

# Can't Share? Won't Share?

## Examining work-family decision making processes at the transition to parenthood

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



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In memory of my father and in dedication to my mother,  
who brought me up to believe involved fathers and empowered women should be the norm.

# Declaration

I declare that this dissertation has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stovell', written in a cursive style.

CLARE A. STOVELL

May 2021

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# Abstract

Since the advent of parenthood is a catalyst for increasing and long-lasting gender inequalities, this thesis investigates why heterosexual couples adopt traditional, gendered divisions of household labour (or otherwise) at this time. Explanations offered by the work-family literatures raise questions regarding how far couples 'can't' or 'won't' share and much research has explored the drivers of work-family divisions. However, few studies have looked in-depth at how these important decisions are made in practice. Using a quantitative recruitment survey and qualitative interviews with 25 heterosexual couples across the transition to parenthood, this thesis explores how first-time parents in the UK negotiate the division of parental leave, paid work and childcare. In particular, it asks how constraints and 'preferences' interact in this process. The thesis makes a key theoretical contribution to explanations for gendered household divisions of paid and unpaid work by demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between work-family preferences and constraints. In keeping with the findings of existing studies, constraints shaped desires - what has been referred to as 'adaptive preferences' - but at the same time individuals' perceptions of and responses to constraint were varied and shaped by their ideals and priorities – something that has so far received less attention in the literature. In light of these findings, the thesis uses a framework of 'motivation' and the duality of structure and agency to understand decision making. Underpinning these findings are further contributions to: 1) explanations for lack of active negotiation and discussion among couples; 2) understandings of work-family preferences; and 3) interpretations of survey measures. These findings suggest avenues for improving gender equality at the transition to parenthood and have important implications for policy on parental leave and flexible working.

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# Introduction

When respondents to the British Social Attitudes survey (BSAS) were asked in 1987 whether a man's role is to earn money and a woman's role is to look after the home and family, almost half agreed (Scott & Clery, 2013). Thirty years later, when the same question was asked to respondents of the 2017 survey, only 8 per cent were in agreement (Taylor & Scott, 2018). Given this fundamental shift in attitudes, we might assume that traditional<sup>1</sup>, gendered divisions of household labour<sup>2</sup> in Britain would also have declined substantially over this period. However, this is not the case. Although changing attitudes appear to be reflected in women's educational attainment overtaking that of men, increasingly egalitarian divisions of labour between young couples (Grunow, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2012; Yavorsky, Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015) and the proportion of men and women in the labour force converging (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010), these apparent moves towards equality mask considerable disparity across the life course. The transition to parenthood, in particular, is associated with persistent gender inequalities (Martinengo, Jacob, & Hill, 2010; Yavorsky et al., 2015). Fathers spend substantially longer hours in paid work than mothers and the gender pay gap is much greater among parents (Bielenski, Bosch, & Wagner, 2002; Dias, Joyce, & Parodi, 2018; Tipping, Chanfreau, Perry, & Tait, 2012). At home, although men's involvement in childcare and housework has increased (Dermott, 2008; Kan, Sullivan, & Gershuny, 2011), in the vast majority of cases, mothers continue to do the "lion's share" (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010) of domestic work regardless of paid work hours (Gershuny, Bittman, & Brice, 2005) or relative income (Schober, 2013b).

There is a common theory that these shifts to more gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work at the advent of parenthood are due to existing gender pay differentials, whereby men tend to earn more and therefore women are more likely to specialise in care work. However, a recent

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts of 'traditional' and 'egalitarian' divisions of household labour require some unpacking and are discussed in more depth in Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Terms such as 'household labour', 'unpaid work', 'housework', 'childcare' and 'domestic work' are integral to this thesis and it is important to clarify how they are used, particularly given a lack of consensus across the literature on their meanings. Here, *housework* refers to chores such as cooking, cleaning, DIY etc. *Childcare* refers to looking after children but may also include some related housework such as cooking children's meals. *Domestic work* and *unpaid work* are used interchangeably to refer to the combination of housework and childcare, or in cases where the distinction between housework and childcare is not critical. Finally, *household labour* is used to describe all the work required or undertaken in a household, and therefore includes both paid work and unpaid work.

study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies finds no evidence to support this theory in the UK since women's working hours and employment decline when they have children regardless of relative income (Andrew, Bandiera, Costa Dias, & Landais, 2021). These findings are also supported by earlier research which concludes that the transition to parenthood itself (generally defined as the period from pregnancy to the end of the child's first year) is a catalyst for gender inequality (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; Dias et al., 2018; Martinengo et al., 2010; Schober, 2013b). This suggests that studying the work-family decisions that occur during this period is crucial for tackling gender inequalities. This thesis therefore asks why couples adopt traditional, gendered divisions of labour (or otherwise) at the transition to parenthood.

Although the move to more traditional arrangements at parenthood is commonplace, it has been observed in many studies that couples expecting children anticipate they will maintain an equal partnership and are caught unawares when the division of labour becomes gendered: 'they describe the change as if it were a mysterious virus they picked up when they were in the hospital having their baby; they don't seem to view their arrangements as choices they have made' (Cowan & Cowan, 1992:98 cited in Barnes, 2015). Miller (2012) describes this as a process of 'falling into gender' and suggests that this may be due to lack of experience, as parenthood is likely to be the first time that dual-earner households are confronted with a need to 'balance' competing work and family demands. However, the repercussions of 'falling into gender' at the transition to parenthood are considerable, as patterns and habits form at this time which are hard to change (Barnes, 2015). In their analysis of longitudinal labour force surveys, Connolly, Aldrich, O'Brien, Speight, and Poole (2016) found relative stability in families' working arrangements in the UK. The fact that gendered divisions of labour at the transition to parenthood may not be a state of affairs that couples enter into willingly makes it all the more important to study this crucial period in which the foundations are laid for long-term inequalities in both the private and public spheres. This thesis therefore also asks whether parents want to share and, if so, what stops them.

Much research on the persistence of gendered divisions of labour looks at the factors which drive work-family decisions and has tended to be placed into two categories: those focusing on preferences as the drivers of decision making and those looking at contextual factors. This 'choice versus constraint' debate (Gash, 2008; McRae, 2003b; Yerkes, 2013) can be crudely summarised as a question of whether couples '*can't*' share or '*won't*' share. However, what is less well reflected in the literature is what Hacoen et al. (2018) call the dynamics of work-family

decision making - how these important decisions are made in practice and the strategies used by couples to negotiate a division of labour. Fewer studies still have focused on the specific dynamics of making ‘anchoring’ decisions that shape the overall work-family approach taken by a couple (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014), at the transition to parenthood, in the UK and since the introduction of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) in 2015. This thesis addresses this gap by using a mixed methods and longitudinal approach to ask *how* couples with apparently egalitarian attitudes make decisions about the division of parental leave<sup>3</sup>, paid work and childcare when they have their first child. Focusing on *either* structural constraints *or* preferences is unlikely to produce a full picture of how work-family decisions are made in practice. Instead, this thesis has responded to calls for work-family research that adopts a more holistic approach (England, 2016; Risman, 2017) by problematising a choice versus constraint dichotomy and asking specifically how preferences, choices and constraints interact in couples’ decision-making processes. Theories of structure and agency as a duality (Giddens, 1986; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008; Sen, 1992, 1999) encourage us to consider this interaction between ‘can’t’ and ‘won’t’ and have been used in this thesis to engage with the grey area where choice and constraint meet. In so doing, this thesis contributes to understandings of work-family decision making, preferences and constraints, as well as wider contemporary debates on how gender inequalities are perpetuated and can be addressed.

## Research questions

This thesis examines why heterosexual couples adopt traditional, gendered divisions of labour (or otherwise) at the transition to parenthood through four research questions:

### **1. How do heterosexual, cohabiting couples in the UK make decisions about parental leave and the longer-term division of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood?**

Although the dynamics of work-family decision making have received limited attention in the literature, implicit assumptions about how couples make these decisions are often evident. For example, rational choice and bargaining perspectives imply that active negotiation takes place,

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<sup>3</sup> Although a policy known as Parental Leave exists in the UK, which allows parents of children up to the age of 18 to take unpaid leave for childcare reasons, in this thesis ‘parental leave’ is used as a collective term to refer to policies that allow parents to take leave in the first year following a child’s birth – namely Maternity, Paternity and Shared Parental Leaves.

that responses to constraint are universal and that financial comparisons occur (see Chapter 3). However, the small body of in-depth studies on work-family decision-making processes suggest that explicit negotiation and discussion among couples is limited in practice. Although there are suggestions that decision making is more explicit for decisions of considerable magnitude – what Radcliffe and Cassell (2014) refer to as ‘anchoring decisions’. This thesis explores whether this is the case by looking at anchoring decisions about divisions of parental leave, paid work and childcare when heterosexual couples have their first child. It asks whether couples actively discuss these decisions and whether analysis of the financial implications occurs. Looking at these decisions from a couple perspective is important since there has been a tendency to focus on men and (more commonly) women’s perspectives in isolation (Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Kaufman & Bernhardt, 2015). Decisions about divisions of other types of unpaid work, such as housework, and the process of making daily work-family decisions are not a primary focus here. The theoretical reasons for this choice are outlined in more detail in the following chapter.

## **2. How do first-time parents think about and approach constraints to sharing?**

Many studies point to the importance of structural context in shaping decision making and constraining parents’ ‘choices’. By looking at decision making processes in depth, this thesis provides an exploration of parents’ accounts of obstacles to sharing, the ways in which these constraints are experienced in practice and how they shape decision-making processes about parental leave and paid work at the transition to parenthood. The common assumption that individuals respond to constraint in similar and predictable ways is explored through a duality perspective (Giddens, 1986; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008; Sen, 1992, 1999), which acknowledges the impact of individual agency and the possibility that material circumstances can be understood as both constraining *and* enabling.

## **3. What are the preferences that drive these decisions? To what extent are parents keen to contribute in more equitable ways to childcare and paid work?**

Although the term preference is ‘loaded’ with essentialist connotations and many scholars have pointed to the problems with perspectives which forefront ‘preferences’ as an explanation for divisions of household labour (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Ernst Stähli, Le Goff, Levy, & Widmer, 2009; Fagan, 2001; Leahy & Doughney, 2006; McRae, 2003a, b; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 2000; Yerkes, 2013), this thesis takes the perspective that sidestepping or overlooking the notion of individual desires altogether may obscure important aspects of work-family decision-

making processes. Assumptions have been made about what parents want and, in particular, that attitudes are synonymous with preferences (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Ogolsky, Dennison, & Monk, 2014; Stertz, Grether, & Wiese, 2017; Wesolowski, 2020), but some question whether this is the case (Hakim, 2003c; Hofstede, 1980). Are increasingly egalitarian attitudes (Scott & Clery, 2013) reflected in an appetite for sharing among parents and, if not, why? By applying a duality perspective, this thesis argues that it is possible to examine stated preferences and how these shape decision making, while also acknowledging that preferences are contextual. To contribute towards critiques of choice-based perspectives such as Hakim's (1998, 2000, 2003b) 'preference theory', the thesis also explores whether preferences are fixed, how they are formed and - leading on to the final research question - how they interact with contextual constraints such as finances, employers and policy.

#### **4. How do preferences and constraints interact in couple decision making?**

As noted above, theorists suggest that preferences are formed by and adapt to constraint (Leahy & Doughney, 2006) – this thesis seeks to understand how and under what conditions. It posits that interrogating the interaction between preference and constraint could be a helpful way of understanding what barriers make sharing unappealing, particularly those that are more insidious or less visible, and give an insight into how context is interpreted and filtered through individuals with agency.

## **Methodology**

These questions are addressed using a longitudinal mixed methods approach, which consists of a short recruitment survey completed by 117 participants and individual interviews with both members of 25 cohabiting heterosexual couples in the UK, conducted at various stages of the transition to parenthood. The data was collected in early 2017, almost two years after the introduction of SPL. Participants comprise of 17 couples of 'Existing Parents' of pre-schoolers (33 individuals), who were asked to reflect back on the decisions made when they had their first child, and 8 couples of 'Expecting Parents' (16 individuals), who were interviewed while making parental leave decisions prior to the birth and then again 9-12 months later when they made decisions about longer term work-family arrangements. These two groups of participants are used to give a full account of decision making throughout the transition to parenthood and to balance the benefits and limitations of contemporaneous and retrospective accounts. Participants are all highly educated professionals and, in the majority of couples, women were equal or higher

earners prior to having children. This is clearly not representative of the majority of parents in the UK, yet it is because this group is associated with privileged decision making capacities and egalitarian attitudes (Fan & Marini, 2000) that they have been identified as having the potential to be ‘trailblazers’ when it comes to sharing (Grunow & Veltkamp, 2016) and the dynamics of their work-family decision making are therefore of particular interest.

## Structure of the Thesis

The first three chapters of the thesis set out the context to this study and outline relevant academic literatures. **Chapter 1** describes the gendered effects of parenthood both on paid and unpaid work and the asymmetrical nature of change in men and women’s working and caring trajectories. It points out the ways in which the transition to parenthood is a catalyst for persistent gender inequalities and highlights why this is a crucial period to study. This chapter also includes a consideration of how equality in a household context can be conceptualised. **Chapter 2** moves on to consider explanations for the gendered division of household labour, focusing on the contrast between choice-based and constraint-based perspectives using the lens of structure and agency. The chapter includes an evaluation of the limitations of these two approaches and concludes by setting out the benefits of using a perspective which understands structure and agency as a duality for analysing work-family decisions. **Chapter 3** turns to the less frequently studied area of the dynamics of work-family decision making, including a consideration the particulars of decision making from a couple perspective and in the context of the transition to parenthood.

Before the thesis moves on to four core empirical chapters, **Chapter 4** provides a detailed explanation of the mixed methods and longitudinal research methodology adopted in this study. In doing so, it identifies the strengths and acknowledges the limitations of this approach for analysing work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood. Following this, **Chapter 5** sets the scene by summarising how couples in the study organised the division of parental leave, paid work and childcare when they became parents. It also includes an unexpected finding that standard definitions of part-time work did not reliably reflect lived experiences. **Chapter 6** addresses the first research question by analysing how couples make work-family decisions at the transition to parenthood. Based on interviews with Existing and Expecting Parents, it concludes that explicit decision making and negotiation were rare, despite the magnitude of the anchoring decisions studied. This chapter goes on to set out four reasons for a lack of discussion centring

on: assumptions and expectations, naivety, risk of tension and lack of impetus. **Chapter 7** responds to the second research question on experiences of constraint. It focuses on six material and cultural barriers to sharing raised by parents in the study (finances, policy, employers, location, reproductive bodies and gender ideology). The key finding of this chapter is that, while common barriers were identified, the way parents perceived and responded to them varied enormously. **Chapter 8** engages with the third research question and critically examines parents' work-family preferences before, during and after the transition to parenthood. The findings challenge essentialist notions of fixed orientations to work and family, revealing that preferences changed over time in response to shifting contexts. Although both men and women expressed desires to share, these occurred at different stages of the transition to parenthood thus hindering egalitarian divisions of labour.

Leading on from these empirical chapters, the discussion in **Chapter 9** draws the findings together to respond to the final research question on how preferences and constraints interact. An argument is set out for a reciprocal relationship between the two domains, in which constraints shape preferences but preferences also shape perceptions of constraint, and a framework of 'motivation' is proposed for theorising this interaction. Finally, the **Conclusion** summarises the arguments made in this thesis and identifies its contribution and limitations. It also proposes recommendations based on the findings, as well as avenues for future research.



# 1. Parenthood: A Catalyst for Gender Inequality

As noted in the introduction, attitudes towards the division of paid and unpaid work in the UK appear to have become considerably more egalitarian. In 1987, almost half of respondents to the BSAS agreed that ‘a man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family’, compared to only 8 per cent in 2017 (Taylor & Scott, 2018). To some extent, these attitudes appear to be reflected in behaviour. Within the UK, dual-earning couples have become the norm (Connolly et al., 2016; Walling, 2005) and the proportion of men and women in the labour force is converging (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010). While only 53% of women were in paid employment in 1971, by 2013 this figure had risen to 67%. Meanwhile, over the same period men experienced a decline in employment rates from 92% to 76% (ONS, 2013).

However, the increasing gender equality described in these figures masks considerable disparity across the life course. In their international study, Martinengo et al. (2010) observe as much within gender difference according to life stage as between gender differences in the division of household labour, with parenthood representing the period of most change. When parents are examined in isolation, gender inequality in labour force participation, paid working hours and wages is much greater (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; Martinengo et al., 2010). According to data from the Office of National Statistics, in 2016 the employment rate for men with dependent children was 93% compared to 74% for women. As a comparison, the difference in employment rates for men and women without dependent children was only 4% (ONS, 2016) and in their analysis of UK career patterns, Dias et al. (2018) find no discernible difference between men and women’s employment rates before the arrival of their first child. Consequently, Biggart and O'Brien (2010) claim that the differing impact of the transition to parenthood for men and women accounts for the gender inequality observed in the labour force. For example, the wage gap is relatively small between men and women in their twenties, however it starts widening slowly but significantly around the late twenties and early thirties, and this can be directly linked to the arrival of children (Dias et al., 2018). Furthermore, women’s paid working hours fall sharply at the transition to parenthood regardless of relative earnings prior to having children (Andrew et al., 2021).

This chapter looks in details at the effects of becoming a parent on employment and unpaid work and how this differs for men and women. It will conclude with a consideration of why inequality matters and how equality in paid work and childcare will be conceptualised in this thesis.

## **Gendered Effects of Parenthood on Paid Work**

Labour force research shows that, cross-nationally, when women become mothers their income and hours in paid work decrease (Andrew et al., 2021; Barnes, 2015; Budig, Misra, & Boeckmann, 2012; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000; ONS, 2013). This has been commonly referred to as a ‘motherhood penalty’ (Budig & England, 2001). Data from the US found that mothers work 4.6 hours less on average per week than women without children (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000). Winslow-Bowe (2006) found that women who were main earners in U.S. households tended not to maintain their income advantage over five years and that the main reason for this was the arrival of children, which led women to reduce their hours in paid work. In the UK, 90% of women aged 25-34 without children were in employment in 2004, compared to 59% of mothers with dependent children (Walling, 2005). Andrew et al. (2021) find that, regardless of relative income, women's average weekly hours in paid work fall by more than 10 hours when they have children.

The impact of parenthood on men’s paid work is very different. While women are less likely to be in paid work when they have children, men aged 25-34 in the UK are more likely to be employed if they have children (89%) compared to those without (87%) (Walling, 2005). Many studies have also found that men, on average, increase their hours in paid work when they have children and fathers earn more on average than men without children (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; Esping-Andersen, Boertien, Bonke, & Gracia, 2013; Hardill & Watson, 2004; Lundberg & Rose, 2002; ONS, 2013). This is particularly pertinent in Britain, as men in this country already work some of the longest hours in Europe (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010). However, Dermott (2006) argues that studies finding a ‘fatherhood premium’ have confused fatherhood with general life stage. When she additionally controlled for age, she found no difference in the working hours and earnings of men with and without children. Biggart and O'Brien (2010) tested this theory and found that being a father predicted working longer hours more than career stage, however occupation type was a stronger predictor than either career stage or parental status. They also suggest that an appearance of no effect of fatherhood could in fact hide diversity in responses to

fatherhood, with more egalitarian fathers who reduce their work commitment balancing out traditional fathers who increase their hours. In support of this theory, Biggart and O'Brien cite Kaufman and Uhlenberg's (2000) study which found that father's work hours were influenced by their gender role attitudes. They argue that 'in times of role transition it would be likely that contradictory behaviours are observed as fathers endeavour to find ways to accommodate new roles within existing social and economic constraints' (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010:347). Regardless of these differences of opinion on the effect of fatherhood, compared to the widely observed penalty for mothers, even a scenario of no significant change for fathers represents a considerable gender difference in the effect of parenthood on career.

This disparity in mothers' and fathers' working patterns is reflected in the fact that, although dual earning is the norm in Britain (Connolly et al., 2016; Walling, 2005), this is often in the form of a 'standard' 1.5 earner model, in which the father works full-time and the mother part-time. Part-time work is associated with lower wages, less responsibility and reduced career progression (Blackwell, 2001; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008) and the UK has some of the highest rates of part-time work for women in Europe (Bielenski et al., 2002; OECD, 2018). It must be noted that, since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the popularity of a 1.5 earner arrangement in the UK has declined and the number of families in which both parents are working full-time has increased (Connolly et al., 2016; McMunn et al., 2015). As a result, in 2013 the prevalence of dual full-time arrangements equalised with 'standard' 1.5 earner households as the most common arrangements for two-parent families with dependent children in the UK (both at 31%) (Connolly et al., 2016).

Although this suggests that Britain is moving towards a more equitable division of paid work between parents, there are still considerable signs of stagnation. To begin with, the proportion of male breadwinner households has not declined over the same period and has remained at 22% (Connolly et al., 2016). Data on working hours tend to mask the disruption to women's careers caused by Maternity Leave, as most studies only take 'usual' hours into consideration (Connolly et al., 2016). It is also important to note that for mothers there is considerable variation in working patterns based on number of children and child's age, but this effect is not apparent for fathers (Connolly et al., 2016). Mothers in the US with one child work, on average, 4 hours more a week than mothers with three or more children (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000) and, in the UK, couples with pre-school children are more likely to be in a male breadwinner arrangement (Connolly et al., 2016; Walling, 2005).

Most importantly of all, however, is that where convergence between men and women's employment patterns has taken place, this has been due to women's work-family biographies becoming more masculine (McMunn et al., 2015). Although career breaks for mothers remain common and 42% of women work part-time (ONS, 2013), women are increasingly engaging in continuous full-time work (Connolly et al., 2016; McMunn et al., 2015). In contrast, only 12% of men work part-time (ONS, 2013) and these are more likely to be men without children than fathers (Walling, 2005). Non-standard arrangements, in which women work longer hours or both partners work part-time have increased, but remain uncommon - representing only 12% of households in 2013 (Connolly et al., 2016). In summary, women's working patterns are varied, but very few men stray from the masculine norm of a lifetime of continuous full-time work (Andrew et al., 2021; Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; McMunn et al., 2015). Interestingly, lone fathers' working patterns are more similar to those of mothers and suggest that it is women's tendency to take on primary responsibility for childcare that leads to gender inequality in paid work hours and income (Walling, 2005).

## **Gendered Effects of Parenthood on Unpaid Work**

The arrival of children is also associated with significant shifts to more traditional gendered divisions of labour at home (Barnes, 2015; Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008; Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012; Kluwer, Heesink, & Vliert, 2002; Martinengo et al., 2010; McMunn et al., 2015; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Sayer, 2005; Yavorsky et al., 2015). As with paid work, prior to having children couples tend to divide unpaid work relatively equally (Baxter et al., 2008; Bianchi et al., 2012; Grunow et al., 2012; Yavorsky et al., 2015), however, once children arrive, women take on the majority of housework and childcare responsibilities.

Fathers' time spent on childcare and housework has increased since the sixties and some have argued that a new trend of 'involved' or 'intimate' fatherhood is emerging (Dermott, 2008; Hook, 2006; Lewis & Lamb, 2007; O'Brien, 2005). The time spent by men in the UK on childcare increased from an average of 3–8 minutes a day in the seventies to 32–36 minutes per day in 2000 (Sullivan, 2010). These trends have also been observed cross-nationally, with a clear increase in men's contribution to unpaid work over time (Hook, 2006). However, women's time spent on childcare has also increased during this period (Sullivan, 2000) and mothers therefore continue to take on the lion's share of childcare responsibilities (Gatrell, 2007; Gracia & Ghysels,

2017; Scott & Clery, 2013). Sullivan (2000) suggests that the overall increase in time spent on childcare for mothers and fathers may be due to leisure activities being more centred around children and changes in how people perceive and report time spent with children. It has also been argued that increases in childcare time for women are linked to changing childcare ideals, in the form of intensive mothering (Budds, Hogg, Banister, & Dixon, 2016; Hays, 1996), which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Many of the studies looking at time spent on unpaid work in the UK rely on time use data which was collected in the early 2000s or before (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; Gracia & Esping-Andersen, 2015; Gracia & Ghysels, 2017; Kan et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2010, 2013; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2013). According to this data, in 2000, fathers in the UK averaged 33 minutes a day on childcare during the week and 37 minutes a day on weekends, compared to 68 minutes a day on weekdays for mothers and 67 on weekends (Gracia & Ghysels, 2017). Time use data is considered the 'gold standard' as there are limited issues of recall or bias when reporting how time is spent (Kan, 2008b; Yavorsky et al., 2015). However, time use studies are expensive and require a level of commitment from participants which means that there are limited numbers of data sets available (Pleck, 1997). Surveys, although less reliable as they rely on respondents' estimations of average time use, provide more recent data. In the 2012 BSAS, fathers reported an average of 10 hours a week caring for family members compared to 23 hours for women (Scott & Clery, 2013). These reports did not differentiate between childcare and care for other family members, but do give an indication of the gendered nature of the division of care work. These gender differences also hold even when work hours are controlled for (Gershuny et al., 2005).

Women's relative contribution to housework also appears to increase at the transition to parenthood, while men's stays the same or decreases (Barnes, 2015; Grunow et al., 2012; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). Analysis of Natcen time use data from 2014/15 finds that in households with no children (where the couple is aged between 25-55), men perform 39% of total housework, compared to 31% in households with children (Hacohen, Likki, Londakova, & Rossiter, 2018). In a rare longitudinal study including data prior to the arrival of children, which gives a comparison point, Grunow et al. (2012) found that in Germany almost half of newlyweds shared housework equally or the husband did more, but over the course of marriage the husband's contribution declined significantly. Schober (2013a) found that the longer women in the UK and Germany interrupted their careers after childbirth, the more traditional the division of labour. She claims that this is due to women on Maternity Leave spending more time at home

and therefore being more available and aware of the need for housework. As a result, women improve their housework skills when they take Maternity Leave while their partners' skills decline. Having children also creates more housework, such as cleaning, laundry and cooking. Schober (2013a) found that while women increased their time spent in housework after the first birth, men's time stayed the same, suggesting that women alone take on the additional domestic work created by the arrival of a child. The habits that develop during this time also change couples' expectations and tend to continue in the long term (Grunow et al., 2012; Schober, 2013a).

When looking at the gender division of unpaid work, it is important to consider not only the quantity, but also the nature of men and women's contributions. Housework can take the form of routine chores that must be completed regularly, such as cooking and cleaning, and also non-routine work, such as gardening and DIY (Kan et al., 2011). Childcare can be divided into routine care, such as clothing, bathing and feeding, interactive care such as teaching and playing (Gracia & Esping-Andersen, 2015; Gracia & Ghysels, 2017) and the 'mental load', a form of invisible labour which involves the planning, organisation and management of childcare. Research finds that women disproportionately take on the mental labour at home (Meier, McNaughton-Cassill, & Lynch, 2006; Offer, 2014; Walzer, 1996) and contribute more to routine housework and childcare (Sullivan, 2013), while men tend to contribute more to interactive care and non-routine housework (Gracia & Esping-Andersen, 2015; Hearn & Niemistö, 2012; Kan et al., 2011). These are arguably the more enjoyable and flexible tasks according to Craig (2006:275), who proposes therefore that 'paternal time with children is less like work than is maternal time'. This is echoed in research by Rose, Brady, Yerkes, and Coles (2015), which found that fathers reported 'trying' to do childcare tasks regularly, implying this involvement was discretionary rather than compulsory, while mothers in contrast talked about 'always' doing tasks regardless of external factors such as returning late from work. Unlike mothers, fathers also reported opting out of tasks that they found challenging or uncomfortable rather than strengthening their skills in this area. This implies that fathers have more agency to decide what form their involvement in childcare takes.

Gatrell (2007) suggests that an unequal distribution of childcare tasks is because routine childcare does not bring 'situational' power, while direct contact (for example, through playing) increases the 'paternal sphere of influence'. She argues that men who take part in childcare, do so to 'bolster male authority, at mothers' expense' (Gatrell, 2007:355). Furthermore, although both

men and women have increased their childcare hours, Craig (2006) found that compared to mothers, fathers were very rarely alone with their children - therefore their care did not substitute mothers' time or relieve them of responsibility. For this reason, many studies describe fathers as 'helpers' and secondary parents (Craig, 2006; Hearn & Niemistö, 2012). Women also spend more time multitasking, particularly in housework and childcare, which may explain why women feel more burdened even when they have similar workloads to men (Offer & Schneider, 2011).

There are considerable distinctions between the trends for housework and childcare and, as such, unpaid work cannot be treated as a homogenous whole. For example, in contrast to increases in time spent on childcare, women's time on housework has decreased in the last 50 years (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016), due to lowered standards and time-saving technological advances (Sayer, 2005) as well as outsourcing and multitasking (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2013). Sullivan (2013:82) argues therefore that 'housework and childcare should always be treated separately both theoretically and analytically' and this advice has been followed here. This thesis looks specifically at the process by which couples decide how to divide earning and caring responsibilities when they have their first child. The focus is, therefore, primarily on childcare rather than housework, although both are included in the analyses to some degree since they are so interconnected.

There are a number of theoretical reasons for the decision to focus on childcare. Firstly, the addition of childcare to the domestic workload at the transition to parenthood has a unique impact on the general division of paid and unpaid work and appears to be a catalyst for inequality. As outlined above, when they become parents, many women reduce their paid work hours to accommodate childcare, while men tend to stay on in full-time work. This has a substantial impact on women's long-term career prospects and accumulation of human capital (Friedman, 2015). Providing care is often cited as a reason by women for part-time working, but other personal responsibilities such as housework rarely are (Eurostat, 2019). Improving inequality in the division of childcare may therefore be the key to improving the overall gendered division of unpaid and paid work. Consequently, Barnes (2015) and Bianchi et al. (2012) claim that childcare is more important than housework when studying gender equality at the transition to parenthood.

Secondly, childcare is likely to require negotiation and decision making in a way that is not necessary for housework, since it regularly involves external parties. Workplaces must be

informed about parental leave decisions, while flexible working or reductions in working hours for childcare need to be negotiated with employers. Many parents also rely on formal childcare outside the home, which is often oversubscribed and costly (De Henau, Meulders, & O’Dorchal, 2007). For this reason, decisions about childcare may require more planning and are likely to be addressed in a less ad-hoc manner than housework. Furthermore, if households are willing to relax their standards, housework can be ignored whereas childcare cannot (Barnes, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2012). Mannino and Deutsch (2007:321) also claim that discussion may be more important in relation to childcare than housework because it is generally perceived as more intrinsically rewarding: ‘[m]en may think they owe their high earning wives more housework without any discussion’ whereas whether women want help with childcare may be more ambiguous. Decision-making processes and negotiations are, therefore, likely to be particularly pertinent in this area and are important with regards to gender equality due to their considerable impact on employment status and relative earnings (Bianchi et al., 2012).

Thirdly, the division of childcare has received substantially less attention in the literature than the division of housework (Barnes, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2012). Many studies on unpaid work omit childcare, as data is not available or is not easily interpreted (Kan, 2008a; Schober, 2013b). This is also linked to the fourth and final reason for prioritising the study of childcare, which is that theoretical explanations for the division of care are limited compared to those regarding housework. Bargaining and relative resources perspectives, which are discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, rely on the assumption that unpaid work is an undesirable task which falls to the spouse with least power or resources (Barnes, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2012; Sullivan, 2013). However, it could be problematic to apply this to childcare, since this tends to be considered as a more enjoyable task - particularly by men, who generally do less routine care (Bianchi et al., 2012; Gracia & Esping-Andersen, 2015; Offer & Schneider, 2011; Sullivan, 2013). Policy-based explanations for the division of household labour also explain housework better than childcare. While a relationship has been found between women's contribution to housework and policy context, the pattern for caring is less clear (Kan et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2013). More research is therefore needed to understand the dynamics that govern decision making regarding the division of childcare.

This dissertation addresses this gap in knowledge by asking how couples negotiate the division of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood and explores to what extent a lack of sharing is a question of can’t or won’t. However, in order to address this question, it is necessary



to outline what is meant by equal sharing. Associated with this, it is also important to consider why the inequalities in paid work and childcare outlined above matter.

## Why Does Inequality Matter?

In order to consider why gender inequality matters, the notion of ‘sharing’ and ‘equality’ in the division of paid work and childcare in heterosexual couples requires some unpacking, as its meaning is open to interpretation (Braun, 2008; Grunow, Begall, & Buchler, 2018; Knight & Brinton, 2017). For example, a traditional ‘separate spheres’ arrangement - where the man specialises in earning and the women in unpaid labour - could be considered as sharing since both men and women contribute equally to the total sum of household labour, albeit in different forms. This is linked to notions of ‘equality in difference’ or ‘egalitarian essentialism’, which seek equal recognition and value for men and women, while considering the sexes to be intrinsically different (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011). However, supporting difference can be a risky strategy since it can provide a justification for discriminatory practices (the idea of intrinsic sex differences has been used over the centuries to exclude women from full social and political citizenship) and there are those who argue that difference always leads to a hierarchy (Freedman, 2001). Furthermore, Nussbaum (1998) claims that individuals are prevented from living a complete life in a separate spheres scenario, and that a better quality of living is achieved with a full range of capabilities.

Knight and Brinton (2017) note that another conceptualisation of equality is increasing in popularity, which they term ‘flexible egalitarianism’, although it is similar to the concept of ‘equality of opportunity’. This notion of gender equality is not concerned with how responsibilities are divided and instead focuses on men and women having the freedom to choose their work-family trajectories. However, approaches such as this do not challenge the primacy afforded to traditionally masculine domains in a patriarchal society and the ways in which this can affect genuine freedom of choice (see the following chapter for a more developed critique of notions of ‘choice’) and lead to asymmetrical forms of change (England, 2010). Alternatively, liberal feminism and research examining gendered divisions of labour have tended to aim explicitly towards an arrangement in which both partners undertake an equitable share of both paid and unpaid work (Doucet, 2006). This perspective has received criticism for ignoring women’s contributions in the domestic sphere and vilifying women who ‘choose’ to stay home (Freedman, 2001). In contrast to a separate spheres model of equality, both liberal and flexible

egalitarianism are anti-essentialist perspectives, which conceive of men and women as equally capable of performing both earning and caring roles, based on the notion that gender differences are socially constructed.

While the presence of multiple conceptualisations of equality is recognised, like most studies on gendered divisions of household labour, for the purposes of this thesis ‘sharing’ is understood as an equitable division between couples of both paid and unpaid work (Doucet, 2006). This could take the form of both parents working full-time (and outsourcing childcare) or a dual part-time arrangement where together the parents cover some or all of the mid-week childcare. Meanwhile, arrangements in which women take on the majority of domestic work and men specialise in earning are referred to here as ‘traditional’ arrangements<sup>4</sup>. This includes modified or 1.5 breadwinner arrangements in which women work part-time while men remain in full-time work. Partial change, with women making some moves into the work sphere but no equivalent increase in men’s participation at home, creates issues with work-family conflict. This is particularly the case for women, who are overwhelmingly balancing paid work with the majority of childcare responsibilities. Hochschild (1989) described this situation as women’s ‘dual burden’ or ‘second shift’ and found that when all paid and unpaid work was put together, dual earning women in the US were working 15 hours longer a week than their husbands. More recently, Yavorsky et al. (2015) also found that women in the US did more total work hours than men. This creates a ‘leisure gap’, in which women have less time for themselves.

The notion of a double shift has been contested by studies which find convergence in men and women’s total hours in paid and unpaid work are converging (Kan et al., 2011; Parker & Wang, 2013; Sayer, 2005; Sullivan, 2000). However, the reduction in salary experienced by women who take time out of work and reduce their hours for childcare is also an important contributor to the gender pay gap (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007; Dias et al., 2018; OECD, 2012) and puts women in a position of economic dependence, which can have important consequences in terms of marital power imbalances. The impact of scaling back or taking time out of the workplace at the arrival of children on women’s future career opportunities is substantial and self-perpetuating. As Kan

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<sup>4</sup> Although this term is used here for simplicity, it is acknowledged that ‘traditional’ is also far from an unproblematic concept. The division of paid work and caring in western society has gone through considerable changes over the centuries, due to shifts in the organisation of the family, and there has also been diversity in working patterns at any moment in time. However, the use of the term ‘traditional’ here reflects the important role that a breadwinner/homemaker arrangement played for much of the twentieth century as the *aspirational* default in the UK.

et al. (2011:247) point out, 'once a couple adopt an even slightly traditionally gendered work distribution [...] the woman subsequently accumulates human capital at a slower rate than does the man, increasing the pressure for further gendered specialization.' Furthermore, the negative impact of a traditional separate spheres approach reaches beyond women with children. The disruptive nature of Maternity Leave and the trend for mothers to reduce their working hours means that any woman of childbearing age can be considered a 'threat' to productivity and continuity in the workplace and therefore risks stigmatisation. Browne (2004) found that even at a British company with exemplary gender policy, over half of the employees interviewed stated that women in general were perceived as an 'inevitable liability'. According to Friedman (2015:148), 'the flexibility and high likelihood of mothers staying home encourages employers to engage in statistical discrimination against would-be mothers (favouring men, as they are less likely to take extended leaves), which locks women into part-time and low-status careers'.

For these reasons, this thesis argues that dual-sided change is necessary with women gaining equal representation and recognition in the work sphere, while men's participation in the domestic sphere equalises with that of women. Several scholars argue that equality between the sexes will not be possible until fathers take on a greater share of housework and childcare, therefore reducing mothers' dual-burden and allowing them to invest more in their careers (England, 2010; Friedman, 2015; Haas & O'Brien, 2010). Challenging a separate spheres approach in this way has benefits for men as well as women since long working hours and a lack of work-life balance are associated with reduced well-being (Graham & Dixon, 2014; Lunau, Bambra, Eikemo, van der Wel, & Dragano, 2014), while investing in family has been linked to an improved quality of life for fathers (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011). Some scholars even make the provocative suggestion that the gendered division of labour is more damaging for men than women:

There is a men's work/life problem and a women's work/life problem. Dropping dead from career-driven stress, or shrivelling emotionally from never seeing one's children, is a different issue from exhaustion because of the double shift, or not getting promotion because of career interruptions. (Connell, 2005:378)

There is also evidence that sharing is beneficial for children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Deutsch, Lussier, & Servis, 1993; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). Father involvement has been associated with children having greater social competence (Torres, Veríssimo, Monteiro, Ribeiro, & Santos, 2014), fewer sex role stereotypes (Carlson, 1984), fewer behavioural problems (Amato & Rivera,

1999) and improved academic achievement (Gordon, 2016). Some have questioned whether fathering itself brings particular benefits, as this suggests intrinsic gender differences in the quality of parenting (Eräranta & Moisander, 2011), and argue instead that sharing of childcare between men and women is beneficial due to the greater overall quantity of parental contact.

Despite taking on a conceptualisation of sharing as equity, this thesis engages with critiques of liberal egalitarianism that it overlooks women's contribution to the domestic sphere by highlighting the devaluation of stereotypically 'feminine' domains such as caring (England, 2010), while at the same time challenging the idea that these should be associated with or performed by women alone.

## Summary

This chapter has argued that the transition to parenthood is a crucial period to study if we want to understand how to improve gender equality, as it appears to be a catalyst for more traditional behaviour. Women tend to reduce their hours at work leading to lower earnings and a 'motherhood penalty', while men's career prospects change little when they become fathers and may even improve, resulting in a 'fatherhood premium'. The patterns of behaviour that emerge at the transition to parenthood have long-term repercussions and are responsible for many of aspects of gender inequality in society.

Given that much of the gender inequality in the labour force and at home can be traced back to inequalities in the division of paid work and childcare, it is important to find out what is happening at the transition to parenthood that leads parents into a more traditional or unstable division of labour. The next chapter considers explanations that have been put forward for a lack of sharing, despite the predominance of egalitarian attitudes and women's increased participation in the workforce.

## 2. Can't or Won't Share?

Explanations for the persistent gender inequalities outlined in the previous chapter largely fall into two camps, which can be crudely summarised as a question of whether couples '*can't*' share or '*won't*' share. This is often referred to as the 'choice versus constraint' debate (Gash, 2008; McRae, 2003b; Yerkes, 2013) and there has been extensive deliberation in the literature about the degree of freedom parents have to choose how they divide work and family responsibilities.

Analysis of 'choice versus constraint' may be understood through the theoretical lens of structure and agency. The *choice/won't* side of the debate implies parents have agency when it comes to work-family decisions. Agency is defined as 'the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to realise his or her intentions' (Hay, 2002:94). In order for agency to have occurred, an actor must have had the opportunity to behave differently and to choose between different courses of action (Giddens, 1986; Hay, 2002). Agentic explanations are based on an assumption that individuals have free will and genuine choice. There tends, therefore, to be a focus on personal preferences and beliefs in agentic theories, and these are often implied to be essential or intrinsic to the individual. The 'choice' perspective on work-family decisions is centred around Hakim's (1998, 2000, 2003b) 'preference theory' and the notion of mothers 'opting out' of work (Belkin, 2003; Boushey, 2005; Stone, 2007).

In contrast, the *constraint/can't* side of the debate is closely aligned with a structural explanation for continuing inequality. Structure is defined as the context or setting in which social events occur and acquire meaning (Hay, 2002). Structural explanations of social phenomena argue that individuals are not free to act as they wish, as their decisions are constrained by social systems. A 'can't' perspective on the persistence of gendered divisions of paid work and childcare focuses on material constraints to sharing such as earning disparities, job characteristics, work-family policies and physical disparities, as well as cultural constraints in the form of gendered ideology and organisational norms.

Although studies may not focus exclusively on structural constraints *or* individual choice, it is often the case that one is prioritised over the other. Advocates of choice-based explanations have been criticised for underplaying the importance of structural constraints and, perhaps as a consequence, there can be a reluctance in the rest of the work-family literature to seriously

engage with personal characteristics such as preference (England, 2016). Many have criticised binary theories of structure and agency and proposed alternative frameworks for understanding the two domains as an inseparable duality (Giddens, 1986; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008; Sen, 1992, 1999). These provide a theoretical lens which will be applied in this study to develop a rounded picture of the interaction between preferences and constraints in work-family decision making.

This chapter outlines choice and constraint perspectives on the persistence of gender inequality in the division of household labour and examines the limitations of each approach. The chapter then concludes by arguing that applying a *duality* perspective that combines both structural and agentic explanations for social phenomena is necessary to understand and address the persistence of gender inequalities in the work-family domain.

## Choice-Based Explanations for Lack of Sharing

One theoretical perspective on the persistence of gender inequalities at the transition to parenthood is that parents ‘won’t’ or choose not to share childcare and paid work responsibilities. This perspective argues that many individuals prefer to divide work and family along gender lines and suggests there may be benefits to traditional roles that they are reluctant to give up (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). A ‘won’t’ explanation assumes that parents are able to enact their preferences and have freedom of choice when it comes to the way they divide paid work and childcare with a partner. Although practical constraints may exist, there is an assumption that these can be overcome if the desire is strong enough and that ‘where there is a will there’s a way’ (Kilzer & Pedersen, 2011; McGill, 2014).

A key proponent of a choice-based explanation for the gendered division of work and family responsibilities is Catherine Hakim. Her controversial<sup>5</sup> ‘preference theory’ (Hakim, 1998, 2000, 2003b) states that individuals have life-long orientations towards work or family, which dictate decision making. Hakim claims that lifestyle preferences can be categorised into three types: *home-centred* individuals are those who prefer not to work and whose main priority throughout their lives are family and children. As a result, she reasons that they will make limited investments in education and paid work. In contrast, *work-centred* individuals prefer to prioritise

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Preference theory’ has provoked considerable criticism, which is discussed later in this chapter.

employment over family and will choose to delay having children or remain childless. According to Hakim, they make large investments in qualifications or training to achieve their career goals. Finally, *adaptives* are those who wish to dedicate time to both paid work and family. They choose to work part-time or flexibly to allow them to combine these two roles.

Central to Hakim's theory is her assertion that increasing opportunities have opened up to women since the late twentieth century, which have allowed them to enact their lifestyle preferences (Hakim, 2000). She claims that the UK is a good 'test-case' for 'preference theory' as the so-called availability of neo-liberal economic policies, part-time jobs, and equal opportunities allow for 'genuine choice' between an emphasis on career or family (Hakim, 2003a). As a result, lifestyle preferences are apparently the primary factor left explaining gender differences in this country (Hakim, 2003a) and agency has become more important than social structure for explaining behaviour (Hakim, 2003c:341). Discourses that reflect these assumptions have also received attention outside of academia, as seen in popular notions of modern women 'opting out' of the labour force (Belkin, 2003; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008).

Although much of Hakim's work has focused on women and their choices, 'preference theory' is described as a 'unisex theory' (Hakim, 2000, 2003b, 2007). In contrast to women, Hakim claims that men have more homogenous preferences and would be generally categorised as 'work-centred' (Hakim, 2000). The persistence of male breadwinning is therefore explained in terms of men preferring work over family life, while the fact that many women reduce their hours of paid work or leave the workforce altogether when they have children is attributed to a greater orientation towards care. According to Hakim (1991), this explains why women carry on with part-time work even when it is no longer necessary and why many claim they are 'highly satisfied' with their work despite it being low in status and pay. However, as will be discussed later in the chapter, there is limited empirical research investigating men's preferences and these interpretations have been challenged by many scholars.

'Preference theory' does not directly address the significance of increasingly egalitarian attitudes and the ways in which this contrasts with persistently traditional divisions of labour (Scott & Clery, 2013; Taylor & Scott, 2018); however, it is likely that this would be downplayed here due to Hakim's (2003c) assertion that general attitudinal survey questions, such as those included in the BSA, do not capture what respondents would do in practice. Instead, an explanation for the disparity in gender role attitudes and behaviour from the perspective of 'preference theory' is

likely to stress that, while parents may support gender equality in the division of labour in theory, this does not mean it is what they desire in their own household. This is supported somewhat by research from Steiber and Haas (2009), who find that the association between attitudes and behaviour is stronger for more personal attitudes than more general attitudes. However, the authors also point to the adaptive nature of preferences, which makes personal ideals hard to study since expressed attitudes (both general and personal) are likely to be dependent on circumstance. This is one of many issues that have been raised in relation to choice-based explanations for the gendered division of household labour, which require further consideration.

### ***Limitations of choice-based explanations***

Choice-based explanations for the persistence of gendered work-family behaviour have received considerable criticism as misogynistic, essentialist, simplistic and problematic to measure. Taking these critiques in turn, scholars have argued that a focus on individual agency can be misogynistic since it attributes the cause of gender inequality to parents themselves, and women in particular (Cotter et al., 2011; Friedman, 2015). As such, Friedman (2015:146) criticises the ‘choice’ perspective for implying that women should be responsible for the work of creating gender equality:

The micro-level “choice” perspective emphasizes individual accountability and responsibility: from this point of view, the answer to “unstalling” the gender revolution lies in individual women “leaning in” (and negotiating) rather than “opting out”

In fact, Hakim’s ‘preference theory’ suggests that moves towards equality are unnecessary, since women are depicted as happy in lower-paid and lower-status roles (see, for example, Hakim, 1991).

