facilitate sharing parental leave evenly, given that women are generally expected to stay home from work when they have children (see Bekkengen, 2002). The non-birth mothers usually took their parental leave at the end of the total parental leave period and, thus, in terms of order, the non-birth mothers arranged parental leave like the typical Swedish father (see Ekberg et al., 2013). An arrangement with an even distribution of parental leave – in a fixed order – constitutes a normative ideal for lesbian families, which seems to be the result of the unique combination of there being two female parents, but only one birth parent (for each child). Staying at home for several months to care for one's child seems to be linked to the female parental role; it is desired and

socially expected for mothers. Staying at home and caring for a newborn child, specifically, is generally perceived as the natural task of the birth-giving parent. This finding makes an important contribution to our theoretical understanding of gender and equality in lesbian families.

The perspectives of modern family theory consider family life to be performative (Morgan, 1996). Rather than discussing 'parenthood' as a fixed and stable notion, 'parenting' is depicted as something done through the everyday practices of parents. Today, families show great variation in their form and structure, with lesbian parenting couples being part of this plurality. Heteronormativity is being challenged, as two-mother units create their own, unique ways of doing parenthood. The present work shows how lesbian mothers develop norms and ideals concerning parental leave that draw more heavily on equality than the norms and ideals of different-sex couples (cf. Bekkengen, 2002). When a lesbian couple shares parental leave unevenly, however, they do account for their arrangement by drawing on arguments similar to those made by different-sex couples. This shows that heteronormativity affects lesbian families too, despite the unique norms developed within this group.

Practical implications

The present study has important implications for those who support lesbian couples in their parental roles or intimate relationships. Understanding the interplay between parenting partners as well as the effects of ideals and social expectations is central. It is important to acknowledge the equality ideals that are common among lesbian mothers. For a lesbian mother who desires to continue working while having young children, it is likely that ideals of equality and close parent-child bonding put social pressure on her to stay at home, in particular if she is the birth mother. On the contrary, non-birth mothers are generally expected to wait for their turn, i.e., not to take parental leave before the birth mother returns to work. As shown in the present article, some non-birth mothers were not happy about this division, but arguing against what is presented as natural or self-evident is not easy. For clinicians who

support lesbian partners' communication, it is important to acknowledge the norms and expectations concerning child caretaking that may affect birth mothers and non-birth mothers differently. While equally shared parental leave was presented as desirable by most interviewees, it is unlikely that one way of doing parental leave suits all. Therefore, clinicians should be aware of the ideals and norms that exist as well as the variation and the uniqueness that exists between families.

The present work only concerns the women's reflections on parental leave once they already have children. It is possible that images of future child caretaking arrangements also affect lesbian women when they are planning to have children. Norms, ideals, and social expectations concerning parental leave may impact on the couple when they decide whether and when to have children, and which one of them will be the birth mother. Thus, parental leave options and norms may impact on lesbian women's relations and careers both before having children and once the child is born.

Politicians and policymakers who establish regulations on parental leave, have a great deal to learn from Swedish lesbian mothers. These mothers have the ability to share parental leave evenly, with most doing so. Given that lesbian women generally prefer to share child caretaking equally (e.g., Bos & van Balen, 2010; Bos, van Balen & van den Boom, 2007), it is likely that many non-birth mothers who do not have access to parental leave would be happy to use parental leave if given the opportunity.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

Lesbian mothers in Sweden have access to a generous parental leave system, available to birth and non-birth mothers alike. The present study has focused on Swedish lesbian couples in families, where the non-birth mother shares the legal parenthood. Possibly, other lesbian family formations in Sweden would arrange parental leave differently. As lesbian women in other parts of the world must adjust their child caretaking arrangements to the parental leave system to which they have access, the findings of the present study cannot be generalised to other contexts. Rather, additional research

is necessary to address questions of lesbian women's parental leave in other countries.

A core finding of the present work concerns the differences between birth parents' and non-birth parents' parental leave. This raises the question of how parental leave is arranged in couples with no birth parent (e.g., adoptive parents or parents through surrogacy). Does the non-presence of a birth parent affect parental leave differently, in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples? This would be a subject of interest for further research.