Critics of choice-based explanations challenge the notion of parental blame and instead point to structural constraints that limit options and prevent freedom of choice (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Ernst Stähli et al., 2009; Fagan, 2001; McRae, 2003a, b; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 2000; Yerkes, 2013). Using longitudinal data collected from a cohort of mothers in Britain and the US over 12 years, McRae (2003b) does not find empirical support for ‘preference theory’ and instead observed that women with similar work-family preferences ended up in very different situations since choices were shaped by personal, economic and social situations. She concludes that parents do not have genuine unconstrained choice with regards to work and family decisions and may therefore be unable enact their desires: ‘a woman might prefer one thing and choose to do



another, for perfectly rational reasons' (McRae, 2003a:586-587). Furthermore, Stone (2007) argues that even when women claim they have 'opted out' of work, this is a *rhetoric* of choice that women draw on to avoid the dissonance that would come with acknowledging that they are constrained in their decisions. This reflects a general criticism of agentic theories as highly descriptive, taking social behaviour at face value and using concepts that actors themselves may use to explain their behaviour (Hay, 2002).

The focus on life-long, stable work-family orientations and a lack of emphasis on structural constraints has led preference theory to be branded as essentialist (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005). Although Hakim (2007) denies this is the case, she also states there is 'solid evidence' for sex differences in the 'relative importance of family life and careers' which lead to gendered 'lifestyle preferences' (Hakim, 2006:280). She also draws upon the work of Goldberg (1993) - who claims that sex hormones, such as testosterone, are responsible for gender differences in motivation, behaviour and ambition - to argue that higher levels of competitiveness explain the tendency for men to be work-orientated (Hakim, 2000, 2007). Hakim's conjectures about the stability of preferences have also been challenged by several longitudinal studies which observe changes in work-family ideals over time (Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Hobson & Fahlen, 2009; Kaufman & White, 2014; Moen & Yu, 2000; Nolan, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2012).

Critics of primarily choice-based explanations argue that, rather than being innate and stable, preferences are malleable and may be moulded by the realms of possibility (Elster, 1983; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Leahy & Doughney, 2006). In this way, constraints not only present barriers to enacting preference, they can also shape preferences themselves (Elster, 1983:121). As well as drawing on a rhetoric of choice, we may adapt our very desires in order to avoid dissonance and the frustration of not getting what we want, what Elster (1983:121) refers to as 'adaptive preference formation' or the 'sour grapes' principle. Wong (2017) observed this process in her study of young couples' decisions about relocating for work. She found that women adapted their work-family desires to 'cope with reality by allowing them to see their constrained choices as meaningful and their unequal outcomes as desirable and justifiable' (Wong, 2017:193). Evertsson and Grunow (2016) also found evidence of adaptive preferences in situations where there was a gap between national family policies and cultural beliefs. For example, mothers in Spain preferred that children under the age of one were not in childcare, however work-orientated mothers with short leave periods justified childcare as good for children's social skills.

These mothers focused on the benefits of the options available to them to adapt their preference in light of constraint.

Another issue with choice-based explanations lies in the conceptualisation and measurement of preferences. To begin with, there is no definitive definition of 'preference' and the concept may not be understood in the same way by researchers and participants. For example, a preference could be the ideal scenario in the absence of constraint, or the most attractive scenario chosen from a range of feasible options. Preference is often interpreted as a relative term, implying a ranking of various options (Payne & Bettman, 1992). To understand a preference, it is therefore important to appreciate which alternatives are taken into account. It may also be assumed that preferences should not depend on how options are described or in what format, this is known as the principle of *invariance* (Slovic, 1995). However, much research has shown that invariance does not hold, and preferences are in fact very sensitive to the way that decisions are framed (Lichtenstein & Slovic, 1971; Tversky & Kahneman, 1986).

If preferences are understood as context dependent, then this makes it very difficult to obtain a reliable measure, since the same individual with the same preferences may make a different decision depending on the particular situation they are confronted with (Bielenski et al., 2002). Even if it were possible to clearly contextualise questions about preference, for example by using vignettes, Bielenski et al. (2002) point out that it can be hard to accurately anticipate or think through the costs and benefits of a particular context prior to actually realising a preference. For example, a parent may express a desire to spend more time with family, but reducing working hours means sacrificing income. When it came to the reality of taking a pay cut, would the desirability (and therefore preference) of spending more time with family decline? Miller's (2011a) longitudinal study of first time fathers revealed that, although most expressed a wish to be heavily involved in looking after their children prior to the birth, in later interviews men's preferences and priorities had shifted more towards work. Desirability bias is an additional concern when it comes to interpreting expressions of work-family preference whereby individuals might overstate their desire for equality to avoid social sanctions. For example, Kimmel (1993) argues that men recognise they 'need' to be more involved in domestic labour, but this does not necessarily mean they 'want' to.

Quantitative studies frequently encounter an additional problem that few data sets include questions which explicitly aim to measure preferences. As a result (or perhaps due to

assumptions about the equivalence of attitudes and preferences) many studies resort to using gender role attitude variables as a proxy for work-family preferences (for example, Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Ogolsky et al., 2014; Stertz et al., 2017; Wesolowski, 2020). This is also the case for studies which explicitly critique Hakim's theory. For example, Crompton and Lyonette (2005) and McRae (2003b) find that constraints have a more significant effect on behaviour than preference, but use gender role attitude questions such as 'do you agree that a man's job is to earn the money; a women's job is to look after the home and family' to operationalise preferences. Hakim (2003c) has taken issue with these studies, stating that they fail to adequately test 'preference theory' since attitude measures are reflective of 'public morality' rather than personal preferences:

As [Crompton and Lyonette, 2005] recognize, ISSP data concern societal norms, not personal preferences. It is thus entirely predictable that they find little or no link between the ISSP attitude items and employment profiles. This is the standard finding, leading to the long-standing but now dated view among sociologists that attitudes generally have no causal importance. It is only lifestyle preferences that are causal, and these must be measured directly. There are no proxies. Here again, the authors disregard the literature on preference theory, and its application, to draw unwarranted conclusions. (Hakim, 2007:128)

Drawing on Hofstede (1980), Hakim (2003c) argues that general attitudinal survey questions assess what is considered acceptable, good for society or 'politically correct' rather than what an individual wants for themselves (i.e. personal preferences). Hakim considers the distinction between attitudes and preferences to be 'fundamentally important', but one which is frequently overlooked (Hakim, 2003c:47). She asserts that personal preferences are linked to behaviour whereas public opinion attitudes are not. Interestingly, McRae (2003b) does include questions which explicitly measure *partners'* personal preferences ('My husband/partner prefers me not to work; My husband/partner is only happy/would be happy for me to work if it fits in with family life') and these did have a significant relationship with women's behaviour. However, these are classed by McRae as a constraint since they prevent women from enacting their own preferences. This emphasises the importance of couple-level investigation into the role of preferences in decision making and highlights the fact that preferences can drive behaviour beyond the individual level.

In her own analyses, Hakim has been criticised for basing her theorising on limited and problematic data (Crompton & Harris, 1998; Ginn et al., 1996). A further underappreciated

criticism is that, while Hakim (2000, 2003b, 2007) claims her 'preference theory' applies to both men and women, her analysis is almost exclusively focused on women's preferences and she accepts that for men the classification is incomplete (Hakim, 2000). Inherent in 'preference theory' is the assumption that men are largely work orientated, however Hakim presents no rigorous empirical data to support this. One study that does include data on men classed only half of the male respondents as 'work-centred' (Hakim, 2003b). More troubling are the results from one of the few studies to explicitly apply 'preference theory' to men (Nolan, 2009), which found heterogenous work orientations and only limited examples of work-centred preferences. Nolan (2009) also observed differences in the ways in which work orientations were manifested for men and women. Although adaptive men valued family over work and wanted to spend more time with their children, they were 'not necessarily committed to becoming involved in the practicalities of home life' (Nolan, 2009:192) and did not express clear desires for a more egalitarian arrangement. Similarly, a study investigating work-family preferences among young adults in Sweden found gender differences, but this did not support the premises of 'preference theory' since women reported stronger preferences for both work *and* having children than men at age 21 (Nilsson, Hammarström, & Strandh, 2016). This suggests that simple work-family orientations are insufficient for explaining gendered divisions of household labour.

Some studies have supported the notion that men's preferences are homogenous and work orientated. Lyness & Judiesch's (2014) cross-national analysis of self-reports and supervisors' appraisals of managers found that the work-family expectations of fathers were more universal than those of mothers (see also McMunn et al., 2015). The full-time male workers McLaughlin and Muldoon (2014) interviewed showed a limited desire to spend more time at home and Pedulla and Thébaud (2015) found that when policy constraints were removed, women were more likely to want to change their work-family arrangement, but not men. However, other studies have found that men are more likely than women to desire increased time with their family (Dermott, 2008; Kanji & Samuel, 2015; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000; Merla, 2008; Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004) and to want to reduce their hours in paid work (Bielenski et al., 2002; Moen & Yu, 2000) - although it is important to note that men generally work longer hours than women. Research suggests that young men increasingly desire equal divisions of labour (Gerson, 2010; Hook, 2006; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015) and value work-family balance (Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013). If both men and women seek work-family balance, this could lead to what (Reynolds, 2014) calls a 'preference tension', where partners' desires conflict. Mannino and Deutsch (2007) found that although women desired

more equitable divisions of household labour, their ideals were closer to equality for housework than childcare, where women wanted to do more than half. However, ‘preference theory’ assumes that partner preferences are complementary and does not account for the process by which couples negotiate their desires (Hakim, 1998, 2000, 2003b).

Campbell and van Wanrooy (2013) suggest that greater qualitative research is necessary to fully understand work-family preferences. In particular, more investigation is needed into the gendered dimension of preferences and assumptions about men’s work-family orientations (Nolan, 2009). As such, Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, and Sparrow (2013), Holter (2007) and Tracy and Rivera (2010) call urgently for new research which sheds light on how fathers perceive and manage relationships between work and family. This thesis seeks to address this gap in knowledge by conducting an in-depth and critical exploration of *both* men and women’s preferences for work and family life, as well as investigating how these interact at the couple-level.

## **Constraint-Based Explanations for Lack of Sharing**

An alternative explanation for the persistence of gendered divisions of labour following the transition to parenthood is that parents are prevented from sharing due to structural barriers. In contrast to essentialist conceptualisations of preference, which ignore the context in which decisions are made, a ‘constraints’ perspective assumes that parents (and mothers in particular) are not free to choose the way in which they divide their time between paid work and childcare. As Miller (2012:40) points out, work-family ‘choices’ are not value free or made in a vacuum. Instead, studies find that choices are shaped and limited by complex and multiple forms of structural constraint (Birkett & Forbes, 2019). The main constraints mentioned in the literature that keep fathers working long hours in a provider role and mothers responsible for the majority of care are financial resources, time availability, organisational culture, job characteristics, work-family policy and differences between men and women’s reproductive bodies (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010). Outside of this, some studies have also mentioned the significance of social networks (Hansen, 2005; Patulny, 2012) and maternal ‘gatekeeping’ (a concept that will be explained later in the chapter) (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Hauser, 2012; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015; Twamley & Schober, 2019; Williams & Chen, 2014). Gendered norms and social expectations are also

frequently referenced in the literature as barriers to greater sharing, although, as will be discussed later, there is some debate as to whether culture should be considered a structural constraint.

This section will look at the mechanisms by which these constraints contribute to the gendered division of parental leave, paid work and childcare following the transition to parenthood and consider related empirical data. Few studies have been published to date on why there is a limited take up of the UK's new SPL policy (notable exceptions are Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019), however there is a substantial literature offering structural explanations for the take up of older parental leave policies and the persistence of a traditional division of paid work and childcare following parents' return from leave.

## **Policy constraints**

Government policies are one of the most explicit forms of constraint on any form of decision making since these set out what is legally permitted and forbidden. Although this whole chapter is concerned with explanations for how parents make use of parental leave, the very nature of work-family policies can pose barriers to take up and influence the time spent in paid and unpaid work (Gershuny & Sullivan, 2003; Hook, 2006; Sayer & Gornick, 2012; Steiber & Haas, 2009).

Parents-to-be must decide how much, if any, leave they take from work around the time of the birth. However, these 'choices' are restricted by eligibility criteria and differing levels of leave and pay entitlements, which depend on the individual's employment status and whether they are classed as the 'primary' parent. Understanding entitlements can be complex (Birkett & Forbes, 2019) and parents must complete various administrative procedures within strict deadlines in order to claim parental leave and pay. In the UK, low statutory pay means taking leave is associated with a considerable reduction in income for many (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). Another key constraint to sharing paid work and childcare responsibilities is that access to parental leave is highly gendered. All women in the UK are entitled to take up to 12 months off work when they have a child and most can access some form of pay during this period, although statutory rates are low<sup>6</sup>. Some employers, particularly those in the public sector, offer more

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<sup>6</sup> All employed mothers-to-be in the UK are entitled to up to 52 weeks of Maternity Leave regardless of how long they have been in their current job. Although women do not have to take the full entitlement to leave, they are obliged to take off at least two weeks following the birth. Employed mothers and some agency workers can access Maternity Pay during this period, however this is subject to eligibility criteria, including a minimum of 26 weeks of continuous service with the same employer by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> week before the due date. Statutory entitlements grant six weeks at 90 per cent of weekly earnings but reduce considerably after this, with 33 weeks at statutory pay

generous maternity packages to retain female employees (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019:131), but almost half of employers simply offered the minimum pay required by law in 2016 (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2016). Fathers, meanwhile, are entitled to a much shorter 2-week period of dedicated leave and eligibility requirements are stricter<sup>7</sup>. Kaufman (2018) points out that this disparity in length of leave leads to differences in whether employers cover workload with a replacement member of staff. She found that employers expected and planned for women's longer periods of leave, but cover was not provided for shorter periods of Paternity Leave. Men therefore had more incentive to return to work sooner to avoid the build-up of unfinished tasks or guilt from offloading on their colleagues.

What is more, requirements around length of service and the need to be classed as an 'employee' mean that self-employed fathers and many of those in precarious employment, such as zero-hours contracts and agency work, are not eligible for any Statutory Paternity Leave or Pay. According to analysis of the UK Labour Force Survey by the TUC, almost a quarter of fathers did not qualify for paid Paternity Leave in 2018 (Trades Union Congress, 2019). As such, many fathers have been found to use annual leave around the time of birth instead, either because they are not entitled to Paternity Leave or because this is better remunerated (Kaufman, 2018; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019).

The introduction of SPL in 2015 increased opportunities for sharing work-family responsibilities somewhat<sup>8</sup>, however take up has been relatively low. Research on the reasons for this is limited

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(£148.68 a week at the time of writing or 90% of weekly pay if this is lower) and no statutory pay offered in the remaining 13 weeks. In order to take Maternity Leave, mothers-to-be must also notify their employer when they intend to take leave at least 15 weeks before their due date and provide proof of pregnancy at least 21 days before the start of leave to claim Maternity Pay. If pregnant women do not qualify for Maternity Pay - because they are self-employed, unemployed or an agency worker, for example - they may be entitled to Maternity Allowance. This is less generous than Maternity Pay and works on a scale, from statutory rates for 39 weeks to £27 a week (at the time of writing) for 14 weeks, depending on employment status and national insurance contributions.

<sup>7</sup> Introduced in 2003, Paternity Leave entitles the baby's father or mother's partner to one or two weeks off work following the birth, but they must have been working for the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> week before the mother's due date. Leave must be taken in one go after the child is born and must end within 56 days of the birth. Most who are eligible for leave are also entitled to Statutory Paternity Pay, which is set at the same rate as the latter weeks of Statutory Maternity Pay, although employers may enhance this. As with Maternity Leave, claiming Paternity Leave and Pay requires fathers to comply with administrative deadlines and notify their employer when they intend to take leave at least 15 weeks before the due date.

<sup>8</sup> Shared Parental Leave (SPL) gives parents the option to divide up to 50 weeks of leave between them. It can be taken all in one go or in blocks separated by periods of work by both parents at the same time or separately. Shared Parental Pay (ShPP) is paid at the same rate and for the same length of time as Statutory Maternity Pay, except that the first 6 weeks are at the lower weekly rate rather than 90% of full salary. The eligibility criteria and rules for

(Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019), but suggests that this could be, in part at least, due to the nature of the policy itself. Crucially, fathers do not have any independent entitlement to SPL and must rely on their partner ending Maternity Leave early to access more than the two weeks of dedicated Paternity Leave. Research suggests that many fathers fear their partner would be reluctant to give up their entitlement (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019), which could put them off using the policy. Studies have also found that SPL may be too complex for parents-to-be and their employers to understand fully (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Hacothen et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2018), suggesting that awareness of rights could be a barrier to take up. Hacothen et al. (2018) tested whether simplified information about SPL improves parents' understanding of the legislation and found that highlighting that SPL is a legal entitlement 'reduced the perceived effort related to taking up the scheme' (Hacothen et al., 2018:8). However, the impact was limited and behavioural messages did not increase interest in either SPL or flexible working overall. In addition to issues of complexity, although SPL means men and women can now access almost the same statutory leave entitlements (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019: 132), the first six weeks of Shared Parental Pay are at lower statutory rates than Maternity Leave and, despite court cases, employers are not legally obliged to enhance SPL payments to the same levels as Maternity Leave. This can disincentivise sharing since statutory payment levels are low in the UK, meaning that enhancements by employers may be 'more relevant for understanding parental decisions around who in the couple takes which amounts of leave' (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019: 132). Similarly, Birkett and Forbes (2019) found that couples are more likely to take SPL when the father's workplace enhances Shared Parental Pay. This suggests that parents are constrained from making use of SPL due to low levels of remuneration.

Comparisons with countries where fathers have longer periods of 'use it or lose it' leave (e.g. Norway's daddy quota), suggest that dedicated entitlements are more effective for encouraging sharing than policies where parents can choose how to divide leave (Brandth & Kvande, 2018). In the UK, Twamley and Schober (2019) also found that individual entitlements to leave for fathers increased reported take-up intentions. This could be due to dedicated parental leave policies legitimising leave taking and providing a sense of entitlement, particularly for men (Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Kvande, 2009). Studies also show that if Maternity Leave entitlements

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claiming SPL and ShPP are too complex to outline in full here, but they involve both partners meeting work and pay criteria and are different depending on which parent is making use of the policy. In order for a couple to make use of SPL, the mother must end her Maternity Leave and Pay (or Allowance) early, effectively transferring her leave rights to her partner.



are too generous this can have a detrimental effect on gender equality, as women are disincentivised from returning to work leading to greater responsibility for domestic work and lower accumulation of career resources (Budig et al., 2012; Friedman, 2015; Grunow & Veltkamp, 2016; Hook, 2006; Misra, Budig, & Boeckmann, 2011). As such, the UK parental leave offering does little to incentivise sharing during the transition to parenthood and presents a number of constraints to equal divisions of paid work and childcare.

Other policy domains can also constrain longer-term decisions about divisions of employment and childcare, including working-hour regulations, state childcare provision and rights to flexible working. Those who work long hours are most likely to struggle to combine paid work and childcare. The EU 'working time directive' indicates that employees cannot legally work more than 48 hours a week on average and this was adopted by the UK in 1998. However, there are exceptions in some types of job and the UK was the first EU country to offer an opt out from this regulation if employees have 'chosen' to work longer hours. Financial worries and concerns about career progression are likely to impinge on so-called 'choices' about long working hours (Kvande, 2009), while self-employed workers are not bound by these working time regulations at all.

Additionally, although the UK government offers some forms of bursary and tax relief, there is no universal state childcare provision and, in comparison to other European countries, private care is very costly and over-subscribed (De Henau et al., 2007). This makes childcare inaccessible and unaffordable for many working parents in the UK (Harding & Cottel, 2018; Kan et al., 2011). As a result, parents may have to adapt their working hours to cover mid-week care. Since 2014, all employees in the UK have had the right to request flexible working as long as they have been working for the same employer for at least 26 weeks. This can include flexible stop and start times, working from home or part-time contracts. However, this legislation only gives employees the right to request, and employers may refuse an application as long as they have a 'good business reason' for doing so. Furthermore, a number of studies find that workers do not necessarily use flexibility even if offered, especially for men with highly autonomous roles in professional firms (Kvande, 2009; Lott & Chung, 2016). In these cases, it appears that organisational culture, employment demands and gender norms outweigh the impact of family-friendly policy entitlements.

## **Organisational constraints**

A popular theory for explaining household divisions of labour points to the constraints of partners' relative time availability (Baxter et al., 2008; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). It proposes that the partner spending the longest hours in paid work will do the least amount of domestic and care work. Therefore, if parents are required to work long hours and cannot access flexible working arrangements, they may face barriers to spending time on childcare. As we have seen, the nature of employment has a considerable effect on working hours, with self-employed and agency workers, for example, unable to access many work-family provisions and some industries exempt from working time restrictions. Additionally, certain professions are more suited to flexible working than others. As has been made clear in the recent pandemic, retail and industrial sectors tend to have more rigid working patterns, while those in knowledge-based industries are more likely to be able to work from home or adapt their hours (Kvande, 2009).

However, as mentioned above, even when workers are given greater freedom this does not necessarily lead to more family time (Kanji & Samuel, 2015), since organisational culture and pressures at work can make employees feel unable to take up work-family policies and flexible working arrangements (Allard, Haas, & Hwang, 2011; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; McDonald, Brown, & Bradley, 2005; Moore, 2020). For example, Kvande (2009) investigated knowledge-based firms in Norway offering considerable degrees of flexibility and generous leave packages, but found that their emphasis on teamwork and a culture of exceeding client expectations led employees to feel like there was always too much work to be done and that they would be letting down colleagues if they took leave. The ideal worker is generally portrayed as competitive, willing to work long hours and free of external commitments (Acker, 1990; Gascoigne, Parry, & Buchanan, 2015; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Williams, 2000). This assumes that someone else (typically a mother) is available to take on family responsibilities and hinders an egalitarian division of household responsibilities (Acker, 1990; Risman, 2017). As such, models of work are based on the traditional 'masculine breadwinner' model (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Hochschild, Garey, & Hansen, 2011; Williams, 2000) and are at odds with an egalitarian division of household labour.

Social and organisational norms that equate long working hours with productivity and commitment mean that making use of organisational work-family provisions, such as flexible working and parental leave, can be associated with penalties and stigma (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Moen & Yu, 2000; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Studies find that part-time workers are perceived as less committed and are given fewer responsibilities and opportunities for career

progression as a result (Blackwell, 2001; Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan, & Stewart, 2013; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Nightingale, 2018). Since women make up the majority of part-time workers, these penalties and stigma are disproportionality experienced by female workers (Boeckmann, Misra, & Budig, 2014; Coltrane et al., 2013; Dias et al., 2018; OECD, 2018). Browne's (2004) investigation of gender equality at the BBC highlights that this stigma can be far reaching, since *all* female workers of child-bearing age were perceived as 'risky' due to the increased potential for them to take parental leave or work flexibly. This study illustrates how the association of work-family provisions with female employees can contribute to gender discrimination in recruitment and promotion. As a result, fears of career sanctions make many women wary of using work-family provisions and organisational assumptions about productivity mean that accessing flexible arrangements can be difficult (Bell & Bryson, 2005; Brescoll, Glass, & Sedlovskaya, 2013; Tipping et al., 2012). However, some studies suggests that men receive even less support at work in accommodating caring responsibilities than women (Burnett et al., 2013; Hill, 2005; McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014) and may experience greater penalties and stigma for making use of work-family provisions (Allen & Russell, 1999; Holter, 2007; Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003).

Gendered assumptions about the use of work-family provisions mean that even where policies are officially available to both men and women, it may be implied or assumed that these are intended only for mothers (Burnett et al., 2013; Caracciolo di Torella, 2015; McDonald et al., 2005; Tracy & Rivera, 2010). Qualitative research by Yarwood and Locke (2016) indicates that managerial expectations regarding work-family balance are highly gendered. One mother found herself responsible for childcare emergencies, even though she had exactly the same job as her husband, due to expectations from his (female) supervisor that a mother should be responsible for these issues. Burnett et al. (2013) point out that fathers are often a 'ghost in the organisational machine' and men's caring responsibilities are frequently overlooked. Consequently, research has found that fathers are particularly uncomfortable using work-family provisions and fear being penalised or considered as less committed (Blithe, 2015; McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014; Thomas & Linstead, 2002; Vandello et al., 2013).

There is evidence to suggest that these fears are justified. Vandello et al. (2013) found that flexible workers are perceived as less committed, less deserving of a raise and less masculine. This suggests that stigmatization of flexible workers may be more severe for men, as they are also considered gender deviant (Allen & Russell, 1999; Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003). In response to this, studies indicate that men tend to use less visible means of accommodating family

responsibilities by making use of other entitlements, such as holiday or sick leave (Gregory & Milner, 2012). Meanwhile, managers and co-workers can mediate parents' access to flexibility (Brescoll et al., 2013; Burnett et al., 2013; Gerstel & Clawson, 2015; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). While unsympathetic colleagues can prevent work-family provision from being used, a compassionate line manager can assist with informal arrangements even when official work-family policies do not exist (Allard et al., 2011; Gatrell, 2005).

It is important to note that some studies challenge the notion that flexible working is associated with career penalties. The fourth Work-Life Balance Survey (Tipping et al., 2012) found nearly half of all respondents reported no career sanctions for flexible working themselves and only 2% claimed that their career had been damaged. The largest reported negative impact of flexible working was a lower salary. Meanwhile, some challenge the idea that sanctions are worse for men, for example Coltrane et al. (2013) found that penalties for privileging family over work applied equally for men and women. In addition, Kaufman (2018) points out that organisational barriers to fathers sharing parental leave are often *perceived* constraints, since few men ask for extended leave in practice. Brescoll et al. (2013) found that, although men were less likely to think they would be granted flexible working, in practice managers were more likely to grant flexibility to male workers than to women. However, both these studies indicate that perceptions of negative reactions are an important deterrent to changing working patterns for childcare reasons.

As explained at the outset of this section, constraints to sharing associated with organisations and employment are generally based on the assumption that more time spent at work means less time for household responsibilities. However, Craig (2006) observes that gender differences in involvement of mothers and fathers in childcare apply even when women work full-time, noting that 'fathers' limited care goes beyond that which could be attributed to limited time availability' (2006:276). Studies supporting a time availability perspective tend to focus on housework and there is evidence to suggest that this does not hold in relation to the division of childcare (Sullivan, 2013). Research looking at this question in more detail finds that time availability is important in understanding routine childcare, but not recreational types of care (Keizer, 2015; McGill, 2014). This can be explained by the fact that routine childcare activities, such as physical care, have more similarities to household chores and must be done at set times of day; while recreational activities, such as playing, can be more easily fitted in around other commitments and could be considered more enjoyable. This suggests that organisational constraints can only provide a partial explanation for gendered divisions of labour.

## Financial constraints

In her study of barriers to men's take-up of parental leave in the UK, Kaufman (2018:316) found that financial concerns were mentioned by almost all participants and were 'by far the largest factor in parents' decisions regarding Paternity Leave'. Similarly, the Scottish fathers interviewed by Koslowski and Kadar-Satat (2019) cited financial reasons for not making use of extended leave opportunities since this would result in a significant drop in income and they tended to be the higher earner in their household. The authors' quantitative analysis of a larger dataset supports this affordability explanation, since only 43% of lower earning fathers took leave following their child's birth compared to 90% of fathers in the top income quartile. More recent research on take up of SPL identifies three financial reasons for couples not sharing leave: 1) pay on shared leave is generally low, 2) mothers stand to lose enhanced pay if they transfer to SPL and 3) men still tend to earn more than women on average (Birkett & Forbes, 2019). Taken together, these factors mean SPL is often perceived as uneconomical. In the only other academic study looking at reasons for low take-up of this policy in the UK, Twamley and Schober (2019) also found that 'doesn't make financial sense' was the most common reason that mothers gave for dismissing SPL.

Following parental leave, finances also appear to be important in decisions about longer term divisions of labour, since state childcare is not available in the UK and private care can cost the equivalent of an individual's salary (De Henau et al., 2007; Harding & Cottel, 2018). In this way, those with higher incomes are more able to outsource care and therefore maintain equal divisions of paid work (Kühhirt, 2011; Schober, 2013b). Women's income seems to be particularly important in decisions about outsourcing care (Gupta, 2007; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Schober, 2013a). In their analysis of UK time use data, Sullivan and Gershuny (2013) found that hours of outsourcing were only associated with child's age and wife's employment status, suggesting that outsourcing is used specifically as a substitute for women's domestic work. The expense of childcare means couples may decide that it makes more financial sense for the lower earning spouse to leave work and take on childcare instead. This is the principle of New Home Economist explanations for the household division of labour, which assume that couples make reasoned decisions at the transition to parenthood to maximise overall income (Becker, 1981). According to this rational choice theory, specialisation is the most efficient approach to the division of household responsibilities. The parent with the highest earning potential should specialise in breadwinning while the lower earning partner is best placed to specialise in domestic work.

An alternative economic model argues that the spouse with higher earnings has more bargaining power when it comes to household decision making and can therefore avoid undesirable domestic work (Blood & Wolfe, 1965; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). Despite these differences in reasoning, which are examined in more depth in the following chapter, both rational choice and bargaining theories highlight the importance of the gender pay gap and men's propensity to be the higher earner as a key barrier to equal divisions of labour. This is supported by cross-national studies which find women who earn more relative to their husbands prior to having children are more likely to remain in full-time work following the transition to parenthood than equal or lower earners (Kanji, 2011; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Wood, Kil, & Marynissen, 2018).

However, two UK studies (Andrew et al., 2021; Schober, 2013b) do not find a significant relationship between pre-birth relative earnings and paid work hours after the transition to parenthood. Furthermore, the gender pay gap is relatively small between non-parents and widens considerably following the arrival of children, suggesting that differences in pay are largely a *result* of the gendered transition to parenthood as well as a possible cause (Dias et al., 2018). Furthermore, on average women are still responsible for the majority of household labour, even when they are the main earner (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Grunow et al., 2012; Lyonette & Crompton, 2014; Wood et al., 2018). Counterintuitively, some studies actually find that the highest earning women do *more* domestic work than their lower earning counterparts, and attribute this to a form of compensation for transgressing gender norms in the division of paid work (Bertrand, Kamenica, & Pan, 2015; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Brines, 1994). Others have challenged this theory, however, and find a significant negative relationship between wage share and contribution to unpaid work (for example, Esping-Andersen et al., 2013). Nevertheless, there is evidence that couples make plans for a traditional division of labour even when they do not make financial 'sense', such as female breadwinners taking long periods of unpaid leave (Evertsson & Grunow, 2016). Kaufman (2018) found that lower earning men still justified their shorter leave periods as an economic decision and points out that finances can provide a convenient way of rationalising leave decisions in the face of gendered norms around parenting and work.

It is worth emphasising here that decisions about the allocation of earning responsibilities are underscored by assumptions about the necessity of each spouse's career (Pixley, 2008a). Even in dual earning heterosexual couples it may be that the wife is not considered to have the same responsibility to provide as the husband and her career may be considered optional or less

valuable (Kroska, 2008; Warren, 2007). A study by Steil and Weltman (1991) found that when men were higher earners, this increased the value the couple placed on his career. However, when women were higher earners, this merely resulted in her career being considered of *equal* value. Grunow and Veltkamp (2016) argue that money earned by men and women has different social meanings, with women's money often considered as 'supplementary'. This is reflected in the findings, mentioned above, that women's income is more important in determining whether couples outsource childcare (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2013) and suggests that men and women's income is not treated in the same way. This fundamentally challenges a rational choice perspective and suggests that financial constraints provide an incomplete explanation for traditional divisions of labour.

### **Physical constraints**

A gendered division of paid work and childcare responsibilities has often been justified as natural and inevitable (Deutsch, 1999). Since pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding can only be undertaken by the birth mother, this places barriers on their partners' involvement and gives women's needs and caring capacities prominence in this process (McKay & Doucet, 2010; Reimann, 1997). For mothers, the transition to parenthood is a physically demanding experience (Braidotti, 1989; Rossi, 1977). Recovery from childbirth and World Health Organisation recommendations of a minimum of 6 months breastfeeding require time, and studies find that both men and women consider mothers to be more entitled to parental leave for this reason (Brandth & Kvande, 2018). Physical differences are therefore often cited as a constraint to more equal divisions of household labour at the transition to parenthood (e.g. Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Dermott, 2008; Faircloth, 2020; Kaufman, 2018; Miller, 2011b; Rose et al., 2015; Twamley & Schober, 2019).

However, according to a social constructionist approach, a distinction can be made between biological motherhood (pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding) and socially constructed or 'political' motherhood, which 'is all the other care work mothers do in connection with children (including economic provision, physical and psychological care)' and is defined by 'prevailing practices and ideas' that change over time (Ellingsæter, 1999:45). This distinction highlights that there are many aspects of care that are not tied to biology and could arguably be taken on by someone other than the birth mother. Ellingsæter (1999:44) proposes that even elements of biological motherhood can be socially constructed and 'the boundaries between nature and culture are not fixed'. For example, expectations about how long it is necessary to breastfeed

have changed in recent years and there is international variation in recommendations. Furthermore, many women struggle to breastfeed or choose not to. In these cases, physical barriers to sharing are more limited and disparities between mothers and fathers in their capacity to provide routine care are diminished. In fact, desire for increased paternal involvement was given as a primary reason for mothers not breastfeeding in one UK study (Earle, 2000).

As babies grow up and become less physically reliant on their mother, theoretically biological constraints to sharing decrease. However, popular cultural assumptions about women's 'natural' caring capacities continue to place constraints on sharing household responsibilities. For example, rational choice explanations for the gendered division of household labour assume that the physical aspects of childcare make women better suited to specialising in the domestic sphere and men in the work sphere over the long term (Becker, 1981). The notion of a so-called 'maternal instinct' is also frequently cited as a rationale for traditional divisions of labour, particularly in parents' own accounts (Miller, 2005, 2011b; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Rose et al., 2015). This supposes that mothers are naturally equipped to care for their children, are intrinsically better at parenting and are able to form a stronger bond with their child (Hrdy, 1999).

However, Miller (2005, 2011b) problematizes the concept of a maternal instinct by demonstrating that childcare is a skill that all new parents must learn. Her interviews with new parents reveal that many women feel unable to talk about the problems they encounter when looking after a new-born due to feelings of inadequacy associated with social norms for mothers to appear competent. Men, on the other hand, do not appear to be exposed to the same pressures and Miller (2011b) finds they are more likely to admit to feeling out of their depth or bored. This undermines essentialist ideas of mothers being naturally better at parenting. Mothers may seem to enjoy childcare more than men and appear to be more competent, but Miller (2011b) argues that this is due to social pressures and expectations rather than biological differences. Similarly, Deutsch (1999) argues that 'anatomy is not destiny' and demonstrates how fathers are able to develop just as strong bonds with their children as mothers (see also Doucet, 2006). Nonetheless, qualitative research with new parents demonstrates the powerful influence of notions of a maternal instinct and the ways in which this shapes caring behaviours and the division of household responsibilities. This points to the importance of socially constructed and gendered norms of 'good' motherhood in shaping decision making about divisions of paid work and care.



## **Normative constraints**

Feminist scholars have argued that cultural norms surrounding appropriate gendered parenting roles pose substantial constraint to how paid work and childcare are divided within households. Some propose that gender ideology (individual levels of support for traditional or egalitarian work-family divisions) is actually better at explaining divisions of household labour than other constraints such as finances and time availability (Bittman et al., 2003; Budig et al., 2012; Kaufman, 2018; Kühhirt, 2011; McKay & Doucet, 2010; Yarwood & Locke, 2016). Normative constraints relating to gender ideology come from socially constructed differences between norms of masculinity and femininity, which contrast with the physical constraints resulting from biological differences between males and females outlined above (Haslanger, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of 'doing gender' argues that we continually seek to perform and display gender norms in order to affirm our sex and demonstrate that we are a successful male or female. Research finds that it is difficult to stand out as different and challenge norms, particularly as those who transgress norms may face social sanctions (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). Gender norms therefore provide a form of invisible constraint, which shapes decision making and prevents freedom of choice. As such, they can explain why traditional behaviour persists even when circumstances may appear more favourable to sharing or reversing gender roles.

Gender norms are socialised from birth and lay out 'appropriate' conduct for men and women (Risman, 2004). Gershuny et al. (2005) claim that habits and skills learnt in childhood, and the meanings attributed to these behaviours, are hard to change even when there is an intention. This means that socialisation into gender norms present long-lasting and persistent constraints on behaviour. Research also finds that we are more likely to learn from and compare ourselves (and others) to those of the same sex (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; England, 2010; Hochschild, 1989). This leads to gendered expectations being passed on down the generations and also affects notions of fairness in the division of household labour. For example, even if a wife does far more domestic work than her husband, she may consider his contribution to be substantial and the division of labour to be fair if he does more than other men she knows (Hochschild, 1989; Kluwer et al., 2002).

It is important to note, however, that gender norms represent ideals or stereotypes, which do not necessarily reflect reality. Scholars point out that many forms of masculinities and femininities exist, although some are more valued than others (Hearn & Collinson, 1994). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) notably set out a hierarchy of gender in which a hyper form of heterosexual, unemotional and aggressive masculinity is privileged in patriarchal society while femininity and more feminine masculinities are subordinated. In the same vein, England (2010) points to the devaluation of ‘the feminine’ in society and argues that domains become less respected, remunerated and visible if they are associated with women or femininity. This can disincentivise men and women from taking on stereotypically feminine tasks, such as childcare.

Research suggests that gender norms are particularly powerful in relation to the family and parenthood (Katz-Wise et al., 2010). Traditionally, a mother’s role has been associated with the domestic sphere and childrearing (Lupton, 2000). Yet, since gender norms are socially constructed, notions of ‘good’ motherhood change over time and there is an increasing expectation for women with children to be a wage earner (Garey, 1999; Sayer & Gornick, 2012). Nonetheless, pressures for women to prioritise family over paid work remain strong (Yarwood & Locke, 2016). In fact, some have argued that expectations of mothering have *grown* following women’s increased representation in the labour force. Hays’ (1996) concept of intensive mothering proposes that women feel obliged to make up for being a ‘bad’ working mother by putting their children’s well-being above all else. Intensive mothering norms provide powerful expectations for women of what ‘good mothering’ should look like (Budds et al., 2016). As we have seen, even when women are higher earners, they are likely to do more domestic work than their male partners and some studies find these women actually do a higher proportion than average (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994). Scholars have explained these counter-intuitive findings as a form of compensatory behaviour for transgressing gender norms and a way of avoiding conflict:

[G]ender construction theorists explain this curvilinear relationship as couples’ attempts to reduce the threat to the husbands’ masculinity and to reaffirm the wives’ femininity in the face of their “masculine” income-generating behaviour (Mannino & Deutsch, 2007:310; see also Zipp, Prohaska, & Bemiller, 2004)

‘Good’ fathering, meanwhile, has traditionally been associated with providing financially and breadwinning is a key marker of masculinity (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). However, scholars argue that economic decline, the rise in feminism and women’s entrance into the work force have also led to changes in fathering norms, with a

‘culture shift’ towards greater domesticity (Bettany, Kerrane, & Hogg, 2014; Dermott, 2008; Kimmel, 1993; O’Brien, 2005; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Sullivan, Billari, & Altintas, 2014). Fathers are increasingly expected to be ‘accessible and nurturing as well as economically supportive to their children’ (O’Brien, 2005:1). Dermott (2008:23) compares this ‘new’ or ‘involved’ fathering with the ‘emotionally distant and authoritarian fatherhood of old’ and points out that there are now commonplace expectations that fathers will take at least two weeks’ Paternity Leave and be present at the birth. In contrast to the notion of ‘maternal instinct’, involved fathering draws attention to the practical side of parenting tasks and the importance of acquiring skills (Miller, 2005, 2011b). As such, the concept of involved fathering challenges assumptions that mothering and fathering are intrinsically different and requires a discourse of parenting as learnt rather than innate (Eräranta & Moisander, 2011; Miller, 2011b). This social constructionist perspective therefore suggests that fathers are equally capable of caring for and about their children as mothers, if they are given the opportunity.

However, the persistent gender inequalities in the division of caring responsibilities outlined in the previous chapter, suggest that the ‘New Man’ ideal has not been achieved. Despite the prevalence of dual-earning families and fathers who wish to be more involved in their children's upbringing, breadwinning continues to be the norm for most men and the male role of provider and breadwinner is resistant to change (Kanji & Samuel, 2015; Kimmel, 1993). Ideas of new and involved fathering may therefore be overestimated and largely superficial (Dermott, 2008). The ‘New Man’ phenomenon could arguably be more about changes in the *perception* of men and fatherhood rather than necessarily reflecting changes in fathering practice. Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003:52) suggest that ‘the notion of the new father is probably best thought of as a cultural ideal: normative claims are being made about how contemporary men as fathers *should* behave’ (emphasis added).

In contrast, mothering ideals seem harder to ignore. Societal expectations for mothers to prioritise intensive and selfless forms of parenting appear stronger and more demanding than pressures to be an involved father (Kilzer & Pedersen, 2011; Miller, 2011b; Yarwood & Locke, 2016). This impedes women’s control over the amount of childcare they do and how much they feel able to delegate to a spouse (Kilzer & Pedersen, 2011), as well as creating greater conflict between family and work (Yarwood & Locke, 2016). Uneven parenting expectations also place responsibility on women that childcare is done ‘right’ even when they are not the one caring for the child (Budds et al., 2016). Kilzer and Pedersen (2011) found that mothers worried that their

spouses would not do as good a job and practiced what is referred to as ‘maternal gatekeeping’ as a result. Allen and Hawkins (1999:204) describe maternal gatekeeping as ‘overt and covert ways that wives manage, exclude, or choose for their husbands levels and types of paternal participation in family work’. A number of studies have observed that ambivalence among women to share aspects of childcare can prevent men from learning parenting skills and impede sharing (Hauser, 2012; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015; Twamley & Schober, 2019; Williams & Chen, 2014). Allen and Hawkins (1999) propose that this ambivalence may be due to mothering being a key source of identity and satisfaction for many women, as well as a source of external validation. Mothers may also be reluctant to give up control of the domestic sphere since this is one of the few domains where women wield social power (Dermott, 2008).

Research suggests that the restrictions to sharing posed by gender ideologies could be declining, however. Recent surveys on social attitudes in Britain suggest that traditional gender norms are increasingly rejected. As noted at the beginning of this thesis, in 1987, 48% percent of respondents agreed that ‘a man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family’, while in 2017 this had reduced to only 8% (Taylor & Scott, 2018). This could imply that gender norms are becoming less of a barrier to equal sharing of paid work and childcare. However, other measures of gender ideology show less dramatic changes. For example, although there are moves away from a consensus that mothers of pre-school children should stay at home (64% of respondents to the BSA survey in 1989 compared to 33% in 2017), most of this shift occurred prior to 2012 and only 7% of respondents in 2017 thought mothers of pre-school children should work full-time (Taylor & Scott, 2018). Most respondents in 2017 (38%) were in favour of mothers working part-time and 20% chose no option at all (up from 6% in 1989) (Taylor & Scott, 2018). This suggests that full-time working for mothers is still stigmatised and less favourably perceived than women who stay home, but more respondents may be agnostic about mothers’ working patterns.

As with other constraints, gender ideology is unlikely to provide a complete explanation for the persistence of traditional behaviour. This chapter now moves on to consider the limitations of a constraints approach in more depth.

## ***Limitations of constraints-based explanations***

One of the first limitations of a structural understanding of inequalities is a lack of clarity on what constitutes a structural constraint. Hays (1994) notes that the meaning of structure changes in the literature depending on what it is contrasted with and she argues there is a tendency to think in terms of dichotomies rather than dualities, with structure often presented in opposition to concepts such as agency and culture. As such there is a debate as to whether cultural constraints such as gender ideology and organisational culture should be considered as a part of structure. This is what Hays (1994) refers to as ‘the sticky problem of culture’. Cultural norms have been presented as nebulous and intuitive forms of pressure which are distinctive from the tangible barriers provided by other forms of constraint discussed in this chapter, such as finances, policy and working hours (McRae, 2003b; Wood et al., 2018). Social structure can be understood as ‘external, publicly-accessible, and open to scientific observation’ whereas culture is ‘internal, hidden, and requiring interpretation’ (Hays, 1994:58).

However, Hays (1994:69) also notes that culture can be interpreted as a constituent of structure, arguing that:

cultural systems of knowledge, values, and practices, just like systems of relations between differently located social groups, are recurrently reproduced far more often than they are transformed; they must be considered as a form of social structure, a pattern of social life that tends to remain stable over time.

As seen in the introduction to this chapter, Hay (2002) defines structure as the *context or setting* in which social events occur and acquire meaning. In the context of decisions at the transition to parenthood, cultural constraints such as gender ideology arguably form an intrinsic part of the context and setting in which new parents decide how to divide paid work and childcare. Following this definition, then, culture could be considered a form of structural constraint (see, for example, Grunow & Veltkamp, 2016). However, within this framework, many scholars have still found it necessary to make distinctions between cultural and so-called ‘material’ constraints (Risman, 2017). In the case of work-family decision making, material constraints could include finances, employment, policy and biology. This suggests that, whether conceptualised as a part of structure or not, some constraints are more visible and concrete than others, and may operate differently to those which consist of less tangible social sanctions and norms (McRae, 2003b; Wood et al., 2018). Risman (2017) proposes a dynamic model of the gender structure, in which material and cultural constraints work together, but she claims that more empirical research is needed to know *how* these material and cultural processes interact at different levels. Other

research suggests that culture could mediate material constraints; for example, Budig et al. (2012) find that national gender ideologies affect whether parental leave and public childcare provision increase women's earnings. This thesis takes on board this limitation, distinguishing between material and cultural constraints to consider how they work together and how they interact with preferences to affect decision making at the transition to parenthood.

Another limitation of constraints-based explanations for the gendered division of household labour is that they tend to ignore the mechanisms around parental desires. As discussed in relation to the limitations of a choice perspective, many scholars have pointed out that preferences are strongly influenced by structural context and adapt to constraint (Crompton & Harris, 1998; Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Elster, 1983; Ernst Stähli et al., 2009; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; McRae, 2003a, b; Yerkes, 2013). However, there is limited understanding about how this adaptation operates in practice when it comes to parental decisions about the division of household labour. Studies looking at practical constraints often imply that parents want to share but are prevented, however these assumptions about parental preference are not always substantiated (see, for example, Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019:132). Are the majority of couples keen to share, but held back by practical constraints? If so, then presumably reducing those barriers should lead to more egalitarian divisions of labour. If couples are not keen to share, is this simply due to adaptive preferences (i.e. barriers make sharing less appealing)? Can we be sure that if these barriers were removed then a desire for sharing would increase or are additional strategies needed to address the desirability of dividing paid work and childcare responsibilities? Research suggests that even if practical constraints are limited or removed, behaviour remains traditional. For example, higher earning, full-time working women still do more domestic work on average than men (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Craig, 2006; Grunow et al., 2012; Lyonette & Crompton, 2014) and mothers take the majority of parental leave even in countries which offer generous gender neutral policies (Budig et al., 2012; Niemistö, Hearn, Kehn, & Tuori, 2021). This suggests that greater understanding is needed about how individuals respond to constraint and the ways in which this interacts with their goals and desires.

There is an implicit assumption in many studies (particularly those using quantitative methods) that individuals respond to constraints in the same way. For example, rational choice explanations based on the higher earner doing least domestic labour assume that couples will routinely prioritise maximising household level income over their own. The fact that the lower earning spouse will be prepared to relinquish their career to maximise overall earnings and the

higher earning spouse to prioritise work over family is also taken for granted at times. However, Giddens (1986:179) argues that focusing purely on structural constraints as an explanation for behaviour does not reflect lived experiences and instead ‘produces a form of reified discourse not true to the real characteristics of human agents’. Qualitative studies suggest that decisions are not made in rational terms since some individuals are considered more entitled to invest in work or family than others and these distinctions are highly gendered (Grunow & Veltkamp, 2016; Kroska, 2008; Warren, 2007). Giddens (1986:176) points out that individual interactions and experiences with structure and culture are variable and that ‘one person’s constraint is another’s enabling’. He posits that individual motives interact with structural constraints and implies that people may be able to resist or overcome barriers:

Structural constraints do not operate independently of the motives and reasons that agents have for what they do. They cannot be compared with the effect of, say, an earthquake which destroys a town and its inhabitants without their in any way being able to do anything about it. (1986:181)

Instead, Giddens (1986:175) argues that sanctions are very rarely entirely impossible to resist and so most sanctions ‘no matter how oppressive or comprehensive’ require ‘some kind of acquiescence from those subject to them’.

Examples of parents overcoming barriers in this way to achieve egalitarian divisions of labour are present in the literature and suggest that those with a strong desire find ‘ways to make things work’ (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Kilzer & Pedersen, 2011; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; Wiesmann, 2010; Wong, 2017). For instance, McGill (2014) argues that fathers who work long hours and want to spend time with their children use strategies such as reducing leisure time to achieve this. However, purely structural perspectives are unable to account for the possibility for individual resistance and can thereby promote a view of passivity. This is associated with a tension in interpreting the division of household labour from a feminist perspective. An agentic perspective in which individuals are assumed to have freedom of choice risks blaming women for experiences of inequality and ignores the multitude of constraints that shape decision making (Cotter et al., 2011; Friedman, 2015). However, a perspective that focuses on structural explanations for inequality risks depicting women as ‘helpless victims of circumstances’ who are unable to ‘[shape] their own biographies and [make] pragmatic decisions on the basis of their calculations of risk and opportunity’ (Glover, 2002; cited in Ransome, 2007).

This conflict between choice and constraint perspectives could be specific to women since there appears to be less reluctance to apply an agentic lens to men's behaviour and, reflecting theories of patriarchy (e.g. Walby, 1990), some suggest that men have more freedom of choice or sway when it comes to work-family decision making (Dermott, 2008; Haas & O'Brien, 2010; Kaufman & Bernhardt, 2015; McRae, 2003b; Twamley, 2021). For example, numerous studies claim that fathers engage in more of the fun and enjoyable aspects of childcare suggesting that they have a choice over which domestic activities they participate in based on their personal preferences (Craig, 2006; Gatrell, 2007; Rose et al., 2015). Greater investigation is needed into the ways in which the choice versus constraint dichotomy is gendered, as well as what makes some parents more motivated to overcome barriers than others. In order to answer these questions, an approach which can comfortably incorporate nuanced understandings of both structural constraints *and* individual agency is needed.

## Combining Structure and Agency

This chapter has shown that explanations for gendered divisions of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood are often reduced to a dichotomy between choice and constraint or structure and agency (Hays, 1994), particularly in relation to mothers' labour market activity (Gash, 2008; McRae, 2003b; Yerkes, 2013). Yet, as we have seen, both 'can't' and 'won't' explanations for the persistence of gender inequality in the division of labour are incomplete. In the case of choice-based explanations, the ways in which context and structural constraints reduce available options and shape preferences are overlooked. Meanwhile, explanations that focus on constraint imply that individuals respond passively to barriers and do not account for variation in goals or desires. A limitation of both perspectives, therefore, is a lack of theory about the relationship *between* constraints and individual preferences. Following England (2016), Risman (2017) and Ransome (2007), this thesis argues that a more holistic approach is necessary to explain the persistence of a gendered division of labour, and draws on the work of theorists who conceptualise structure and agency as a duality (Giddens, 1986; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008; Sen, 1992, 1999) to consider the ways in which the two domains interact with one another.

A common endeavour in the social sciences has been to distinguish whether structure or agency have more of an effect on a particular action. For example, Kelley (1967) proposes three criteria for determining whether an action is due to the environment (as opposed to the person): *consensus* – when an individual's behaviour is similar to that of others in the same situation,



*distinctiveness* – when an individual’s behaviour changes in different contexts, and *consistency* – when an individual’s behaviour changes over time. However, some theorists have argued that it is impossible to separate the effects of these two domains.

Giddens (1986) claims that it is reductionist either to assume that humans have freedom of choice and society is ‘the plastic creation of human subjects’ (1986:26) or that all human activity can be explained by social norms or structural constraints without regard for individual reasoning. As such, he puts forward an alternative ‘theory of structuration’, which challenges the commonplace dichotomy between structure and agency and claims instead that there is a ‘duality’ in which the actions of individuals unintentionally reinforce (or potentially shift) our social structure as well as being guided by it. He describes human beings as ‘purposive agents’ who are able to rationalise their actions and are constantly aware (albeit unconsciously) of the context in which their actions take place. However, he clarifies that ‘reasons’, ‘motives’ and ‘intentions’ are not formed in a vacuum and must be understood within their social context and the expectations of others. Giddens (1986) understands motivations as the ‘wants’ which prompt action. They constitute only the potential for action and, unlike reasons for action or intentions to act, actors are often unaware of them. This perspective therefore offers a theoretical lens for interpreting how preferences and constraints interact in decision making at the transition to parenthood, and draws attention to motivations for action and the context in which these are formed.

Responding to criticisms that Giddens perceives of agents in de-gendered terms (Jamieson, 1999), as noted above, this thesis explicitly interrogates the gendered nature of agency and its interaction with structure.

Heckhausen and Heckhausen (2008) also argue that it is futile to try and decide whether a person or the situation has more influence over an action. They propose a more concrete way of conceptualising the interaction between preferences and constraints, as well as their relationship with ‘motivation’. In this model actions are conceived as dependent on expectations of achievement, which are based on the person's assessment of the situation, as well as the value the person places on that achievement (‘expectancy-value theory’). In this way, both preferences and situational constraints combine to create ‘motivational tendencies’, which go on to guide behaviour. Echoing Giddens (1986), Heckhausen and Heckhausen (2008:4) argue that motives can be implicit (individual personality differences, skills, habits etc.) or explicit (self-expressed goals) and that these do not necessarily align: ‘people's conscious impressions of themselves and their motives are not necessarily congruent with their unconscious preferences and habits’.

According to this theory, motivations shape individual perceptions of a situation: ‘depending on the individual motive orientation, situations that appear similar to outside observers may seem radically different to the individual involved’ (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008:6). This perspective thereby incorporates the possibility of differing responses to constraints and attributes this to different goals and motivations.

What does a duality perspective look like when applied to understanding the gendered division of household labour? Finch (1989) and Dyck (1990) have demonstrated that Giddens’ structuration theory can be effectively applied to understand family practices and everyday lives within a wider social setting. Meanwhile, Gatrell (2005), Tracy and Rivera (2010) and Kirby and Krone (2002) adopt this lens specifically in relation to parenting and paid work to show how gender can be both revealed and disrupted. Heckhausen and Heckhausen’s (2008) theory of motivation has yet to be used in this context, however another theory encompassing elements of duality that has been employed by some work-family researchers is Sen’s Capabilities Framework (1992, 1999). Like other theories of duality, this conceptualises agency as embedded in context and proposes that action consists of choice under constraints. It also acknowledges that agency is situated and therefore varies according to resources and means. The focus on capabilities brings in an appreciation of whether individuals are *able* to convert these resources into action and provides another way of distinguishing between material and cultural constraints. Here material constraints are represented as ‘means to achieve’ and this is distinguished from ‘freedom to achieve’, which takes into account both personal factors (such as skills and knowledge) and social factors (such as norms and power relations). Kurowska (2018) gives an example of how this framework can be applied to family policy, indicating that Paternity Leave provides a *means* for gender equality, but social norms around appropriate parenting roles for men and women reduce *capabilities* and *freedom* to achieve this outcome (see also Hobson & Fahlen, 2009; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019).

However, while work-family issues have been explored through the lens of duality, there are still gaps in understanding. Although the capabilities framework acknowledges preferences and includes them in models, how they are formed and the way in which they interact with means and freedoms to achieve is not clearly defined. Heckhausen and Heckhausen’s (2008) motivation theory infers that preferences and constraints mutually interact, but it is unclear exactly what this interaction looks like in the context of work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood. While much research has pointed to the ways in which context shapes work-family

desires, in the form of adaptive preferences, the question of how work-family desires affect responses to constraint has not been addressed.

According to England (2016), social scientists can be wary of engaging with concepts of choice and preference due to the significant limitations of existing theories and the fear of being branded essentialist or misogynistic. However, adopting a dualist perspective allows this thesis to address the valid criticisms of choice-based explanations for the gendered division of labour by rejecting the essentialist notion of fixed, innate preferences and bringing in understandings of structural constraint to consider the context in which desires are formed and modified (Hobson & Fahlen, 2009). The notion of desires as adaptive and sensitive to perceived alternatives (Elster, 1983; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Leahy & Doughney, 2006) is taken into account by exploring (and challenging) the reasoning behind stated preferences in in-depth, qualitative interviews. This allows for an understanding of the dynamics around preference formation, which are important for enacting change and avoiding victim blaming (England, 2016). Drawing on Jessop (1996), Hay (2002:131-2) provides a useful alternative framework for interpreting preference from a duality perspective, which will be adopted in this analysis:

Different actors in similar material circumstances (exposed perhaps to different influences and experiences) will construct their interests and preferences differently. In a similar manner, the same actors will review, revise and reform their perceived interests and preferences over time (as material circumstances and ideational influences change). Accordingly, in monitoring the consequences (both intended and unintended) of their actions, actors may come to modify, revise or reject their chosen means to realise their intentions as, indeed, they may also come to modify, revise, or reject their original intentions and the conception of interest upon which they were predicated

In this way, the concept of ‘work-family preferences’ is reclaimed and the lack of theorising about the mechanisms of parental desires in constraints-based explanations can be addressed. This thesis explores the interaction between preferences and constraints to fill gaps in understanding about the process by which parental desires are shaped by circumstances in work-family decision making; the conditions under which individuals overcome constraint; the relationship between attitudes and preferences; and the extent to which freedom of choice and experiences of constraint are gendered – in other words, do men have more agency in work-family decision making than women?

In order to understand how preferences and constraints interact to shape divisions of household responsibilities at the transition to parenthood, it is necessary to look at the micro-processes by which individuals come together as couples to make decisions about parental leave, paid work and childcare. This thesis now moves on, therefore, to consider the literature on work-family decision making.

# 3. Dynamics of Decision Making

The gendered and unequal outcomes of decisions about the household division of work and care made at the transition to parenthood are well documented and have been summarised in Chapter 1. Furthermore, much research has focused on theoretical explanations for the persistence of a gendered division of labour and the factors that influence decisions about the division of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood, what Hacothen et al. (2018) refer to as the *drivers* of decision making. These were discussed in Chapter 2 (see, for example, Barrow, 1998; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Kaufman, 2018; Miller, 2005, 2011b; O'Brien & Lubold, 2015; Twamley & Schober, 2019). However, what has received less attention, particularly in the quantitative literature (Warren, 2011), is what Hacothen et al. (2018) refer to as the *dynamics* of work-family decision making - how these important decisions are made in practice and the 'explicit decision-making strategies that couples use to reach a division of labor.' (Carlson & Hans, 2020:208; see also Miller, 2012; Wiesmann, Boeije, van Doorne-Huiskes, & den Dulk, 2008). How are factors such as constraints and preferences negotiated in practice? What do couples do if preferences conflict? How do couples go about discussing these topics - who initiates discussion and who leads the decision-making process? Which options do couples consider and how do they choose between them? Do couples calculate the financial impact of different options and, if so, how and when?

Although empirical data is limited, theoretical explanations for the persistence of gender inequality at home and in the workplace are dependent on many *assumptions* about the process by which decisions are made (Carlson & Hans, 2020; Garcia, 2015). For example, relative resources explanations state that the partner with the highest income has more bargaining power in the division of household labour, which infers that active negotiation takes place within couples and that men and women's income is given equal weighting (Blood & Wolfe, 1965; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). Rational choice perspectives are based on an assumption that couples calculate the relative costs of various work-family scenarios and choose the option that leads to the best financial outcome for the whole family (Becker, 1981). 'Preference theory' assumes that decisions about the household division of labour are guided by long-term, fixed orientations to work or family (Hakim, 1998, 2000, 2003b), and explanations that highlight how material or

cultural constraints direct decision making tend to imply that individuals respond to these constraints in the same way (Giddens, 1986).

In order to determine whether these theoretical explanations are convincing, and to better understand what leads to gendered divisions of household labour, we need to know how work-care decisions are made in practice and how choices and constraints interact in this process. This chapter therefore considers the limited in-depth research that has been conducted on work-family decision making and points to the gaps in knowledge that this thesis seeks to address. It begins by considering theories of decision making that are particular to the context of work and family, and goes on to discuss how couple decision-making processes can be understood as theoretically distinct from other collaborative or individual forms of decision making. Finally, the chapter concludes with a close summary of the scant research on couple-level decision-making processes at the transition to parenthood.

## **Work-Family Decision Making**

Historically, research on decision-making dynamics or processes have come from the fields of psychology and economics, and have tended to focus on how individuals come to rational decisions (see Fischhoff & Broomell, 2020). Applying these theories to the domain of work and family, Greenhaus and Powell (2003, 2016; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010, 2012) define decision making as ‘a choice between alternative courses of action’ (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016:27) and put forward two different approaches to decision making: the *logic of consequences* occurs when ‘decision-makers estimate the consequences of different courses of action and select the alternative that is most likely to lead to a preferred outcome’ (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016:27). However, the authors point out that, in practice, decision makers work from incomplete information, since they will not necessarily be aware of all the possible options to choose from or all the potential consequences of making a decision (bounded awareness). As such, Greenhaus and Powell propose that individuals may instead adopt the *logic of appropriateness* in which they ‘establish and follow rules that they see as appropriate to their identities’ (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016:28). The authors state that work-family identities are revealed through questions such as ‘who am I as an employee’ and ‘who am I as a family member’, with potential answers including being ‘a good breadwinner’ or a ‘nurturer’. They argue that personal identities have a consequence on how individuals ‘frame’ decisions. For example, when faced with a decision in

the work domain, the strength of someone's family identity will affect whether they consider the effect on the family domain (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).

However, Greenhaus and Powell do not provide a full explanation as to where these identities originate, nor do they critically evaluate the ways in which these may reinforce gender inequalities. Instead, echoing choice-based perspectives outlined in the previous chapter, they imply that individuals have freedom to 'choose' how much they identify with work or family and to what extent they prioritise one or the other - stating, for example, that 'it would be difficult for employees to make sound work-family decisions if they were not aware of the roles and activities with which they identify most strongly and least strongly' (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016:98). This overlooks theories of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and the important cultural and structural pressures, outlined in the previous chapter, which reinforce gendered expectations and identities. Although the authors acknowledge the existence of gendered norms that encourage women to prioritise the family sphere and men to prioritise the work sphere in their later work (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016), the connection with identity is not explicitly made and there is an assumption that what the individual 'truly values' or prefers can be separated from external gender role stereotypes (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016:131). Understandings of work-family decision making that explicitly adopt a gendered lens are therefore needed.

These gender norms and the fact that women have traditionally been responsible for combining work and family means that research on work-family decision making has often been restricted to female participants (Valentine, 1999). For example, Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) use mixed methods to explore how mothers of pre-schoolers in the UK make decisions about childcare and paid work. Like Greenhaus and Powell (2016), they highlight the importance of personal identities ('what that particular mother felt right doing because of who she was'), but found that women were constrained in their decision making by both internal and external factors (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004:461). In contrast to essentialist interpretations, they also found that neither identities nor behaviour were fixed. In response to constraints, women made changes to their circumstances and/or aspects of their identities. Behaviour and identities also interacted with each other, with interpretations of external constraints depending on women's identities.

Another example of a female-focused study is Mannino and Deutsch (2007), which investigates women's assertiveness in work-family negotiations and whether they demand change in a clear

and direct manner. It finds that relative income, working hours and gender ideology do not explain divisions of childcare, but that more assertive women were more likely to achieve the division of childcare they desired. The impact of women demanding change was also demonstrated by the observation that higher earning mothers did divide childcare more equally when assertiveness was controlled for, although the authors point out that not all attempts to make a change were successful. Women were more assertive in seeking an equal division of housework than childcare, which the authors suggest is due to the higher intrinsic rewards associated with childcare than household chores. This study therefore highlights the importance of explicitly stating one's desires in order to achieve an egalitarian division of labour, but reveals that women may be less concerned about unequal divisions of childcare than housework. Mannino and Deutsch (2007:321) claim that, for this reason, discussion may be more important in relation to childcare than housework since '[m]en may think they owe their high earning wives more housework without any discussion' whereas whether women want help with childcare may be more ambiguous. However, the authors state that future research should include men to better understand this.

In response to the emphasis on women in work-family research, a growing literature centred on fathers has emerged. This has included research looking at how men make decisions about the division of paid work and childcare. Brandth and Kvande (2002) studied men's decisions about using Paternity Leave in Norway and the intersection with class. They found that because working-class fathers had less expectations of gender equality, they experienced less conflict and reported less reflexivity about combining work and family. Among middle-class fathers, however, they observed more dilemmas attached to choices not to take leave. This suggests that awareness and expectations may be important when it comes to use of Paternity Leave and that deliberation occurs only if there appear to be alternatives to choose from. However, this study implies that men's decision-making takes place in isolation and does not explore the ways in which partners may have influenced or responded to parental leave decisions.

Even those studies that incorporate both men and women's perspectives do not necessarily investigate explicitly at the couple-level. Tina Miller has conducted several in-depth longitudinal studies on women's (2005, 2017a) and men's (2011b, 2017a) experiences of having children, which include consideration of work-family decisions. These studies provide a comprehensive overview of the differences between men and women's experiences of parenthood in the UK. However, as the decision-making process itself has not been the key focus in this research and



mothers' and fathers' experiences are examined independently, these volumes do not offer a couple perspective on the dynamics of work-family decision making. A later paper (Miller, 2012) focuses more closely on the decision-making process and finds that women express a lot of guilt in relation to decision making processes whereas men were able to talk more freely about their desires and decision making, since they are less confined by normative pressures relating to work and family. However, here again the use of independent male and female samples does not allow for investigation of decision making from the perspective of both members of a cohabiting couple.

Although individuals do make work-family decisions alone (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016), investigation at the couple level is important since decision making is likely to have reciprocal effects on each partner and may occur as a result of collaborative processes. Furthermore, studies find that there are considerable discrepancies in how spouses perceive situations, including disagreement over who makes decisions and whose opinion is more important (Valentine, 1999). For these reasons, Barnett and Lundgren (1998) argue that models based on individual decision making are not adequate for explaining the behaviour of dual-earning couples. According to Valentine (1999:67), interviews with couples enable us to 'expose the negotiated and contested nature of household relationships, and so contribute to the development of more complex and nuanced understandings of gender relations in a domestic context'. However, Kaufman and Bernhardt (2015) claim there is limited knowledge about how couples arrive at decisions about work and family life and Emslie and Hunt (2009) have emphasized that more qualitative research looking at couples is needed. This study seeks to fill that gap by interviewing both members of cohabiting couples about their work-family decision-making processes.

## **Couple-Level Decision Making**

Some theories that seek to explain how work-family decisions are negotiated as a couple follow rational models common in the literature on individual decision making. For example, Greenhaus and Powell's (2016) 'logic of consequences' is reflected in the New Home Economists' proposal that couples choose the division of household labour which leads to optimal financial outcomes for the family unit (Becker, 1981). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, this rational choice theory has been challenged by a bargaining perspective, which argues that couples do not necessarily work together to achieve common goals (Blood &

Wolfe, 1965; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). This perspective puts forward an alternative model of couple decision making based on power relations. It proposes that the partner with the highest income or earning potential has greater bargaining power in negotiations over the division of household labour since they have the least to lose in the case of relationship breakdown.

However, those looking at dyadic decision-making processes in more depth challenge the principles of relative resources and rational choice theories, since they propose that active negotiation and analysis are rare when couples make decisions. In their analysis of collaborative decision making, Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) point out that much of the research in this area is focused on organisations. They argue that couples are less likely than employees to make 'rational' decisions, due to the differences between organisational and family contexts. Decision making in organisations tends to be formalised and orientated towards tangible objectives, collaboration, and efficiency - for example, through meetings and agenda items. However, in an intimate couple relationship, decision making could be considered a necessary by-product rather than a primary task or goal, and may even be at odds with the aims of preserving a romantic relationship. Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989:201) argue that employees have the benefit of tackling decisions during set working hours, 'when their mental facilities are most lucid', whereas couples face numerous daily decisions that must be confronted at all hours and often 'when their energy level is lowest, that is, early or late in the day'. Decision making in a family context is therefore frequently 'fitted in' around other activities and may occur spontaneously in response to external catalysts.

While organisational models present decision making as 'direct, explicit, organised and proactive', Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989:180) propose that couple decisions tend to be 'indirect, implicit, impulsive and incremental'. They may be based on silent arrangements (decisions reached without verbal agreement) and couples may only have retrospective awareness that decision making occurred. The incremental nature of couple decision making has been described as a process of 'muddling through' (Kirchler, 1993), especially when understanding of the decision is 'unclear, incomplete, or fragmented' (Sillars and Kalbflesch 1989:186). As such, Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) claim that rational choice theories such as those of the new home economists do not reflect practice.

This theory was investigated in a paper by Wiesmann et al. (2008), which looks specifically at daily decision making in a work-family context. Applying Sillars and Kalbflesch's (1989) concepts

of explicit and implicit decision making, this qualitative study explored how Dutch couples make daily decisions about the division of paid work and housework in the formative period of their relationship (from moving in together to first pregnancy). The authors were surprised to find that the young, modern, highly educated couples they interviewed did not report explicit discussions about the division of household chores and instead relied on silent agreements, taking for granted that tasks would be shared. Partners said they had had vague ideas about how they would divide household labour before moving in together, which formed 'guiding principles or motives', but they did not have 'clear-cut or prescriptive notions about how to share or divide paid and unpaid work on a daily basis' (Wiesmann et al., 2008:349). As such, a lack of explicit discussion was found to be associated with more traditional divisions of household labour. Couples were not necessarily aware of this connection, however, and some inconsistencies in logic and 'reverse causal reasoning' were observed in the interviews. For example, one couple explained that they had decided the wife would reduce her working hours so that she could spend more time on domestic work, however later in the interview they rationalised that the woman took on a larger share of household chores because of her shorter working hours.

More recent research from the US by Bass (2015) adds further weight to the claim that the division of household labour is not something that is negotiated prior to the transition to parenthood. Couples discussed intentions to have children, but not how parenting and work responsibilities would be divided. Implicit couple decision making was also observed in research from Sweden with couples at different stages of their lives and relationships. Evertsson and Nyman (2009) found that discussion about work-family decisions and negotiation was unusual in couple relationships and therefore call for more studies that 'question the tacit assumption that the everyday lives of modern couples are characterized by negotiations' (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009:54). Bargaining models of work-family decision making have also been challenged by quantitative analysis. Although decision-making processes were not investigated explicitly, analysis of UK Panel data by Schober (2013b) found that relative resources theories did not explain the division of housework. The author suggests that this could be an indication that bargaining does not take place in couple relationships: '[t]he non-significance of women's relative resources may suggest that British women do not bargain with their partner for a more equal division of labour' (Schober, 2013b:83)

Given the implicit nature of couple decision making, it can be hard to define and conceptualise what counts as negotiation and decision making in a family context. Some argue that decision

making, by its very nature, must be conscious and explicit (Etzioni, 1968), however Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) argue that conscious and unconscious decision making can be hard to separate in a couple context since this often takes place alongside or as a by-product of other activities. Wiesmann et al. (2008:343) therefore define couple decision making as ‘the ongoing dynamic process in which couples with similar or dissimilar preferences arrive at certain outcomes, either implicitly or explicitly’. However, Evertsson and Nyman (2009:36) caution that too wide a definition can become unmeaningful since ‘it is difficult to determine where negotiation starts and ends or how explicit or implicit it has to be before it ceases to be negotiation’. They argue that without boundaries on definitions of decision making, theories can conclude no more than ‘the organization of family life is a result of social interaction’ (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009:36). They therefore propose that three criteria must be present for negotiation to have occurred: 1) a perception of disagreement or tensions between partners’ preferences, opinions or interests, 2) more than one possible option to choose from, and 3) some common interests and mutual benefit in reaching an agreement. If these criteria are not met, then the authors argue that negotiation is not possible or necessary.

However, although perhaps not ‘negotiation’ as such, purposeful and explicit deliberation about decision making could still be present without a perception of disagreement or tension. After all, how are couples to know whether their preferences, opinions and interests align without discussion? Since this study is concerned with how couples approach preferences and constraints in decision making more generally, it will draw on Wiesmann et al.’s (2008) definition above of an ongoing dynamic process of negotiating preferences to arrive at outcomes, but with a specific focus on explicit decision making since this appears to be key in explaining whether household responsibilities are divided equally and should mitigate against the pitfalls of ‘conceptual stretching’ (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009). High levels of negotiation will be identified according to level of discussion, adopting Garcia’s (2015:106) notion of ‘purposeful dialogue by both partners over an extended period of time’.

### ***Explaining a lack of explicit decision making***

Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) suggest that incremental decision making and a process of ‘muddling through’ could be due to the subjective nature of decisions made by couples (compared to those made by organisations, for example). Greenhaus and Powell (2016) point out that in the context of work-family decisions there are often no ‘right’ answers and what counts as an ‘optimal outcome’ can therefore only be assessed subjectively. Couples may seek to

improve their well-being, for example, but what well-being looks like depends on the couple's particular priorities (for example, maximising income, children's physical or emotional health, the couple relationship etc.). This may lead to incomplete decision making or avoidance of discussion since subjective criteria are harder to agree and converge on (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989).

Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989:198) also propose that couples avoid reasoned decision making and intentional deliberation due to limited resources (such as time and expertise) and in order to maintain harmony:

[B]ecause of the pressing need to dispense with decisions quickly and move on to other business, couples may be more concerned with lowering immediate tensions to a comfortable level than with comprehensively analyzing decision options.

They argue that implicit decision making is the baseline for couples since it is the easiest and most passive option. Evertsson and Nyman (2009) support the notion that the use of implicit negotiation and decision-making short cuts is due to limited resources and add that the aim of couple relationships may be to get through daily life rather than 'critically reflect upon it':

[C]ouples seldom experience the reason, room, space or need to negotiate. This can in part be understood from the perspective of seeing everyday life as a matter of practical coordination, i.e. as something we strive to master rather than something we try to change or critically reflect upon. (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009:33)

Explicit decision making requires an active approach and the willingness to risk conflict if couples disagree. This may be common according to research on house buying decisions by Park (1982), which found that partners could easily misinterpret each other's decision plans, incorrectly assuming that they were similar. Avoidance of conflict was noted as a reason for avoiding explicit discussion in Wiesmann et al.'s (2008) study of young Dutch couples' daily decision making. They found that couples avoided bringing up the division of household chores since rational bargaining on these topics was perceived as 'incompatible with a romantic relationship' (Wiesmann et al., 2008:358). Related to this, in their study of women's strategies for dividing household labour, Mannino and Deutsch (2007) found that women who earned a higher proportion of family income achieved a more equal division of childcare and housework, as would be expected according to relative resources theory, but only if they were assertive in speaking out and demanding change. Challenging a bargaining perspective, the authors observed that levels of assertiveness were lower among higher earning women, thus mediating the effect

of income. The authors suggest that a combination of increased earning power and assertiveness in a female partner could be too much of a challenge to hegemonic notions of male breadwinning and so these women may avoid speaking up for fear of conflict. This study therefore highlights the importance of persistent gender norms over income.

Existing studies offer conflicting findings about the gendered dynamics of work-family decision making. Wiesmann et al. (2008) found that, although couples avoided work-family negotiations to keep the peace, when frustration was voiced it tended to be women who initiated discussion. In contrast, research by Garcia (2015) on couple decision making following redundancy observed that male partners were more proactive or assertive in overturning unequal divisions of labour. These men were able to lead decision making using implicit strategies such as 'withdrawing from negotiation attempts or acting without consulting their partners' (Garcia, 2015:8). The lack of female assertiveness observed in this study echoes the findings of Mannino and Deutsch (2007) and could be linked to the life stage or context explored here. Pixley (2008a:5) suggests that in couple decisions relating to careers, men's preferences tend to be prioritised: 'In important decisions, couples tend to choose options in which the husband remains the primary breadwinner and, when the spouses disagree, to choose the option that the husband prefers'. These conflicting findings suggest that more research is required on couple decision making dynamics.

In some cases, explicit deliberation over the division of labour may be perceived as unnecessary rather than something to be avoided. For example, one reason given by Wiesmann et al. (2008) for a lack of explicit discussion between couples is that women struggled to give over responsibility for household tasks due to concerns that it would not be done 'properly' - what the authors refer to as 'meddling' - and as a result these women found themselves in a manager role. This made explicit negotiation as a couple unnecessary since decisions were effectively made unilaterally and men were asked to perform tasks in an ad-hoc way. In this way, lack of negotiation could be associated with maternal gatekeeping practices, outlined in the previous chapter (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Lack of deliberation can also occur due to a perceived absence of viable options, either through limited awareness or due to external constraints (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). When considering possible scenarios, Greenhaus and Powell suggest that decision makers are likely to contemplate the 'most obvious or familiar courses of action' first

and only move to more 'novel or creative courses of action' if initial options are deemed unfavourable (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016:89). If couples are in agreement and share ideals then this may be another reason for not considering alternatives. In this context, implicit decision making does not necessarily constitute a negative (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989) and explicit decision making may occur due to a lack of mutual understanding or the presence of conflict.

Evertsson and Nyman (2009) argue that the gendered nature of routines and rituals make a lack of explicit negotiation unsurprising since the division of labour appears self-evident and natural. They use the concepts of 'routine' and 'ritual' to explain how couples navigate daily life on 'auto-pilot'. The routines and rituals observed in the Swedish couples they interviewed tended to be based on traditional notions of women as nurturers and men as breadwinners, although the couples themselves described decisions as being based on preferences, skills and practicality. In contrast, going against the grain and sharing household labour equally would require greater negotiation of tasks since there are no guidelines for dictating the division of labour (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009). In support of this theory, egalitarian couples have been found to do more explicit decision making, while open and constructive negotiation has been associated with greater sharing of household labour (Garcia, 2015; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007). This is observed in research by Wiesmann et al. (2008), which found that some participants had more explicit decision-making styles, but these tended to be women who had clearly formed ideas about the division of household labour and had demanded that potential partners should be prepared to share equally. The authors conclude that 'couples who wish to achieve equality need to engage in explicit decision-making, at least until they have developed an egalitarian routine' (Wiesmann et al., 2008:357).

Explanations based on routines and rituals due to limited resources also suggest that explicit and reasoned decision making is more likely when considerable change prompts reevaluation of the status quo or in circumstances where the consequences of decisions are of a significant magnitude and the costs of not discussing outweigh the risks (Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). Radcliffe and Cassell's (2014) distinction between decisions made regularly on a daily basis and less frequent 'anchoring' decisions, which shape the overall work-family approach taken by a couple, can help identify the types of decisions that may lead to more explicit negotiation. Anchoring decisions are often made at key transitional stages. The present study investigates anchoring decisions made at the birth of a first child, such as decisions about whether or not to return to work and whether to work part-time or full-time. According to the

theory that explicit negotiation increases in periods of change and when decisions have major consequences, we might assume that these anchoring decisions will be made in a more explicit manner.

This theory is supported by Wiesmann et al. (2008) who found that when couples started to think about having a children they began to speak more plainly about the division of household labour and explicitly planned childcare arrangements. External pressures from employers or nursery waiting lists pushed some couples into making these plans, however participants were reported as finding it hard to imagine what life would be like once the child came along. The authors note that although explicit discussion about work-family decisions increased, these discussions did not focus on the division of housework. Evertsson and Nyman (2009:42) also found that explicit decision making occurred in 'situations in which the taken-for-granted character of everyday life was questioned, and no given or established routines or rituals applied or existed'. Although they point out that not all decisions relating to fundamental life changes ended up 'on the negotiating table'.

While these studies tend to support the assumption that explicit negotiation occurs for anchoring decisions but not daily decisions, other studies looking specifically at anchoring decisions have also found decision making to be largely implicit in these cases. For example, Rijken and Knijn (2009) found a lack of discussion in their study looking at the anchoring decision of whether to have a child. Even disagreement between partners did not necessarily lead to discussion, and external factors (such as the impact on education) were not always consciously taken into account in the decision-making process. Garcia (2015) also found lack of explicit negotiation in anchoring decisions about redistribution of household labour following redundancy. Here, unconscious, implicit decision making and a lack of discussion were prevalent despite the upheaval and change in daily routine. The lack of clarity about the presence of active negotiation relating to anchoring decisions indicates that this is an area which requires further exploration.

As seen in Chapter 1, the transition to parenthood is a period of considerable change and decisions made at this time have a substantial long-term impact on the division of household responsibilities and gender (in)equalities. According to the resource- and routine- based theories of decision-making discussed above (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989), we might therefore expect this to be a time at which explicit discussion and negotiation takes place. Rational choice and bargaining explanations for the persistence of traditional behaviour



occurring at the transition to parenthood also assume that active negotiation takes place between couples in order to allocate the division of labour. However, research looking in depth at how couples make work-family anchoring decisions at the transition to parenthood is limited (Carlson & Hans, 2020).

## **Negotiating Work and Childcare at the Transition to Parenthood**

Research suggests that prior to children, career plans and transitions to work are perceived as a joint project. Domene et al. (2012) found evidence of turn-taking, mutual support of goals and both partners' careers being prioritised in couple decisions among young adults. But does this change after children arrive? The answer to this question remains elusive and Domene et al. (2012:23) claims more research is needed. While a growing body of literature has looked at work-life decision making from the perspective of couples, the majority of these studies focus on the day-to-day division of household tasks (e.g. Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Yarwood & Locke, 2016) rather than major anchoring decisions, such as those made at the transition to parenthood. Radcliffe and Cassell (2014) have interviewed cohabiting couples about decision making in cases of work-life conflict using a combination of diaries and interviews. This research identified crucial differences between daily and 'anchoring' decisions, however the focus was primarily on daily decisions and the study did not look specifically at anchoring decisions made during the transition to parenthood. Other studies have focused on different anchoring decision catalysts such as leaving university (Domene et al., 2012) or redundancy (Garcia, 2015).

This thesis addresses the gap in research by investigating the dynamics of how couples make anchoring decisions about the division of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood. A review of the literature uncovered only a handful of other in-depth studies that look specifically at this question and include both members of a couple. Almost half of these were published since research for this thesis began and only a couple focus on the UK context<sup>9</sup>. While international studies provide important context and correspond closely to the present research, they are not able to speak to how couples make work-family decisions in the particular

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<sup>9</sup> There are many studies that investigate experiences at the transition to parenthood, work-family intentions and factors affecting the division of household labour, which may touch on lived experiences of decision making. However, since an explicit understanding of how work-family decisions are made has been noted as lacking in the literature, this review is concerned specifically with studies whose primary aim is to explore couple-level decision-making processes and dynamics during this period of transition.

cultural and policy context of the UK. The rest of this chapter will consider each of these studies in turn.

In their study of Canadian couples' decisions about the division of parental leave, McKay and Doucet (2010) found that mothers tended to want to take the bulk or entirety of parental leave available. While fathers also expressed desires to take leave and care for their child, for the most part they acquiesced to their partners' preferences and mothers took the lead in decision making. As a result, McKay and Doucet (2010) describe decision making as a process of collaboration rather than negotiation. This contrasts with the lack of 'assertiveness' observed among the women in research by Mannino and Deutsch (2007) and Garcia (2015), which suggests that men have more agency in work-family decision making. These findings instead echo those of Wiesmann et al. (2008) and Wong (2017) where men deferred to their wives on decisions about the division of labour.

Investigating rationalisations for the division of childcare more generally, Rose et al. (2015) interviewed eleven Australian couples who had recently had a baby to find out how they justified unequal divisions of labour in the first year of their child's life. They found taken for granted assumptions among the couples that fathers' paid work should take precedence over care, including implicit understandings that fathers required more sleep due to paid work responsibilities. Couples reported that this was not something they had discussed:

For some couples, the gendered rationales for infant care between the mother and father were tied to the father's status as primary breadwinner, and the mother's status as primary carer. For example, couples often rationalised fathers opting out of night care on the grounds that their worker role required them to have continuous sleep. [...] These kinds of narratives suggest that when fathers opt out of care tasks, it usually occurs through implicit or silent understandings between couples, rather than explicit negotiations (Rose et al., 2015)

The authors suggest that this lack of discussion indicates the taken for granted nature of gendered divisions of household labour.

Contrary to the expectations of routine-based theories, Dechant and Schulz (2014) also observed unspoken and implicitly understood assumptions about how household labour should be divided in their study following highly-educated German couples at the transition to parenthood. In this case, interviewees expressed that whoever is at home should do more housework and if both

work equally it should be shared, however this logic was not always reflected in behaviour. Couples stated that the division of labour arose without question and, contrary to other studies which claim that discussion is necessary for sharing (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007), this also appeared to be the case for egalitarian couples. The authors suggest this was due to ‘greatly internalised ideal[s] of equality’, however they note that discussion was necessary to *maintain* an equal division of labour: ‘[a]part from egalitarian attitudes, frequent discussions about them are needed to ensure that patterns contradicting the expressed ideals do not inadvertently develop’ (Dechant & Schulz, 2014:626).

In contrast to studies looking at heterosexual partnerships, Reimann (1997) found that lesbian couples starting a family approached parenthood decisions consciously with explicit decision-making processes since even conceiving required in-depth and active planning. This study therefore demonstrates the power of gender norms and suggests that greater negotiation is deemed necessary when gendered scripts cannot guide decision making about divisions of labour.

For her doctoral thesis, Wiesmann (2010) interviewed couples in the Netherlands before and several months after the birth of their first child to compare intentions and outcomes. Like McKay and Doucet (2010), Wiesmann found that some fathers in traditional arrangements were ambivalent about the division of childcare. These men expressed desires to share in individual interviews, but they reported that this was not something they had discussed with their wives and they left the decision making up to her:

‘they let go of their own caring time without discussing or negotiating the responsibility for breadwinning and childcare [and] seemed to be easily convinced that their overall responsibility was to provide the family with income as soon as mothers expressed the desire to work fewer hours’ (Wiesmann, 2010:77-78).

Wiesmann (2010) suggests that this ambivalence can lead spouses to adopt implicit or deferred decision making in order to avoid cognitive dissonance and marital conflict. Traditional gender norms appear wrapped up in this ambivalence and influenced assumptions regarding spheres of influence. Echoing Miller’s (2011a) concept of ‘falling into gender’, she identifies a ‘gendered kick-off process’ where inequalities in experiences of parental leave led to subsequent strengthening of gender specialisation, since women had greater opportunities to acquire childcare expertise and develop routines. She analyses this process through the lens of Kahn’s (1966) ‘tyranny of small decisions’ where a gradual accumulation of specialised expertise leads

couples to a situation that is much more traditional than they had intended. Gender norms were also found to trump other factors such as financial concerns, which were hardly mentioned in couple negotiations. Challenging rational choice perspectives, maximising household income was not a priority at all for many couples, and some higher earning women took on childcare if this was their preference. As a result of these findings, Wiesmann argues that the period just after birth is very important for setting long term divisions of labour. She suggests that increased awareness of the potential for ambivalence at the transition to parenthood and the need for explicit decision making are necessary for greater sharing.

Turning to research on couple decision making processes in the UK context, only two studies were found where this was a primary focus. The first is non-academic research commissioned by the Government Equalities Office. Hacoen et al. (2018) use a 'behavioural insights' approach to investigate parental leave and return to work decisions of thirteen heterosexual couples, who were interviewed when their child was aged between 1 and 2.5 years. They find the opposite to what would be expected by Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) - couples discussed daily issues as they arose, but virtually none of the couples explicitly discussed or negotiated the overall division of childcare and paid work, despite the considerable impact of these decisions on both parents' lives. The authors suggest this is in line with research showing that people make intuitive decisions about other major life decisions (such as education, pension savings and end-of-life choices). Drawing on Kahneman's (2011) dual-process theory, they explain that people tend to make intuitive decisions based on quick judgements and 'the minimal information at hand', rather than slow and effortful reflective judgments based on more detailed information. This is a form of 'cognitive shortcut', which occurs when individuals experience 'high cognitive load' and when 'cognitive resources are under strain'. The authors suggest that a new situation such as the transition to parenthood would produce these conditions, since it involves taking on board 'a lot of new information, as well as mental and physical fatigue' (Hacoen et al., 2018:21). Like Wiesmann (2010) and McKay and Doucet (2010), they point out that a reliance on implicit and intuitive decision making means that work-family decisions are heavily influenced by 'easily available, implicit heuristics, such as social norms around mothers as primary carers' (Hacoen et al., 2018:21). Although couples were not found to engage in explicit decision making at the transition to parenthood, the authors do argue that critical periods of change provide an ideal opportunity for bringing in successful interventions since this is a time when habits are disrupted, and reflection could be increased. As a result, the authors tested whether different messages could increase fathers' stated intentions or interest in making use of SPL or flexible

working using a sample of 1600 men who were planning to have a child in next 4 years. However, the impact was limited and behavioural messages did not increase interest in either SPL or flexible working overall, although existing fathers were found to be more receptive than new fathers. The authors did not test any interventions which specifically aimed to address the lack of discussion about work-family decisions, however they suggest that prompting discussion in antenatal classes and highlighting the need to consider the long-term impact of decisions could help.

Most recently, Twamley (2021) offers a case study of how two heterosexual couples in the UK negotiated the division of parental leave. One couple ultimately shared leave and the other did not. In both cases, female partners wanted to share leave and initiated negotiations, but Twamley finds that men were ultimately positioned as having the final say in decision making. This contrasts with other studies which found that men acquiesced to women's work-family desires (McKay & Doucet, 2010; Wiesmann, 2010; Wong, 2017) and reflects patriarchal notions of men's agency: '[t]he way in which leave is presented as the father's option or choice maintains heterosexual scripts of the man as active decision maker, and the woman as passively reacting to him' (Twamley, 2021:11). Echoing Mannino and Deutsch (2007), outcomes were influenced by women's negotiating skills. This somewhat contrasts with studies finding limited explicit decision making, although women adopted a 'low-pressure' approach, downplayed the notion of sharing for reasons of gender equality and avoided putting direct pressure on their partners. Twamley observes first-hand the tension explicit negotiation could cause and concludes that sharing leave can be a sensitive topic. However, the author notes that when negotiations about sharing leave were initiated by men, women were presented as showing little reticence or guilt and discussion was limited. She suggests that this is indicative of 'a generally favourable view of parental leave as a 'good' among the female sample, and/or the superior relational and other resources available to men' (Twamley, 2021:13). In contrast, most men showed a reluctance to take extended parental leave. She claims, therefore, that men's gender consciousness may be a key requisite for more egalitarian divisions of parental leave, but that more longitudinal research is needed to investigate this.

## Summary

Studies investigating work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood find that, for all but the most determinedly egalitarian couples, work-family decision making appears to be

implicit and active discussion is limited (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Hacothen et al., 2018; McKay & Doucet, 2010; Rose et al., 2015; Wiesmann, 2010). This challenges the assumptions of rational choice and relative resources perspectives that couples actively plan the division of labour (Blood & Wolfe, 1965; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996) and also routine-based theories, which suggest that explicit decision making is more likely during periods of change (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). Several studies indicate that lack of discussion allows traditional gendered roles to fill the void, since egalitarian arrangements require active planning, and some findings suggest that unquestioning support of these norms is what leads to discussion appearing unnecessary in the first place, because gendered separate spheres remove the need for collaborative decision making (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Rose et al., 2015; Wiesmann, 2010).

However, there are limitations to these existing studies which the present research seeks to address. The greatest gap is a lack of academic research looking at couple decision-making processes during the transition to parenthood in the UK. Existing studies have been conducted in countries with work-family policies, practices and cultures that cannot simply be extrapolated to the UK context. As Twamley (2021) points out, the transfer mechanism in UK SPL policy means that discussion and negotiation are likely to be more important than in countries where men have their own entitlements. It is therefore important to confirm with empirical data whether trends are replicated in this country. Furthermore, most existing studies concentrate on either return to work *or* parental leave decisions, however both appear to be significant in establishing long-term divisions of labour and the ‘gendered kick-off’ process suggests that these decisions are interconnected (Miller, 2011b; Wiesmann, 2010). Those looking at parental leave decisions tend to focus on one type of leave (i.e. maternity, paternity or shared leave) and in the UK, there is a particular dearth of research looking at how couples negotiate the division of parental leave in the post-2015 context of increased potential to share (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019). Fewer still look at both return to work *and* parental leave decisions in this context. Currently, only one other study in the UK does this, but it is grey literature and more focused on the drivers of decision rather than the dynamics of the decision-making process itself (Hacothen et al., 2018). The present study advances this small body of literature by investigating how UK couples make anchoring decisions about divisions of parental leave and also longer-term divisions of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood.

There are also methodological limitations among existing research in this area. Interviews with couples about their decision-making processes tend to be either retrospective or take place

during the year of transition. Both of these sampling strategies have limitations: issues of recall and adaptive preferences in the case of retrospective interviews (Wiesmann et al., 2008), and the potential for research participation effects and an inability to study the longer-term impact of decisions in the case of contemporaneous interviewing (Twamley, 2021). The present study mitigates against these limitations by using a longitudinal method with two different samples, one consisting of couples going through the transition to parenthood and the other of couples with pre-school children, thereby securing the benefits of both retrospective *and* contemporaneous perspectives.