References

- Ahrne, G., Roman, C., & Franzén, M. 2003. *Det sociala landskapet*. Gothenburg: Bokförlaget Korpen.
- Bauer, G. 2016. "Gender roles, comparative advantages and the life course: The division of domestic labor in same-sex and different-sex couples." *European Journal of Population* 32 (1): 99–128.
- Bekkengen, L. 2002. *Man får välja: Om föräldraskap och föräldraledighet i arbetsliv och familjeliv*. Malmö, Sweden: Liber.
- Bjørnholt, M. & Farstad, G. 2014. "'Am I rambling?'" on the advantages of interviewing couples together." *Qualitative Research*, 14 (1): 3–19.
- Björk Eydal, G., & Rostgaard, T. 2011. "Gender equality revisited: Changes in Nordic childcare policies in the 2000s." *Social Policy and Administration*, 45 (2): 161–179.
- Boll, C., Leppin, J., & Reich, N. 2014. "Parental childcare and parental leave policies: Evidence from industrialized countries." *Review of Economics of the Household* 12: 129–158. doi: 10.1007/s11150-013-9211-z
- Borrell, C., Palència, L., Muntaner, C., Urquía, M., Malmusi, D., & O'Campo, P. 2014. "Influence of macrosocial policies on women's health and gender inequalities in health." *Epidemiologic Reviews* 36: 31–48. doi: 10.1093/epirev/mxt002
- Bos, H., & van Balen, F. 2010. "Children in new reproductive technology: Social and genetic parenthood." *Patient Education and Counselling*, 81 (3): 429–435. doi:10.1016/j.pec.2010.09.012
- Bos, H., van Balen, F., & van den Boom, D. 2007. "Child adjustment and parenting in planned lesbian-parent families." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 77 (1): 38–48.
- Brewster, M. E. 2017. "Lesbian women and household labor division: A systematic review of scholarly research from 2000 to 2015." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 21 (1): 47–69.

- Carlson, J. 2013. "Sweden's parental leave insurance: A policy analysis of strategies to increase gender equality." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 40 (2): 63–76.
- Clarke, V. 2005. "Feminist perspectives on lesbian parenting: A review of the literature 1972–2002." *Psychology of Women Section Review*, 7 (2): 11–23.
- Ciano-Boyce, C., & Shelley-Sireci, L. 2002. "Who is mommy tonight? Lesbian parenting issues." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 43 (2): 1–13.
- Downing, J., & Goldberg, A. 2011. "Lesbian mothers' construction of the division of paid and unpaid labor." *Feminism & Psychology*, 21 (1): 100–120.
- Duvander, A–Z. 2014. "How long should parental leave be? Attitudes to gender equality, family, and work as determinants of women's and men's parental leave in Sweden." *Journal of Family Issues*, 35 (7): 909–926.
- Duvander, A–Z., & Johansson, M. 2012. "What are the effects of reforms promoting fathers' parental leave use?" *Journal of European Social Policy*, 22 (3): 319–330.
- Ekberg, J., Eriksson, R., & Friebel, G. 2013. "Parental leave: A policy evaluation of the Swedish 'Daddy-Month' reform." *Journal of Public Economics*, 97: 131–143.
- Evertsson, M., & Boye, K. 2018. "The transition to parenthood and the division of parental leave in different-sex and female same-sex couples in Sweden." *European Sociological Review*, 34 (5): 471–485.
- Evertsson, M., & Duvander, A–Z. 2011. "Parental leave: Possibility or trap? Does family leave length effect Swedish women's labour market opportunities?" *European Sociological Review*, 27 (4): 435–450.
- Försäkringskassan. (2013, November 13). Parental benefit. Retrieved from https://www.forsakringskassan.se/wps/wcm/connect/a8203012-839a-4602-abef-00dfed41885b/4070_foraldrapenning_enGB.pdf?MOD=AJPERES
- Försäkringskassan. (2018, Mars 21). Det som är bra delar man lika på. Retrieved from https://www.forsakringskassan.se/!ut/p/z0/DccxDsIwDADAtzB4RALiY6sQH4Cl6IIZYsBKcCzbDd-H2y4taU6L4OAXBnfB9v_8fXxOivGGw3GCfO4SJHG7rFdy7eI8CLLaDwwlc8jPbtgKGeRCDfeNK0J2Lii-2nY3rknrtPsBKrnIlg!!/
- Goldberg, A., & Perry-Jenkins, M. 2007. "The division of labor and perceptions of parental roles: Lesbian couples across the transition to parenthood." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24 (2): 297–318.
- Goldberg, A., Smith, J. A., & Perry-Jenkins, M. 2012. "The division of labor in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual new adoptive parents." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 812–828.