All but one of the existing studies on work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood discussed in this chapter were small-scale and qualitative in nature, highlighting the importance of in-depth research in this area and the vital observations that cannot be captured in quantitative surveys. However, Wiesmann (2010) provides an example of the benefits of mixed-methods research. In order to better understand the relationship between micro decision-making processes explored in these qualitative studies and macro discrepancies in attitudes and behaviour observed in quantitative studies, this thesis also adopts a mixed methods approach. In addition to obtaining in-depth understandings of decision-making processes through interviews with both members of cohabiting couples, this study uses a recruitment survey to purposively select couples for interview. This ensures a variety of household working arrangements are accounted for and enables an understanding of how these couples would be categorised according to a quantitative study. The specifics of these research methods are now discussed in the following chapter.

# 4. Methodology

This chapter addresses the methodological choices that were made in order to investigate how heterosexual couples negotiate the division of parental leave, paid work and childcare when they become parents. In summary, a mixed methods approach was adopted, comprising of a recruitment survey followed by longitudinal semi-structured interviews with 25 couples in the UK at various stages of the transition to parenthood. To balance the benefits and limitations of contemporaneous and retrospective accounts, interviewees were sourced from two groups: 33 *Existing Parents* of pre-schoolers reflected back on decisions made when they had their first child, while 16 *Expecting Parents* were interviewed as they went through the transition to parenthood. This second group were interviewed twice, once prior to the birth as they made parental leave decisions and then again 9-12 months later when parental leave came to an end and decisions about longer term work-family arrangements were being made.

To begin with, the chapter presents the aims of the research and explains why these pointed towards a mixed methods approach. It goes on to consider the philosophical underpinnings of this methodology and then explains how the two samples were selected for the study. A rationalisation of the choice of semi-structured interviews and the decision to interview couples separately and over the phone follows, along with a discussion of how ethical guidelines for research with human participants were taken into consideration. Finally, the process of analysis is described and the themes that emerged from the data are introduced.

## **Research Approach and Philosophical Underpinnings**

To recap, the overall purpose of this thesis is to study how preferences and constraints interact in couples' decision-making processes about the division of parental leave, paid work and childcare when they have their first child, with the aim of understanding why those with apparently egalitarian attitudes end up in relatively traditional divisions of household labour at the transition to parenthood. This is addressed through four research questions:

1. How do heterosexual, cohabiting couples in the UK make decisions about parental leave and the longer-term division of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood?



2. How do first-time parents think about and approach constraints to sharing?
3. What are the priorities and ideals or 'preferences' that drive these decisions? To what extent are parents keen to contribute in more equitable ways to childcare and paid work?
4. How do preferences and constraints interact in couple decision making?

A mixed methods approach has been adopted to investigate these research questions. Many of the studies that document the unequal and gendered division of household responsibilities rely on quantitative methods, as these aim for representative data and generalisability, which enable the identification of broad trends. Theoretical explanations for the persistence of this inequality are also often based on quantitative data (especially rational choice, time availability, bargaining and preference theories). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, large-scale surveys make a lot of assumptions about work-family decision making processes and are not able to capture how couples negotiate the division of care and paid work in practice. They are also restricted by the availability of appropriate variables, which are lacking with regards to work-family preferences and negotiation of the division of paid and unpaid work (Crompton & Harris, 1998; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Warren, 2011). A more in-depth, qualitative approach is advantageous for examining how preferences and constraints interact in decisions about the division of parental leave, paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood, since it allows for decisions, attitudes, perceptions and desires to be fleshed out and rationalised. In this way, qualitative interviews permit a thorough investigation of the individual thought processes, stories and motivations behind national trends.

As the research is focused on two particular decision-making points - division of parental leave and decisions about work-care arrangements once parental leave ends - a longitudinal approach has also been adopted. Couples experiencing the transition to parenthood were interviewed before the birth, as they made decisions about parental leave, and again 9-12 months later when they were making return to work decisions. Using this longitudinal approach allows an investigation of the decision-making process as it happens, considering to what degree intentions and preferences are egalitarian, whether these are put into practice and, if not, what prevents this from happening. It is also important to explore the implication of decisions over a more extended period, as the literature suggests that decisions made at the transition to parenthood have long-lasting effects (Friedman, 2015; Grunow et al., 2012; Schober, 2013a). Therefore, another sample of Existing Parents with pre-school children were able to reflect back on

decisions made and also consider their effects beyond the transition to parenthood. Further consideration of the rationale behind these two samples follows below.

Alongside the qualitative interviews, a quantitative recruitment survey has been used to purposively select couples with a variety of household employment arrangements for the second sample of Existing Parents. This survey was not intended or used for the purposes of rigorous statistical analysis, but responses provided prompts and comparison points for participants' interviews. Mixed methods have not frequently been used in the work-family literature, however they bring a number of benefits. Warren (2011:145) states specifically in reference to the negotiation of unpaid work, that mixed methods may be 'the most fruitful of approaches for researching a topic holistically' since 'a multi-methods strategy offers advantages in terms of answering complementary questions about unpaid domestic work, for enhancing the interpretability of results and providing better opportunities to explore their validity'. The use of a recruitment survey here enhances the interpretability of results by indicating how participants would be classified according to quantitative analyses. This enables links to be made between participants' own narratives and the large-scale, representative findings of quantitative studies.

By adopting a pragmatic mixed methods approach, this study critically engages with a positivist epistemology and objectivist ontology to comment on the validity and reliability of quantitative measures, but the research itself is conducted from an interpretivist and constructionist paradigm. It does not aim to find universal 'truths' and focuses on the constructed nature of reality and meaning through individual perspectives and narratives (Duckworth & Buzzanell, 2009; Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999). What is considered normal and appropriate behaviour is understood as being formed within a particular cultural and historical context, with expectations changing over time and place. Since researchers in the social sciences are subject to all the cultural influences of the participants they study, the notion of a 'neutral observer' is also rejected (Denzin, 1994). Following this research paradigm, interviews were conducted on the basis that there is no objective reality 'out there' to be dispassionately observed from a distance. Consequently, reflexivity formed an important part of this research project, with an awareness placed on the assumptions, opinions and preconceptions of the interviewer, and the power dynamic within interviews (Denzin, 1994; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). The researcher's personal experiences and forms of 'otherness' - being female and of a similar age to participants, not having experienced the transition to parenthood - were also critically reflected upon when interpreting the data and interactions with participants (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Gatrell, 2006).

Interviews were considered an interactive process where meaning is constructed both by the interviewer and the interviewee (Cassell, 2015; Holstein, 1995). The aim was not to access ‘true’ depictions of participants’ experiences or evaluate whether one partner’s account is more ‘reliable’ than another’s. Instead, the data is understood as individuals’ subjective *interpretations*, *perceptions* and *experiences* of work-family preferences and decision making at the transition to parenthood in the context of a particular interview and point in time. This approach assumes that personal identities are ‘inherently fragmented, contingent and unstable’ and interview data are not ‘exact representations of ‘real’ experiences but [...] constructions, narratives or stories produced in the specific context of the research interview’ (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014:4). Following Hogg and Maclaran (2008), this study aimed for authenticity, plausibility and criticality rather than reliability and validity. Interview data is used to support claims, which aim to account for the breadth of participants’ experiences.

Although well suited to the research questions and aims, a small-scale and predominantly qualitative approach naturally impinges on the claims that can be made from the data. The experiences of the 49 individuals interviewed cannot be generalised to the population as a whole and this thesis does not seek to make causal claims about the reasons for couples’ work-family behaviour. Instead, this research aims to suggest avenues for further enquiry, identify possible causal mechanisms that large-scale data is unable to access, and explore whether assumptions about decision-making processes and motivations made in quantitative studies are reflected in individual narratives.

## Participants

Participants in this research consisted of 25 highly educated, professional, heterosexual, cohabiting couples living in the UK, who had experienced or were in the process of experiencing the transition to parenthood. At the outset of this research project, the intention was to focus on men’s preferences for the division of paid work and childcare when they become fathers. The rationale for this was threefold: 1) men are ignored in Hakim’s (1998, 2000, 2003b) ‘preference theory’ and in many studies on career decisions at the transition to parenthood; 2) although we know there is much less variation in men’s working patterns when they become parents compared to women and little effect of fatherhood on career, there is limited in-depth research investigating why is this the case; 3) according to the literature, the lack of change in men’s work-family behaviour compared to women is a primary reason for persistent gender inequalities

(England, 2010; Friedman, 2015; Haas & O'Brien, 2010). The intention was to find out whether fathers' tendency to remain in full-time work was due to a limited desire to change working patterns (won't share) or whether practical constraints held them back (can't share). However, further exploration of the existing literature indicated that several single sex studies recommend that future research would benefit from exploring the perspectives of both mothers and fathers (Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Kaufman & Bernhardt, 2015; Kaufman & White, 2014; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). Some studies on decision making at the transition to parenthood have included both mothers and fathers in their samples, allowing for important comparisons of male and female perspectives (Miller, 2005, 2011b, 2012; Perälä-Littunen, 2018), however these studies did not include members of the same couples and were therefore unable to make direct comparisons or analyse both sides of specific negotiations. Furthermore, Emslie and Hunt (2009) state that more qualitative research looking at couples is needed and Kaufman and Bernhardt (2015:5) note that 'there is limited knowledge about how couples arrive at decisions about work and family life'. It was therefore decided early on in the recruitment process to shift the attention to both members of co-habiting couples.

### ***Population of Interest***

Although important research is taking place investigating work-family division in same-sex couples (see, for example, Brewster, 2017; Kelly & Hauck, 2015; Rothblum, 2017), this study was limited to heterosexual couples due to a particular focus on comparing and contrasting the gendered behaviour associated with the onset of fatherhood and motherhood and the interaction between the expectations, preferences and constraints of new mothers and fathers.

The choice of a highly educated demographic was motivated by the research aim of better understanding the decision-making processes that lead those with apparently egalitarian attitudes to end up in relatively traditional divisions of household labour. Studies show that those with high levels of education are most likely to be dual-earners and have egalitarian attitudes (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Connolly et al., 2016; Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Dias et al., 2018; Fan & Marini, 2000). Theoretically, the highly educated should therefore be most open to and able to envisage an egalitarian division of household labour. It is clear that this demographic is not representative of the wider population and may be described as elite. However, if we are to make moves towards a more equal society, finding out what prevents this privileged demographic from dividing paid work and childcare more equally ought to be an essential first step. These parents have the potential to be 'trailblazers' (Grunow

& Veltkamp, 2016) and if they are not in a position to share then it can lead to the question of who will be?

In order to access a highly educated sample, participants were recruited through university alumni networks. Two contrasting alumni departments took part in the research, one from an established Russell Group university in the south of England and another from a ‘plate glass’ (Beloff, 1970) northern university established in the 1960s. In early 2017, staff working in these departments sent emails about the research project and recruitment process to ex-students between the ages of 25 and 45 living in the UK; included notices in alumni newsletters; and posted messages from the universities’ official alumni accounts on professional networking website LinkedIn (see Appendix 3 for recruitment materials). These communications had the potential to reach over 90,000 alumni and all participants were recruited in this way. As participants only had their alma mater in common, it was possible to access individuals in a wide range of professions and locations. There is the potential for a degree of self-selection bias, however following the constructionist paradigm adopted here and in common with much qualitative research, a representative sample was not sought and therefore the results are not generalisable to the population as a whole or even those who are highly-educated (King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2019).

Although 25 couples took part in the research, the total number of participants was 49 as one parent withdrew from the project due to work commitments. All of the participants had been in employment before the arrival of children and all except one had university degrees. In addition, 34 had postgraduate qualifications, including eleven with a PhD. A variety of professions were represented, and couples lived across the country (see Appendix 1 for further participant details). To obtain a fuller picture of the process of decision making across the transition to parenthood, the recruitment messages disseminated by alumni departments invited two groups to take part in the research: parents of pre-school children (Existing Parents) and those who were going to have their first child in the next five months (Expecting Parents). Eight of the couples were Expecting Parents and 17 were Existing Parents. The recruitment and selection processes for these two samples differed and are outlined below.

### ***Expecting Parents***

Twamley and Schober (2019) point out that much qualitative research on work-family decisions is retrospective and this is problematic because accounts of decision making can change over

time (see, for example, O'Brien & Twamley, 2017). In order to explore decision making during the transition to parenthood as it happened, recruitment messages (Appendix 3) called for couples expecting their first child in the next five months to take part in two interviews. The interviews were timed to coincide with the two decisions-making points of interest in this study: couples were interviewed before the birth, as they made decisions about parental leave, and again 9-12 months later when they were making return to work decisions and their babies were between 5 and 11 months old. The literature suggests that intentions regarding the gendered division of household labour during pregnancy are very often different to decisions made once the child arrives (Miller, 2012). Speaking to this sample of Expecting Parents during the decision-making process allowed for an investigation of the degree to which intentions were egalitarian, whether these were put into practice and, if not, what prevented this from happening.

Eight Expecting Couples responded and took part in the study. Three were recruited via the Russell Group university and five from the 'plate glass' university. All but one couple also took part in follow-up interviews. The average age of the Expecting Parents at their first interview was 33.8 years for men and 31.6 for women, which is above the national average age for first-time mothers of 28.8 years (ONS, 2017), but much closer to the national average of 32.9 years for mothers with degree level education (ONS, 2018). Two of the Expecting Parents self-identified as Asian Pakistani and the others as White British.

For these participants, there was a risk that taking part in the research during the time of decision making would influence the way they mediated and negotiated work-family preferences (Gatrell, 2009) in a form of observer effect (Simonton, 2010). Comments from the interviews suggest that this could have occurred, particularly for fathers who may have had less opportunity or encouragement to discuss these topics before (Miller, 2011b, 2017b):

*It's been quite enjoyable actually just to talk to a neutral person about it. I don't often chew people's ear off in the same way, especially about thoughts and feelings on fatherhood. I've actually found it quite a constructive process, given that I'm about to be a father in a month.* Expecting Father A

*[The interview's] been great for me as well, it's got me thinking about things. I'll be able to chat with [my wife] later, after she's spoken to you, to explore some of those things.* Expecting Father E

To balance the fact that Expecting Parents' experiences of work-family decision making may have been influenced by the research process itself, parents of preschool children who had already made decisions about parental leave and return to work, were also recruited.

## *Existing Parents*

To compensate for the possibility of observer effects among Expecting Parents and to see how decisions panned out in the longer term, another sample of Existing Parents with pre-school children were also recruited. When looking at the consequences of work-family decisions, it is important to consider the impact over time, as the literature suggests decisions made at the transition to parenthood have long-term effects (Friedman, 2015; Grunow et al., 2012; Schober, 2013a). For example, women who take time out of work to look after young children accumulate less financial and human capital, therefore reducing future employment prospects and increasing reliance on their partner's career (Kan et al., 2011:247). In order for a pattern of behaviour to emerge, a group of Existing Parents was therefore interviewed up to five years after the birth of their first child. The cut-off point of five years was chosen, as this is the age at which most children start school in the UK and parents are likely to go through another stage of work-family decision making and employment status changes at this time (Martinengo et al., 2010).

Although there were benefits to retrospective accounts of decision making, there was the possibility for issues with recall and post-event rationalisation (Wiesmann, 2010). Again, these concerns were reflected in the interviews with several Existing Parents struggling to remember the details of decision-making processes, as seen in these excerpts:

*I'm trying to think back actually. It's difficult to recall specific conversations* Existing Father N

*I don't know, I can't even remember. It feels like such a long time ago that we probably had those discussions, but I imagine that we consulted each other.* Existing Mother O

*I'm not sure. I think I'd heard about [Additional Paternity Leave] from the media first, if I remember rightly. You are kind of going back five years now...* Existing Father P

Issues with recall underscore the utility of also interviewing Expecting Parents who were currently going through the process of planning parental leave and childcare provision, and therefore better able to reflect on specific conversations. The use of two samples therefore balanced limitations associated with researching at different time points and provided a fuller picture of the decision-making process at the transition to parenthood.

## Recruitment Survey

In order to purposively select a range of couples and to be able to make connections between micro-level decision making processes and findings of large-scale studies, Existing Parents were asked to complete an initial screening questionnaire. To understand how participants would be classified according to quantitative studies, the questionnaire was based on surveys which have been used in studies reporting a discrepancy between work-family attitudes and behaviour (such as the BSAS in Scott & Clery, 2013). Respondents were asked about number and age of children; hours spent in paid work before and after children for respondent and their partner; ratio of earnings before and after children; preferences regarding time spent at work and with family; gender role attitudes; and demographic questions about age, profession, education, ethnicity and location (a full list of survey questions is included in Appendix 5). The intention of this survey was for aiding in selective sampling rather than rigorous analysis, however comparison between assumptions based on survey data and interview responses led to important findings, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

As this study was initially focused on the perspective of fathers, men living in the UK with a female partner and preschool children were asked to complete the survey and in total 117 responded. In order to understand the processes that lead those with apparently egalitarian attitudes to end up in relatively traditional divisions of household labour, these fathers were first classified by gender role attitude (GRA). As substantive quantitative analysis of these attitudes was not the purpose of this study, one commonly used GRA item focusing specifically on attitudes towards the gendered division of earning and caring responsibilities was used in the recruitment survey (Question 12, Appendix 5): *'Do you agree that a man's job is to earn money and a woman's job is to look after the home and family'*. Behr, Braun, Kaczmirek, and Bandilla (2012:131) refer to this question as the 'benchmark' measure of GRA. This question or a similar variation features in numerous surveys and is sometimes used in studies as a single measure to control for GRA in multiple regressions (for example, Baxter et al., 2008). Following definitions in studies reporting an increase in egalitarian attitudes (such as Scott & Clery, 2013), those who disagreed with the GRA item were classed as having egalitarian attitudes.

Survey respondents were then organised into traditional and egalitarian household working patterns using responses to questions about own and partners' current working hours (Table 1). These categorisations were based on the typology of household work-family arrangements used by Connolly et al. (2016) in their investigation of UK household employment status trends. Full-



time and part-time work were distinguished according to number of hours worked a week, as is common practice in the literature (Walling, 2007). In this case, a threshold of 35 hours and over for full-time work was used, reflecting UK government guidelines for part-time work (GOV.UK, 2020). A selection of fathers from each household employment status category who had ‘egalitarian’ attitudes and whose eldest child was aged between 1 and 5 were then invited to interview and asked if their partners would be interested in being contacted about the research.

**Table 1.** Household working pattern of couples selected for interview

Household working pattern	Weekly working hours		Number of couples chosen for interview
	Father	Mother	
<i>Male Breadwinner</i>	≥ 35	0	3
<i>Standard 1.5 Earner</i>	≥ 35	< 35	9
<i>Dual Full-Time Earner</i>	≥ 35	≥ 35	3
<i>Dual Part-Time Earner</i>	< 35	< 35	1
<i>Part-Time Male Breadwinner</i>	< 35	0	1

In total, 17 Existing Couples were selected for interview and in all but one case both partners agreed to take part. A breakdown of the household employment classification of each couple is given in Table 1, although this distribution will be challenged somewhat by the findings in the following chapter (see Table 5, Chapter 5). The average age of Existing Parents taking part in the interviews was 36.9 years and the majority identified as White British. Three participants self-identified as White Irish, one as Bangladeshi and four as Indian or British Indian.

## Interviews

A total of 63 individual interviews took place with the 25 couples selected for interview, including 14 follow-up interviews with the sample of Expecting Parents. The interviews were recorded with participant permission, lasted 42 minutes on average and were mostly conducted over the telephone, although two took place in person. The rationale for this mode of interview is explained below.

The interview format used in this research was semi-structured. This meant an interview schedule laid out key questions and follow-up probes informed by the research aims, but this was not followed rigidly. Questions were not addressed in a set order and were adapted and generated in reaction to participants’ responses. This semi-structured format was chosen to allow

for consistency in the topics covered, while also giving priority to individual interpretations and narratives (King et al., 2019). Questions in initial interviews with Expecting Parents focused on ideal<sup>10</sup> and intended parental leave and work-family arrangements; decision making processes and levels of discussion; and gender expectations and attitudes towards gendered work-family roles. Follow-up interviews focused on experiences of parental leave and combining work and childcare; obstacles preventing ideals and intentions from being realised; and any changes in preferences or attitudes towards gender expectations. Interview questions for Existing Parents asked how participants had divided parental leave and how they currently shared the responsibilities of childcare and paid work with their partner; how decisions had been made regarding parental leave and return to work; what priorities and ideals had driven these decisions; whether practical constraints had been experienced and how these had been approached; and to what degree participants felt men and women should take on different responsibilities in the household (full interview schedules can be found in Appendix 6). In most interviews with Existing Parents, questions from the recruitment survey were used informally to stimulate discussion, for example many fathers were asked why they had disagreed with the benchmark gender role attitude question. Mothers (who had not completed the original recruitment survey) were asked what their response to this question would have been and why.

Although it was decided early on that interviews would be semi-structured, other decisions were less obvious. In particular, there were dilemmas about whether to speak to couples together or individually, and whether to conduct interviews face-to-face or over the telephone. Literature on work-family research methods (including Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014; Gatrell, 2009; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Valentine, 1999) and four pilot interviews were used to help make these decisions. The intention for the pilot interviews was to interview one couple expecting their first child separately over the telephone and to conduct a joint interview with another couple in person in order to gain insight on the implications of each approach. However, as will now be discussed, this format was not tenable in practice.

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<sup>10</sup> Since the concept of preference could be interpreted in many ways and is context-dependent, these questions referred to specific scenarios, such as ‘what would be your ideal arrangement for work and childcare if money were no object?’ and ‘if you could be completely selfish and decide exactly how the whole family ran, what would be your dream scenario for managing work and childcare as a couple?’

## ***Individual interviews***

All interviews for this research were conducted individually. This decision was made for *practical*, *ethical* and *theoretical* reasons. Initially, it was intended to conduct both individual and joint interviews to ensure that the benefits of both approaches were utilised, particularly as this combined approach has been used effectively in similar research with couples by Wiesmann (2010). Bjornholt and Farstad (2014) argue that within the field of family studies there has been a general acceptance that individual interviews are preferable to couple interviews, based on the assumption that the former allows access to a ‘truer’ representation of the interviewee. However, the authors propose that this is a naïve realist interpretation of ‘truth’ and instead argue from a subjectivist paradigm, similar to that adopted in the present study, that data collected from couple interviews is as ‘true’ as that gained from individual interviews. They conclude that interviewing couples together can, in fact, bring several advantages: a different kind of data is produced, which can bring new and interesting insights; there is an opportunity to observe couple dynamics; and there are reduced issues around participant confidentiality and anonymity (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014).

However, the pilot interviews led to a reconsideration of this intention. To begin with, there were practical issues with joint interviews. The expecting couple that was initially asked to interview together was unable to find a time that was convenient for both of them. They had busy work schedules and understandably found it hard to sacrifice their limited joint leisure time to take part in an interview. The approaching birth of their first child made this couple especially keen to make the most of their quality time together while they still had the opportunity, suggesting that this might be a problem particularly associated with those going through the transition to parenthood. This was also likely to be an issue for existing parents who would also have childcare responsibilities added to the mix. Indeed, practical issues such as this appear to be common to work-family researchers, as reflected in advice from Valentine (1999:68) on interviewing couples together and apart:

At a practical level, joint interviews are difficult to arrange, both because of the limitations of finding a mutually convenient time when everyone can participate (especially if there are young children in the household), but also precisely because of the assumption within many households that one person—most commonly the woman—is the spokesperson on domestic or “family” matters.

Although it was not possible to interview the couple together, both partners were keen to take part and were able to find time to conduct separate face-to-face interviews. All the pilot interviews were therefore conducted individually.

Pilot interviews not only highlighted the practical issues involved in conducting joint interviews but also challenged the suitability of joint interviews for researching personal perspectives and desires. After one of the pilot interviews, a participant mentioned that, in light of the questions asked, they were pleased they had been interviewed alone. This implies that participants may feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics in front of their partner, which raises two ethical issues and one theoretical consideration that further tilted the balance in favour of interviewing parents separately:

Firstly, joint interviews could bring up ethical issues relating to consent and safeguarding. If, as research outlined in the previous chapter suggests, couples do not tend to actively negotiate the division of paid work and childcare (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Gatrell, 2005; Wiesmann et al., 2008), then there is a considerable risk that a research project focusing on the interaction of partners' (potentially conflicting) preferences, experiences and intentions regarding this division will touch on sensitive topics that couples have perhaps never discussed before. As Gatrell (2009) suggests, interviewing couples about their decision-making processes and division of labour has the potential to touch on relationship issues or encourage tension between partners. Is a joint research interview the best place in which to address unspoken issues in a relationship for the first time? Although information about the research was given in advance of all interviews and informed consent was sought, it is impossible for participants to anticipate exactly what they will be asked in a joint interview and how they will feel about it. Participants were informed that they could stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question, but there is a risk in joint interviews that a participant will not enforce this right if their partner appears to be comfortable.

Secondly, although participant experiences were the primary factor in deciding on interview mode, as an active participant in the process, the experiences of the researcher as an interviewer also influenced decision making. One of the pilot interviews conducted in person took place at the participant's home and, during the discussion, their partner returned from work. Although they did not actively interrupt the interview, as an interviewer, I was acutely aware of the other partner's presence in the next room and the fact that they would be able to overhear our

conversation. I also perceived that the responses I received from the participant became more evasive once their partner arrived, although this could have been a reflection of my own discomfort. In my unease, I found myself skipping over follow-up questions on the interview schedule which asked whether the participant was happy with the decisions they had made as a couple and whether there had been any conflict in desires or intentions. I feared that questions like these could offend the other partner or put the interviewee in a difficult situation once I left. I felt responsible for keeping the peace within a couple's relationship and was particularly wary of provoking strain or conflict at a time of such important transition as the arrival of a first child. Valentine (1999:70) suggests these fears should be taken seriously, as there is a risk in joint interviews that disagreements between partners can put the interviewer in a difficult position of 'being called upon to adjudicate over who is right' and can create an ethical minefield, 'in which they need to strike a delicate balance by extricating themselves from the discussion without taking sides or leaving one or other respondent in a "vulnerable" position'. I wanted to avoid taking on this kind of responsibility as far as possible in my research and found individual interviews allowed participants to take the lead in directing discussion and deciding which topics they were comfortable addressing.

The third issue which arises if participants do not feel comfortable discussing work-family decisions in front of their partner, is that potentially insightful information about individual preferences, desires and experiences could be lost in a joint interview. In her research on work-family decision making using a variety of data collection methods, Wiesmann (2010:133) found that some individuals disclosed sensitive information in individual interviews or questionnaires that they did not discuss when interviewed with their partner. Previous research finds that very often explicit negotiation is cursory or does not take place (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Gatrell, 2005; Wiesmann et al., 2008), as such unspoken individual perspectives, intentions and desires are likely to be important here. Although we may agree with Bjornholt and Farstad (2014) that individual interviews do not offer greater access to the 'truth', they may lead to a different *kind* of data or 'truth'. Valentine (1999:71) notes that the privacy of separate interviews enables participants to discuss power dynamics and 'relationship secrets', and encourages participants to reflect on their own experiences rather than presenting a couple consensus:

Answering without the shared memories of the other spouse means that individuals have to untangle their own views from the shared or merged view, or that individuals try to

speak for their partners by constructing a 'joint version' from their own individual version of what happened.

In studies investigating work-family issues from a couple perspective, there is an added risk that parenting norms and traditional gender roles lead to a situation in which mothers lead discussions or become 'gatekeepers' of childcare narratives (McKay & Doucet, 2010; Rose et al., 2015; Valentine, 1999). Therefore, as well as providing important insights into the dynamics behind decision making at the transition to parenthood by permitting discussions about issues that participants may feel reluctant or unable to discuss with their partner, separate interviews also encourage and leave space for men's work-family narratives to be heard.

### ***Telephone interviews***

The second decision to be made regarding the format of the interviews was whether to conduct interviews over the phone or in person. Knowing that interviews would be conducted with parents individually meant both options were equally plausible. Face-to-face interviews are more commonly used in qualitative research and tend to be considered as producing better quality data (Holt, 2010; Vogl, 2013), however it was decided that for this study telephone interviews brought the most practical and theoretical advantages.

To begin with, telephone interviews are often more convenient for participants (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004:113), which was an important consideration when trying to recruit from a demographic of busy working parents. Using the telephone meant that interviews could be conducted in a variety of locations, with flexibility over timing and the opportunity to easily rearrange at short notice (Holt, 2010). Thanks to mobiles and hands-free technology, participants took part in interviews while they were getting on with other essential tasks such as commuting to work, walking their dog and keeping an eye on their children. The commitment required of participants was therefore reduced and only five couples invited to interview declined to take part. This tallies with recommendations made by Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) that telephone interviews can be useful for reducing respondent reluctance.

With regards to the content of interviews, those conducted over the phone are often considered second best as they do not allow for an appreciation of body language and setting (Burnett & Gatrell, 2018; Holt, 2010; Vogl, 2013). However, in their comparison of both approaches Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) found no significant differences in the amount, nature or depth of data

from telephone and face-to-face qualitative interviews, and conclude that both methods can be used productively. In fact, for studies that have the potential to touch on sensitive topics, as may be the case in work-family research (Burnett & Gatrell, 2018; Gatrell, 2009), Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) advise that telephone interviews may be *more* appropriate and *increase* data quality due to the relative anonymity afforded. Indeed, Vogl (2013) found that sensitive information was as likely to be divulged in semi-structured interviews conducted over the phone as in person and suggests that respondents may feel more at ease interviewing over the telephone as they cannot 'lose face'. Furthermore, researchers' reactions, note taking and recording equipment are invisible and therefore less distracting; visual features of the interviewer and interviewee are removed; and identities are limited to a voice. This reduces the potential for stereotyping and biases on the part of both researcher and participant (Holt, 2010), and mimics the environment of a 'confessional' (Burnett & Gatrell, 2018). For these reasons, researchers have suggested that interviewing over the phone may put participants at ease and allow them to talk more freely (Chesley, 2011; Gatrell, 2009). However, as in any qualitative research, it is impossible to remove the potential for social desirability bias and the results must be considered in light of this.

In relation to my own experiences as a researcher and my desire to avoid arbitrating couple conflict, discussed previously in relation to the decision to conduct interviews separately, telephone interviews also reduced the likelihood that I would censure interviews due to my own discomfort. Even if participants were with others, the nature of a phone call meant they would be the only one who could hear what I was saying and they were therefore able to decide for themselves what they were comfortable discussing. As most of the calls were to mobile phones, presumably participants also had the choice to move away from others if they found during the course of the interview that they wanted more privacy (Holt, 2010). For these reasons, Holt (2010:116) suggests that telephone interviews give a 'far greater degree of control for the participants than a face-to-face interview', thus removing responsibility from the researcher to 'second-guess' issues around safeguarding.

Although these factors pointed towards using individual telephone interviews, as recommended by Gatrell (2009) participants were included in the decision-making process and given the choice to meet in person if they wished. One Expecting Father opted for this format and both the initial and follow-up interviews were conducted in a meeting room at his office.

## Ethics

Thorough steps were taken to ensure that taking part in the research did not have any negative consequences for participants. University and ESRC ethical guidelines on areas such as consent, safeguarding, anonymity and confidentiality were followed throughout the project and ethical approval was granted by Lancaster University ethics board.

Interview participants all completed individual consent forms, which outlined what participation would involve, procedures for leaving the study and how data would be used (Appendix 4). Oral consent was also obtained at the beginning of interviews. Considering the longitudinal aspects of the research, it was made clear that consent for one interview did not imply consent for future interviews and those taking part in follow-up interviews were asked to complete a new consent form. For those taking part in the online recruitment questionnaire, a message at the outset informed participants that choosing to complete the questionnaire signified consent that their anonymised responses may be included in publications and that they consented to the possibility of being contacted about further involvement in the interview portion of the study.

In terms of safeguarding, the sample of self-selecting, non-vulnerable adults were made aware in the consent form that participation in any part of the research process was voluntary and that complete withdrawal from the project was possible at any time up to two weeks following their final interview. This period allowed time for reflection and for data to be removed from the research if necessary. Interview and survey questions focused on work and family life and it was not the intention for interviews to cover topics that could be harmful or distressing.

As discussed above, interviewing couples about their decision-making processes and division of labour could have the potential to touch on relationship issues or encourage tension between partners (Gatrell, 2009) and the decision was made to interview participants separately to minimise these risks. However, as Miller (2017b) points out, when talking to individuals about their lives there is always the potential that difficult or sensitive topics will be brought up unexpectedly, and this research was no exception. Drawing on Miller's (2017b) techniques, when potentially distressing topics came up, participants were encouraged to take the lead in deciding whether this was a topic they wanted to explore further. The possibility of participant discomfort was a primary consideration in the interviews and, at any sign of unease or tension, participants were reminded that they did not have to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with. If necessary, the line of questioning was adjusted accordingly. In case issues arose despite these



precautions, participants were provided with information about relationship support groups, such as Relate, and organisations that provide information about parental rights, such as Working Families. In practice, although interviews touched on unexpected emotional topics (such as bereavement), as in Miller (2017) and Burnett & Gatrell (2018), participants appeared to want to discuss these topics.

As well as taking measures to avoid distress, it was also important to ensure that participants' anonymity and confidentiality were preserved. During interviews, it was made clear that the information discussed would remain confidential and responses from individual interviews would not be discussed with the other partner. Participants were made aware that responses would be anonymised and that the universities involved in the recruitment process would not have institutional access to any of the interview or questionnaire data. Participant names and, as far as possible, any information which might be used to identify them have been changed or removed from transcripts and this thesis. Any documents containing personal details were stored securely and separately from audio files of interviews and transcripts.

However, despite following these standard guidelines, because participants knew their partner was also taking part in the research this made anonymity and confidentiality harder to protect. Although beneficial from a methodological perspective, the decision to interview both members of couples separately brought up complicated ethical issues relating to participant (internal) confidentiality, defined as follows:

External confidentiality is traditional confidentiality where the researcher acknowledges they know what the person said but promises not to identify them in the final report.

The less apparent aspect of confidentiality is internal confidentiality. This is the ability for research subjects involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication of the research. (Tolich, 2004:101)

As Tolich (2004) notes, internal confidentiality is a neglected ethical dilemma and the issue is not often identified in the work-family literature. It was therefore not until analysis of the data had begun that these issues became apparent, an experience shared by other researchers of dyads (Taylor, 2015). Subsequent investigation revealed a limited literature from other fields, such as health research, which address this issue (Forbat & Henderson, 2003; Taylor, 2015; Tolich, 2004; Ummel & Achille, 2016). However, these papers primarily focus on identifying the problem and practical suggestions for how to deal with or reduce internal confidentiality are limited.

The standard practice of removing obvious identifying information such as locations and names is unlikely to be sufficient for participants not to recognise their partner. As Tolich (2004:103) warns, many instances with the potential to violate internal confidentiality will go unnoticed by researchers:

It is unlikely any researcher would know the connected person's situation so well as to pick up finer nuances of meaning shared only by insiders. Could the researcher be guaranteed to disguise an insider's "turn of phrase" or a verbal mannerism in a published piece even if the quote is rewritten without [any obvious identifying information]?

Even if it were possible to remove enough identifying features so that a participant could not be identified by their long-term partner, it is unlikely that a researcher could anonymise data to the extent that a participant would not be able to recognise themselves. In research with dyads, there is also the possibility of participants identifying their partner by association (Forbat & Henderson, 2003) particularly if the responses of couples are directly compared.

The limited advice in the literature for dealing with these issues recommends having an awareness, being reflexive and consulting with participants in cases where it has been possible to identify specific instances of potential internal confidentiality violation. However, contacting participants can have the effect of increasing their awareness of weak internal confidentiality and alerting them to the possibility of identifying other participants. The solution adopted in this thesis is to avoid direct comparisons between the responses of individual partners as far as possible. Although this has meant some interesting findings have not been included, the anonymity of participants must take precedence. If these issues had been identified earlier in the research process, the advice of Ummel and Achille (2016) to outline the issues surrounding anonymity in consent forms could have been followed. This way, those invited to interview could have made their own informed decisions about participating in light of these risks.

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded, with participants' permission, and transcribed in a denaturalised manner (i.e. stutters, pauses etc. removed. See Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005) by the researcher and a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement. A broadly thematic approach was then used to analyse this data (King et al., 2019). Cassell (2015:77) defines thematic analysis as 'a technique for analysing data that relies on organising textual data thematically according to a template of codes, some of which will be predefined and some of

which will emerge from the process of analysis'. While this approach was adopted, the specific method of analysis developed organically as the interview data was analysed.

To begin with, the interview transcripts were summarised. As it became clear that it would be necessary to compare certain elements of the interviews easily, these summaries were organised in an excel spreadsheet under thematic headings. Some of these themes came directly from the research questions and interview schedule, others were common themes that emerged as interviews were conducted and transcribed, and the rest were themes that appeared pertinent from the literature:

- Division of working and caring
- Impact of having children on career
- Intentions for division of working and caring
- Decision making process
- Extent of discussion
- Obstacles/constraints
- Preferences/ideal scenario
- Whose preferences prioritised
- Awareness of partner's preferences
- Orientation to work
- Childhood experiences and intentions when younger
- Gender ideology

Once individual interviews were summarised, participants' responses were compared and notes made in a further column called 'couple comparison'. The process of summarising interviews in this way encouraged a focus on each individual's and subsequently each couple's experiences. Organising the summaries thematically allowed for improved comparison of situations across the sample.

Alongside these summaries, all the interviews were thematically coded using NVivo software and an approach known as template analysis (King, 2004). This involves producing a list of codes that represent themes and assigning sections of text from the transcripts to these codes. The template of codes is organised hierarchically representing the relationship between different themes and sub-themes, and is modified throughout the process of analysis: 'in qualitative

template analysis, the initial template is applied in order to analyse the text through the process of coding, but is itself revised in the light of the on-going analysis' (King, 2004:259). High-level initial codes were defined in advance to address the research questions and aims: 'type of decision', 'behaviour', 'decision making process', 'factors affecting decisions', 'gender ideology', 'intentions' and 'preferences'. Sub-themes were shaped by the literature and by the data, as common phenomena were spotted in the transcripts (see Appendix 7). Coding became more granular throughout the data analysis process and new sub-themes and associated codes were created.

Reflecting the constructionist paradigm underpinning this research, which assumes that there will always be multiple interpretations of the same data, coding 'reliability' was not a priority in this process of analysis. Instead, the focus was on researcher reflexivity and internal consistency (King et al., 2019). According to King (2004:257), template analysis is a flexible technique in comparison to other more traditional qualitative methods, such as grounded theory and this approach allows for material to be organised without being too prescriptive: 'Broad higher-order codes can give a good overview of the general direction of the interview, while detailed lower-order codes allow for very fine distinctions to be made, both within and between cases' (King, 2004:258). One drawback of the approach is the potential to lose an appreciation of individuals and their responses as a whole (Cassell, 2015:79), however this was balanced through the use of thematic interview summaries. These summaries allowed for couples' and individuals' decision making, behaviour and ideals to be compared and contrasted, while thematic coding moved away from personal narratives and permitted analysis of the interview data as a whole. In this way, common experiences and issues could be identified and it was possible to consider to what extent certain phenomena were common across the interviews. These findings are now presented and analysed in the following four chapters.

# 5. Setting the Scene

The purpose of this study was to find out how couples make ‘anchoring’ work-family decisions (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014) at the transition to parenthood. What leads the majority of parents in the UK to end up with unequal and gendered divisions of household labour (or otherwise)? Couples’ decision-making processes will be explored in detail over the remaining chapters, but to begin with, it is important to reflect on the outcomes of these decisions.

A variety of work-family arrangements were represented in this sample. In the case of Existing Parents, this diversity was purposively selected for via a recruitment survey in order to represent a range of experiences. However, in practice, it transpired that assumptions about work-family arrangements based on data from this survey were often at odds with the accounts given in interviews. As will be seen later in the chapter, the resulting combination of work-family scenarios was therefore to some degree unanticipated. With Expecting Parents, the variety was more organic, since these couples were interviewed as they became parents for the first time and at this stage their work-family arrangements were yet to be finalised. Follow-up interviews took place 9-12 months later, when their children were 5-11 months old, and revealed the outcomes of work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood. By comparing the two interviews conducted with this sample, it was possible to consider the extent to which their intentions were put into practice. Intentions are defined here as what Expecting Parents stated they were planning on doing in the original interviews, whether this was their ideal or not. This is in contrast to preferences (the focus of Chapter 8) which are defined as an individual’s ideal scenario ignoring, as far as possible, questions of feasibility.

This chapter looks firstly at how the 25 cohabiting, heterosexual couples interviewed for this study ended up dividing parental leave and considers how this compares to trends observed in the literature. It then moves on to make similar observations for the division of paid work and childcare following the termination of parental leave.

## **Divisions of Parental Leave**

Parental leave in the UK can take the form of Shared Parental Leave (SPL), Maternity Leave and Paternity Leave (see Chapter 2 for a full outline of entitlements and restrictions). Couples in this

study utilised these forms of leave in a variety of ways, although some commonalities were evident. For example, reflecting national trends (Birkett & Forbes, 2019), women took considerably more leave than men. In most cases, parents were able to receive some form of statutory pay during these leave periods and some employers offered enhanced payments. Not all parents were eligible for these three forms of leave and pay, however, and this particularly affected those who were self-employed.

### ***Existing Parents***

The 17 couples of Existing Parents were asked how they had made use of parental leave at the transition to parenthood and for any subsequent children. The responses to these questions are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Existing Parents' use of parental leave

<b>Existing Parents</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Mother's parental leave</b>	<b>Father's parental leave</b>	<b>Child(ren) born since SPL introduced?</b>
<i>Couple A</i>	3	12 months both times	2 weeks both times	Yes (second child)
<i>Couple B</i>	1	9 months	2 weeks	No
<i>Couple C</i> <sup>11</sup>	1	6 months	2 weeks	N/A
<i>Couple D</i>	2	12.5 months both times <sup>12</sup>	2 weeks both times	Yes (second child)
<i>Couple E</i>	2	12 months both times	2 weeks both times	Yes (second child)
<i>Couple F</i>	1	12 months	2 weeks	Yes
<i>Couple G</i> <sup>11</sup>	1	12 months	2 months	N/A
<i>Couple H</i>	1	12 months	2 weeks	Yes
<i>Couple I</i>	2	12 months first time	2 weeks both times	Yes (second child)

<sup>11</sup> It transpired in the interviews that these two Existing Couples had had children outside the UK and were therefore subject to different leave policies. Their experiences of parental leave policy are not included in the subsequent analysis.

<sup>12</sup> Although the maximum duration of statutory Maternity Leave is one year, women had often accrued additional weeks of holiday entitlement.

		8 months second time		
<i>Couple J</i>	1	10 months (12 according to him)	2 weeks (unpaid)	No
<i>Couple K</i>	2	12 months first time 9 months second time	2 weeks both times (second time one week unpaid)	Yes (second child)
<i>Couple L</i>	1	12 months	2 weeks	No
<i>Couple M</i>	1	17 months (unpaid)	2 weeks	No
<i>Couple N</i>	2	3.5 months first time 7 months second time	2 weeks first time 5 weeks' SPL second time	Yes (second child)
<i>Couple O</i>	1	12 months	3 months (unpaid)	No
<i>Couple P</i>	2	9 months first time 8 months second time	2 months both times (first time additional Paternity Leave, second time SPL)	Yes (second child)
<i>Couple Q</i>	1	12 months	2 weeks	Yes

By far the majority (12/17) of Existing Mothers said they had taken the maximum leave available to them, which tended to be around one year. Those who took shorter periods were on leave between 3-10 months; although most of these women returned to work at around 9 months, which is when statutory payments end. One Existing Mother had not been eligible for paid leave and instead took a 17-month career break. Those who had had more than one child sometimes changed the amount of Maternity Leave they took the second time. In some cases, opting for longer (e.g. Couple N) and in other cases slightly less (e.g. Couple P).

All fathers who were eligible for the statutory two weeks of Paternity Leave took this and, echoing findings from Kaufman (2018) and Koslowski and Kadar-Satat (2019), some supplemented with annual leave (e.g. Couple E). Reflecting stricter eligibility criteria for men, several fathers were not eligible for paid leave due to being self-employed or not having been with their employer long enough. In these cases, some employers granted leave anyway, while

other fathers took unpaid leave or used holiday entitlements. For example, one self-employed father took three months out of work between contracts, but this meant he had no income during that period:

*I had a contract that was ending, it was like a hard end, I knew it wasn't going to renew, which was two weeks before, or a month before my daughter's due date. So I thought I'm not going to start something brand new, because usually the first couple of months are quite hard work and you have to show up. So I thought I'd wait until after she was born and take a month off maybe and then start looking for something. [...] It ended up being three months.* Existing Father O

Many of the self-employed fathers in this study used the flexibility associated with this mode of work to take longer leave periods than fathers who were eligible for paid Paternity Leave.

No Existing Fathers had taken SPL with their first child, but two made use of the policy when they had a second child. This is not a surprising finding, however, as many Existing Parents had their first child before 2015 when SPL was introduced (final column, Table 2). This was the case for Existing Father P, who took two months' Additional Paternity Leave with his first child, however with his second child he was able to take 5 weeks' of SPL. Existing Father N took 5 weeks' SPL with his second child. He claims that some of this was used to have a vacation with his partner while she was also still on leave: *'We thought [laughs] this was a way to get on holiday at the same time and maximise these entitlements'.*

It is important to note that there was some discrepancy between partners' reports of how much leave was taken (for example one father said his wife took 12 months' leave while she said she took 10). This could be related to issues of recall several years after leave took place and implies we should be cautious about reported use of parental leave, particularly in survey data or when relying on the response of only one partner (Geist, 2010).

### ***Expecting Parents***

In their first interview prior to the birth, the 8 couples of Expecting Parents were asked about parental leave intentions. The way in which these parents went on to use leave in practice was discussed in follow-up interviews 9-12 months later. In all cases at least one partner was still on leave at the time of the follow-up interviews. Since only 8 weeks' notice need to be given to employers for decisions about parental leave, length of leave periods was open to change. Parental leave outcomes for this group were therefore often firm intentions. These outcomes are



summarised in Table 3 and where parents were still undecided in their final parental leave outcomes this is indicated.

**Table 3.** Expecting Parents' parental leave intentions and practice

<b>Expecting Parents</b>	<b>Mother's intentions</b>	<b>Father's intentions</b>	<b>Mother's parental leave</b>	<b>Father's parental leave</b>
<i>Couple A</i>	9-10 months maternity  2 weeks paternity  Possibly some SPL	7 months maternity  2 weeks paternity + annual leave	9.5 months	2 weeks paternity  3 weeks annual leave  9 weeks SPL
<i>Couple B</i>	13 months maternity  2 weeks paternity	12/13 months maternity  2 weeks unpaid paternity	13 months	2 weeks unpaid leave (self-employed)
<i>Couple C</i>	12 months maternity  2 weeks paternity + annual leave	12 months maternity  2 weeks paternity + part-time work for 3 or 4 weeks using annual leave	12 months	2 weeks paternity then took approx. one day off a week for 4 months using annual leave
<i>Couple D</i>	9 months maternity + annual leave	In process of deciding Maternity Leave duration  2 weeks paternity + part-time work to use up annual leave	10.5 months	2 weeks paternity  1 or 2 weeks annual leave
<i>Couple E</i>	10 months maternity  No paternity (self-	12 months maternity  2 months unpaid leave	11 months (according to her) or 12 months (according to him)	7 months unpaid leave at time of interview (looking to start new employment)

	employed) but planning to take time out between contracts	between employment contracts		contract as soon as possible)
<i>Couple F</i>	12 months maternity	12 months maternity	12 months	1 week paid paternity
	1 week Paternity Leave + 2 weeks annual leave	1 week paternity + up to 3 weeks annual leave		2 weeks annual leave 2 weeks of half days
<i>Couple G</i>	No Maternity Leave due to redundancy. Does not intend to return to work.  2 weeks paternity + some long weekends using annual leave	No Maternity Leave due to redundancy.  2 weeks' Paternity Leave	[NO FOLLOW UP]	[NO FOLLOW UP]
<i>Couple H</i>	6-7 months maternity	In process of deciding Maternity Leave duration  2 weeks' paternity + annual leave	9-10 months (still undecided)	2 weeks paternity spread over 3 weeks

As with the sample of Existing Parents, most mothers in the Expecting Parents sample also intended to take the majority of leave available to them. Expecting Mothers took between 9- and 12-months' Maternity Leave and most fathers only took 2 weeks' Paternity Leave despite SPL having been introduced when these babies were born. At the time of the follow-up interviews, only Expecting Father A reported using SPL, taking the final two months of unpaid leave

following his wife's return to work after 9.5 months. It is important to note, however, that not all couples were eligible for SPL due to their employment situation.

As with the sample of Existing Parents, a number of fathers extended their two-week Paternity Leave with annual leave. For example, Expecting Father F's employer only offered one week of Paternity Leave on full pay, so he supplemented with annual leave rather than taking the second week on statutory pay (Kaufman, 2018; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). Again, there were also two self-employed fathers who had no right to paid Paternity Leave. Expecting Father B took 2 weeks' unpaid leave reflecting standard entitlements (*I mean that's the sort of standard paternity, so I just went with that really*), while the father from Couple E made use of the flexibility of self-employment to take a much longer leave period despite not receiving any form of pay.

*One of the advantages I've got I suppose being freelance, it means basically between contracts I can take time. I'm employed by my own company, so I have to sort of force myself to take leave because if I'm not working I don't get paid from a client. So, what I plan to do is take some time off [...] a few months.*

Expecting Father E

The use of a longitudinal methodology with this sample of Expecting Parents enabled a comparison between couples' intentions for the duration of parental leave prior to the birth and the outcomes 9-12 months later (when their children were between 5 and 11 months old). When it came to the division of parental leave, outcomes generally reflected intentions, however there were some deviations. Some parents said that when the end of their intended leave period came closer, they felt on reflection that it was 'too soon' and they did not feel ready to return to work. For one self-employed father, this was due to concerns about leaving his wife alone with their daughter, who was not sleeping well:

*I mean we looked at our finances and everything and thought it would be safer for us if I go back in October. But then when we were in September, I can't quite do the maths here, but she was about 8 weeks or something like that, I kept asking my wife, do you think you can cope on your own at the moment, given the fact that if she doesn't sleep and she only sleeps on us, then how does this work in practice? [...] I sort of said to [my wife] I just don't think I'm ready to go back yet.* Expecting Father E (follow up)

Similarly, another Expecting Mother had originally planned to return to work at seven months, but said time went too fast and she had yet to organise childcare by this stage:

*Yes well it went too fast! As in I hadn't really thought, it's only when you sort of think "oh she's nearly six months now and I haven't got round to sorting out childcare"! But also with working anyway you can take 12 months and you don't really have to, you are not obliged to say well I want to come back at this point or whatever, you can just take your 12 months and then after that year say right I'm coming back tomorrow kind of thing, or you know I'm back. It sort of takes that pressure off me having to make a decision about what I was doing.* Expecting Mother H (follow up)

Knowing she had the flexibility to change her mind, this mother still had not finalised her return-to-work date at the time of the follow up interviews. Her husband also changed his leave plans and took two weeks' paternity spread over three weeks rather than in one go, since the baby came unexpectedly early at a time when many of his senior colleagues were on holiday.

Expecting Father A took two months' SPL which was not presented as an intention at the first interview, although it was something the couple said they had discussed. Both members of this couple had extended discussions about sharing leave when prompted to reflect on this in the initial interviews and it is possible that this could have influenced their change in plans. This suggests that the combination of Existing and Expecting samples was important to balance out the effects of taking part in the study. Other factors which may have led to a difference between couples' intentions for parental leave and the amount taken in practice will be discussed in subsequent chapters. For example, a discrepancy between intentions and practice could be an indication of constraint, which is the focus of Chapter 7. The presence of discrepancies in intentions and outcomes also suggests that it may be hard for expecting parents to predict how much time they will need or desire away from work at the transition to parenthood. The concept of naivety and the difficulties this presents to forward planning are discussed in Chapter 6.

As in the sample of Existing Parents, there were discrepancies in partners' reports of amount of leave taken, but here it was also possible to observe differences in reported intentions. In particular, there were disagreements over how much annual leave fathers took to extend Paternity Leave (Couples D and F), and mothers' intended return to work date (Couples A and E). This indicates that recall can be an issue in interviews even when events are relatively recent. It also implies that decision making may be ambiguous and that couples may have limited discussion around intentions, which will be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

## **Divisions of Paid Work**

Return to work decisions encompass the longer-term division of both paid work and arrangements for (mid-week) childcare. This section looks at the employment arrangements couples decided upon when parental leave came to an end and a consideration of the complex assortment of childcare solutions follows. However, before moving on, it is important to note that parents reported changes in working hours, employers, occupation, location and availability of non-parental childcare options across the transition to parenthood and beyond, which had knock-on consequences for divisions of household labour. Consequently, work-family decisions are never final, and these interviews demonstrate that arrangements are often in a state of flux.

Furthermore, for Existing Parents, rich descriptions of employment status given in the interviews often did not tally with assumptions based on responses to the recruitment survey and standard definitions of part-time and full-time work based on weekly working hours. This study set out to investigate assumptions about the nature of decision-making, but it appears that even relatively straightforward assumptions about employment status could also require further scrutiny.

### ***Existing Parents***

Existing Parents were selected from a recruitment survey to represent a variety of working arrangements in proportions as close to the national landscape as the available respondents would allow (see Table 1 in previous chapter). The survey included questions about relative household earnings and working hours, and there was a considerable contrast in both before and after children (Table 4). However, as can be seen in Table 4, several couples (A, D, G, K and M) disagreed on who was the higher earner and so reported earnings should be treated with caution.

**Table 4.** Comparison of Existing Parents' paid working hours and earnings before and after children according to recruitment survey

<b>Existing Parents</b>	<b>Weekly working hours prior to children</b>	<b>Current weekly working hours</b>	<b>Higher earner prior to children<sup>13</sup></b>	<b>Current higher earner</b>
<i>Couple A</i>	Him: over 40 Her: 35-40	Him: over 40 Her: 16-24	Her (according to him) Equal (according to her)	Him
<i>Couple B</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: 25-34	Her	Him
<i>Couple C</i>	Him: over 40 Her: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Him	Him
<i>Couple D</i>	Both: over 40	Him: over 40 Her: 25-34	Equal (according to him) Her (according to her)	Him
<i>Couple E</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Him	Him
<i>Couple F</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: 25-34	Equal	Him
<i>Couple G</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: none	Him (according to him) Equal (according to her)	Him

<sup>13</sup> Women's accounts of relative earnings come from demographic questions which were asked at the end of the interview, as the initial recruitment survey was completed by fathers only.

<i>Couple H</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Equal	Him
<i>Couple I</i>	Both: over 40	Him: over 40 Her: 25-34	Him	Him
<i>Couple J</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: none	Him	Him
<i>Couple K</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Him (according to him) Equal (according to her)	Him
<i>Couple L</i>	Both: 35-40	Him: 35-40 Her: none	Him	Him
<i>Couple M</i>	Him: over 40 Her: 35-40	Him: 25-34 Her: none	Equal (according to him) Her (according to her)	Him
<i>Couple N</i> (only father interviewed)	Both: 35-40	Both: 25-34	Her	Her
<i>Couple O</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: over 40	Both: 35-40	Him	Him
<i>Couple P</i>	Both: over 40	Him: 35-40 Her: over 40	Her	Her
<i>Couple Q</i>	Both: over 40	Both: 35-40 hours	Him	Him

As can be seen in Table 4, reflecting the highly educated, professional demographic of the sample, the majority of Existing Mothers had previously been equal or higher earners but, in line with cross-national trends (Budig & England, 2001; Misra et al., 2011; Winslow-Bowe, 2006), most were earning less than their partners since having children. In a number of these cases, the women would still be earning more at a full-time equivalent salary but had moved to part-time work and it was therefore the reduction in hours rather than earning potential that led to the shift in higher earner status. In couples where the higher earner had not changed, the difference in salary was often marginal before children, but in the case of male higher earners the gap often increased substantially following children (Couples C, E, I, Q), reflecting research from Dias et al. (2018) that gender pay inequalities widen after the transition to parenthood.

As with earnings, common ‘motherhood penalty’ trends were also observed in employment status (Andrew et al., 2021; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000; ONS, 2013; Walling, 2005). Almost all women’s working hours were lower than before they had children, while most men’s remained the same. However, this reflects the fact that more couples were purposively selected from households where the woman is employed part-time or not at all than those with dual full-time earners (Table 1 in previous chapter). In fact, it would be more accurate to state that Table 1 represents the *assumed* household working patterns of Existing Parents, based on standard definitions according to a weekly working hours threshold (in this case, set at 35 hours for full-time status). During the interviews, it transpired that the way in which Existing Parents described their working arrangements did not always align with these assumptions. Table 5 compares household status according to working-hours data from the recruitment survey and self-categorisation in the interviews (a full comparison of each couples’ working arrangements according to survey data and self-classification can be found in Appendix 2).



**Table 5.** Discrepancies between classifications of household working pattern based on working hours and self-assessment

	<b>According to working hours in survey</b>	<b>Correcting for changed working hours in interviews</b>	<b>Based on self-assessment in interviews</b>
<i>Male Breadwinner</i>	3	2	2
<i>Standard 1.5 Earner</i>	9	10	12
<i>Dual Full-Time Earner</i>	3	4	1
<i>Dual Part-Time Earner</i>	1	0	1
<i>Part-Time Male Breadwinner</i>	1	1	1

In two cases, discrepancies in classifications were due to circumstances changing in the period between the recruitment survey and interviews (central column of Table 5)<sup>14</sup>. Existing Mother G had not returned to work following the birth of her daughter and they were therefore classed as a Male Breadwinner household at the time of the survey due to her reportedly working 0 hours a week, however during the interviews it transpired that she had recently moved into full-time work and so they were reclassified as a Dual Full-time Earner household. Couple N had been in a dual part-time arrangement since the birth of their son with both working 25-34 hours a week. However, just before the interviews, the father had moved to a full-time role and they were therefore reclassified as a Standard 1.5 Earner household.

These reallocations due to changing circumstances do not explain all the discrepancies between interview- and survey- based classifications. Those which remain all centre on the couples who had been chosen from the survey to represent those in dual full-time arrangements, whose working hours at interview tallied with those in the survey (Table 6).

<sup>14</sup> Changing working patterns were common. In particular, women often increased or decreased the number of days they worked after returning from Maternity Leave. Some (e.g. Existing Mothers B, F and N) had ‘eased themselves in’ to work by starting on 2 or 3 days and then increased to 4 after a period of time. Others started on 4 or 5 days (e.g Existing Mothers D and I) but found this was too much (sometimes due to the arrival of a second child) and reduced. Existing Mother M was on extended Maternity Leave and her husband was sole earner working four days a week, however previously they had both worked part-time.

**Table 6.** Employment status of the three ‘Dual Full-Time Earner’ Existing Couples

	<b>Occupations</b>	<b>Working hours</b>	<b>Self-assessed working arrangement</b>
<i>Couple O</i>	Him: Manager Her: Scientist	Him: 35-40 hours Her: 35-40 hours	Him: full-time (5 days) Her: part-time (4 days)
<i>Couple P</i>	Him: Police Officer Her: Lawyer	Him: 35-40 hours Her: over 40 hours	Him: full-time (5 days) Her: part-time (4 days)
<i>Couple Q</i>	Him: Doctor Her: Doctor	Him: 35-40 hours Her: 35-40 hours	Him: part-time (4 days) Her: part-time (4 days)

Existing Fathers O and P worked 35-40 hours a week across five days and identified as full-time workers. However, despite working similar or even longer hours, their wives described themselves as part-timers. Based on self-assessment of employment status, Existing Couples O and P would therefore be reclassified as Standard 1.5 Earner households. Existing Mother and Father Q *both* described themselves as part-timers despite both working in excess of 35 hours a week. They worked for the same employer and had both negotiated a move to what they termed ‘80% contracts’ when their daughter was born. They would therefore be reclassified as a Dual Part-Time Earner household based on their own descriptions of employment status.

On what basis did these parents, whose working hours would classify them as full-time according to most measures, consider themselves to be part-time workers? All four parents with an ‘ambiguous’ employment status said they had worked full-time before the transition to parenthood and had subsequently reduced their working hours for childcare reasons. As a result, these parents spent one weekday looking after their child on their own and, in Couples O and P, did more mid-week childcare than their ‘full-time’ working spouse. Experiences of unpaid work were therefore typical of assumptions about part-time working parents. Furthermore, these four parents described negotiating part-time contracts with their employers, as illustrated in the following extract:

*I spoke to [a senior member of staff] who needs to support the application if you’re going part-time. We also have a part-time advisor [...] and she had a lot of advice about the practicalities of it – money, training, what it’s like to be 80%, what it’s like to be 60%, what it’s like to be 50%, who you need to get in touch with.* Existing Father Q

This indicates that discrepancies in classification of employment status were not merely between academic definitions and individual understandings, but also workplace classifications.

Why did employers classify them in this way? In line with the highly educated demographic of this sample, these professionals had highly responsible roles in sectors with long working-hour cultures such as law, medicine and scientific research (first column of Table 6). Due to full-time working expectations being in excess of 40 hours a week in their organisations, when they moved to part-time contracts their working hours were still well above standard definitions of full-time work. Like many in part-time work, these parents also appeared to experience stigma and career penalties when they reduced their hours (Blackwell, 2001; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Moen & Yu, 2000; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Walsh, 2007). For instance, Existing Mother P, who had been working 65-80 hours a week as a lawyer before children and was now working in excess of 40 hours a week over 4 days, described moving off a trajectory to partnership when she transferred to a 'part-time' position following Maternity Leave: *'when you get to that partnership prospect, the idea that you can do that flexibly is not there at that level'*. Similarly, moving to part-time contracts disrupted the career progression of both parents in Existing Couple Q since this delayed their medical training: *'when I went part-time, I had three years of full-time training left and for each year that I did part-time at 80% that would extend my training by 3 months... As long as we're in training we move hospitals every six months, and it doesn't create a lot of certainty'*. Existing Mother O also implied she had experienced some stigma associated with her 'part-time' status, describing managers who *'frowned on'* flexible working and expected her to *'be more visible'*.

The lived experiences of these 'ambiguous' parents reflected many of the assumptions made about part-time working parents and also the experiences of other parents in the study who were unambiguously defined as part-timers: greater responsibility for mid-week childcare, reduced earnings, inferior career prospects and workplace stigma. Since they were also understood as part-time workers by their employers, classifying these parents as full-time following definitions based on working hours appears problematic. This indicates that that there may be issues with commonly used working-hour indicators to describe the experiences of part-time work. Parents' descriptions of employment status in the interviews suggest that it could be important to consider self-classifications<sup>15</sup> and industry standards in definitions of employment status, as well as number of working hours (Walling, 2007).

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<sup>15</sup> Although caution must be taken with self-classification measures in surveys, as these questions often specify particular working hours for each category. For example, questions on employment status in the BSAS that appear

## *Expecting Parents*

Most of the couples in the Expecting sample had one parent still on leave at the time of the follow up interviews so this was a period in which return to work decisions were still being finalised. Pre-birth intentions from the first interviews and firmer return to work plans from the follow-up interviews are outlined in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Expecting Parents' return to work intentions and practice

<b>Expecting Parents</b>	<b>Mother's intentions</b>	<b>Father's intentions</b>	<b>Mother's return to work</b>	<b>Father's return to work</b>
<i>Couple A</i>	Both: full-time	Both: full-time	Full-time hours over 4 days	Full-time
<i>Couple B</i>	Her: undecided, but wants to take second Maternity Leave as soon as possible  Him: full-time	Undecided – will think about it nearer the time.	Part-time (3 days)	Full-time
<i>Couple C</i>	Her: return to work, but undecided on full-time or part-time  Him: full-time	Him: full-time, but plans to work from home one day a week	Part-time (4 days – including one at home)	Full-time
<i>Couple D</i>	Her: full-time or full-time hours over 4 days  Him: full-time	Her: undecided  Him: full-time until Maternity Leave ends then may move to full-time over 4 days	Almost full-time hours over 4 days (reducing by 3.5 hours)	Full-time
<i>Couple E</i>	Both: full-time	Her: undecided	Full-time	Not in employment (looking for full-time work)

to involve self-classification include response options phrased as 'Full time (30+ hours a week)' and 'Part time (10-29 hours)'. (NatCen Social Research. 2017. British Social Attitudes Survey, 2016: UK Data Service.)

		Him: full-time with possibility of breaks between contracts		
<i>Couple F</i>	Her: part-time  Him: full-time (possibly one day from home)	Her: part-time  Him: full-time	Part-time (5 mornings)	Full-time
<i>Couple G</i>	Her: not in employment  Him: full-time	Her: not in employment  Him: full-time	[NO FOLLOW UP]	[NO FOLLOW UP]
<i>Couple H</i>	Both: full-time (hopes she will be able to do this over 4 days)	Her: part-time  Him: full-time	Part-time (4 days)	Full-time

According to the follow-up interviews, three Expecting Mothers (A, D and E) were returning to work full-time (or very close to full-time hours) and had all intended to do this prior to the birth. Expecting Mother E said she would have preferred to come back part-time but was not able to. Expecting Mothers D and A were condensing full-time hours into four days to allow one day at home looking after their child. Four of the mothers were planning to return to work on a part-time basis (B, C, F and H) and one intended to leave employment altogether (G). Expecting Mothers B and F were already working part-time before children and they both planned to return to the same working pattern when Maternity Leave ended. One of these mothers often used to work freelance to top up her hours to full-time, but she said she would probably not do this when she returned to work, at least initially (*‘Not just yet. Maybe eventually. I just need to see how it goes with him in the nursery and how I feel about that really’*). The other two mothers returning part-time had been full-time prior to having children and were therefore reducing their working hours and days. One had intended to do this and the other had hoped to retain her full-time hours but condense these into four days.

In all but one case, therefore, Expecting Mothers would spend at least one day off work for childcare reasons and, in most cases, this involved changing their working patterns. For most, reducing working days was associated with reduced income due to working fewer hours,

reflecting ‘motherhood penalty’ trends (Budig & England, 2001; Misra et al., 2011; Winslow-Bowe, 2006), however some mothers were able to avoid this by maintaining their pre-birth working hours across four days. Bearing in mind the findings from the sample of Existing Parents, it would be interesting to know whether these mothers would still be *perceived* as full-time workers once they took up these working patterns.

Expecting Fathers C and D also mentioned intentions to adapt their working days prior to the birth, but in follow-up interviews they said they had not done this in practice since their partners had reduced their hours and one partner working part-time ‘was sufficient’. Reflecting national trends for men to remain in full-time work when they have children (Biggart & O’Brien, 2010; Esping-Andersen et al., 2013; Hardill & Watson, 2004; Lundberg & Rose, 2002; ONS, 2013), no Expecting Fathers moved to part-time, therefore. However, like Existing Fathers, many had shifted their working hours and cut back on overtime so that they could spend time with their new family:

*I often feel like my best time at working, funnily enough, is between about 5pm and 8pm, and sometimes before [my son arrived], if I was on a bit of a roll, I would just stay at work at least until seven. But now that’s not really an option. So that sort of flexibility has gone, and I just do the sort of standard, nine or ten until six and then sort of head back home.* Expecting Father B (follow up)

*I would often work from home in the evening and at the weekends, just because I liked doing it [...] What’s really interesting is I don’t do that anymore. I don’t work in the evenings at all now basically. Here and there at the weekend I find some time and do what I want to do basically and it’s okay. My life hasn’t ended, my passion hasn’t changed, my ambition hasn’t changed, but I’ve just re-prioritised things.* Expecting Father F (follow up)

However, compared to their wives, these changes were rather minimal and did not involve negotiations with employers to reduce contracted hours or change the number of days they worked. Reflecting national trends, revaluation of working patterns was therefore left largely to women and there was a strong norm among these professional, highly educated mothers to work four days or less (Andrew et al., 2021; Fagan & Norman, 2012; Taylor & Scott, 2018). For the one mother who was working full-time hours over 5 days, she pointed out that this was not her ideal scenario.

## Divisions of Childcare

Closely linked to employment outcomes, another aspect of return-to-work decisions was how to arrange mid-week childcare. The results of these decisions for both Existing and Expecting Parents can be seen in Table 8. As mentioned in the previous section on paid work, all Expecting Couples had one parent still on parental leave at the time of the follow-up interviews and this meant childcare arrangements were not yet in place. Therefore, in these cases, responses are an indication of firm intentions rather than final outcomes.

**Table 8.** Existing Parents' mid-week childcare arrangements and Expecting Parents' firm childcare intentions (according to follow-up interviews)

<b>Couple</b>	<b>Number of weekdays being cared for by:</b>			
	<b>Formal childcare<sup>16</sup></b>	<b>Grandparents</b>	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>
<i>Existing A</i>	3		2	
<i>Existing B</i>	4		1	One day a fortnight
<i>Existing C</i>	5			
<i>Existing D</i>	5			
<i>Existing E</i>	3		2	
<i>Existing F</i>	4		1	
<i>Existing G</i>	5			
<i>Existing H</i>	2	1	2	
<i>Existing I</i>	3		2	
<i>Existing J</i>	A few mornings		5	
<i>Existing K</i>	3		2	
<i>Existing L</i>	Mornings		5	
<i>Existing M</i>	Mornings		5	1

<sup>16</sup> 'Formal childcare' includes all paid-for care, such as nannies, nurseries and childminders.

<i>Existing N</i>	3	1	1	
<i>Existing O</i>	4		1	
<i>Existing P</i>	4		1	
<i>Existing Q</i>	3		1	1
<i>Expecting A</i>	4		1	
<i>Expecting B</i>	3		2	
<i>Expecting C</i>	4		1	
<i>Expecting D</i>		4	1	
<i>Expecting E</i>	4	1		
<i>Expecting F</i>	5 mornings		5 afternoons	
<i>Expecting G</i>		[NO FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW]		
<i>Expecting H</i>	3	1	1	

As discussed in the previous section, some couples had one parent who did not work in order to provide full-time care and many parents (mostly mothers) worked less than five days a week in order to provide mid-week care. However, most couples relied on some form of non-parental childcare. There is no state childcare on offer in the UK and formal care is often oversubscribed and costly (De Henau et al., 2007; Harding & Cotel, 2018). As can be seen by the variety of responses in Table 8, many couples therefore relied on a complex assortment of carers, including parents, nannies, nurseries, childminders and extended family. This description of weekly routines from Existing Mother P illustrates how complex the patchwork of care providers could be:

*It's a kind of a hodge podge really. I don't work Mondays, so I have both boys on Mondays and [our eldest] goes to nursery. Then Tuesday to Thursday I do drop off with the boys to the childminder, we've got a childminder who looks after both of them and she takes [our eldest] to nursery in the afternoon and then picks him up. Then my husband picks them up at night and does dinner with them and puts them to bed. And then on Fridays I work from home, so I can do drop off and pick up.*



The main focus of this study is the key ‘anchoring’ decisions (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014) couples make at the transition to parenthood about parental leave, paid work and childcare, which set the scene for the long-term division of household labour. However, discussions about the day-to-day division of childcare inevitably came up in the interviews. Although these were gendered, with women responsible for the majority of daily childcare, men reflected that they spent more time looking after their children than their own fathers had (Sullivan, 2010) and there were rich descriptions of intimate and involved fathering (Dermott, 2008; Lewis & Lamb, 2007), particularly during evenings and weekends:

*In a typical day I will get her dressed usually whilst [my wife] is preparing breakfast. Quite often [she] has to shoot off to work in the morning, so once [our daughter] is down at the breakfast table, I’ll be the one who makes sure she eats it, then gets her ready for nursery, takes her to nursery, drops her at nursery and on average I’m usually the one that picks her up as well. [...] In the evenings it varies a bit, but usually when we get back from nursery again [my wife] will deal with making [our daughter’s] tea. Then we’ll usually play with her for a bit. And then when it comes to bedtime, we have a routine. So I will usually get her bedroom ready, get her bed clothes laid out, sort out her a drink of water and stuff whilst [my wife] is cleaning her teeth. I’m usually the one that gets her dressed for bed and then we take it in turns to read stories and that kind of stuff. So we’ve got a fairly good routine sorted out, which we both participate in.* Existing Father B

*I think for [my husband] he’s always been very clear that he’s not a babysitter, he is not helping mum out, he is the parent of our children and so we just work it out jointly. His care of our children is the same as mine, it’s not that mum’s best or anything, it’s a parent is best. So I think hopefully our kids [...] feel very clearly that mum and dad are interchangeable and can equally care for them.* Existing Mother P

In the past, the image of the father was that of disciplinarian, however nowadays it appears that fathers are more likely to see their parental role as being 'the fun one' (Dermott, 2008). Echoing other studies on childcare divisions (Craig, 2006), mothers appeared to take responsibility for the more confrontational and unpleasant aspects of parenting, while care by fathers was often confined to playing and entertaining, as seen in the following extracts:

*I almost feel like I’ve kind of just had all the good bits. Coming home and playing with her for a bit, putting her down, you know a few nappies or whatever, but I don’t deal with all the stress. And because we’ve gone exclusively breastfed at the moment, there is so much more strain on [my wife]. But actually, you know, I’ve tried so many times to lighten the load and it still comes back to every two or three hours she needs feeding.* Expecting Father H (follow up)

*I guess as a dad your role is more playful in a way because the mum from the start is a source of food (laughs) and is more present I guess because they are there during the day. So you find your role as a dad becomes more to entertain I guess, or help get to sleep or do bath time and more fun stuff I think.*

Existing Father F

Other quotes show that, even in more egalitarian families, it was predominantly women who took on the ‘mental load’ of parenting, which echoes the findings in the literature that this is one of the most persistently gendered aspects of domestic labour (Meier et al., 2006; Offer, 2014; Walzer, 1996):

*I go to work and I don't think about my family for eight hours and then I go home and then I do think about them lots. So, yeah, she is definitely more focused on the family. She is constantly thinking about, you know, things we need to go to; and parents evening meetings; and the fact that the kids have just grown out of clothes and we need to get some more of those; and arranging to go to a birthday party for one of the kids and things like that. So she is constantly thinking about those things.*

Existing Father K

*It's better now than it was. [My husband] runs all our finances, [he] now does the shopping, so we are more split. But if you are talking about who knows that [our son] has to take something in for show-and-tell on a Monday, that's me. So that planning aspect of knowing that it's wee Jimmy's party at the weekend and we need a present and get that in order, and all that sort of stuff. So we are split but I'm not going to deny that sometimes it feels as if it's me in the manager role in the household, but if that is the case then I don't micromanage and I'm quite good at delegation.*

Existing Mother P

As seen in the quotes above, and reflecting findings from other studies (Craig, 2006; Hearn & Niemistö, 2012), fathers were often portrayed as a helper and incapable of taking on a primary carer role. As a result of the disparities in use of parental leave noted earlier, fathers had not had as much opportunity as their partners to learn the intricacies of day-to-day life as a primary carer and it was striking that fathers spent relatively little time alone with their children (Craig, 2006). As such, fathers often framed their wives as the main caregiver who they looked to for guidance and approval: *I'd always double-check most things with [my wife], just to check is it right', I'm kind of a good number two, so I step up and take over when number one is burnt out'*. However, for some, being perceived as a less capable parent appeared to cause some resentment:

*I think there is a little bit of a cultural side of it, because certainly from schools and stuff the first contact is always with the mother. There is almost presumption that the mum can be trusted to plan things and stuff whereas the dad will probably just let them eat custard and shoot each other or something!*

Existing Father P

*I had [my daughter] all day, so [my wife] had a list left out for me. She left out her clothes, because obviously I wouldn't be able to choose the perfect clothes [laughs]. Existing Father C*

Some parents suggested that men were naturally less capable as parents and invoked essentialist notions of a maternal instinct to explain gendered divisions of childcare. However, reflecting Miller's (2005) study of motherhood, many women spoke about the difficulties they had encountered as a new parent and the new skills they had had to acquire, as can be seen in the following comments, suggesting that parenting is a learning process for women rather than instinctual:

*Both of us had no idea what we were letting ourselves in for and it's been like a wonderful mess of really not knowing what to do and turning to other people and the internet and friends and making it up as we go along. Expecting Mother C (follow up)*

*I know the children potentially better than [my husband], but then [he]'s worked and I've had them on my own so I've had to learn to cope with two children. [My youngest] is one and trying to understand a one-year-old is interesting, a three-year-old even more so! I probably know their tempers a little bit more so in some senses they are a little bit more relaxed. Existing Mother I*

Those fathers who had had extended periods of looking after children on their own through leave or part-time work also described this learning process, as seen in the extracts below, giving support to Miller's (2011b) argument that time and the opportunity to learn parenting skills are crucial:

*I think definitely with the eldest [taking Additional Paternity Leave made a difference] because it gave me the confidence. Prior to that my wife was on Maternity Leave, so even if I was looking after him at the time, she was still around, or she would at least be available to bail me out if it went wrong, whereas when she went back to work, [...] it was that kind of well you just have to get on with it now. Existing Father P*

*We're part of an NCT group [...] and some of the other fathers haven't bonded as strongly I think and not from not wanting to bond, but because the babies don't see the fathers as often. In those situations, the women have taken Maternity Leave and all of the men I think, except myself, have gone back to work quite soon. Sometimes they are scared by their fathers because they don't see them as much and the fathers struggle, because they haven't got the confidence, I think, of being around the baby and having enough cards up their sleeve to calm them down. You know, the little things that they can do to... And it's just I want to be at home as much as possible to see that. Expecting Father E (follow up)*

These comments indicate the importance of doing childcare alone, without a partner to fall back on, for building confidence in parenting skills and a parent-child bond.

Before closing this discussion of childcare, it is important to touch on divisions of housework since, although this is not a key focus of the study, the two are firmly intertwined (Hardill & Watson, 2004; Martinengo et al., 2010; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Schober, 2013a). While they were on Paternity Leave, fathers said they had increased their contribution to housework, as they felt it was a way they could make a contribution while their partner was occupied with feeding and recovering from the birth. However, beyond this period, mothers often described taking on a greater share of the housework, as seen in the following extract, since they were now spending more time at home than their partners due to the prevalence of long Maternity Leaves and part-time working for women:

*I am at home more, so it becomes my responsibility to do the weekly shop and do the washing and process life at home and do that five days a week and working hard. So I mean [my husband] does help with those things when asked and offers and definitely mucks in, but again that becomes my primary role, because I'm at home role.* Existing Mother K

A father also pointed out how easy it is to fall into the habit of ignoring housework when you can rely on someone else to do it for you:

*Yeah, there are definitely many things that [my wife] does that I don't do so much of and that's in large part a legacy of the fact that she's been off work for four years. She's been the full-time housewife, so, yeah, she is still at me for not pulling my weight with the laundry in particular! (Laughs.) I'm trying to get back into these kinds of things because it's awfully easy to be lazy when there is someone who is at home 100% of the time, it's extremely easy. I've hardly cooked a dinner in the last four years, because I get there and it's halfway done already and just jumping in at that point usually doesn't end too well.*  
Existing Father G

Reflecting Schober's (2013a) claim that women's contribution to housework increases at the transition to parenthood as a result of patterns established during Maternity Leave, mothers also described how they were more practiced at combining housework and childcare due to the time they had spent at home as primary carer and these patterns carried over once Maternity Leave ended:

*[My husband] can't really do two things at once very well. He's not so used to juggling logistics [like making dinner] and actually looking after them. So to do the logistics he needs at the moment a child free*

*period of time to sort the logistics out, whereas I'm used to having the kids around whilst doing the logistics.* Existing Mother D

*A bit of it was left over from when I was on Maternity Leave and I felt quite guilty about being on Maternity Leave and seeing [my husband] working hard and struggling with that. Not that I didn't think that I was working hard in my own way by looking after [my son], but I felt like the way I could help him the most out was by having everything sorted at home and then that's just carried on as I've gone back to work.* Existing Mother F

As can be seen from the comments in this section, although there were examples of fathers taking on a wide variety of domestic tasks, gendered behaviour pervades even in those households with more egalitarian divisions of paid work and childcare. The interview data also reveals the extent to which anchoring decisions about parental leave, paid work, and childcare set the scene for the day-to-day division of care and housework (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014). Taking extended periods of leave or moving to part-time work gives parents the opportunity to learn parenting skills and contributes to greater confidence in caring for their child, as well as awareness of the mental load involved in parenting. Spending more time at home also means those on leave or working part-time are more available to do housework while also being more likely to suffer if it is not completed. It is therefore possible to see how women's greater share of routine childcare and housework tasks are in part a by-product of the prevalence of long Maternity Leaves and mothers in part-time work discussed earlier in the chapter.

## Summary

This chapter has set the scene by examining the ways in which the couples interviewed for this study organised the division of parental leave, paid work and childcare when they became parents. Some parents showed evidence of 'undoing gender' (Deutsch, 2007) at the transition to parenthood, particularly among Existing Parents who were purposively selected for their egalitarian employment arrangements. A number of fathers were working part-time or had been in the past, and there were also examples of fathers taking extended periods of unpaid leave for childcare, often thanks to the flexibility of self-employment. Three fathers had made use of the new SPL policy, including one Expecting Father who had not intended to do this prior to the birth. Even in households with more traditional working arrangements, fathers were actively involved in the practical care of their children, particularly in the evenings and at weekends.

However, reflecting common trends in the literature, most couples had moved to more traditional, gendered divisions of labour following the transition to parenthood (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; Dias et al., 2018; England, 2010; Sullivan, Gershuny, & Robinson, 2018). The parents who took substantial periods of leave and reduced their working hours were predominantly mothers, even though the majority of women within these highly educated, professional couples had been equal or higher earners relative to their male partner before children. These employment outcomes went on to create a gendered day-to-day division of domestic labour and impaired women's career progression and earnings. Even in more egalitarian households, women were responsible for the more onerous and unpleasant childcare tasks. In particular, 'the mental load' of ensuring that the family is organised (Walzer, 1996) fell overwhelmingly to mothers.

In fact, these interviews suggest that behaviour may be even more traditional than presumed in the literature. An unexpected finding was that even some parents working in excess of 35 hours a week described themselves as part-time workers and were understood as such by their employers. They experienced the stigma, career penalties, reduction in income, and increased domestic work associated with part-time working (Blackwell, 2001; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Moen & Yu, 2000; Nightingale, 2018; Stone & Hernandez, 2013), but would typically be categorised as a full-time worker in large-scale quantitative studies due to their working hours. This study set out to scrutinise common assumptions about work-family decision making processes, however these findings indicate that even apparently more straightforward assumptions about behaviour may be problematic. This constitutes an important contribution to the literature since it indicates that standard definitions of employment status based on working hour thresholds may not reliably reflect common understandings or lived experiences, particularly among professionals in industries with long working-hour cultures.

This novel finding also contributes to understandings of the state of the 'gender revolution' (England, 2010). Recent studies using standard definitions of employment status based on working hours have suggested that dual full-time earning families are on the rise in the UK and interpreted this as a sign of moves towards an 'egalitarian equilibrium' (Connolly et al., 2016). However, if these discrepancies between academic and popular understandings of part-time work are replicated at a national level, more parents may be understood as part-time workers and traditional, gendered divisions of labour may be more prevalent than such studies imply – suggesting a slower pace of change towards gender equality than currently presumed. However,

these findings do not necessarily imply a more negative perspective on advancing gender equality. The presence of one ‘ambiguous’ father suggests that more men could also be understood as part-time workers than current measures indicate, particularly since industries with long working hours tend to be male dominated (Cha, 2013). These findings thus highlight the importance of using qualitative analysis to ensure that quantitative measurement is valid.

The following chapters will explore the processes that led to these work-family outcomes and the preferences and constraints that influenced couples’ decision making.

# 6. Making Work-Family Decisions

The previous chapter revealed that among the 25 couples interviewed for this study, mothers took on the lion's share of childcare and housework. Women were also much more likely to take extended periods of leave and reduce their hours in work at the transition to parenthood. However, these are not novel findings and statistics indicating the prevalence of gendered behaviour at the transition to parenthood have been dissected in the literature for several decades (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Connolly et al., 2016; Sullivan, 2000). Yet, despite this scrutiny, Chapter 3 highlighted that relatively little is known about the decision-making processes that lead to gendered employment, leave and childcare divisions at the transition to parenthood (Carlson & Hans, 2020; Miller, 2012; Wiesmann et al., 2008). The findings outlined in the present chapter seek to address this gap and respond to calls for greater investigation in this area (Carlson & Hans, 2020; Warren, 2011).

This chapter starts by adding to the small body of existing literature on the dynamics of work-family decision making by examining the process of making 'anchoring' work-family decisions (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014) at the transition to parenthood among heterosexual couples in the UK, focusing in particular on the extent to which the divisions of parental leave, paid work and childcare are actively discussed. This analysis builds on existing studies to consider the *content* of any discussions, with an exploration of what is discussed and what remains unsaid. The second half of the chapter takes the analysis a stage further by examining the *mechanisms* behind a lack of negotiation and makes a novel contribution to the literature by identifying four factors which prevent couples from discussing work-family decisions: assumptions and expectations, naivety, risk of tension and lack of impetus.

## Decision-Making Processes

Despite a dearth of empirical investigation, many *assumptions* are made about the dynamics of work-family decision making (Carlson & Hans, 2020). For example, rational choice perspectives propose that decisions are made in order to maximise income for the whole family, thus implying that couples calculate the relative costs of various work-family scenarios. Meanwhile, a



relative resources perspective claims that men do less domestic work because their higher earnings give them greater bargaining power, which relies on the assumption that couples actively negotiate the division of paid and unpaid work (Blood & Wolfe, 1965; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). However, there is little concrete evidence to support these assumptions. In fact, as outlined in Chapter 3, the few studies which explore couple work-family decision-making processes in depth suggest that very little active negotiation or discussion takes place (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Rijken & Knijn, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989; Wiesmann et al., 2008).

Some theorise that active negotiation or ‘explicit decision making’ - understood here as an ongoing, dynamic process of negotiating preferences to arrive at outcomes (Wiesmann et al., 2008) involving ‘purposeful dialogue by both partners over an extended period of time’ (Garcia, 2015:106) – is more likely to occur in periods of change and when decisions have major consequences (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). This study provided an opportunity to investigate whether this is the case. As seen in Chapter 1, fundamental lifestyle shifts occur at the transition to parenthood and decisions made at this time about divisions of parental leave, paid work and childcare have been found to have long lasting consequences (Barnes, 2015; Connolly et al., 2016; Kan et al., 2011).

### ***Did couples discuss work-family decisions?***

Some couples, both in more egalitarian and in more traditional arrangements, reported rigorous and involved negotiations about the division of paid work and childcare. In some cases, starting well before the pregnancy.

*We talk about it on a regular basis, about how we will manage work going forward and what opportunities versus how to make sure the kids are okay and well looked after, and what have you. And we do talk on a regular basis about him dropping down and me stepping up. But so far it kind of works.*  
Existing Mother P

*We’d kind of talked about things like that before we had kids. So you have those conversations about how many kids do you want and all those kind of things. Would we work, would we not work, would we want to share?* Existing Mother J

Supporting claims by Evertsson and Nyman (2009) that sharing work-family responsibilities requires greater negotiation, it appeared that conversation was an essential part of achieving a

more equal division of parental leave. An Expecting Father mentioned in his follow-up interview that SPL could have been an option in hindsight and reflects on why they did not make use of the policy, concluding that they would have needed to start discussions much earlier on:

*We would have to have, sort of, much earlier on had a serious think about [sharing leave] and decided to go for it from the offset. Whereas we said, “oh well let’s see how it goes” and then realised that things were already in place. So, that kind of confirmed our laziness in not thinking about it properly. That sort of trapped us in.* Expecting Father C (follow up)

We can see here Miller’s (2011a) concept of ‘falling into gender’. While it is easy to fall into more traditional gender roles, egalitarian arrangements seem to require in-depth planning and discussion well in advance of the transition to parenthood. For example, one Existing Mother whose husband had made use of shared leave policies with both their children, said they had had several discussions about work-family decisions long before she had become pregnant: *We had lots of conversations about is this really for us. If we want children how is this going to work and what have you. We had a lot of fear before it all fell into place.*

However, despite the importance of discussion, reflecting other qualitative studies which find limited negotiation about work-family decisions (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Rijken & Knijn, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989; Wiesmann et al., 2008), most parents reported brief, unstructured and superficial conversations with their partner about parental leave and return to work arrangements:

*I think it’s just something my wife generally said her preference would be to [go back part-time] and I think it was one of those things we didn’t spend a huge amount of time talking about. It was more just, “yeah, that could probably just about work”.* Existing Father F

*We never really... that I recall, sat down and said we’re going to talk about this and worked it out. [...] The fact that I don’t remember any particular discussions, might indicate that we could have focused on it a bit more.* Existing Father A

While conversation may have been limited, the interviews somewhat challenged existing theories of implicit decision making by revealing that parents had deliberated on decisions individually, even though they had not discussed this with their partner. The following extracts show evidence of personal reflection:

*[My wife] tends to plot things and think about things and frankly worry about things a lot earlier than I do. So [chuckles] quite a lot of the time she’ll bring up the topic and the trouble is when she tends to bring it up, she’s almost certainly got a solution in mind. So quite often it’s a case of just sort of*

*sometimes nodding along politely and agreeing. But no that sounds cruel doesn't it, that's an exaggeration. I mean it was sort of, I think [my wife] had had a discussion in her head first and then we had a discussion ourselves.* Existing Father B

*I think I just said how it was going to be [...] I knew that I didn't want to go back to work five days a week, but equally to feel like we could maintain enough of a salary to keep us able to pay our mortgage and to cover nursery fees, we - well I - made a calculation in my head that four days a week was what I needed to go back to work to do.* Expecting Mother F

As indicated in these comments, women appeared more likely to have performed this kind of personal deliberation and also seemed to have a more dominant role in work-family decision making. Couples reported that women tended to be the ones to bring up and lead any discussions about the division of parental leave and longer-term work/care solutions and, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, women's preferences were also prioritised in work-family decision making during the transition to parenthood. As in Wiesmann's (2010) Dutch study, rather than being actively involved in decision making, fathers often took on the role of supporting women's choices:

*Well to be honest, I'm not sure that he expressed a preference because I have been quite clear in a lot of things about what I want to do, like staying at home, which colours everything else. So, he has gone along with me for a lot of things.* Existing Mother L

*I think it's down to the mother, she's the one who's just given birth to the baby. So, I'll let her make that decision.* Expecting Father F

*I think we discussed it as a couple, but I think he was quite happy to take my lead. I don't think he really had a strong preference. I don't feel that he wanted me to stay at home, I think he knew that probably wasn't the best thing for me to stay at home five days a week. So, I'm not sure he was really too fussed as long as I was happy with what I was doing.* Existing Mother O

This was also the case in couples who divided leave more equally. One father had taken just over a month of SPL when his wife returned to work and he explains that she was instrumental in driving that decision:

*I would say that was a situation where [my wife] was much more leading. I think to be honest she was much more proactive than me, thinking ahead to how things might work out. I think, to be honest, left to my own devices I would probably have defaulted into our previous pattern. But, I think... yeah... [my wife] is quite aware of the different options [her employer's] offer in terms of how you take your leave. I*

*think she knows quite a few people there who have been on Maternity Leave and done it in different ways. I definitely remember her coming home and saying 'oh, you know, we could do it this way or that way'. So, she definitely drove that decision.* Existing Father N

These findings therefore suggest that that women are key in driving egalitarian divisions of labour and challenge assumptions that men have more agency in heterosexual couples, at least during the transition to parenthood. This echoes the findings of Wiesmann et al. (2008) and McKay and Doucet (2010) that men defer to their wives on decisions about the division of labour at the transition to parenthood, but contrasts with Twamley (2021) and research conducted during other transitions, such as when couples relocate for work or experience redundancy (Becker & Moen, 1999; Garcia, 2015; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; Pixley, 2008b), where men were found to take the lead or have the final say in decision making. These contrasting findings on whether men or women take the lead in work-family decision making could be due to the arrival of children having a particular impact on gendered power dynamics. Gendered norms and assumptions about parenthood, discussed later in the chapter, associate primary responsibility for children with women, suggesting that decisions relating to childcare are their domain (Dermott, 2008; McKay & Doucet, 2010). Although this may grant women more agency in work-family decisions at the transition to parenthood than at other times, gendered assumptions do not mean that this necessarily leads to more equality and women are left with the mental and emotional labour of decision making (McKay & Doucet, 2010). Furthermore, decisions made at this time seem to contribute to women having less agency later on, since long Maternity Leaves and reductions in working hours lead to a decline in women's human capital and financial contributions to the household (Friedman, 2015), which appear to shift couple power dynamics. Findings outlined in Chapter 8 indicate that beyond the transition to parenthood the women in this study had less sway and therefore agency in work-family decision making.

The findings of this study also challenge the theory that explicit decision making occurs in periods of change and when decisions have major consequences (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989), since the majority of couples reported limited discussion and decisions appeared to have been made implicitly or unilaterally in many cases. As limited discussion about work-family decisions between partners was reported, it is particularly important to consider what topics *were* covered in any conversations that took place and explore what remained unsaid.