- Gotta, G., Green, R., Rothblum, E., Solomon, S., Balsam, K., & Schwartz, P. 2011. "Heterosexual, lesbian and gay male relationships: A comparison of couples in 1975 and 2000." *Family Process*, 50 (3): 353–376.
- Holli, A., Magnusson, E., & Rönnblom, M. 2005. "Critical studies of Nordic discourses on gender and gender equality." *NORA – Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 13 (3): 148–152.
- Kawash, S. 2011. "New directions in motherhood studies." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 36 (4): 969–1003.
- Kitzinger, C. 2005. "Heteronormativity in action: Reproducing the heterosexual nuclear family in after-hour medical calls." *Social Problems*, 52 (4): 477–498.
- Kurdek, L. 2007. "The allocation of household labor by partners in gay and lesbian couples." *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(1), 132–148.
- Lalive, R., Schlosser, A., Steinhauer, A., & Zweimüller, J. 2014. "Parental leave and mothers' careers: The relative importance of job protection and cash benefits." *Review of Economic Studies*, 81: 219–265.
- Land, V., & Kitzinger, C. 2005. "Speaking as a lesbian: Correcting the heterosexist presumption." *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 38 (4): 371–416.
- Magnusson, E. 2008. "The rhetoric of inequality: Nordic women and men argue against sharing house-work." *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 16 (2): 79–95.
- Malmquist, A. 2015a. "Women in lesbian relations: Construing equal or unequal parental roles?" *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 39 (2): 256–267.
- 2015b. *Pride and prejudice: Lesbian families in contemporary Sweden*. PhD thesis. Linköping University.
- . 2015c. A crucial but strenuous process: Female same-sex couples' reflections on second-parent adoption. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 11 (4): 351–374.
- Moberg, Y. 2016. *Är lesbiska föräldrar mer jämställda? Institutet för arbetsmarknads- och utbildningspolitisk utvärdering*. Rapport 2016:9, Uppsala: IFAU.
- Morgan, D. 1996. *Family connections*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Morgan, D. 2011. *Rethinking family practices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Patterson, C., Sutfin, E., & Fulcher, M. 2004. "Division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual parenting couples: Correlates of specialized versus shared patterns." *Journal of Adult Development*, 11 (3): 179–189.
- Perlesz, A., Power, J., Brown, R., McNair, R., Schofield, et al. 2010. "Organising work and home in same-sex parented families: Findings from the work love play study." *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 31 (4): 374–391.
- Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. 1987. *Discourse and social psychology*. London: Sage.

- Ryan-Flood, R. (2009). *Lesbian motherhood: gender, families and sexual citizenship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ronsen, M., & Hege Kitterød, R. 2015. "Gender-equalizing family policies and mothers' entry into paid work: Recent evidence from Norway." *Feminist Economics*, 21 (1): 59–89.
- Smith, D. 1993. "The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an ideological code." *Journal of Family Issues*, 14 (1): 50–65.
- Tegmyr, H., 2015. *Parenthood and Sickness Absence: A Comparative Analysis between Opposite-Sex and Same-Sex Couples*. Master's thesis. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Weston, K. 1991. *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van der Vleuten, M., Jaspers, E., & van der Lippe, T. 2021. "Same-sex couples' division of labor from a cross-national perspective." *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 17 (2): 150–167.
- Van Rijn-Van Gelderen, L., Ellis-Davies, K., Huijzer-Engbrenghof, M., Jorgensen, T. D., Gross, M., Winstanely, A., Rubio, B., Vecho, O., Lamb, M. E., & Bos, H. M. 2020. "Determinants of non-paid task division in gay-, lesbian-, and heterosexual-parent families with infants conceived using artificial reproductive techniques." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11: 914.
- Wetherell, M., & Potter, J. 1992. *Mapping the language of racism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Zetterqvist Nelson, K. 2007, *Mot alla odds: Regnbågsföräldrars berättelser om att bilda familj och få barn*. Malmö: Liber.