## ***What was the content of work-family discussions?***

Related to the fact that women tended to take the lead in decision making, initially conversations focused on the duration of Maternity Leave and whether couples were able to afford for mothers to take latter unpaid portions. As leave progressed, discussion turned to decisions about the mother's employment situation. Most women planned to return to work, but there was uncertainty about working patterns, with most assuming these would change: *'We knew that I probably wouldn't go back full-time, but we didn't know the exact arrangement that that would take'*.

Alongside discussions about women's Maternity Leave and return to work, the other topic that couples spent time deliberating was the complexity of childcare solutions. Since nationalised childcare provisions are not available in the UK, there was no obvious default for parents to fall back on and so childcare arrangements were a decision that required active discussion for most dual-earning couples. Parents described weighing up a wide range of possibilities including nursery, childminders and grandparental care.

Women's employment and non-parental childcare were not only the primary focus of work-family decision making, at times it appeared that these were the *only* topics of conversation. The following comments indicate that parents could not envisage the need to discuss anything else and had not considered options which deviated from the most common scenario of women taking maximum Maternity Leave and returning to work on reduced hours.:

*It was just a question of were we happy for the kids to go to nursery or did we want her to stay at home full-time? But we just thought it's probably good for their development to be in nursery at their age, to get them used to it for school and get them mixing with other kids.* Existing Father E

*We'd discussed that she would have at least 12 months' maternity and then towards the end of that period she would look to finding a job [in the area we recently moved to] and just see what the market was like. Then if it was full-time work we would have used my parents to assist with childcare so that the practical arrangement of what we wanted was still there. So they'd only go to nursery for part of the week, rather than full-time.* Existing Father I

Although there was awareness of SPL and some Expecting Parents - often men - said they had considered privately whether they would make use of the policy, discussions as a couple about the policy appeared to be superficial and many referred to SPL being spoken about in a 'jokey' way, perhaps reflecting the sensitive nature of conversations about sharing leave:

*Yes, [we did consider SPL] I think in a joking way it was. We know it is a valid option, but yeah, we never really took it any further and never delved into the detail of it any more than him laughing that he'd love ten months off.* Expecting Mother D

*It just kind of, it sounds silly, but it's the traditional thing isn't it that you hear the mum is off rather than the dad. But it was an option and I think we did discuss it, but only in a jokey way.* Existing Mother H

In some cases, couples had not discussed the option of sharing leave at all, as revealed in the following comments:

*I've heard of Shared Parental Leave. Yes, I have heard about it and there's plenty of people talking about it, but I think it comes under the same topic as we discussed before, it's just simply not something that my position and job role will allow for, given the relative state of our income and careers and ages and so forth. So it's not something we really discussed or entertained.* Expecting Father G

*I would imagine her only view [on SPL] would have been if I wanted to rather than her wanting to go back to work earlier. But I don't know, we never really discussed it, so that is probably speculating a little.* Expecting Father H (follow up)

Although mostly limited to superficial conversations and personal consideration, there is evidence that couples did engage in *some* deliberation about sharing parental leave. However, in contrast there was very little discussion reported about men's longer-term working patterns or their work-family preferences and ideals:

*It would be nice [for me] to work less of course. It still might be a possibility. To be honest, it's not something we've thought about [...] I've thought about it a little bit, but not really seriously.* Expecting Father H

*No, we haven't really talked about [my husband's ideal work and childcare situation]. I think he'd be very happy with our parents looking after the child if they could, but again he would never push that. But yeah, I don't know apart from that.* Expecting Mother D

Lack of consideration about fathers' working patterns was not necessarily due to parents being against the idea of men changing or reducing their hours. Often parents were surprised when this was brought up in the interviews and it had not occurred to them as an option (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). For example, one Existing Mother laughed when asked whether they had considered her husband going part-time or reducing his hours and reflected that: *'he could do that now, but it's never something we've discussed, ever'*.

There were a few couples who mentioned discussions about the possibility of fathers reducing their working hours, although it was unclear how seriously they had considered this option (*we never really got into practical detail about how we would make that happen*). What couples did seem to have considered when it came to men's employment, was a reduction in (often informal) overtime and the possibility of shifting working hours to allow fathers to take on childcare tasks in the mornings and evenings:

*What we have discussed and we need to discuss more is, rather than him working fewer hours or part-time, is him having a more consistent role in the logistics of their lives, so drop-offs, pickups, to carve out time like that. So, we have discussed that, but we haven't discussed reduced days or anything.* Existing Mother D

*Especially since the news of me being pregnant, I've noticed that change in [my husband] where he's mentioned to me that "oh, I'm thinking of coming home now at 5pm, I want to make sure I set my times in this way that I'm home a bit earlier, so that I'll be able to spend a bit of time with the baby". He's mentioned to me that he'll shift his hours a little bit so he might go a bit earlier than usual in the morning, so that he can come back home early.* Expecting Mother F

This indicated a consideration among highly educated professionals of adapting *when* fathers worked, but not *how much*. As we have seen, decision-making focused on the ways in which women would adapt their careers to allow time for childcare, but in contrast couples spoke about finding ways for fathers to 'fit parenting in' around work (Miller, 2011b; Rose et al., 2015). Similarly, there were some references to women 'fitting earning in' as though it was an added bonus or hobby, for example one Existing Father spoke about his wife retraining so she could do some work '*if she wishes*' and to get '*a bit of income in if she chooses to*', whereas paid work tended to be considered as unavoidable for fathers. This reflects studies which find differing attitudes towards the necessity and value of men and women's work (Grunow & Veltkamp, 2016; Kroska, 2008; Pixley, 2008a; Steil & Weltman, 1991; Warren, 2007).

A final important topic of discussion, and one that appears to have received little attention in the literature (see Wiesmann, 2010 for an exception), is whether couples actively analyse the costs involved when weighing up various work-family scenarios. Bargaining and rational choice perspectives rely on the assumption that couples calculate the effects of relative incomes and understand which household arrangement will make most economic sense, however it is unclear whether this occurs in practice (Carlson & Hans, 2020; Garcia, 2015). Couples appeared to be

acutely aware of who earned the most and conversations about money were mentioned, in some cases with explicit reference to cost analyses, as can be seen in the extracts below:

*We just basically looked it all up [about childcare] and then sat down and decided. A lot was driven by economics and at the same time as well, while we were doing the figuring out about childcare, we were also figuring out how flexible working would affect our income and things like that.* Existing Mother P

*[SPL] was something we did discuss [...] but then when we discussed it and we went through it and worked out our finances and stuff, we realised that it wouldn't really benefit us with him being at home, or using some of that leave from my side. We figured out that with our savings over that year - hopefully we'll have some savings! - that we'll be okay for those few months' unpaid leave as well.* Expecting Mother F

However, it was often hard to gather whether financial implications were assumed or had been actively confirmed.

Associated with the limited consideration of alternatives mentioned earlier, it also appeared in many cases that calculations centred on whether couples could afford their *preferred* arrangement rather than weighing up the financial benefits of multiple scenarios. For example, this Expecting Father was frank in his follow-up interview that he had not considered whether SPL would have made sense financially:

*I didn't really think about [SPL] from the financial perspective either how that would have worked. I mean in hindsight maybe we could have. [My wife] actually got pregnant just after she had started a new job, so she didn't qualify for their maternity scheme, which is just the way it fell really. It was bizarre that it fell that way, just luck of the draw or whatever. So maybe it would have been a little bit better financially, but I don't know.*

This challenges rational choice theories (Becker, 1981) since decision making did not appear to be driven by a reasoned comparison of possible outcomes and the most cost-effective scenario was not necessarily considered. Even where multiple scenarios were compared to each other, the preferred or chosen options were not always the most sensible from a financial point of view. In fact, what 'makes sense' financially turned out to be a very subjective concept, as will be seen in the next chapter.



## Factors Preventing Discussion

This study supports the findings from previous research that negotiation and active discussion are an important part of achieving an equal division of labour (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989), but that explicit negotiation often does not take place (Carlson & Hans, 2020; McKay & Doucet, 2010; Miller, 2012; Wiesmann et al., 2008). Some parents appeared to regret not having discussed work-family decisions more, which begs the question: what stops couples from having discussions about parental leave and subsequent working patterns? Four key factors emerged from the interviews: assumptions and expectations, naivety, risk of tension and lack of impetus.

### *Assumptions and expectations*

Parents often implied they had come to decision making with strong expectations or assumptions that guided their behaviour and made discussion appear unnecessary. Decision making processes have been found to be strongly influenced by what is perceived as possible (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). This is seen in comments from couples that assumptions about constraints had led them to discount options, such as men working part-time, because they did not think this would be permitted or practical. They implied that discussing these unviable scenarios was unnecessary, as illustrated in the following exchange:

Clare: *Was there any discussion about [your husband] reducing his hours?*

Existing Mother H: *Not really. I think the automatic thing these days seems to be the mum, doesn't it really? But because [my husband] does have a busier job than m(Simonson, 2008)e, because he works slightly longer hours, he was finding it difficult to fit his work in, so it would have been even worse if he was to reduce his hours by a day. So yeah it made sense for me to be more flexible.*

Clare: *Was that something that you both kind of just implicitly understood, or is it something that you actually talked about?*

Existing Mother H: *I think it was implicitly understood, yeah.*

However, echoing the findings of Kaufman (2018) and Brescoll et al. (2013), often these assumptions had not been tested. An Existing Mother whose partner had taken three-months' unpaid leave from work when her child was born said she would never have considered this to be an option unless her husband had mentioned it:

*I think he suggested [taking unpaid leave], because I think for me I didn't think he would ever have done that and it's not the norm for any of our friends, or for people that we know that have been able to do that [...] I think it wouldn't have ever entered by mind that he would be able to do that, not for that period of time anyway.*

Constraints and the assumptions parents make about what is possible when it comes to work-family decisions are discussed in more depth in the following chapter. However, it is clear that, in order for active decision making to take place, couples must perceive there to be options to choose from (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Greenhaus & Powell, 2016; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989).

As well as causing parents to perceive certain options as implausible, normative assumptions also had a strong influence on decision making by providing a default for parents to follow, effectively eliminating the need to discuss alternatives (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009). When considering possible scenarios, Greenhaus and Powell (2016:89) suggest that decision makers are likely to contemplate the 'most obvious or familiar courses of action' first and only move to more 'novel or creative courses of action' if initial options are deemed unfavourable. According to these interviews, work-family and parenting norms in the UK are gendered and appear to dictate that the most obvious course of action for couples in this demographic is for women to take on the primary carer role and therefore be the one to take parental leave and reassess their working patterns when they have children, while fathers remain full-time:

*I think I had assumed, and it's panned out that [my husband] thought the same - that it is a woman's role to look after the children and he would go out and earn the money. I think that would have been in the rudimentary terms of what he would consider the automatic thing we would have done, and I didn't have any views to counteract that; so that's just what we did. Existing Mother K*

*I'm not sure how comfortable I would be being the breadwinner. I'm not sure if that is something that he's thought of in a great deal of, you know a great lot of thought, just because as I said it's social convention and it's the way that our relationship was set up. Expecting Mother G*

When it came to decisions about mothers' employment, there was some indication that norms are becoming less traditional, as it was generally not the assumption that women would remain at home. Many mentioned that these expectations stemmed from observing what others had done at the transition to parenthood. Whether to return to work did not, therefore, appear to require a great deal of deliberation or discussion, as can be seen in these extracts:

*My mum worked, so I think I had always assumed that I would keep on working and that I would never be a stay-at-home mum. I think I always thought that but beyond that I never really thought about it too much I don't think. I think I've just thought I would always work actually.* Existing Mother F

*[My husband and I] were always at the top end of the achievers at school and you work hard, you go to university, you get a job, you have a career, and so I guess I never thought anything different really. I just always assumed that [I would return to work]. My sister, she's got three children, she's always gone back to work in between her children. I think I only know one person that works [with me] that hasn't gone back to work after their kids, it's more the unusual thing.* Existing Mother A

However, there was a strong assumption that returning to work for mothers would be on a part-time basis if possible and, again, this was often based on what others had done:

*When I got pregnant and was pregnant, people were saying oh are you coming back part-time, it was almost expected that I would, whereas I think [my husband's] colleagues would have been very surprised to hear that he'd be going back part-time. Do you know what I mean? That there wouldn't have been that expectation.* Existing Mother B

*When [my wife] got pregnant it was "okay you're going to go part-time", it was something we always knew that would be the route that we picked. We'd seen how well that worked for other people.* Existing Father C

There was a strong expectation that going part-time is something that *only* mothers would do, which accounted for limited discussion of men adapting their working hours. Reflecting findings from Bass (2015), women were much more likely to mention that they were encouraged to anticipate and plan for changes to their working patterns at the transition to parenthood, often many years before they became pregnant. This means women had a considerable head start on considering their leave and employment arrangements and explains why they appeared to have engaged in more personal deliberation than men. This is reflected in the following comments from an Existing Father who spoke about the fact he had not considered changing his working hours:

*I never anticipated working part-time, I suppose is how I think about it. Maybe rightly or wrongly [laughs] I partly assumed that my wife would do it, which in this case it worked out okay, she was more than happy to. So yeah, I guess there was partly an assumption on my part. [...] I guess it was such a deep-rooted assumption, I just never considered the possibility that we'd do it any other way. [...] So it wasn't a conscious decision of I think I should probably be the one that works. It's, almost, I never considered it or considered an alternative.*

As can be seen in these extracts, interviewees had tended not to question gendered parenting assumptions and, as alternatives were not considered, it is unsurprising that couples end up ‘falling’ into traditional gendered roles (Miller, 2011a). An Expecting Mother reflected on the fact that people can be oblivious to the gendered norms and assumptions they hold unless they are given reason to examine them:

*It wasn't until we sat and talked about how we wanted our lives to go that I realised that I wanted to be married before we had kids and I didn't realise actually how important that was to me until we were talking about it. So, it makes you realise that you're quite old fashioned or traditional if you like when you realise things like that about yourself. (Laughs.) [...] [My husband] always said to me that he feels that he should be seen as the provider, which again harps back to those traditional things that perhaps you don't realise until you vocalise them.*

Finding such gendered, normative assumptions was rather surprising among this group of highly educated professionals, who had all disagreed with the survey statement that ‘a man's job is to earn money and a woman's job is to look after the home and family’. It is commonly reported in the literature that those with high levels of education have more egalitarian attitudes, however these findings indicate that traditional gendered norms can be powerful even for this demographic. These norms create a perception that work-family decisions only apply to women and explain the lack of couple negotiation and focus on mothers' behaviour and preferences in decision-making conversations. Women had more opportunity to lead negotiations and act without consulting their partner because decisions made at this time were seen to affect them more, as reflected in these comments:

*So I mean we did talk about things a lot, but because I'm the one that stays at home suddenly I'm the one DOING it and then it takes the emphasis away from him. Existing Mother L*

*Yeah, we considered [SPL], but it's... Yeah, it's kind of just all on the mother isn't it. It all depends on how long [my wife] wants to take really. Shared Parental Leave, it's good, but I don't know... I think it's down to the mother, she's the one who's just given birth to the baby so I'll let her make that decision. Expecting Father D*

However, the fact that there was widespread awareness and some consideration of SPL suggests that legislation can challenge these norms by indicating the possibility of other options and giving legitimacy to the idea that parental leave decisions also affect men. Experiences of taking leave also have the potential to change assumptions about long-term working patterns and encourage consideration of alternatives from the norm. One Expecting Father mentioned in his follow-up interview that his experiences of taking one day off a week to extend his period of

Paternity Leave had led him to consider the option of going part-time: *'I guess I've never envisaged going down to four days a week, so that wasn't ever sort of in the plan. It's sort of more fairly recent, since having done a lot of last year like that'*.

## ***Naivety***

When parents acknowledged, in hindsight, that their decisions had been led by assumptions, several wondered if they should have discussed work-family decisions in more depth:

*I suppose because neither of us had spoken about [who would adapt their working patterns], it was just an assumption. Really what we should have done is sit down and be more honest about it all. The hardest thing in a relationship is to talk about the situation.* Existing Mother I

These regrets were reflective of a lack of awareness among expecting first-time parents about the strong risk of 'falling into gender' at the transition to parenthood (Miller, 2011a) and the importance of discussion and planning for avoiding this (Wiesmann, 2010). As seen in the following quotes from Expecting Parents, most of these highly-educated professionals implied that equality is socially desirable and, like participants in Wiesmann's (2010) study, they saw no reason to doubt that the equity they perceived currently in their relationships would continue into parenthood:

*I think that the stereotype is for a woman to stay at home and look after the children and do all the cooking and the cleaning for the family and look after the husband when he's home, I think that is really archaic. And it's certainly not the kind of relationship that we've got at the moment, so I can't imagine it would be something that we would then actually have when we have children.* Expecting Mother C

*Well [my husband] and I have a very equal relationship, if that makes sense. He's brilliant with kids, so I expect that he'll be ... we'll just kind of support each other basically. Obviously at the beginning if I'm breast feeding then it's a little bit more on me, but I expect that we'll share it as much as possible really.* Expecting Mother A

However, many Existing Parents (and also Expecting Parents in their follow-up interviews) reported surprise at the difficulties involved in sharing following the birth:

*I think we should have done our research more about it, having spoken to some mums who have done Shared Parental Leave after, it seemed actually it's slightly more complicated than we had thought.* Expecting Mother C (follow up)

*[My husband] was going to take the Additional Paternity Leave. We were going to do six months each for the first year. Because I thought, "well I'll breastfeed for six months, that will be fine". But I had no idea that that's just not how it works. You don't just one day say, "here's a bottle".* Existing Mother M

*I think definitely before I was the one who was more career focused and, before we had children, we even talked about him being a stay at home dad. But now he thinks, he can't really think of anything that would be worse. (Laughs.) He's done a couple of days at home and didn't massively enjoy it.* Existing Mother D

The answer to the question of why couples do not discuss one of the most important decisions of their lives may then be that decisions about divisions of parental leave and paid work at the transition to parenthood are not commonly perceived as having substantial import. This naivety is echoed in research by Ely, Stone, and Ammerman (2014) in which Harvard Business School alumni were asked about their expectations when they graduated and this was compared to their current work and family situation. The results showed that the majority of women had anticipated that their career would be equally as important as their partners, but also assumed that they would take on the majority of childcare. Given this unrealistic combination of expectations, it is not surprising that women's hopes for egalitarian careers were not borne out.

Some Expecting Parents were aware of their own naivety and reflected that things might be different following the arrival of children, as seen in these comments:

*I think both of us are going into this quite blind, (laughs), because obviously it's our first child and none of our friends have started having kids yet.* Expecting Mother C

*Who knows [whether Paternity Leave will be long enough], I've never done it before so I don't know whether two weeks is ample time or not enough. I don't really know yet.* Expecting Father G

*I have no idea [what becoming a parent is going to be like]. I'm purposefully avoiding reading. I haven't read any baby books because I just want to see what my instinct tells me, and just see how I am without any external influence if you see what I mean.* Expecting Mother B

However, it was precisely this sense of having 'no idea' what parenthood would be like in practice that prevented Expecting Parents from having in-depth negotiations and discussions. How can couples discuss eventualities and complexities that they are unaware of? Perhaps reflecting the content of popular advice manuals and antenatal services, couples demonstrated

considerable awareness and concern about childbirth and breastfeeding, but little about negotiating work and childcare, the long-term consequences of work-family decisions or how to maintain equality in a relationship post-parenthood. Unless parents are explicitly encouraged to interrogate and discuss the intricacies of sharing and are aware of potential setbacks, then it is very easy to stumble into a traditional arrangement (Miller, 2011a; Wiesmann et al., 2008).

Contributing to the lack of awareness about the active negotiation required for sharing, is the fact that couples may never have had an explicit need to coordinate decision making before children. Couples without children often have quite separate responsibilities and independent lives even when cohabiting (Domene et al., 2012). Household chores are often a source of argument, but can be ignored to some extent (Barnes, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2012) or outsourced and tasks are easier to break up: *'I do the cooking, he does the finances'*. Childcare, in contrast, cannot be put on hold, is unpredictable, encompasses a wide variety of interdependent tasks, requires consistency and involves regular moral judgements (Barnes, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2012). Couples may have differing views on how often the bathroom needs cleaning, but this potential for disagreement is nothing compared to the minefield of varied and competing views about the best way to parent. One Existing Mother discussed how she and her partner had very different views on her desire to practice 'attachment parenting', for example:

*I'm the kind of parent that if she cries, I pick her up and it's all very intensive. And I'm not sure that he was comfortable with how much 'attachment parenting' I was doing. I think perhaps sometimes he might have felt like just put her down for goodness sake and let her cry, or something like that.*

Raising a child may be the first task that couples intend to undertake as a team and therefore they are likely to be unpractised in the daily negotiation and combined decision making this involves. Traditional separate spheres can represent the path of least resistance not only because of deeply entrenched gender norms reflected in the assumptions and expectations discussed earlier, but also because, in a situation where each partner specialises in either paid work or the home, they are free to manage their own realm as they see fit without the need for constant compromise and negotiation (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). The potential for conflict and tension in these negotiations is also a reason why couples may be reluctant to discuss and negotiate work-family decisions.

## ***Risk of tension***

An Existing Mother's comment that '*the hardest thing in a relationship is to talk about the situation*' hints that discussion is not always easy, particularly if there is potential for conflicting opinions or preferences (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). So far in this chapter, we have seen that rejecting gendered assumptions and sharing work-family responsibilities requires continuous, effortful negotiation. However, this type of negotiation can be risky, as it opens up the possibility of arguments and turbulence in the couple relationship (Wiesmann, 2010; Wiesmann et al., 2008).

Fear of creating tension was particularly important in explaining why fathers' work-family preferences were rarely discussed. One Expecting Father assumed most men would be interested in taking more parental leave, but echoing research finding that men lack a sense of entitlement to leave (Brandth & Kvande, 2018), he indicates that they may be reluctant to voice these desires for fear of offending their partner or encroaching on her right to leave:

*I can't see a father initiating that conversation, especially if you've got to put things in place before the baby's born. So having that conversation with a mother-to-be who's pregnant as well, it's kind of like I wouldn't want to go there! I think if you're just going to your wife or girlfriend 'do you want to share your maternity', I don't know. You're saying it there 'your maternity', it is theirs. You might get the wrong reaction. So I think that's probably why you wouldn't approach the subject.*

The in-depth consideration of ideals and priorities that follows in Chapter 8 indicates that these fears may be well-founded, as women implied that they were grateful that their partners did not dictate what they should do and some even expressed hostility towards the idea of sharing parental leave, suggesting that maternal gatekeeping can occur prior to the birth of children.

Reflecting many previous studies (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004), these middle-class professional women often reported feeling in a double-bind when it came to work-family choices, with both egalitarian and traditional behaviour coming with a risk of stigmatisation:

*It feels quite pressured in some ways in that somehow you have to defend your position whatever you decide to do. So these stay-at-home mums almost apologise for being stay-at-home mums and working mums apologise for being a working mum. So you think well I don't know quite what society expects because both positions you end up apologising for.* Existing Mother B

However, the interviews also suggest that fathers experience a similar 'catch 22' in terms of voicing their preferences. If a man's ideal is to take on a traditional provider role, it could be risky to suggest to his educated wife suggest she abandon the career she has invested so much



time in and risk being branded misogynistic or controlling. Meanwhile, if an expecting father has more egalitarian preferences and wishes to be equally involved in childcare, he may also find voicing this to be risky since it implies minimising the mother's opportunity to practice 'good' intensive mothering and spend as much time as possible with her child. Current parental leave policy in the UK makes voicing egalitarian desires particularly risky for men, as in order for a father to take more leave, the mother must first agree to relinquish her Maternity Leave (Twamley, 2021). Furthermore, men with more egalitarian values may also more be likely to support feminist discourses of a woman's 'right to choose' and may feel uncomfortable pushing for their own preferences in a domain where women are perceived to have more entitlements (Brandth & Kvande, 2018). Reflecting the complexities for men in navigating pro-feminist positions (Holmgren & Hearn, 2009), deference to a partner in work-family decisions may consequently be the only 'socially acceptable' behaviour for expecting fathers. If this is the case, it does not place women in a particularly advantageous position, as they must ultimately take on the burden of balancing the conflicting demands of intensive mothering and feminism (Budts et al., 2016; Niemistö et al., 2021; Wiesmann et al., 2008; Wong, 2017). In a scenario where men feel unable to voice their desires, egalitarian behaviour can only occur if women press for it.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, many parents commented that they had 'joked' about alternatives that strayed from the typical scenario of a long Maternity Leave followed by the woman reducing her hours at work. This could be interpreted as couples not taking alternatives seriously or finding them odd, however in the context of a desire to avoid conflict, humour may have been used to as a way to test the water or dispel tension. Both members of one Expecting Couple mentioned that they had discussed SPL 'in a jokey way', but the Expecting Father explained he had been given information about the policy by his employer and appeared to have a genuine interest in investigating the option. His partner's rather negative reaction to the suggestion meant he did not pursue the topic further and she remained unaware of his genuine interest in sharing. Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) indicate that jokes can be used as an opportunity to put forward ideas in a 'safe' way, but they do not necessarily lead to direct discussion about the conflict or decisions at hand.

The transition to parenthood represents a significant test for any relationship. Partners are likely to rely on each other more than they ever have before and, as such, this is a time of considerable vulnerability. It is therefore understandable that those embarking on this transition would be keen to maintain a harmonious relationship and wary of creating conflict. Fear of consequences

means couples are only likely to bring up these conversations when they are unavoidable or there is a clear impetus.

### ***Lack of impetus***

Lack of awareness about the magnitude of decisions about the division of parental leave and paid work following the transition to parenthood, meant that the catalyst for initiating and directing conversations about work-family decision making tended to come from external pressures. Echoing findings from Wiesmann et al. (2008), long waiting lists for childcare providers compelled parents to consider their options and preferences about non-parental childcare well in advance. Meanwhile, the need for women to inform employers about the pregnancy, the intended duration of leave, whether they would return to work and, if so, their confirmed return to work date created a dialogue about what was possible from the employer's perspective and encouraged decision making and discussions as a couple about Maternity Leave and women's working patterns, as indicated in the following extract:

*I think what may have happened is that at six months my wife goes back for like a check-in, to meet the managers, and she has to start planning what she wants to do or start having the conversations about flexible working and moving to five to four days. So that was probably the initiator.* Expecting Father  
O

This provides some explanation for the focus on non-parental childcare and women's working arrangements in decision making conversations, noted earlier in the chapter.

However, there was a lack of equivalent catalysts to prompt reassessment of men's employment situation. The introduction of Paternity Leave and now SPL appears to have created some impetus for men to discuss leave options with their employers and partner. However, with Paternity Leave only lasting two weeks, there was no need for employers to organise cover (Kaufman, 2018) and, as such, fathers did not need to give notice well in advance: '*I haven't actually got round to telling work, so I don't know the exact details of what paternity options there are. I'm assuming that it's the normal two weeks*'. As can be seen from the comments of this Expecting Father, the lack of impetus to talk to employers about leave contributed to untested assumptions about constraints that inhibit discussion (see the following chapter and discussions above about assumptions in decision making). Unlike Expecting Mothers, whose physical signs of pregnancy necessitated conversations with employers, impending parenthood could remain invisible for men (Burnett et al., 2013).

When it came to longer-term division of paid work, gender disparities in external catalysts were even starker and prompts for discussion and deliberation about men's working patterns were almost non-existent. After many months out of work taking on new childcare responsibilities, the end of Maternity Leave was a time at which many women reassessed their working patterns. However, as seen in the following comments from Existing Parents, since most fathers returned to work after very short periods of leave, there was no obvious point at which men would reconsider their working patterns and opportunities for joint decision making about the household division of paid work and childcare were limited:

*With [my husband] having already gone back to work sooner than I had, like a whole nine months before I did, maybe that was why it didn't really come up in conversation for him to take time out, because I was off for the year and he was already back to work.* Existing Mother O

*There was no disagreements on it as such. I think it was more, it was also more of a default in that I kept on working full-time while [my wife] was off for the maternity so it was always assumed I would continue with that and then generally the case that she would go for about four, four days a week. There was no huge discussion about it.* Existing Father F

Furthermore, whether a parent had taken extended leave could have a considerable effect on their habits and priorities, which created another impetus for reconsidering working patterns. Unlike most men, women had already modified their working arrangements significantly and had already accepted some form of penalty to career progression so adapting working hours following Maternity Leave did not require as much of a mental shift. Some Existing Fathers reflected on the fact that they have not had a reason to reassess their attachment to work in the same way as their partner:

*Her career if you like got disrupted a bit almost before children. So I think from that point of view she was already in the head space of she was more prepared to work part-time and make that sacrifice.*

Existing Father K

*You have a couple of weeks Paternity Leave, but it's the kind of thing that's business as usual I guess, you're not making the change. I guess for the mother you took the time off, you made a work change anyway, but I guess as the dad your life has changed, but your work situation is kind of going on as it was before I guess.* Existing Father F

The fact that women's careers and earning potential had already been affected or even damaged also led to a 'sunk costs' logic where couples argued men should not make changes to their working patterns to avoid the risk of 'ruining' both careers. Echoing Wiessman's (2010)

‘gendered kick-off’ process, during long Maternity Leaves couples had also become used to fathers being the full-time worker while their partner cared for the child(ren). This reflects the literature suggesting that once a status quo has formed, it is difficult to change (Barnes, 2015; Grunow et al., 2012; Kan et al., 2011) and provides some indication as to why this is the case. This also provides an explanation for why very few couples had discussed the possibility of men adapting their long-term working patterns.

## Summary

This chapter has focused on responding to the first research question: How do heterosexual, cohabiting couples in the UK make decisions about parental leave and the longer-term division of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood? In particular, it has addressed the question of whether couples actively discuss or negotiate work-family decisions and, if not, why this is the case. The findings challenge the idea that explicit decision making takes place even when routines are upset and decisions have considerable consequences (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). Despite the magnitude of the decisions being made at this time, and their long-term impact on the division of caring and earning responsibilities (Barnes, 2015; Grunow et al., 2012; Kan et al., 2011), results echoed studies examining daily decision making (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Rijken & Knijn, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989; Wiesmann et al., 2008) and found that lack of discussion and implicit decision making was also a feature of anchoring decisions.

However, in-depth interviews revealed that *individual* deliberation did place, particularly among women. This was associated with frequent reports of women taking the lead in couple decision making, and discussions when these took place. This runs contrary to assumptions about men or higher earners having more agency in couple negotiations (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996; Pixley, 2008a; Twamley, 2021), but does not mean women had genuine freedom of choice, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Greater agency was also not necessarily a positive for women since the responsibility of decision making often fell to them alone. Reflecting this, when couple conversations on work-family decisions were reported these tended to focus on women’s leave taking and return to work decisions, as well as the non-parental childcare solutions that would enable this. Some deliberation was noted about sharing parental leave, but there was little to no consideration of fathers adapting longer-term working patterns or of men’s work-family preferences.

Contributing to understandings of the mechanisms behind these findings, this chapter then turned to possible *reasons* for a lack of discussion and women's dominant role in decision making. Firstly, Expecting Parents appeared to approach the transition to parenthood with engrained expectations, based on gendered normative assumptions and observations of others, that women would take on the primary carer role through long Maternity Leaves and reduced hours in work. This default plan of action removed the need to discuss alternatives and gave the impression that decision making fell to women alone.

Secondly, naivety about the risk of 'falling into gender' (Miller, 2011a) meant that Expecting Parents were unaware of the degree of active discussion required to maintain the equality they had been used to thus far in their relationship into parenthood. Existing Parents came to realise that sharing childcare and paid work goes 'against the tide' and therefore requires planning and considerable effort, however this awareness often came too late when the status quo had become entrenched. Even those with strong motivation to share struggled with conflicting priorities and wished they could have anticipated these hurdles in advance.

Thirdly, some parents hinted that they had avoided discussion due to fears of causing tension within the couple relationship. Men reported feeling reluctant to voice their own parenting preferences due to the assumption that mothers had the primary right to care and should be given first priority in work-family decisions as a result. Expectant mothers were therefore unaware of any interest their partner may have had in sharing leave and discussions tended to focus on her behaviour. Couples come to rely on each other more at the transition to parenthood and so it is not surprising that they are particularly keen to avoid creating conflict at this time.

Finally, discussion about work-family decisions among couples appears to rely on external catalysts. Requirements to report pregnancy to employers and long nursery waiting lists forced expectant parents to consider how they would proceed with women's employment and non-parental care. However, there was very little impetus encouraging consideration of men's employment situation, particularly in regard to reducing their hours in paid work for childcare. Unlike Paternity Leave and now SPL, which legitimise men's leave taking and to some extent encourage discussion of men's behaviour at the transition to parenthood, there was nothing to

encourage couples to consider men's longer-term working patterns. In contrast, long periods of time away from work made changes to women's working hours appear natural at the end of Maternity Leave. Although the UK has one of the strongest 'right to flexible working' policies in the EU, normative assumptions gave the impression that this applied only to women and that employers would not allow men to reduce their working hours.

These findings attribute lack of discussion less to limited time resources than previous studies (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989) and give an indication of mechanisms that are specific to the transition to parenthood. In particular, it was noticeable that new parents do not give much thought to the long-term consequences of decisions about divisions of parental leave, paid work and childcare and are not encouraged to think about these decisions strategically before or after they have children. The reason why lack of explicit decision making was found even for these anchoring decisions may therefore be because they are not perceived as being major decisions. The thesis now moves on to consider the context in which these decisions are made.

# 7. Constraints to Sharing

Existing research on inequality in the division of paid work and childcare points to the many practical constraints that restrict parents' choices and prevent them from achieving a more equal division of labour. This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of parents' accounts of obstacles to sharing, the ways in which these constraints were experienced in practice and how they shaped decision-making processes about parental leave and paid work at the transition to parenthood.

Four practical (or 'material') constraints to sharing parental leave or paid work responsibilities more equally, which have been commonly cited in the literature, came up in the interviews: finances, employment, work-family policies and reproductive bodies. In addition, another material constraint emerged that has received less attention in the literature: location and its association with the availability of social support. Finally, cultural constraints relating to gender ideology and parenting norms also emerged from the interviews. Although these barriers to sharing have been identified in previous studies (e.g. Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Bittman et al., 2003; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Horne, Johnson, Galambos, & Krahn, 2018; Kaufman, 2018; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), the ways they were confronted in practice did not always follow assumptions laid out in the literature. The analysis of these in-depth interviews from a duality perspective (Giddens, 1986; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008; Sen, 1992, 1999), which focuses on parents' agency alongside the impact of structure, problematizes understandings of constraint by indicating that the ways in which individuals experienced and responded to these barriers was not universal and, in some cases, constraints can be overcome.

## Finances

Finances are commonly identified in the work-family literature and popular media as a key reason for lack of sharing (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Kaufman, 2018; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Topping, 2017; Twamley & Schober, 2019). Parents in this study were also quick to present finances in their accounts of decisions about the division parental leave and paid work, and this was one of the most commonly cited constraints to sharing. These are a few of the ways in which more traditional, gendered arrangements were framed as an economic necessity:

*If you go forward a year and you think about nursery costs and things like that, you need to have a decent wage coming in to be able to afford it. So if I had gone three days a week and my wife had gone back to work, we would be worse off than we are now.* Existing Father K

*To be honest, [reducing my hours] is not something we've thought about and it would be quite an economic hit to reduce to four days a week for me.* Expecting Father H

*I think you have to weigh somewhere the income. If the income that we were both earning was equal, then maybe you would have tapped things more equal. But it's not equal, I earn a reasonable amount more than my wife was earning, so you have to preference [me not reducing my hours] in this instance.*

Expecting Father G

Couples were particularly concerned about finances at this period of transition, as the arrival of a baby brings new expenses and formal childcare is costly in the UK (De Henau et al., 2007; Harding & Cottel, 2018). Often explanations for men not taking SPL and continuing in full-time work were linked to their higher earning status and their salary was perceived as more important to the couple. Likewise, as seen in the quotes above, many implied it was logical for lower earning women to specialise in childcare and reduce their hours in work. These accounts therefore appear to support a rational choice explanation for the gendered division of household labour and echo the extant literature on work-family constraints (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019).

However, although most mothers were lower earners in this sample of highly educated professionals, the majority of had been higher or equal earners prior to having children. A financial explanation for a lack of sharing could still apply here in the case of parental leave, since gender inequalities in paid leave provision (discussed below) mean it could still make more financial sense for women to take leave even if they are a higher earner, however this does not explain the disparities in longer-term working patterns. Furthermore, although income was commonly cited here and in other studies looking at work-family decisions as the main reason for parental constraint, the interviews indicated that how finances were understood and experienced in practice varied considerably. One Existing Mother hinted that although finances may be presented as the primary form of constraint, the reality is often more complex ('that's how I justify it in my head, anyway'):

*I think my husband was earning more than me, so it made sense that if one of us was going to sacrifice salary that it would be the person who earned less, so that was me. That's how I justify it in my head, anyway.*



As seen here, interviewees were not always clear how much their partners earned (*'I think my husband was earning more'*) and, as noted in the first findings chapter, partners did not always agree on who was the higher earner in the couple. While finances were often portrayed as an insurmountable obstacle to men taking extended leave or working part-time, the use of a duality framework revealed a novel finding that couples made considerable efforts to overcome other financial barriers and were not always concerned with maximizing household income. There were many examples of couples saving in order for women to be able to take as much leave as possible – including unpaid portions – or to reduce hours in paid work. This was even the case in couples where women were the higher earner, as can be seen in the following quotes:

*I earn more so we would have had to consider things and we're having to save to cover for the months that I am on statutory for mortgage payments and so on. But it was really my decision. I think we would have struggled and done a whole year off and bundled holidays on to the end if I'd wanted to.* Expecting Mother D

*From a financial perspective that does mean that there will be a chunk at the end when she will be without either occupational or statutory maternity pay and we are starting to think about how do we save enough now for that, so that when that time comes, we can at least feel comfortable.* Expecting Father F

As well as challenging the rational choice assumption that couples seek to maximise household income, a bargaining perspective is also unable to explain this behaviour since higher earning women negotiated for *more* childcare. This supports claims by Sullivan (2013) that theoretical explanations for divisions of housework cannot be applied straightforwardly to childcare, since this may be perceived as a more desirable task - at least at this stage of making parental leave decisions.

Comments relating to *'really, really wanting to take the full year'* in the last extract above, suggest that overcoming financial constraints may be closely linked to preferences, which will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter. Although it was most commonly mothers' preferences that led to overcoming financial constraints, saving also took place to enable one Expecting Father to take an extended period of leave. As can be seen in the following quote from his wife in her follow-up interview, his desire to share was also highlighted as an important reason for this:

*I think we've always kind of had in the back of our minds that if we were to have children that [my husband] would want to be around. I think it's just always been how it was. So he'd saved that money especially for it, so that we could take the break in salary. I don't know how we decided, I think it's just*

*something that's always, just it's always been something that he wanted to do. I think you know obviously if I had a much better paid job, he probably would take a lot longer off and happily be a stay-at-home dad now.*

However, this father was in the less common situation of being self-employed and so his extended period of leave was entirely unpaid. This suggests that the combination of mothers being obliged to relinquish Maternity Leave in order for their partner to take advantage of SPL and fathers' wariness of causing tension (see previous chapter) is a more significant barrier than finances to uptake of SPL. The fact that this father was motivated to overcome financial constraints also highlights the importance of concerns about how fathers' leave-taking will be perceived in the workplace. When self-employed fathers took extended leave, this was often in the form of time out between contracts, rendering their leave-taking comparatively invisible and therefore reducing the risk of stigma or penalties at work (Allen & Russell, 1999; Humberd, Ladge, & Harrington, 2014; Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003).

There was also evidence to suggest that the entire concept of a financial barrier was subjective and linked to differing priorities and goals (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). In some cases, finances were only framed as a constraint if the option was perceived as unaffordable. Bearing in mind that this was a relatively privileged demographic of highly educated professionals who were not struggling to make ends meet, in some cases parents decided to 'go without' to allow fathers to have more involvement in childcare:

*At the time when I was going back to work it felt really awful to think she'd have to go to nursery four days a week. And then we sat down and worked out if we could afford for [my husband] to go part-time at 80% as well. And we could afford it, so he thought he'd ask about going part-time. We didn't actually think he'd be allowed, but we thought this might be a good opportunity to try and readjust our work-life balance as a family, so we went for it. Existing Mother Q*

*Now that I've had to stop work, [my husband] is still working four days a week, which is great because we have three-day weekends, but it's crap because we have 20% less income. If he was on a full-time...but you know, you pay your money you take your choice. It's really important for us to have him involved with the children and it's important to us not to live to work. Existing Mother M*

*If I work and [my wife] works then of course we've got more disposable income. But then it comes to this question, how much disposable income do you really need? It would be good to have some saved for a*

*rainy day and everything, but the most important thing is really our family and that we've got enough money, but at the same time we're doing stuff that interests us.* Expecting Father E (follow up)

In other cases, however, any scenario that would reduce the overall household income was presented as untenable. Following rational choice assumptions (Becker, 1981), these parents prioritised maximising earnings. For example, an Existing Father in a traditional 1.5 earner household said that he felt unable to achieve his 'ideal' dual part-time arrangement due to financial constraints, but also stated they would do 'quite well' financially in this scenario:

*If we both did four days a week and if we had done that, hopefully my wife would probably be, she wouldn't have fallen as far as she has in her career, she would still be earning as much as she was four or five years ago. I might be a bit lower, but between us we'd do quite well. But when I think forward to what we want to do for our children, practically it probably wouldn't work. In my current job, I do benefit for being here five days a week. So if I wasn't constrained, yes it would be nice and things would be better [if we both worked four days], but I do feel constrained and that's because of what I want to do for my children in the future, because I have to maximise my output if you like.*

These differing perspectives on reducing income reflect Himmelweit and Sigala's (2004) observation that parents have different positions towards affordability and indicate that what is deemed possible depends on each individual's criteria for financial security. Some parents even referred to explicit thought processes or negotiations regarding their financial priorities and the level of financial 'disadvantage' they were willing to put up with, such as this Existing Mother in a traditional 1.5 earner household:

*So if he was like 'I want to reduce my hours', I'd be like 'fine, let's look, we need to make sure we can afford... or what standard of living do we want to have and then can we afford it'.*

However, overcoming constraint was not just about some parents being willing to 'make do' or sacrifice income. What 'makes sense' when it comes to maximising income also appeared to be a subjective concept based on goals and priorities (Greenhaus & Powell, 2016). For example, rather than focusing on current costs and benefits, some parents considered long-term financial outcomes and prioritised investment in earning *potential*. A part-time working mother of three worried about the cost of sending three children to nursery and considered reducing her hours further. However, she ultimately decided against this because she feared the long-term financial cost to her career would be greater, as there was a strong possibility she would not be permitted to increase her hours again in the future.

The most striking examples of the subjectivity of financial constraints and what ‘makes sense’ financially came from couples where the woman was the higher earner. Their financial justifications for employment decisions were often diametrically opposed to the maximising income/rational choice explanations used to justify (male) higher earners not taking leave or part-time work (Becker, 1981). For example, in contrast to arguments made about fathers not taking leave for financial reasons, one higher earning Expecting Mother suggested it was self-evident that her earning status meant it made more sense for her to be the one to take more leave:

Clare: *You were mentioning that you were the higher earner, would it have made any sense financially for him to have taken some of the time off?*

Expecting Mother D: *Yeah, it could of. To be honest, I don't know how it works, if he has to look into his maternity and paternity rights. His may have been better or worse, but obviously with my salary being more we just didn't delve into it any further.*

Another Existing Father mentioned his wife’s higher earning status as a reason *for* her working part-time:

*My wife went back four days a week, so part-time, and again it was partly financial. My wife earns more money than I do, so her salary is more important to the house than mine is. But also, she didn't want to give up work and stay at home full-time.*

In her interview, his wife also reasoned that it made more sense for her to go part-time on the basis that she could lose more of her salary and still provide a considerable contribution to the household income:

*It made more sense for me to drop down because I would still be paid quite a lot, whereas 20% for him is a big cut and also, you've got all the other consequences of that.*

The ‘other consequences’ of her husband’s salary decreasing did not appear to be taken into account in more traditional male breadwinner households. As such, this justification focuses on maximising the household earning *potential* rather than total household income. This contrast in the logic applied when men and women are higher earners implies that financial constraints are understood in a context of gendered expectations about men’s and women’s earning responsibilities (Kaufman, 2018; Kroska, 2008; Warren, 2007), which will be considered in more depth later in the chapter. As seen in the Existing Father’s justification above, if gendered expectations mean the perceived alternative for higher-earning mothers is not working at all (Taylor & Scott, 2018), then it ‘makes sense’ for her to work part-time (*‘But also she didn't want to*

*give up work and stay at home full-time*). In couples where men were the higher earner, however, full-time working was portrayed as the default and therefore this was the perceived alternative to part-time employment. In this comparison, full-time work was seen to make more financial sense. This example reflects the tendency to compare to same sex peers when considering what is normal, acceptable and fair (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; England, 2010; Hochschild, 1989) and demonstrates that giving up employment is still the yardstick against which mothers' behaviour is judged (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004).

Overall, these findings highlight the subjective nature of financial constraints and the importance of perceived alternatives in decision making, which was a finding that was replicated across the different forms of constraint to sharing.

## Work-Family Policies

Policy constraints mentioned in the interviews focused on the amount of parental leave and pay available to parents, which varied considerably and posed some serious constraints to sharing childcare more equally and taking time out of work following the birth. Furthermore, many parents in this study were not entitled to paid leave due to the length of time they had been working for their employer or because they were self-employed. Reflecting national policy, the variability in leave entitlements and payment levels was also highly gendered, with women reporting greater access to paid leave than men.

Fathers who qualify for Paternity Leave are only guaranteed one or two weeks' leave and employers are only required to pay statutory rates. Most fathers were offered full pay by their employers for these two weeks; however, one Expecting Father was offered full pay for one week, but only statutory pay for the second. He decided to use annual leave instead (Kaufman, 2018; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019) and, as seen in this extract from his follow-up interview, he says his decision was based on principle as much as financial concerns:

*[Paternity leave was] not enough, yeah not enough by any means. I think it was very interesting because even though financially I could have taken the whole two weeks of paternity, I just didn't like the fact that you can't even get two weeks of fully paid paternity. [...] it's just on principle I didn't realise that there's such a big kind of difference between what a mother would get versus what a father would get. So the first 18 weeks for example for my wife in her maternity are fully paid. A father can't even get two? It was really, I think it was a bit of a shocker you know to me.*

If fathers wish to take more leave by using SPL, their partner must relinquish the equivalent portion of Maternity Leave and pay. In contrast, mothers who qualify for paid Maternity Leave are entitled to six weeks at 90% of salary followed by 33 weeks of statutory pay as a minimum. Additionally, the interviews supported assertions that a key constraint to sharing associated with work-family policy is the extent to which statutory pay is enhanced by employers (Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). Within this sample of relatively elite professionals, most mothers were entitled to enhanced Maternity Leave packages well beyond statutory pay requirements, however, as there is no requirement for employers to match maternity enhancements in SPL offerings, fathers were often not eligible for enhanced payments. Therefore, taking extended leave for fathers was more likely to be paid at low statutory rates or not at all. As a result, discrepancies in leave entitlement and pay appeared to make a traditionally gendered division of parental leave the simpler and more cost-effective route for most (although, as mentioned in the previous section, few couples reported actually calculating the relative costs).

However, although the interviews implied that gender differences in the length of parental leave and pay offered to parents had some effect on decision making, misunderstandings about SPL policy also appeared to be influential. Echoing the findings of existing studies on drivers of decision making about SPL (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019), parents commented on the complexity of this relatively new policy and on the limited information or guidance offered by HR departments in comparison to Maternity Leave. The following comments from an Existing Father indicate that lack of knowledge about the policy prevented this couple from making an informed decision about sharing leave:

*I know from Paternity Leave, it's two weeks and you have to take it altogether, so I don't know how it would work if I wanted... If we split the Maternity Leave, whether I'd have to take six months off as a block or if I could take six months off as two days a week for a year. It probably might have been the block, which would have been tricky.*

When talking about why they had dismissed SPL, parents often mentioned issues around the mother returning to work at six months:

*I had a caesarean section, I had complications with my surgery, I didn't take to being a mother as well as I'd hoped for in the first few months. So I think if I'd gone back to work after six months, for example, and then left my daughter for the next few months, that wouldn't have felt satisfactory for me. I would have felt that I'd barely gotten into the whole mum thing before going back to work. I think I needed that time and that became more obvious a few months into having our daughter.* Existing Mother Q

*With the maternity policy and the shared parental, I mean I haven't really looked at it because I haven't needed to, but I think it's something like for the man to get the leave, the woman has to give up half of her leave. So if you're... I know there are ways around it, but if you are doing exclusive breastfeeding or something like that, that makes it harder, you have less time.* Existing Mother L

This implies that policy was also at times an *assumed* constraint due to misunderstandings that SPL had to be shared 50/50 with both parents dividing the year of leave equally. Three couples in the study had made use of SPL and their experiences highlight that others were making decisions based on misconceived notions of constraint. None of the mothers in these couples went back to work at six months. Instead, the fathers took three months leave or less and, in some cases, this was taken simultaneously while their partner was still on leave. Comparing these experiences shows that, as was the case with financial constraints, *how* constraints are perceived was as important, if not more, than *what* they consist of in practice.

## Employment

Reports of constraint relating to employment tended to centre on barriers to part-time working rather than parental leave. While no one reported that employers would not let them take leave, many parents said they felt unable to work part-time because their employer would not allow this, as seen in the following extracts:

*I would have liked to have done four days, but there's nowhere I could get a contract that would accept it, they wanted me in five days, or doing a full-time role.* Existing Father O

*I'm quite certain that I won't be able to go part-time. I don't think they would allow it in the role that I've got. So, even though in an ideal world I would probably like to drop to four days' a week, my assumption at the moment is that I will have to return to work full-time.* Expecting Mother E

*No, [I didn't consider reducing my hours when I had children]. Probably not. It probably wouldn't work in my line of work. They wouldn't really let me reduce my hours.* Existing Father E

One reason for this contrast could be that, although the UK has a relatively strong 'right to request flexible working' policy, employers are not obliged to accept these requests whereas parental leave is highly regulated, and employees' rights are more clearly defined in this context.

In many cases, parents appeared to be sympathetic to employers and mentioned that the nature of certain jobs made them incompatible with more flexible working arrangements:

*I simply wouldn't be able to [work part-time]. With the job that I do, there isn't the flexibility to work less than a full working week. So I'm going to need to do the 40 hours regardless and I would just need to fit them in a different way. I wouldn't have been able to balance that, that wouldn't have been possible.*

Expecting Father G

*Home working would be great, but at the same time I accept that's not really the best for my boss. If he wants to ask me questions, or get me to do things, or be in meetings... so it needs looking at.*

Expecting Father H

Those parents in the sample who were self-employed were not constrained by employers, however some also described part-time work as incompatible with owning their own business:

*I sort of feel like I need to be there, because we've just had this period off on holiday and I am employing one person at the moment full-time and some other people are working on the project part-time and I sort of felt when I was away they basically all downed tools and I wonder if I'm not there whether that does kind of happen. So I sort of feel like I need to be around.* Expecting Father B (follow up)

Yet, for others, self-employment was seen as a facilitator to achieving greater flexibility and particularly for enabling men to take longer periods of leave, as noted in Chapter 5.

Concern for 'doing the right thing' by employers also seemed to present a barrier to more egalitarian leave-taking for some. For example, when asked about the possibility of moving to SPL, one Expecting Mother said she would feel uncomfortable going back to work earlier than planned because this would have disrupted the arrangements for her maternity cover:

*My role isn't something that...like it's a role on its own and if I'm not doing it, nobody does it. So they recruited a maternity post for me to do that role, but I don't think I could have turned round, well I could have done, I could have turned round and said I'm coming back after six months, but that would make, I don't know, morally I think ... for maternity cover, expecting a job for a year and only being there six months.*

In her follow-up interview, this Expecting Mother went on to discuss concerns that the small firm her husband worked for may have struggled to provide paternity pay:

*I know [my husband] was anxious that... he works for quite a small start-up company and you know they've only just got a pension and I think suddenly saying 'oh we're going to do Shared Parental Leave now', I think he would have really struggled sort of asking that. It's quite a good company, but they are quite small and then suddenly having to provide maternity or paternity pay in that way might have been quite tricky.*



This ‘concern’ for employers was perhaps driven by fears of losing work if the organisation suffered or relations with them were damaged, particularly since the arrival of a new child leads to increased household costs. Reflecting the literature on stigma and penalties associated with flexible working and transgressing ‘ideal worker’ norms (Blackwell, 2001; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Moen & Yu, 2000; Nightingale, 2018; Stone & Hernandez, 2013), parents expressed concerns that asking about work–family policies could negatively impact on career progression and perceptions of their commitment as a worker, as can be seen in these comments from two Existing Fathers:

*Six years ago, I had a big career change, we moved geographically, we both started new jobs. I think at that starting out point it might have been quite difficult to say “oh by the way, I want to go part-time”. I think that might have met with some resistance.* Existing Father N

*I guess... Yeah, practically speaking if I'd gone to [my employers] and said this is what I want to do, I think they probably would have made [part-time work] happen. I guess there's always that bit, the sort of unseen, or unspoken barriers that maybe loom larger than anything else. But I certainly know in my current role, which is slightly unusual I guess compared to most people, it wouldn't work. So although they might allow me to do it, it would hinder my progress, I'm sure it would. [...] Maybe it's a wrong assumption or maybe it's the right one, I don't know. But it's not one, if I'm honest, I'm willing to test.* Existing Father K

Associated with this, career stage and stability also appeared important in whether parents pursued requests for flexible working. A part-time working Existing Father said he probably would not have felt comfortable asking to reduce his hours at an earlier stage in his career:

*I think at that starting out point it might have been quite difficult to say ‘oh by the way, I want to go part-time’. I think that might have met with some resistance. But I suppose actually at the point that she was born, I'd been [with the company] for three years, I'd really established myself and, without being arrogant, they definitely didn't want to lose me. So, I suppose I was in a position of confidence. I could propose it and I'd thought about how to propose it, and what to suggest in terms of how to make it workable. So, I guess I was fairly clear I could make it work and it wasn't going to be a major black mark on my career. They weren't going to try and manage me out as a result of it. Whereas I can imagine in a lot of jobs, or at a lot of stages in careers, that would be harder.*

This suggests that findings from Himmelweit and Sigala (2004), which indicate that more expertise and responsibility at work gives mothers the impression that they have a better negotiating position with employers, can also be applied to fathers and reflects Hochschild's (2012) notion of a ‘status shield’ against flexibility stigma.

Often those who stated that part-time contracts would not be permitted or feasible in their line of work were men and out of both samples only three mothers identified as full-time workers<sup>17</sup>. Men may have been more likely to report they were unable to work part-time due to female dominated industries being more open to flexible working (Minnotte, Cook, & Minnotte, 2010; Wood, De Menezes, & Lasasosa, 2003) and women perhaps ‘choosing’ career trajectories that are more suited to part-time work (Crompton & Harris, 1998; Hakim, 2006). However, a number of women had succeeded in acquiring part-time contracts despite working in highly responsible roles in male-dominated fields. Their narratives described the persistence and ingenuity that was often involved in securing more family-friendly patterns of work. For example, one Existing Mother working in accountancy was not permitted by her employers to work her ideal of three days a week, but she persevered to achieve her desired working arrangement and came up with a job share solution that was accepted by the business:

*Because I wanted to progress my career, I thought I needed to come up with an alternative plan: either move out of my existing job, which I really didn't want to do, and out of my profession into another area of our organisation where three days a week would work with the business model, or find an alternative way of doing my working pattern. So I've just recently been successful at getting a job share off the ground.*

This reflects research on women's work-family decision making by Himmelweit and Sigala (2004), which found that some mothers adapted their behaviour when external constraints prevented them from enacting their desires. Other Existing Mothers also spoke about having the confidence and determination to fight for their desired flexible working arrangements:

*When I went back, I was quite forceful with I want to work [from home] one day a week and I'll come into the office on these days. I think I felt a bit more confident about what my rights were and that it didn't need to be an exception, that work should be flexible to accommodate my needs as well and that I'd been there for so long that the trust was there. Existing Mother O*

*There have been meetings that I've had to get up halfway through and say 'I'm sorry I've got to go, I need to make this train for pickup' and that's it, that's the line in the sand. And, surprisingly, that hasn't affected anything. Existing Mother P*

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to acknowledge here that these women came from a relatively privileged demographic and worked in jobs that were more likely to offer flexibility. They also had a relatively high level of bargaining power due to their level of qualification. It is likely that women in other sectors would experience more constraint in acquiring part-time work (Webber & Williams, 2008).

*I'm sure you're having conversations with lots of other women that are having to do crafty things to get themselves employed when they want to spend time with their children. Existing Mother M*

This suggests that more men in similar roles may also have been able to work part-time, however it transpired that few men had actually enquired about this or verified with their employers whether part-time work would be possible (Brescoll et al., 2013; Kaufman, 2018). An Existing Mother was not convinced by her husband's claim that he could not do his job part-time and believed his employers would have to accommodate his request if he asked:

*[My husband] seems to be very much under the impression - and maybe he's right, I don't know - that he has a workload and that is it. And everyone is expected to achieve that workload whether you work four days a week or three days a week, it's the same workload. Now I find that very hard to believe! I cannot believe that if he didn't approach his boss and say 'this is the situation, I need to drop to four days and therefore I need to lose a day's worth of work' that they wouldn't be obliged to do something to meet him halfway, but I don't know.*

As mentioned in the previous chapter on decision-making processes, constraints to part-time working among men were therefore often assumed and many fathers admitted that working part-time was not an option that had occurred to them prior to the interviews.

However, overcoming constraints to part-time working is not only about men's agency, as this part-time working father points out when discussing friends whose employers have not been as accommodating as his own:

*One of my very close friends wanted to do it, but his company wouldn't accommodate it. He asked for four days instead of five, but instead they offered more money. It wasn't what he wanted, but that was the choice. So, it's not just personal motivation. It's also companies being prepared to do it, offering that flexibility. So, it is possible that we've been fortunate in that respect. The company that I've landed at has been flexible. Existing Father M*

As will be discussed later in the chapter, men's relative reluctance to request changes to their working hours and lack of consideration of part-time work are also linked to gendered norms and expectations around parenting and paid work, which mean that the stigma and penalties associated with part-time work could be stronger for men (Allen & Russell, 1999; Holter, 2007; Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003).

Although few fathers worked part-time, a number were working flexible or condensed hours, suggesting that men may have found alternative ways of overcoming employer constraints. For

example, a full-time working Existing Father had negotiated flexible working hours to allow him to drop off and pick up his daughter at nursery:

*Fortunately, I managed to make the case that I'm primarily the source for dropping [our daughter] off and picking her up from the nursery, which limits the hours that I can attend work. If the nursery doesn't open until eight, I can't get into work much earlier than say quarter to eight or quarter past eight. On this basis I was able to negotiate a bit more flexibility in my working pattern, which makes it a bit more bearable.*

In his follow-up interview, an Expecting Father said he had decided to ignore company policy and effectively worked flexible hours when the baby arrived, however he also mentioned he was not happy in his job and may therefore have been more willing to risk the consequences:

*[My employer] has got a policy of when you've got to be in by and when you can kind of leave by, but I basically just ignored that, which is alright and I didn't get into any trouble or any problems. [...] I was just kind of flying under the radar a little bit. So, you know, I suppose part of it was being able to get away with it anyway, but then the other part was anybody who may have kind of noticed or observed, probably wouldn't have said anything anyway, because they knew that I'd just had a baby.*

Although fathers tended to be wary about reducing their working hours, many expressed an interest in either working at home one day a week; having flexible start and finish times; or condensing their working hours into longer days to enable them to have one day off every week or fortnight. These arrangements meant fathers could effectively work in similar patterns to those women on long part-time contracts (see Chapter 5), while avoiding the workplace stigma and penalties associated with flexible working (Blackwell, 2001; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Moen & Yu, 2000; Nightingale, 2018; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Similarly, fathers described using holiday to extend their Paternity Leave rather than making use of formal shared leave policies. These solutions were perceived as less noticeable and did not incur a reduction in salary, making them more 'acceptable' for men than part-time work or a career break. This was reflected in the comments of one Existing Father who initially expressed an interest in using SPL to work part-time when he had his second child, but went on to talk about how he could achieve this using his holiday allowance or by sacrificing some salary to 'buy' additional annual leave (Kaufman, 2018; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019):

*It might be possible now, I've not looked into it in that much detail, maybe I should for number two. [...] I'm sure [my employers] would accommodate me to keep me. It's not something I've asked to be honest, but I suppose they can manage with me... I can buy more days leave, I can have up to 40 days*

*off a year if I sacrifice some salary. That in a way, with bank holidays, I'm almost there with having a day off a week with that.*

This response suggests that he was wary of using explicitly family-friendly policy and could be an indication of the stigma attached to part-time status, particularly as he later mentioned that being part-time might affect which projects he could work on.

The employment options available to parents were also closely linked to another material constraint - where couples lived.

## Location

Many couples reported that they had moved when they had children, generally from big cities to suburban or more rural areas. Although this was frequently portrayed as providing a better quality of life for their children, parents sometimes described it as a practical constraint to sharing paid work because it limited the availability of jobs or increased commute times. This could, in turn, affect divisions of domestic work. For example, an Existing Mother described how she ended up doing most of the housework and childcare because she works closer to home than her husband, who has a long commute:

*I can be a bit more flexible. I don't have to travel into [the city], so I guess I do most of the drop offs and pickups from nursery, which means I'm home early enough to sort out dinner and things. So that's kind of just fallen into place, because that's just what works best, because he's travelling such a distance to get back home.*

She balanced this comment by adding that her husband takes on most of the financial management of the household, but again framed this in terms of spatial constraints explaining that this is a chore that he can complete away from home. This indicates that the relative portability of chores could contribute to some of the typical gender discrepancies in the distribution of household chores (Kan et al., 2011).

Couples' relative lengths of commute could also influence who took on most of the childcare responsibilities. This Expecting Mother assumed she would be the one doing the majority of the nursery drop-offs and pick-ups because she worked closer to home:

*The idea is that we continue to work together like we are now. I think the reality is going to be that I'll probably be the principal person, you know. I'll be the one dropping her off at nursery, I'll probably be the one picking her up from nursery, I'll be the one doing the majority of the housework and that kind of*

*thing. That assumption is based on the fact that I work 25 minutes away from home and I think [my husband], even if he's working more locally, it will still be probably an hour-, two-hour commute from where we live, realistically. So, you know, by virtue of that, I think it's going to be me.*

The prospect of long commutes also influenced return-to-work decisions. This Expecting Mother was unsure whether to return to work full-time or part-time after Maternity Leave and said her decision would be dictated in part by the practicalities of train fares:

*The biggest problem is the fact that train companies don't do part-time season tickets. So that would be a massive consideration for when I go back to work, of how many days, because it makes more sense to go back full-time, but I think I would struggle. I think I would find it hard to go back full-time because I work quite long days, so I wouldn't be getting back until, even though I actually work nine to five, I leave at seven and I'm not back until gone seven. I think just for a healthy family life, I think it's better to have more time at home, whether that's over the course of the week, or the extra days themselves. So that's the obstacle in the future I can see.*

However, this did not appear to be an insurmountable constraint. In her follow-up interview this Expecting Mother said she would be returning to work only 4 days a week and one of these would be at home. As can be seen in the extract above, she had a strong drive to overcome this constraint linked to her desire to have more time at home for a 'healthy family life'. As will be discussed later in the chapter, this is likely to be linked to the pressures of 'good' mothering norms.

Location was also important when it came to accessing social support. For example, the following extracts indicate that many couples' childcare arrangements were influenced by whether or not extended family were located nearby:

*When I've had a baby, I may feel that five days is too long to leave her, because we don't have family close by who could look after her one or two days a week, so it's got to all be done by third-party care.*

Expecting Mother A

*If our parents were nearby and we were in a position for her grandparents to look after her a few days of the week, I actually wouldn't have a problem with both [my husband] and me being back in full-time.*

Existing Mother Q

Mothers in couples who could rely on relatives to provide care appeared to spend more time at work, leading to more egalitarian divisions of labour. However, in some cases, not having family

nearby facilitated sharing, as men taking on more childcare was often perceived as a necessity when less alternatives were available, as seen in the following quote from an Existing Father:

*My wife [...] is the main wage earner. She has to work fairly long hours, so it's not really possible for me to do the same, because we have no family in the area. All our family are hundreds of miles away, so it is basically the two of us, plus our childminder and stuff that does the childcare.*

Examples of men increasing their involvement in childcare when extended family are not available suggests that father care may be considered a form of 'last resort'. Hierarchies of preferred carers will be considered in more depth in the following chapter.

Access to social support was also a gendered constraint. Parental leave was described as lonely and boring by both men and women, especially if family support was not available nearby. An Expecting Mother described the limited interaction with other adults in her follow-up interview and the isolation this caused:

*It was tough because it was just me on my own here. My husband of course is here, but he's at work most of the day. So, being at home with my son, I wasn't really able to sort of talk to anyone else. I mean the health visitor, of course, I could talk to her, but I mean having family and friends is a very different thing and I don't have anyone sort of nearby around me, so it felt quite lonely and difficult.*

However, often when mothers feared or experienced isolation during Maternity Leave, they were able to turn to 'mother and baby' activities and social networks of other mothers on leave. The following extract from another follow-up interview with an Expecting Mother indicates how local female support networks can transform Maternity Leave into a more pleasant experience and make the prospect of extended leave more manageable:

*I've like befriended lots of mums in the local area, so there's a really good support network. So, I really don't feel like I'm on my own at all, particularly in the daytime. If I have any concerns, you can just WhatsApp and there's lots of mums there to sort of provide any support and advice. So, it's just been, yeah... it's been great.*

Conversely, for men these support networks of local parents do not appear to exist in the same way. As few men take extended periods of leave, fathers were less likely to know other men who were also available during the day and parents described groups of mothers as 'cliquey' and unwelcoming for fathers:

*He's envious that I'm doing the classes with her and he isn't, because he really would like to. And I think he's felt quite sort of, there isn't that much out there for dads that are around at this time, it's very*

*much focused on mums than fathers. So I think he's found that a bit disappointing really that it's very mum focused.* Expecting Mother E (follow up)

This lack of perceived social support may have contributed to the fact that men spent less time alone with their children (Craig, 2006) and take-up of SPL from men was limited. Social activities with other parents appeared to be crucial for women's well-being during long periods of parental leave. If fathers do not have access to these sources of support, parental leave and childcare in general could be intrinsically less enjoyable and therefore less appealing for men.

Forms of constraint could also interact to create compounded barriers to sharing. Location was strongly associated with financial constraints since childcare, living costs and salaries differ dramatically by area. One Existing Mother living in an affluent city was considering whether she and her partner would still be able to afford childcare locally if they had a second child and this had made her think about the possibility of leaving work to become a stay-at-home parent. However, she worried that it would put a lot of pressure on her partner to be a sole breadwinner and he would miss out on time with the children. Moving to a less expensive area was another option they were considering: *We're having conversations about what would it take to feel less pressure about having to earn money and the most obvious thing is moving out of [city] to somewhere that's cheaper.*

Considerations like this indicate that some parents could envisage overcoming constraints relating to location and had some agency regarding where they lived. This is also reflected in comments from other parents in this privileged demographic who said they had chosen the place they lived for work-family reasons:

*I suppose we were quite targeted when we bought our house [...] we logistically worked it out so that, no matter what, the school is maybe a four-minute or five-minute walk away and [our workplace] is a fifteen-minute walk away. Because we don't have family [nearby] or you don't have the support you might have [...] because you're kind of isolated here. So everything was very finely planned, even down to buying our house, the location.* Existing Father C

*We're lucky in the sense that her mother and father and sister live five minutes' walk from our house, which is great. Part of the reason we chose the house really was that it was local..* Expecting Father E

Agency over location was not the case for all parents though. Moving to a new house can be stressful, unaffordable and impractical. When there are strong motivations these barriers might be overcome, however agency within a couple must be negotiated between two people (Challiol & Mignonac, 2005; Park, 1982). For example, one couple of Existing Parents had lived apart for



many years due to work commitments in different parts of the country, but when they had children they decided this arrangement could not continue. As such, they had to make difficult decisions about where to live and in the end the family moved to be closer to the husband's workplace. The wife appeared very ambivalent about this outcome, particularly in terms of her career:

*So you're kind of split in half on what the right thing to do is and what the wrong thing is, and unfortunately it's always women that seem to suffer over men, especially when it comes to children. In regards to my career it's totally messed it up and it's something that I need to fathom out and get back on the ladder of climbing. It's not been a great transition unfortunately [sighs], but hopefully something will come up.*

Although women's preferences appear to be prioritised when it comes to decisions about parental leave and childcare (see Chapters 6 & 8), location is often closely tied to work commitments and men's careers tend to be prioritised over women's (Challiol & Mignonac, 2005; Pixley, 2008a).

## Reproductive Bodies

Another constraint to sharing mentioned by many parents was that only mothers experienced the physical aspects of childbearing. The need for the mother to recover from childbirth and to breastfeed were often given as reasons for not sharing parental leave, as the following comments show:

*I feel strongly about it being me that spends that year with our baby [laughs]. [...] I guess breastfeeding is a large part of it. I'll be breastfeeding up until, if not beyond, six months, so in a practical way that means I'll need to be there. Expecting Mother B*

*I also suffered a [serious] tear having [my daughter], so I needed the time off to be honest. I don't think I could have coped with the commute to work when I was healing up to be honest. Existing Mother F*

Connected to this, a number of interviewees suggested that breastfeeding meant fathers were of little use in the early months of childcare and it was not worth them taking extended time away from work:

*I guess in those first two weeks I mean as the dad... there's so much you can do, but the mother baby bond is much more about, it's much stronger I guess. It's much more about breastfeeding in the early few weeks and stuff, whereas the dad there is probably less you can practically do. Existing Father F*

Interviews also indicated that breastfeeding contributed to some women's decisions about returning to work. This was often associated with difficulties around expressing milk at work, as seen in this Existing Mother's account of why she was the one to go part-time:

*I suppose one of the other factors [...] initially was because I was still breastfeeding when I returned to work and so that would have just made things slightly more awkward I think, because obviously [my husband] couldn't breastfeed and it's jolly difficult to express milk, or I found it really difficult to express milk. So that kind of influenced the decision initially as well.*

Some parents chose to bottle feed, and this was sometimes portrayed as a way of overcoming physical disparities in order to increase sharing: 'for the next child [my husband's] already saying we need to make sure they can take a bottle, like if you do it early enough it's easier, so he can kind of do more of that care' (Expecting Mother C, follow up). However, as seen in these other extracts, bottle feeding was often portrayed negatively by parents and ideological stances towards breastfeeding emerged in the interviews:

*I don't want to sound as if I'm a... what's the word? I'm not against formula, but at the same time if I can express enough for her so she doesn't need it, then I will do it. I don't want her to have formula unless she really needs to have it. Expecting Mother H (follow up)*

*[Our daughter] will take a bottle of expressed milk, but actually [my wife] doesn't really want to give her that, which is a bit um ... [...] So if she wants feeding, [my wife] feeds her so I don't know... yeah frustrating... not frustrating, that's not the right word, but I kind of feel like it's going to hit me at some point. I mean a good example is that I've not actually had her on my own for more than about three hours yet, because of the feeding point. Expecting Father F (follow up)*

As well as those most likely to have egalitarian ideology (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Fan & Marini, 2000), it is possible that this demographic of highly educated professionals is also most likely to hold the view that it is important to prioritise breastfeeding, echoing Usdansky's (2011) 'gender-equality paradox' that those with higher education have more structural incentives for traditional behaviour. This combination of beliefs conflicts somewhat and could provide some explanation as to why egalitarian attitudes are often not translated into behaviour among those who are potentially best placed to share.

Attitudes towards breastfeeding also included views about the 'right' time to wean, which varied from anything up to 17 months, although six months was commonly given as a minimum. Some

parents cited UN and NHS guidelines, as seen in the following quotes, suggesting that these are important in establishing norms:

*[Sharing leave would] probably not [have worked for us] because of [my wife]'s firm intention to breastfeed. Certainly, up until six months exclusively and then beyond that as necessary. So six months being the time when you can start weaning according to the NHS.* Expecting Father F (follow up)

*I think it's important that the baby breastfeeds... To be honest the baby might not breastfeed so you might speak to me in six months and you know it didn't work out. At six months that's when you start to wean the baby off food and I wouldn't have thought you would do any Shared Parental Leave until at least that point.* Expecting Mother A

Although six months was often considered a minimum for breastfeeding, some mothers were unable or chose not to breastfeed exclusively or at all in the first six months, while others wished to continue for longer or found weaning to be a lengthy process. As seen in the following extracts, some women had intended to share leave, but found breastfeeding to be more restrictive than they anticipated and had to change their original plans:

*When we first had our son, [my husband] was going to take the Additional Paternity Leave. We were going to do six months each for the first year because I thought, "well I'll breastfeed for six months, that will be fine". But I had no idea that that's just not how it works. You don't just one day say, "here's a bottle".* Existing Mother M

*Well, originally when we first talked about it, I said I might come back at seven months and then [my husband] could do the bit after that, but then actually that wasn't really going to be feasible with things like feeding and all that kind of stuff.* Expecting Mother A (follow up)

A reluctance to combine weaning with paid work resulted in many discrediting the possibility of SPL, often due to misconceptions that the leave must be divided equally with the mother obliged to return to work at six months:

*I had a caesarean section, I had complications with my surgery, I didn't take to being a mother as well as I'd hoped for in the first few months. So I think if I'd gone back to work after six months for example and then left my daughter for the next few months, that wouldn't have felt satisfactory for me.* Existing Mother Q

*With the maternity policy and the shared parental, I mean I haven't really looked at it because I haven't needed to, but I think it's something like for the man to get the leave, the woman has to give up half of*

*her leave. So if you're... I know there are ways around it, but if you are doing exclusive breastfeeding or something like that, that makes it harder, you have less time.* Existing Mother L

However, these rationales did not take into account the flexibility of SPL policy and the option for fathers to take leave towards the end of the parental leave period. A contrast can therefore be seen here between these parents being well informed on infant nutrition but not on their rights to parental leave, perhaps reflecting the content of popular advice manuals and the priorities of governments and NGOs.

When considering bodily constraints to sharing, some of these parents' accounts - particularly those of couples who had intended to share but felt unable to due to experiences of breastfeeding - imply it is naïve to think that heterosexual couples can ignore sex differences in the physical aspects of childcare. However, the experiences of those couples who did share more equally demonstrated that SPL and dual part-time working were not necessarily at odds with breastfeeding and that active planning can allow for feeding duties to be shared, particularly towards the end of the first year. As with the neutral and 'common sense' barrier of finances, men's inability to breastfeed or give birth appeared at times to provide a convenient excuse for not examining more complex aversions towards sharing, and it is possible that some wilfully 'misunderstood' the nature of SPL. In the following quote from an Existing Mother, we can see that the impact of traditional gendered norms on decisions not to make use of SPL are glossed over (*the traditional idea as well of it's easier for the mum to be at home*) and the focus is brought back to the less contentious explanation of breastfeeding:

*We made a decision that I wanted to breastfeed, at least the first six months, so obviously with that the reasoning of me taking the majority of the leave was so I could do that. I suppose the traditional idea as well of it's easier for the mum to be at home. But, yeah, with definitely wanting to breastfeed that makes it a lot easier if I'm around and could take that leave.*

In his follow-up interview, another Expecting Father began by stating that SPL would not have worked for him and his wife because of her firm intention to breastfeed beyond six months. However, in the course of discussion, a far more complex picture of ambivalence towards sharing emerged, which included grappling with deep-seated views about men and women's roles:

*If we'd decided to maybe feed her earlier [Shared Parental Leave] might have worked, but I don't know. I did think about it, but I couldn't decide what my opinion on it was, whether that's some sort of innate*

*sexism, or some worry about how it would be looked at at work. I don't know if that's even a genuine worry. (Sighs.) I don't know, it's still such a new thing, it's probably difficult to know how people would respond to it and would I have wanted to do it – um, yeah and no. I probably do have, you know, views on men's and women's roles in society and the ability as a mother over a child. But that doesn't mean I'm not open to change in that and, you know, I've just never thought about it too much to be honest. I've not really explored my deepest views.*

These comments could be seen as surprising given the educational achievements of this group and suggest that cultural constraints are important when it comes to sharing childcare.

## Gendered Norms

Among these highly educated professionals, gender role attitudes were complex and will be considered in more detail in the following chapter, however there was a broad consensus that sharing was a positive thing for society and traditional gender norms appeared to be rejected, with all interviewees disagreeing that a man's role is to earn money and a woman's role is to look after the home and family. Reflecting Dermott's (2008) research on fathering in the UK, men said they wanted to be involved in childcare and having a relationship their children was important. Likewise, many women were keen to maintain careers and described themselves as feminists. As seen in the following extracts, often this was framed in the context of modelling egalitarian divisions of labour for their children:

*I hope that we're going to be joint role models, and I'd like to be a hands-on father and be around as much as possible.* Expecting Father B

*I would never want a child to think I was always at work, or not there, do you know what I mean. I don't want them to think oh mum was always around, but dad was always at work.* Expecting Father H

*I'm quite pleased with everything I've achieved, and I hope that when I've had kids and I can tell them the job that I had, it's a positive thing and that they'll look at mummy and think okay mummy worked really hard for what she was doing. I want to be seen as a positive role model in my children's life in terms of having a good work ethic and making sure that you work for what you want to achieve.* Expecting Mother G

*I have quite strong views on feminism and stuff like that, albeit quietly so as not to disturb the neighbours. (Laughs.) I've got two boys and I want them to grow up knowing that mummy is just as*

*capable as daddy and daddy is just as capable as mummy. I don't want them to grow up thinking there's any difference.* Existing Mother P

Reflecting this last mother's comment that her views on feminism could be negatively received, traditional normative assumptions that 'good' mothers prioritise caring and 'good' fathers prioritise earning were nonetheless powerful and acted as a form of constraint to sharing:

*I think [my husband] will definitely want to join in where he can, but still traditionally the society that we live in, it's still very much male and female job roles. And whilst I think that's not right, you sometimes can't escape the way society is and it will actually force you to be that way.* Expecting Mother H

*I think to an extent we're quite traditional in the role of a woman... Not the role of a woman, I'm a feminist so I can't really say that, but in the same respect it's still seen as more the norm for a woman to stay at home than a man, however right or wrong that is. I think to an extent I agree with that.*

Existing Mother J

As seen in the previous chapter, these gendered norms contributed to the impression that work-family decisions at the transition to parenthood principally concerned women and meant that sharing did not occur to many couples, thus preventing consideration or discussion of this possibility. Norms made more traditional, gendered arrangements appear natural and 'just the way things are' (Gergen, 1999), as one Existing Father reflected: '*I don't really know whether [culture] has an effect. I could imagine it does, but it's hard to be sure because it's so much a part of the background noise to all of our thinking*'.

In this chapter, we've also seen that gender norms mediated understandings of material constraints. Couples with lower earning women tended to present maximising overall household income as the priority and therefore claimed it 'made sense' for higher earning men to work full-time while their partners reduced their hours in paid work for childcare. However, echoing findings from previous research that expectations and meanings associated with earning are gendered (Kaufman, 2018; Kroska, 2008; Warren, 2007), in couples where men were the lower earners, it was rationalised that both spouses' ability to contribute to household income should be prioritised and so it did not 'make sense' for men to work part-time since their income was already lower. The following comment from an Existing Mother suggests that this divergence in

reasoning may reflect assumptions that earning is an integral part of male identity and performing masculinity (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002):

*I think there is still an element of would [my husband] find it really difficult if I was the one who earned the money and he didn't earn the money? I think there is the element of would that make him feel slightly emasculated? I don't know. But they're all considerations that go through my head.*

In contrast, women were less likely to be perceived as *needing* to provide financially. For example, this higher-earning Existing Father was rather dismissive about his wife's desire to contribute to the family income:

*She wants to work, primarily because she wants to be contributing or have her own money as she puts it. She is quite independent and doesn't really want to be seen to be, even though we're married and a team or whatever, she doesn't want to, she probably does feel like it's... She doesn't want handouts, even though that's not how I view it at all.*

Similarly, when women spoke about return-to-work decisions, the number of hours and days they spent in employment were often justified in relation to childcare costs, as seen in the following extracts:

*So actually, being able to afford to send them to childcare I needed to work a certain number of days. So, I was very much in the camp of I'm not just going back to work to then just be earning enough to pay someone else to look after my children and what's left at the end, I can buy myself a beer at the end of the week and that's it! (Laughs.) So yeah, it's quite a delicate balance in finding a job that's part-time and pays enough. Existing Mother K*

*We're fortunate that even with three of them in nursery for three days a week, I am still bringing money home even after we've paid the nursery fees. But I suspect quite easily that margin would go if I dropped a day. Existing Mother A*

It is noticeable that women's earnings and employment status were considered in isolation here. Similar justifications and calculations were not made in relation to men's working patterns, suggesting childcare is perceived as a replacement for mothers specifically (Gupta, 2007; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Schober, 2013a), presumably linked to assumptions that women hold a greater responsibility for caring (Hays, 1996; Yarwood & Locke, 2016). In these ways, understandings of financial constraint and responses to these barriers were shaped by the cultural constraint of gendered parenting norms.

Gender norms could also mediate the degree of material constraint parents experienced. For example, although both men and women were wary of career penalties and stigma for working part-time, reflecting findings from Holter (2007) some perceived that these were more severe for men, as seen in the following extracts:

*Work is very understanding [about women going part-time], but I don't know what the answer would be if a man tried to do it. I don't know whether... actually a couple of the bosses are 50 year old men and I don't know how they would react. I think they would privately have some quite strong views on it. But I don't know, I've not really considered it greatly.* Expecting Father H

*I think it's much more acceptable... I think employers will tolerate women - you might suffer a consequence in terms of your career - but I think they tolerate women having a more flexible arrangement to do pickup and to take days off sick for sick kids than they do men. I think it is more difficult for [my husband] to ask that because I think his career... [sighs] I think it's viewed more negatively.* Existing Mother D

Fears of penalties for transgressing masculinised 'ideal worker' norms (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2000) may provide some explanation for why fathers appeared to feel less empowered and entitled to ask for part-time work and parental leave. Pertinently, those fathers who had taken extended leave were often self-employed and had taken time out between contracts, thus rendering their leave-taking comparatively invisible (Allen & Russell, 1999; Humberd et al., 2014; Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003). Beliefs that part-time work and extended leave would be less tolerated for men are supported by studies which find that employers consider work-family policies to be aimed at women (Burnett et al., 2013) and men are less likely to have leave and flexible working requests authorised (Tipping et al., 2012). However, these assumptions were not always accurate and gendered expectations may lead some parents to dismiss viable options. For example, one Existing Couple were both at similar stages in their medical training and both ended up moving to part-time contracts when they had their first child, yet the mother explained that initially she assumed it would not be possible for her husband to move to an 80% contract even though she had a clear intention to do this herself and had not questioned whether *she* would be able to:

Clare: *And what made you think that it wouldn't be possible for him to reduce his hours?*

Existing Mother: *[short pause] I suppose it's not really the done thing, particularly in medicine – I don't know about other professions - but it's not really the done thing for both parents to go part-time to look after the children.*

Clare: *Do you have the same employer? Are you in the same hospital?*



Existing Mother: *No, different employers. I think regardless of who the employer would be, we would have still thought that we're trying our luck really. [...] We thought if [my husband]'s employers knew that I was part-time, they wouldn't really understand the need for him to go part-time as well.*

It is surprising that this mother assumes employers would have a right to know about partners' employment situations and take this into account in HR decisions. These fears could instead be a reflection of this mother's own feelings of discomfort about not conforming to norms, which are reflected her comments about dual part-time not being 'the done thing' and that they were 'trying their luck'. An Existing Father who had made the move to part-time work when he had a child, reflected that people often assume men will not be able to go part-time and are surprised when they realise it is possible:

*I think people were surprised... not because it was me, but just the concept of a dad going part-time. A lot of people maybe think it's very difficult to do or employers aren't supportive, or dads just don't want to do it. I think people are pleasantly surprised. Not we never thought you would have done that, but didn't think conceptually you as a dad could easily go part-time.*

Although women may have been more likely to request part-time working, employers were not always tolerant or accepting of this and women also suffered career penalties (Blackwell, 2001; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Moen & Yu, 2000; Nightingale, 2018; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). However, unlike men, when employers were resistant to part-time work, women tended to resign or downgrade rather than work full-time, as seen in the following extracts:

*Pre-children, I had, I would say, a better job. I was a director of a company [...] and then I went on Maternity Leave and the business couldn't find a place for me to work part-time. So, it was just inevitable that I had to resign basically. They did offer me a role, as legally they are obliged to do, but it didn't fit with what I needed it to fit with for my personal circumstances.* Existing Mother K

*[My wife] found when she went back to work, and she wanted to work part-time, she wasn't able to get a permanent position. It wasn't available. She had to get a temporary contract in order to work part-time; with the result that, when the contract came up she had to stop.* Existing Father M

*[If I hadn't been allowed to work part-time], I think I probably would have looked for another job. I would have probably taken on a different role whereby I could work more flexible hours even if it had involved a pay cut.* Existing Mother B

Women's tendency to 'overcome' material constraints to part-time working is likely to be grounded in cultural pressures and expectations around 'good' mothering norms (Lupton, 2000; Yarwood & Locke, 2016). Unlike their partners, most women did not appear to consider full-time work as a viable option, and some indicated they had waited to have children until they were at a workplace where they felt able to achieve a satisfactory work-family balance. The influence of cultural norms on whether efforts were made to overcome constraint is also reflected in the ways that couples saved up to enable women to take long Maternity Leaves, discussed earlier in the chapter.

This chapter has demonstrated that constraint is a subjective concept, however in the case of cultural constraints, such as gender norms, this is amplified since these tend not be tangible barriers that prevent parents from sharing (McRae, 2003b; Wood et al., 2018). Although transgressing norms can come with penalties and gendered expectations can feed into experiences of discrimination or exclusion, often norms were presented in terms of concern about what others would think, feelings of shame or guilt and wariness of standing out as different. The importance of this stigma is reflected in the following extracts:

*I think socially it's still looked upon with surprise if, as a female, I had gone to work full-time having just had a baby. And people would ask me questions, I'm pretty sure there would have been some shock responses of like, "oh, so your husband is looking after the children?". I think there is still a stigma attached to it, for sure, for sure. Existing Mother K*

*I'll be there making a sandwich because the other mums will be watching and if I'm just feeding them crisps for lunch, I'll feel a load of pressure that the other mums are judging me. Whereas [my husband] will be like, "they'll have crisps and it's fine, and they won't be hungry anymore" and no one really judges a dad if they do that. They would get away with it more. Existing Mother D*

It is theoretically possible to do something that is stigmatised or unusual however this is likely to be less appealing and parents reflected it involved more effort, as seen in this comment by an Expecting Mother when asked whether they had considered SPL :

*If you're a man, you've got to actively say I'm going against the norm, if that makes sense. You've got to make that statement. So I think that is different. [...] I think there are still a lot of expectations that make it different for each of us and it makes it much easier to make the decisions that we've made [for me to take the year of Maternity Leave].*

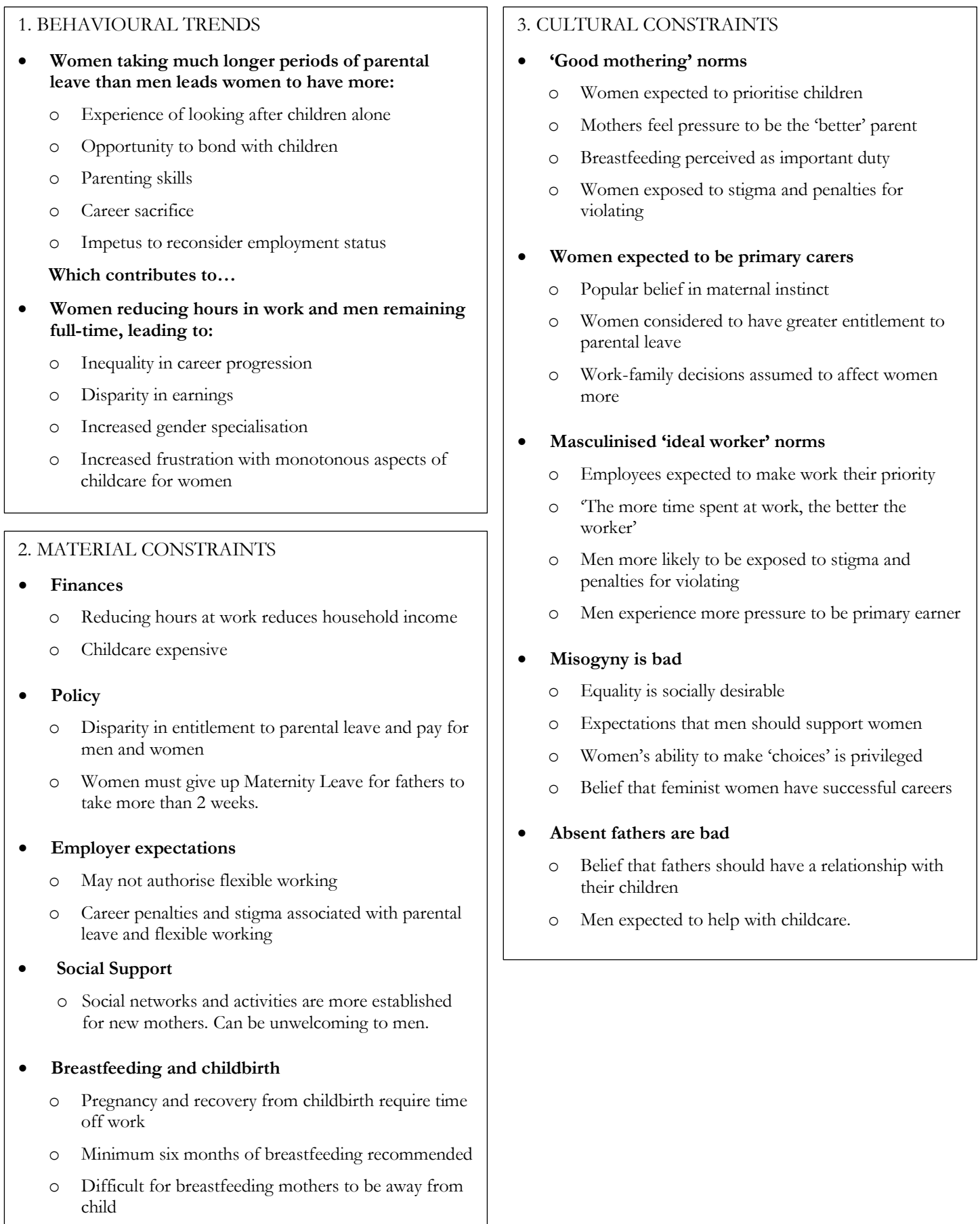
As will be explored in the next chapter, norms therefore played an important role in shaping parents' preferences.

## Summary

This chapter focused on the second research question, which asks how first-time parents think about and approach constraints to sharing. Six key factors (finances, employment, policy, location, reproductive bodies and gender norms) were identified in the interviews as constraining decisions and presenting an obstacle to sharing. These factors reflect the extant literature and, with the exception of location and its association with social support, have been analysed extensively in other studies (e.g. Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Bittman et al., 2003; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Horne et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2018; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Together with the findings of Chapter 5 on experiences at the transition to parenthood this forms the context in which parents made decisions (Figure 1).

However, the key finding of this chapter is that what informs decision making is individuals' *perceptions* of this context and constraints, something that is often overlooked in the literature. The in-depth discussions with parents in this relatively elite sample revealed that barriers to sharing are not a universally agreed concept nor experienced in the same way by all. Perceptions varied on the severity of constraints, what 'makes sense' and whether something was considered a constraint at all. Following Giddens's (1986) theory of structuration, what one parent considered to be a barrier to combining work and family, others perceived as an enabler. For example, being the higher earner was often presented as a constraint to taking parental leave or working part-time, however, some couples where women were the higher earner argued the opposite. As seen in previous chapters, constraints could also be assumed, for instance many believed that men would not be permitted to work part-time, but few had actually verified this with their employers.

**Figure 1** Contextual factors influencing decision making and preferences



To understand decision making it is therefore essential to understand how constraints are perceived and why. Even if a barrier is not genuine, it can still constrain decisions if it is perceived as such. Perceptions of material barriers (Box 2, Figure 1) were shaped by the cultural norms in Box 3. For example, normative assumptions that men should be primary earners and prioritise their career fed into perceptions that employers would not authorise them to work part-time, while assumptions that women should be primary carers and prioritise family shaped perceptions that part-time working 'made sense' even when they were higher earners. However, as can be seen in Figure 1, norms often conflicted with fathers also experiencing pressure to be present in their children's lives and mothers to be successful in their careers. This could create ambivalence in decision making and complexity in how contextual factors were perceived. Perceptions also direct responses to constraint, for example in some cases constraints were overcome but others perceived these barriers as more severe and insurmountable (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Kilzer & Pedersen, 2011; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; Wiesmann, 2010; Wong, 2017). Whether parents perceived constraints as surmountable appeared to be associated with preferences, priorities and ideals. When parents in this rather privileged demographic had a strong desire to take leave or make time for childcare, they often found a way to make it work by negotiating or planning. The thesis now turns to explore these preferences in more depth and how they were shaped by the contextual factors in Figure 1.

# 8. Work-Family ‘Preferences’

Reports of increasingly egalitarian attitudes (Scott & Clery, 2013; Taylor & Scott, 2018) suggest that there could be a growing desire among parents for sharing childcare and paid work.

Constraints-based explanations for traditional behaviour also imply that parents would be keen to share if constraints were removed. However, there is limited empirical research exploring stated preferences qualitatively, in-depth and over time. Many quantitative studies rely on attitude survey questions as a measure of preferences, but questions remain as to whether these are a suitable proxy (Hakim, 2003c). The use of a standard gender role attitude (GRA) question in the recruitment survey for the present study gave the opportunity for assumptions about the equivalence of attitudes and preferences to be explored. This chapter therefore begins with a consideration of the meanings behind participants’ responses to GRA survey questions and their relationship with preferences.

The chapter then turns to how participants described their ideal household divisions of paid work and childcare in the interviews, focusing on three time points – 1. prior to the birth, when decisions are being made about parental leave; 2. around one year after the birth, when leave ends and decisions about return to work are being made; and (among the sample of Existing Parents) 3. a few years after the transition to parenthood. Challenging essentialist notions of preference, it reveals that work-family desires were highly gendered, context dependent and changed over time. Importantly, participants were also asked about perceptions and awareness of their partners’ preferences. Previous studies (e.g. Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; McRae, 2003b) indicate that the interaction between men and women’s ideals and behaviour is important in decision making, rendering a couple perspective crucial for understanding gendered divisions of household labour. This chapter therefore also includes an analysis of how couples’ preferences interacted.

## Attitudes vs Preferences

One of the overriding rationales of this study has been to gain a better understanding of the discrepancy noted in the literature between increasingly egalitarian work-family attitudes and persistently traditional behaviour (Scott & Clery, 2013; Taylor & Scott, 2018). When these comparisons are made, there is often an implicit assumption that attitudes should be able to tell

us something useful about behaviour, presumably because they reflect what people want in their own lives (Hakim, 2003c). We may consequently conclude that parents desire a more equal division of labour but are prevented from achieving this due to structural constraints.

Variables which claim to measure GRAs are commonly used in quantitative research across the social sciences and there are many examples of studies which use these attitude measures as a proxy for preferences (for example, Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; McRae, 2003b; Ogolsky et al., 2014; Stertz et al., 2017; Wesolowski, 2020). However, drawing on the work of Hofstede (1980), Hakim (2003c:340) has argued that the attitude questions used in these studies are not an adequate measure of preference since they reflect ‘what is considered desirable in society in general’ rather than ‘what is desired by the survey respondent for their own life’. In their analysis of responses to GRA questions in the BSAS, Taylor and Scott (2018:5) also acknowledge that while these multiple choice questions ‘are designed to tap into “agreement” with “traditional” gender roles’, it is not known what drives respondents’ answers in practice and it is therefore unclear how these measures should be interpreted.

The present study investigating preferences provided an ideal opportunity to contribute to the literature by exploring this under-researched debate, as a standard question measuring attitudes towards gender roles was included in the recruitment survey for the sample of Existing Parents (Do you agree that a man’s job is to earn money and a woman’s job is to look after the home and family?). Although all the Existing Parents selected for the study had disagreed with this benchmark GRA measure (Behr et al., 2012) and would therefore usually be classed as having ‘egalitarian’ attitudes, it became apparent in the interviews that this question had been interpreted in different ways and parents had not necessarily drawn on their personal preferences in their responses. Therefore, questions were introduced into the interviews which specifically asked parents to reflect on the reasoning behind their survey responses. These reasonings, analysed here, provide important information about how we measure and interpret both attitudes and preferences.

### **Attitude questions are interpreted in different ways**

The first thing that stood out in parents’ explanations for disagreeing with the survey’s GRA question were important differences in the way the question was understood. There are some variations on this ‘benchmark’ question in the literature, but the one used here asks whether respondents agree that a man’s job *is*... and a woman’s job *is*... The responses of some

participants in this study suggested they took this to mean, ‘do you agree that this is the way things *are* in society?’, what Kerr and Holden (1996) refer to as a ‘**descriptive interpretation**’. However, most parents interpreted the question as asking whether a traditional gendered division of labour is the *best* option or the way things *should* be, what Kerr and Holden (1996) refer to as a ‘**prescriptive interpretation**’. This is also how the question tends to be interpreted in academic analyses<sup>18</sup>.

Parents who interpreted the question **descriptively** explained that they had disagreed with the statement because they had observed behaviour which conflicted with it or knew alternatives were possible – i.e. situations where the woman’s job was earning money and the man’s job was looking after the household. This was a typical comment of this kind: ‘*In today’s society, no, I think it could easily be switched to say that man is a homemaker and woman is career breadwinner*’. Some also qualified that although they were aware of cases that conflicted with the ‘benchmark’ statement, these were not the norm:

*I work with people where the female is the predominant breadwinner and sometimes the man doesn’t work at all or works part-time, so the opposite of [my wife] and I. So I’m exposed to that, however I suppose that’s in the minority where I am.* Existing Father C

In responses of this nature, parents did not necessarily indicate whether they personally supported or desired non-traditional gender roles, merely that they knew these alternatives were possible. This supports Kerr and Holden’s (1996:4) argument that it is important, when designing and interpreting GRA measures, to make the distinction between prescriptive beliefs, measuring ideology, and descriptive beliefs, which they suggest more accurately reflect stereotypes, since it is possible to believe in the existence of something without believing that these differences *should* exist. However, while Kerr and Holden (1996) argue that a descriptive wording results in overestimates of traditional attitudes, these findings suggest the opposite to be the case. Changes in gender stereotypes and increasing examples of non-traditional behaviour (Scott & Clery, 2013; Taylor & Scott, 2018) may mean that descriptive interpretations of gender ideology measures are increasingly likely to lead researchers to overestimate *egalitarian* attitudes.

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<sup>18</sup> A variation of the benchmark question, used for example in the US National Survey of Families and Households, avoids this confusion by asking whether respondents agree that ‘*it is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home*’, however many surveys (including the British Household Panel Survey and BSAS) use the wording adopted in the present study.



Among the majority who interpreted the GRA question **prescriptively**, as it is generally intended, their apparently ‘egalitarian’ responses concealed a considerable variation in attitudes towards gender roles. Three key reasons emerged for rejecting the idea of traditional gendered divisions of labour: explicit support and preference for gender equality, a desire to avoid appearing old-fashioned, and a belief in freedom of choice. In the first case, parents referred explicitly to their own lives suggesting attitudes could reflect personal aspirations and preferences, however in the other two cases, reasons were removed from personal experiences and attitudes did not appear to give an indication of what parents wanted for themselves or their family.

### **Explicit support for gender equality**

In some cases, the reasonings given in the interviews aligned with the assumption that disagreement with the GRA question is an indication of support, and perhaps even a personal preference, for a gender equal division of paid work and childcare. These parents often referred to their own choices and family situation when justifying their response, as illustrated in the comments below:

*I think having a life is a shared responsibility, I don't think it really matters who does which bit. [...] I think it's generally an adult's responsibility to be able to do most things and be supporting each other in each of those things as well. Existing Father Q*

*If I had given that answer [agree that man's job is to earn money and woman's job is to look after home and family] I'd be very much failing in my duty in my family. [...] I think, especially having two boys, it's a good role model for them to see a successful mother that isn't just there sewing costumes for the Christmas play, but is going out and actually doing a high-powered responsible job as well. I think that's a great experience for them. Existing Father P*

However, although these responses show explicit support for gender equality, it is not clear exactly how these two fathers define an egalitarian arrangement or whether they understand gender equality in the same terms. The first father suggests that both parents should be able to take on earning and domestic responsibilities and he implies that both should contribute to each activity to some degree, but he does not specify that this needs to be in equal measure. His comments suggest that an egalitarian arrangement could be a situation in which both partners do a similar amount of paid work and a similar amount of domestic work; or a reversal of the traditional scenario with a female breadwinner and ‘house husband’; or even a more traditional

separate spheres arrangement where the mother does *most* of the childcare and the father does *most* of the earning. Any of these interpretations of egalitarianism would warrant disagreement with the statement that a man's job is to earn money and a woman's job is to look after the home and family.

The second father's response makes no reference to his role. Based purely on his comments above, he could understand egalitarianism as a situation in which a mother manages to sustain a 'high-powered' career while also managing the home and family. At another point in the interview, he expressed essentialist beliefs that mothers have a maternal instinct and are naturally better suited to taking on childcare:

*I think there are certain things that mothers are better at, certain things that children will always look to their mother for and I think that's purely nature.* Existing Father P

This indicates that disagreement with the benchmark GRA question does not preclude traditional beliefs.

These comments are reflective of quantitative studies taking a multidimensional approach to gender ideology which report a growth in 'egalitarian essentialism' (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011; Grunow et al., 2018). This is an interpretation of egalitarianism which combines the belief that earning and caring should be equally valued with essentialist notions that men and women are naturally suited to different roles. These responses therefore provide evidence to support claims in the literature (Braun, 2008; Grunow et al., 2018; Knight & Brinton, 2017) that attitude measures are limited since they obscure varying understandings of 'equality' (see Chapter 1).

### **Desire to avoid appearing out-dated**

Some parents' reasons for rejecting traditional gender role attitudes appeared to centre on identities and how they would be perceived by others. These parents did not want to think of themselves as 'old-fashioned' and implied that traditional attitudes were no longer socially acceptable, as seen in the comments below:

*I guess partly that I would imagine that I would come across as a dinosaur if I agreed with that.*  
Existing Father K

*I just think this whole thing of women in the kitchen at home with the kids and dads at work is just so prehistoric, it just doesn't fit with the modern world anymore.* Existing Father J

*I think that sounds old fashioned, doesn't it? I don't want to sound pretentious, but I'm reasonably educated, and I've got a Masters.* Existing Father F

As discussed in the previous chapter, there appeared to be a normative pressure among these parents to avoid appearing misogynistic. The fact that this last father explicitly refers to his educational status as a reason for his response further indicates that this normative pressure, which makes it socially unacceptable to support a traditional division of labour, is particularly associated with this demographic of a highly educated professionals.

The references to how attitudes are perceived indicate parents may have been reporting what they thought they *should* do rather than what they themselves necessarily *wanted* to do. For example, an Existing Father expressed a complex relationship between attitudes and personal preferences implying that what he feels he ought to do (*'I wouldn't feel it was unreasonable'*; *'I would feel an obligation'*) contrasts with what he feels comfortable with (*'it would be a challenge for my mentality'*; *'I would be a bit worried'*):

*I would say that if it was better for us now for [my wife] to go back to work and me not to, if it worked out financially viable, it would be a challenge a bit for my mentality, but I would feel it entirely reasonable for [my wife] to say that. [...] To be honest, I would be a bit kind of worried and probably clinging onto some kind of bit of work, but I wouldn't feel it was unreasonable for her to want that and I would also feel an obligation on me to sort of try and fulfil that request.*

Another Existing Mother demonstrated a degree of ambivalence in her feelings about an egalitarian arrangement not being realised in her own family:

*It's just unfortunate that that didn't happen, well not unfortunate, that just didn't happen in our family dynamic.*

She retracts her comment that the contrast is 'unfortunate' suggesting that she does not have entirely negative feelings about her traditional arrangement. As with those who interpreted the question descriptively, egalitarian attitudes in this case were to some degree a reflection of changing cultural norms and stereotypes and did not necessarily reflect personal ideology or preferences.

## Support for freedom of choice

Another common theme in explanations which interpreted the question prescriptively was a rejection of the idea of social obligations, as illustrated in comments such as ‘*I don’t think it should be a rule that that’s how it should be done*’, ‘*I don’t agree that that is how it has to be*’ and ‘*I don’t think it’s the rule or the law*’. Echoing Knight and Brinton’s (2017) concept of ‘flexible egalitarianism’, responses of this kind reflected support for freedom of choice with parents emphasising that they did not mind how other people organised their lives and did not want to pass judgement on whether an egalitarian or traditional division of labour was better:

*My brother, him and his wife have very much split in terms of who’s at home and who’s at work, and that works brilliantly for them and I wouldn’t have an issue. [...] I don’t think one way is right or the other way is right. I think it’s very much couple dependent.* Existing Mother J

*So, if a woman happened to be a breadwinner and the dad was staying at home, fine, what’s wrong with that? Vice versa, the mum’s staying at home and the dad’s being the breadwinner and going to work, fine, what’s wrong with that? Sharing the load and both having part-time or whatever, it doesn’t matter.* Existing Father J

In their explanations, many expressed the importance of couples deciding what works best for them. For these parents, the priority appeared to be what makes most ‘sense’ and a belief that couples should do whatever ‘works’, as reflected in the following extracts:

*I think it doesn’t matter if it’s the other way round, or if you both do a bit of everything, whichever is the most sensible thing, I think.* Existing Father O

*There’s no explicit assumptions that it should be the man or the woman that works more or cares more. It’s just whatever is the right thing for your family.* Existing Father K

What is particularly evident in responses focusing on freedom of choice is that parents tended not reference their own situation. This can be seen in the following comments which combine a belief in freedom of choice for others with claims that the traditional arrangement outlined in the survey question is ‘right’ for the respondent and their partner:

*For me and [my husband], that’s absolutely what’s right for us, but I wouldn’t... I think it’s very dependent on how the couple is and how they function as a family unit.* Existing Mother J

*I don’t think it should be a rule that that’s how it should be done, but I think women have got naturally the maternal instinct, so I think it’s probably better in our situation.* Existing Father H

This suggests that disagreement with the GRA question could reflect what individuals accept or tolerate in others, which does not necessarily correspond with their own values or preferences. Indicators suggest that there is a growing trend for greater tolerance in society, linked perhaps to neoliberalism and notions of increasing individualism (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992), seen in increasing support for gay marriage and acceptance of sex before marriage (Park & Rhead, 2013). Similar justifications could be behind the rise noted in the number of ‘can’t choose’ responses on survey questions asking which is the best way for couples to divide parental leave (Curtice, Clery, Perry, M., & Rahim, 2019) and paid employment (Taylor & Scott, 2018) when they have children. This also reflects findings from Himmelweit and Sigala’s (2004) investigation of mothers’ decision making, which found that they were ‘usually unwilling to judge other mothers who had made decisions different from their own’, suggesting that this type of response to GRA measures could be widespread.

In summary, although some who disagreed that ‘*a man’s job is to earn money and a woman’s job is to look after the home and family*’ gave reasons for their response that drew on egalitarian beliefs and ideals for their own lives, often responses to the GRA question did not appear to be informed by personal preferences or values. Instead, many parents indicated that their responses were the result of tolerance (supporting freedom of choice), open-mindedness (awareness that sharing is possible) and social desirability (a fear of appearing old-fashioned). These findings therefore provide concrete examples to support Hakim’s (2003a, c) argument that attitudes are not a suitable proxy for preferences. Her assumption that attitudes reflect ‘measures of tolerance towards specified behaviours’ (Hakim, 2003c:341) was also borne out in justifications based on a belief in freedom of choice. The observation that parents could justify a rejection of the gender role attitude question while expressing traditional views also supports criticisms made by scholars such as Braun (2008) and Grunow et al. (2018) that ‘beliefs about the roles of men and women are more complex than a single continuum with traditional at one end and egalitarian at the other’ (Grunow et al., 2018:43), but challenges their claim that disagreement with traditional statements indicates a rejection of traditionalism (rather than a reliable measure of egalitarianism) since descriptive interpretations and social desirability bias mean giving an egalitarian responses does not preclude agreement with traditional values.

Having established that attitudes towards gendered divisions of labour could be quite distinct from personal desires, this chapter now moves on to consider how parents’ work-family preferences were depicted in the interviews.

## What Were Parents' Ideal Work-Family Scenarios?

This section looks at stated preferences for parental leave, returns to work and work-family divisions beyond the transition to parenthood. For the purposes of this study, preference was loosely defined as a person's ideal scenario given freedom of choice and ignoring constraints as far as possible, although the findings discussed below demonstrate that this is not straightforward (Bielenski et al., 2002). Taking a duality perspective, essentialist notions of preference were rejected and instead preferences are understood as constructed and adaptive (Elster, 1983; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Hay, 2002:131-2; Leahy & Doughney, 2006). As such, analysis of what shaped parents' desires is a key focus here, drawing on the context of constraint examined in the previous chapter. A longitudinal design means it is also possible to consider how preferences change over time. Interviews indicated that preferences were gendered, and so women and men's preferences are compared and contrasted. A couple perspective also allows for a consideration of the extent to which partners are aware of each other's preferences, whether partners' preferences align and what happens if they do not.

### *Parental leave*

This section explores parents' ideals when it came to decisions about Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave and SPL, including how much time they would have wanted to take off work if they were not limited by constraints such as policy entitlements.

### **Women's parental leave preferences**

When it came to taking leave, women's preferences centred around maximising time with their child and preferred scenarios generally involved long periods of Maternity Leave, including making use of unpaid portions in most cases:

*I mean [my husband] has been around loads and lots more than other fathers definitely are, but it was just the agreement that we had and what I wanted to do is to be there for my children and look after them on that Maternity Leave and I chose to take the nine months, which ended up being twelve when I was changing jobs. But that felt right and what I wanted to do.* Existing Mother K

*To be honest, I'd had a long run of training and I thought Maternity Leave was an opportunity to take a break and do something different. [...] I just thought I'm not going to get any other opportunities to take a year out and not do something [non-work] related so I might as well take this opportunity.*

Existing Mother Q

These preferences were important in parents' explanations for why they made efforts to overcome financial constraints to taking long leave periods mentioned in the previous chapter, with a number of couples saying they would do whatever they could to meet mothers' leave preferences: *'for some reason I really, really wanted to take the full year and um... yeah, we've just sort of made it possible financially'*.

When explaining what made long leave periods appealing, women mentioned desires to have time to bond with their new baby, to be able to breastfeed and to take time away from work. Mothers also implied they felt pressure to fit with norms around leave taking and did not want to be perceived as unusual or a 'bad' mother for taking what they perceived as a short period of leave. For example, one Existing Mother had returned to work after 6 months with her second child and said this made her feel guilty, however she also expressed desires to be able to return to work: *'You do feel a little bit of a guilt as a mother I think because you don't want to abandon them, but you also want to have a career. You're an independent woman and you want that back really'*. This mother was also unusual in stating that her ideal leave period would be less than a year, however she appeared to feel uncomfortable admitting this: *'Dare I say this really? I don't think... I took a year [with my first child], but do you really need a year's maternity?' As well as social expectations of 'good' mothering, her ambivalent feelings about taking leave also appeared to be tied up with financial concerns since she mentioned that latter portions of leave are unpaid under current legislation – demonstrating that it is difficult to untangle preferences from constraint even when invited to imagine a context of freedom of choice.*

This study is particularly focused on interactions in preferences at the couple level and so interviewees were also asked about how they would ideally like their partner to make use of parental leave, as well as their awareness of their partner's own preferences in this regard. In discussions about Paternity Leave, many mothers mentioned they did not feel two weeks was long enough for fathers. For example, in her follow-up interview, this Expecting Mother said she would have liked her partner to have had four weeks' leave so that they could spend more time together as a family:

*I think that would have been nice for him to have had another two weeks, because it's so special that first time, where you're just... you've got this new person in your home, as part of your family. And I'm always saying to mums that are about to have baby, like just don't invite too many people around in the first couple of weeks, because it's such an amazing moment, just you and your partner and your new baby.*

However, reflecting findings from other studies on SPL (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019), Expecting Mothers were not particularly keen on the idea of sharing leave. The nature of current UK policy means that for fathers to take more time off after the birth, their partner has to give up the equivalent portion of her Maternity Leave entitlement to enable him to take SPL. Couples must effectively compete for leave. Material constraints in the form of policy restrictions therefore shaped aversions to sharing and the factors that made women want to take as much time off as possible contributed to feelings of aversion towards the idea of sharing leave. For example, these comments from three Existing Mothers<sup>19</sup> indicate that reluctance was associated with fears of missing out and concern about going against the norm:

*I would probably have felt a little bit left out in a way, because all I've known is for like my friends who have had babies, the woman to be off with the child. So I would have probably felt oh this is a bit strange, a bit unusual.*

*He'll say that he is quite keen [on taking shared leave] actually. And um... it was partly me wanting that time off work. So I think if I was more open to going back to work earlier then between us we probably would have decided that he can have some time off. [Pause] But yeah, it didn't feel right at the time.*

*I was really looking forward to having a year off work to spend some time with [the baby] and certainly that was definitely, for the first six months I wouldn't have wanted to go back to work. I would have found it a real wrench to go back to work and leave [the baby] behind after six months.*

This final quote touches on a common misconception, noted in previous chapters, that SPL must be divided equally (i.e. six months for each parent). This misunderstanding contributed to mothers' aversion to sharing, and many noted that they would not feel ready to return to work or stop breastfeeding at six months. Later in her interview, this Existing Mother admitted that her aversion to SPL was also exacerbated by complications with the birth and feeling like she needed time to get into 'the whole mum thing':

*I don't think I was ever that keen, but then after our daughter was born... so I had a caesarean section, I had complications with my surgery, I didn't take to being a mother as well as I'd hoped for in the first few months. So I think if I'd gone back to work after six months, for example, and then left my daughter for the next few months, that wouldn't have felt satisfactory for me. I would have felt that I'd*

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<sup>19</sup> Since this chapter deals with more sensitive topics, some participant identifiers have been removed for reasons of internal confidentiality (see Chapter 4).



*barely gotten into the whole mum thing before going back to work. I think I needed that time and that became more obvious a few months into having our daughter.*

She says these feelings were also heightened by the fact that her husband appeared more comfortable than her as a parent, which she describes as being abnormal and unfair:

*You always hear about dads who are really helpless when the mother's giving birth, really hopeless when the baby first arrived, terrified. [My husband]'s never any of that, he always knew what was happening. He was always from the onset really comfortable handling her, when I wasn't. That's not normal. That's not fair. That's not the usual story, usually mums get used to the baby first and dads sort of muddle along and get used to things. They tend to be the useless ones and I was the one that felt quite useless when she was born.*

These comments suggest that reluctance around shared leave is also linked to the powerful and restrictive cultural norms regarding 'good' motherhood, discussed in the previous chapter. This woman wanted the opportunity to 'become a mother', but implies that her partner did not require time to become a father. Her dialogue suggests that tied into social norms dictating that women should be the primary carer is the implication that being a mother also requires being the 'better' or more 'capable' parent.

Although this mother claimed that her husband wanted to share leave, most women assumed that their partners were indifferent towards parental leave and primarily wanted to be supportive, as seen in these reflections from two Expecting Mothers:

*He wouldn't pressure me to go back sooner at all. I think he's really happy for me to do what suits really.*

*I don't think he really minds as long as it works. I don't think he's going to be like well no that's not how it's going to be. I think he'd be like, well if that's what you want then do it, as long as it doesn't really cause any massive detriment to him.*

Some mothers also admitted that they may have assumed their husband was supportive, but they had not actually considered or enquired about his preferences before:

*I was very definite in my thinking, I wanted to spend a year with my child. And maybe I'm quite guilty of not really making 100 per cent sure that [my husband] is definitely... I mean I know he's 100 per cent supportive of that, but maybe I've assumed he would be and didn't necessarily ask him too many times if it's ok for him. Expecting Mother*

As seen in Chapter 6, fathers did not tend to discuss their preferences because work-family decisions were perceived primarily as a mother's choice and they were wary of causing conflict. This is likely to have contributed to women's perceptions that their husbands had no particular preference for division of leave, but how did men describe their own preferences?

### **Men's parental leave preferences**

Reflecting women's assumptions, some fathers did describe themselves as indifferent towards parental leave decisions and would have been supportive of their partners' preferences whatever these were. This Expecting Father provides an example of men who professed not to have a strong opinion about taking leave and preferred to follow their partner's desires:

*I'm probably easy either way [about taking shared leave] to be honest. If [my wife] had said "I want to go back straight away", I'd have stopped work and done it, and if she says "I want you to go back to work and I'll have the full year" then I'd have done that as well. [...] She's probably a bit more on top of it than I am, but I'm willing to just fit into what she wants to do.*

However, in contrast to women's assumptions, most men were more concrete in their preferences. Some, like these two Existing Fathers, said they were happy with the minimal leave available to fathers and were keen to return to work:

*In terms of paternity, I think two weeks was enough, I was quite happy by the end of it to go back to work just for a change. Having the intensity of looking after a baby for 24 hours a day, work was a bit of a break from that. So I probably wouldn't have wanted paternity to go on too long, as a full seven days a week kind of thing.*

*I think it would have been nicer to have spent more time with the newborn. But from a practical point of view, (laughs) I kind of couldn't wait to get back to work. I mean it's obviously exhausting, completely exhausting in the first few weeks when a baby is born, so I think the time I had off was enough to support my wife through that first couple of weeks and that's what it's there for.*

In these cases, work was framed as less demanding than looking after a new-born - echoing Hochschild's (2001) notion of work as a haven from home.

However, many men said that two weeks did not feel like enough leave following the arrival of a child and expressed an explicit interest in taking a month or more. When asked why they wanted more time, like women, a commonly cited reason was the opportunity to bond with their child.

As can be seen in the following extracts, there were some signs of resentment at missing out and being cast in a secondary parenting role:

*I think that a month is crucial to develop that kind of long-term relationship that will follow the good principles of bringing up the children, on having a relationship that lasts for a long period of time, not just between you and your child, but you and your partner as well, because you've both been through a very stressful and very difficult time and emotions really do fluctuate like anything.* Expecting Father (follow up)

*I guess as the husband I did the functional bit of it. I supported her and was there when she was having really rough nights and recovering from the whole experience. But I guess I never got onto the nicer bit, you know once you are out of the first six or eight weeks, it would kind of be nice to almost go back, once you're settled and got over the initial shock of a new baby arriving.* Existing Father

Some, like this Existing Father, also mentioned wanting a longer period of leave so they could have more time to support their partner:

*It needs to be four to six weeks to allow for that initial new-born period so that the fathers can actually give more support to the mums in the new-born period more than just two weeks. I don't think two weeks is anything near enough for that.*

And others were keen on the idea of having time away from work:

*At the time I was, in fact, quite annoyed [that I couldn't take shared leave]. I tried to keep it away from [my wife], it wasn't her fault at all [that her contract at work was not renewed], but yeah there was certainly a point where I was quite annoyed that I wasn't getting like months off work with full pay! [Laughs] I was quite looking forward to the break.*

This Existing Father's comments about missing out on a break could be interpreted as showing a lack of interest in the childcare aspect of leave, however this might be a gendered assumption based on stereotypical perceptions of fathering. As seen earlier, there were also examples of mothers wanting to take leave for the same reason and it is interesting to question whether we perceive their comments differently due to assumptions about who is entitled to leave.

A substantial proportion of men therefore desired longer leave periods and indicated a greater appetite for sharing leave than mothers. However, this must be understood in the context of UK policy, which offers very little leave for men exclusively and requires women to relinquish their own leave entitlement to enable men to take more time off work. An important finding here, though, is that many mothers were apparently unaware of men's stated desires for extended leave.

## Parental leave preferences at the couple level

When it came to the interaction between men and women's leave preferences, as we saw in the first empirical chapter, most of the women in this study took the maximum period of leave available to them when they had their first child, suggesting that women's desires for long leave periods were put into action. Many comments implied that women's preferences were prioritised in decisions about parental leave:

*I mentioned the fact I'd quite like to look after a child for a part of the time before we had our daughter. [...] I think the initial hurdle was what's going to happen in the immediate period after the child is born. And [my wife] was quite clear, she said I'm going to be off on Maternity Leave and I'm going to take the whole year. I did say did you want to split it and that was kind of laughed off a bit.* Existing Father

*I did suggest to [my wife] I could take some of the Maternity Leave, I think you can do that now can't you? But she said she wanted it all, so I thought alright, fair enough.* Existing Father

*I think he says he would be happy to do [shared leave]. He's not kind of... breaking down the doors to do it. It would just depend how we feel... or how I feel really, I imagine will be the main driver.* Expecting Mother

The interviews demonstrated that men who were keen on sharing leave tended to avoid voicing these preferences due to fear of causing tension (see Chapter 6) or quickly backed down when their suggestions were vetoed by their wife. This may be because they were not under the same pressures to spend time with their children as women, and reflecting research on fathers' perceptions of Norwegian parental leave by Brandth and Kvande (2018), many mentioned they did not feel entitled to take shared leave. According to Thébaud and Pedulla (2016), observations that men's work-family preferences are not influenced by policy interventions (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015) are due to men's privileged career status and the risk of family friendly policies threatening men's masculinity. These findings show there may be other reasons why fathers are reluctant to take leave relating to partner preferences.

This prioritisation of women's preferences could be interpreted as a form of maternal gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Birkett and Forbes (2019) found similar examples of gatekeeping over leave in their study of couple decisions about parental leave in the UK, where fathers lacked a feeling of entitlement to discuss SPL and made assumptions about women's

preferences rather than initiating discussions. The authors note how men's reluctance to voice their preferences combines with active gatekeeping to give women a considerable amount of power over leave decisions, although they may not be aware of it. However, they suggest this was uncommon amongst professionals and particularly among higher earning women. The present findings challenge that conclusion and also indicate that men's assumptions about their partner's reluctance to share leave are likely to be accurate. As Birkett and Forbes (2019) point out, gatekeeping over leave is strongly influenced by UK parental leave policy, which makes the mother the gatekeeper of SPL who must 'transfer' her leave to her partner.

Supporting the idea that women have more agency in leave decisions and their preferences are prioritised, when fathers did take SPL it was because their partners were keen and not necessarily because it was their own preference. This Existing Father, who took SPL with his second child, said he would not have considered making use of the policy if his wife had not persuaded him to explore the option:

*I would say that was a situation where [my wife] was much more leading. I think to be honest she was much more proactive than me, thinking ahead to how things might work out. I think, to be honest, left to my own devices I would probably have defaulted into our previous pattern. [...] I definitely remember her coming home and saying "oh, you know, we could do it this way or that way". So, she definitely drove that decision.*

Counter-intuitively, fathers tended to have greater agency to realise their preferences for longer periods of leave when they were *not* entitled to SPL. These self-employed men were able to take (unpaid) time off work without affecting their partner's ability to take the full entitlement of Maternity Leave. In these cases, therefore, there was no competition for leave and time with children was not perceived as a finite commodity. Their wives often mentioned they were surprised at their husband's desire to take extended leave, but were happy to let his preferences dictate how much time he took off, as seen in the following extracts:

*Because it just would be any time he'd take off would be unpaid, so it would have been up to him to have taken more time. I think I would have expected him to take additional time over the usual two weeks, but I wouldn't have anticipated that three months was even on the table. Existing Mother*

*If we've got enough money in the bank, he does have the flexibility to take that time off. And so, yeah, of course it will be a huge support to me and make everything so much easier in the first few months, but for him as well I think he really wants to be there and play a big part. So I'm really pleased for that [...] if he's able to take a couple of months off that's fantastic, if he's got a really good role at that time and they*

*offer him an extension then I'm equally happy for him to continue and I know that he'll take some time a bit later probably.* Expecting Mother

A number of studies suggest that partner preferences influence behaviour (e.g. McRae, 2003b; Stertz et al., 2017), but these quantitative studies are unable to capture the mechanisms behind the phenomenon. Here, thanks to in-depth qualitative interviews with couples, we can see the dynamics of the interaction between preferences of mothers- and fathers-to-be. These findings indicate that when couples must compete over leave, expectant mothers have more agency than expectant fathers and their preferences tend to take priority, whether these are more traditional or egalitarian. This occurs in the context of gendered parenting norms and UK parental leave policy, which includes maternal transfer mechanisms.

### ***Return to work***

When it came to considering ideal scenarios for the longer-term division of earning and caring responsibilities following parental leave, most implied that certain forms of childcare were preferable to others; for example, echoing other studies in this area (e.g. Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Miller, 2005), many parents expressed aversion towards formal childcare (such as nurseries) and the idea of handing over children to 'strangers', but were more comfortable with extended family taking on care. However, ideals tended to centre around parental care, with mothers implicitly identified as the preferred carer, as seen in the following quotes:

*I would feel awful if I was going back full-time actually. I really just wouldn't want that at all [...] because you're just not seeing him really and you're really putting him with people you don't really know. He is spending more time during the week with strangers than his own parents and I think at such a young age that would really worry me.* Expecting Mother (follow up)

*I think if the choice was the woman looks after the family and the man looks after earning the money, or everyone works and the child goes to childcare, I'd probably say the first one, because at least then she's being looked after by family rather than other people.* Existing Father

More days with family than formal childcare was often cited as the ideal and wider familial care, generally in the form of grandparents (and here again implicitly grandmothers), was therefore next in the hierarchy of preferred carers: *I think if I was going to hand my child over to anybody, I would certainly want it to be a family relative* (Expecting Mother). However, as noted when considering how location poses constraint in the previous chapter, some did not have family nearby or were concerned about imposing on older relatives.

Although there was wariness towards non-familial care, formal childcare in moderation was described by many as beneficial - particularly for those over the age of two or three - due to the opportunity for children to socialise and for mothers to return to work:

*I think I'd prefer that mummy is looking after baby, because to us that just seems like the most natural thing [...] we've talked about potentially putting the little one in a nursery when he's about two years old just to get him socialised with other kids and in an environment when I'm not around.* Expecting Mother

*I'd say originally before we had our daughter, I think we were both against nurseries for children so young but it seems to be the best thing for her in terms of her development and her personality and interaction. So I don't like, I think five days a week might have been too much, but four is a nice balance.* Existing Father

Nurseries and childminders therefore found a place at the bottom of the hierarchy of preferred carers. It was less clear, however, where fathers fit in to this hierarchy. With the premium put on parental care, there was a general implication that fathers fell between mothers and other family. However, some parents implied that grandmothers were preferred over fathers, for example in one Expecting Couple the lower earning father had been looking into reducing his hours in paid work to spend time with their child however his wife said that this was unnecessary since their mothers would be able to provide childcare. This may have been linked to beliefs about women being naturally more maternal. Similarly, another Existing Mother whose partner took two months of parental leave said it was a 'no-brainer' for her husband to take time out because there was no family support available. When participants mentioned fathers adapting their hours for childcare, this was often portrayed as a last resort, suggesting that the only reason for the father to take time out to care would be to avoid external childcare. Unlike for mothers, the notion of men being entitled to spend time with their children and learn how to parent was not prioritised or taken very seriously, even though a number of fathers expressed desires for this: '*[working part-time] just wasn't worth it and when I look at it now [...] it's worked out okay. I don't think [our daughter] lost out greatly, it's probably more selfish on my part that I wanted to do that'* (Expecting Father follow-up).

Surprisingly, considering the stigma attached to external childcare and the premium placed on familial care, in some cases, paternal care appeared to be less desirable than outsourcing care. For example, one Existing Mother said she had been reluctant to work full-time because she worried about her daughter spending too long in nursery. However, when asked whether she would feel

better if her husband was able to look after their daughter, she admitted this would have made her feel jealous instead. She concludes that her concerns about nursery would have been replaced with a different kind of anxiety: *'It probably would have [reduced the worry], but I think I would have been wildly jealous so I think it would have just introduced a different kind of stress'*.

The context around these feelings will be explored below, as this chapter moves on to look at divisions of paid work from a gendered perspective by comparing men and women's return-to-work preferences. As mentioned earlier, several studies note that partner preferences influence work-family behaviour, but there is limited understanding of exactly how couples' desires interact in the decision-making process.

### **Women's return-to-work preferences**

The premium placed on maternal care was reflected in discussions with mothers about return-to-work decisions. Most expressed desires to be the one looking after their children and many, including these two Existing Mothers, were reluctant to return to work full-time:

*I wanted children, I wanted a family and I've always considered it to be something that is my responsibility to do and something that I wanted to do. I don't begrudge it by any stretch. I wanted children, I don't want anybody else to look after my children full-time. It's important to me to invest my energy and love into the girls and to do that I need to be there.*

*I'd had seventeen months at home with my son, I was still breastfeeding him just about at that point, so I'd literally never been apart from him. You know the regular physical proximity, I just thought to go from that to full-time would be too much for us both.*

These extracts suggest that these women's desires to be primary carer were partly due to stigma associated with formal childcare (*'I don't want anybody else to look after my children'*) and pressures associated with 'good' mothering norms (*'I've always considered it to be something that is my responsibility'*), but also the experiences of taking long Maternity Leaves. Echoing Wiesmann's (2010) concept of a 'gendered kick off' and findings from Miller's (2005) motherhood study, after spending a year providing full-time care to their child and forming a strong bond, women wanted to reduce the pain of separation. Consequently, women often mentioned they had a reduced orientation to work following the transition to parenthood and discussed prioritising time with family:



*I was never sort of the most career focused person, I was never pushing so hard to try and do the very best, but I think I had to change my whole attitude a bit being on Maternity Leave. You can't force the baby into a schedule, you can't force a baby to do exactly what you want it to do all of the time, even if all of these parenting guides are telling you that you can. [...] The only way I could make it work was to get a lot less worried about stuff.* Existing Mother

However, most women said they did not want to stop work entirely and, for some, the experience of becoming a parent affirmed the importance of work for them. For example, an Existing Mother described how she had been open to prioritising family, but realised during Maternity Leave how much work meant to her:

*I guess I started my maternity not really with a fixed idea of whether I would go back or not. I knew I would take the full year, which ended up being 14 months, because she came out early and I had a lot of holiday to take. So I actually had extra time and I think I just quickly realised over that Maternity Leave period that I wasn't someone that could probably stay at home all day, every day with her. As much as I love her, I think I needed to have my own identity, my career was going quite well.*

There were also comments from mothers about missing the company of adults and wanting a break from non-stop childcare in relation to their experiences of Maternity Leave. Reflecting the demographic of highly educated professionals, these women described work as a fundamental part of their identity and the opportunity to be something other than a mother:

*Work helps me remember that I have a brain that I use in a different way compared to when I'm with [my child]. Like honestly, I'm not... that sounds terrible, I don't mean it to say that I don't have a brain, or that anyone who doesn't work, doesn't have a brain. It's just that, for me, my brain was being used in such a different way that I really felt...and I think I attached so much value to myself through my work that when work was taken away for a bit that it really, my self-esteem kind of dropped a bit.*

Expecting Mother (follow up)

As seen in this new mother's fear that her comments sound 'terrible', many women indicated they felt guilty or ashamed for implying that they did not always enjoy childcare and wanted to prioritise work at times, indicating that intensive mothering norms for women to treasure time with their children and put caring for them above all else may have contributed to desires to prioritise family over work (Budds et al., 2016; Hays, 1996).

In order to satisfy these competing desires for work and family, and to achieve the ideal of having children with family more days a week than external childcare, the majority of women

said they wanted to work part-time, as seen in these extracts from interviews with two Existing Mothers:

*Having spent a year off with [my son], I was desperate to go back to work. I was quite ambitious and so I really missed it, but I also knew that I was going to miss him as well. I wasn't sure what the balance was going to be for me and so it felt like a bit of a compromise to try it that way [part-time].*

*I was due a promotion, and obviously it would have needed me to be full-time at work to take that next step up the ladder. I think, in my head, part-time seemed like the ideal situation. You could do some work and still have that for me, and I'd also be growing in my career, and I'd also be able to spend more time with my son.*

The strength of these (contextually formed) desires is manifested in the efforts made by mothers to overcome external barriers to part-time working and the observation that women tended to resign or downgrade rather than work full-time, noted in the previous chapter.

When it came to women's preferences about their partners' employment, as with decisions about parental leave, men's working patterns were rarely questioned. Women implied they wanted their partners to work full-time, but only because they mentioned no alternative. When specifically asked in the interviews whether they would like their husband to change his working hours, some mothers indicated they would be keen on, or at least accepting of, him working part-time:

*I really don't know why we didn't think [about my husband going part-time], which makes me think that maybe we were more in that gender stereotypical mind frame. But it wasn't intentional, and I would be more than happy if [my daughter] had time just with him and I was at work and vice versa I think she would have the best of both worlds then. Existing Mother*

*I would have been surprised if he had really been thinking about [going part-time] in all seriousness. And I suppose in a way... I'd be a bit concerned about other people's thoughts about that as well. [long pause] But yeah, I'd be happy with it. Expecting Mother*

However, as implied in this last comment, many women were hesitant about the prospect of their partners working part-time, due to fears that they would be stigmatised for diverging from the norm as well as desires to maintain a close bond with their child (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Often this was associated with an assumption that only one partner could reduce their hours, therefore meaning mothers would have to return to work on a full-time basis, which, as we have seen, is something most women were keen to avoid:

*I mean as much as I would like to be equal in our genders, I think being, I don't know, I think I would, I think as a person I would find it difficult to be the one who goes back full-time and isn't there, possibly just because you've had that, because I've had that year and I might find the separation difficult.*

Expecting Mother

As with sharing leave, when time with children was seen in competitive terms mothers wanted to protect their status as primary carer and there was evidence of gatekeeping. It was already noted earlier in this chapter that one mother feared she would feel jealous at the prospect of her husband spending time with their child while she was at work, but she was not the only one to express these concerns:

*I would probably have felt a little bit left out in a way, because all I've known is for like my friends who have had babies, the woman to be off with the child. So, I would have probably felt oh this is a bit strange, a bit unusual* Existing Mother

*Emotionally you've got to be prepared emotionally that he will perhaps be, I don't know, the one that the kids go to or the one that's there for certain milestones and something like that. You slightly have to be emotionally prepared for that and that is, that tugs at the heartstrings.* Existing Mother

Having taken long Maternity Leaves, mothers were used to being the 'go-to' parent and had developed a strong bond with their children. These comments about feeling left out also demonstrate the importance of comparison to same sex peers in forming expectations and perceptions of fairness (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; England, 2010; Hochschild, 1989).

Again, comparable with decisions about sharing leave, often mothers indicated they had not considered their partner's preferences regarding the long-term division of work and care. There was a continued perception that husbands had no strong feelings either way and women admitted they had been more focused on their own preferences in return-to-work decisions:

*Well to be honest, I'm not sure that he expressed a preference, because I have been quite clear in a lot of things about what I want to do, like staying at home, which colours everything else. So, he has gone along with me for a lot of things.* Existing Mother

*I think we both operate as a team and I think he pretty much wanted to take my lead on it because he knew it was me that was being impacted the most. So, he was quite happy to basically do what worked for me and then make it work.* Existing Mother

*I think we discussed it as a couple, but I think he was quite happy to take my lead. I don't think he really had a strong preference. I don't feel that he wanted me to stay at home, I think he knew that probably wasn't the best thing for me to stay at home five days a week. So, I'm not sure he was really too fussed as long as I was happy with what I was doing.* Existing Mother

These quotes indicate that women's belief that men had no strong preferences about return to work were linked to perceptions that these decisions only influenced mothers and a lack of impetus to reconsider men's working patterns, discussed in Chapter 6. For these same reasons, mothers' assumptions that their partners were apathetic were reflected more in men's own descriptions of their preferences with regards to return-to-work decisions than was the case in parental leave decisions, as we will now see.

### **Men's return to work preferences**

Legal entitlements to Paternity Leave and SPL gave men reason to consider their own preferences for taking time away from work at the beginning of the transition to parenthood. But with only two weeks out of the workplace for most fathers, there was little to make them reflect on their longer-term working status. Men were not necessarily keen to return to full-time work, but demonstrating adaptive preferences in what they perceived<sup>20</sup> to be a context of limited alternatives, they described a process of 'getting on with it':

*I guess the accepted practice is that men have the Paternity Leave and then go back to work. Although I have got a friend who's a guy who the looking after the kids is his main role and his wife's gone back to work full-time, that's the only instance I know of in our circle where it's not the traditional arrangement. So that's kind of why I see it as a bonus, it's not like every father's only working four days and I'm feeling left out.* Existing Father

Echoing the interviews with mothers, comparisons with same sex peers shaped strong expectations that mothers would be the only ones to change their long-term working patterns. As such, men tended to focus discussion on their partners' return to work preferences in the interviews and struggled to identify their own. For example, an Expecting Father said it was difficult to think about his own preferences because he found it impossible to disentangle them from what his wife wanted:

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<sup>20</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, in practice these highly educated professional fathers may have been less constrained than they believed, but *perceptions* of constraint shaped adaptive preferences

*I would have been quite happy to take the full year and be primary carer for that year, but I wouldn't have done that because... It's difficult to know [what my ideal would be] because I know [my wife] wouldn't have wanted .... wouldn't like that. I suppose if I took [my wife] out of the equation... it's difficult because I would have to be the primary carer anyway. So, I don't really know. I'm probably easy either way to be honest. If [my wife] had said I want to go back straight away, I'd have stopped work and done it, and if she says I want you to go back to work and I'll have the full year then I'd have done that as well.*

This comment also illustrates the complexity of researching preferences and the difficulties in even hypothetically conceiving of a context of freedom of choice.

When fathers were asked specifically to reflect on their preferences for their own working arrangement, there was evidence that men's orientation to work was affected by the arrival of children as it was for mothers. In some cases, this was an intensification of their attachment to work due to increased feelings of responsibility to provide an income, reflecting traditional norms around fatherhood, masculinity and breadwinning (Dermott, 2008; Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). This Expecting Father described how he feels pressure to support his family in his follow-up interview:

*I feel like there's a new sense of responsibility definitely and I'm still in the process of launching a new business which is about to happen in a couple of weeks' time and I've been doing that ever since we last spoke really. There's quite a lot riding on it in a way because initially, a few years ago, it was just me; and then it was me and [my wife] I had to worry about, but in a way not so much because she also had a job, so it was still sort of just me; but now it is very much the case that it's us that I've got to worry about all three of us. So if it doesn't really work then I'm going to have to find a plan B pretty quickly. So it sort of feels like it's quite a pressure time from that point of view.*

In contrast, for other fathers becoming a parent was accompanied by a reduction in prioritisation of work and a desire to reduce overtime or to work hours more flexibly so that they could spend more time with their child.

*I just want to spend time at home now with family rather than wasting, not dead hours, but work is always going to be there, it will still be there tomorrow and yeah, I'd just rather spend the time doing nicer things. My attitude has definitely changed. Existing Father*

*I think before I would have focused a lot more on work whereas now it's a means to an end. My career is still important to me, but so are my children. So I do take time off to go to important events, I don't want to miss anything.* Existing Father

*Before I would have definitely said [I was] work centred. That's changed a lot. I think [now I'm] probably towards the middle, probably a bit more towards family actually.* Existing Father

However, this increased orientation towards family did not tend to translate into changes in working patterns, as 'preference theory' would predict (Hakim, 1998, 2000, 2003b). Although fathers were interested in 'fitting parenting in' (Rose et al., 2015), there was less enthusiasm about formalised part-time working. Furthermore, one Existing Father mentioned he was becoming less orientated to work, but did not imply he was necessarily more orientated to family instead. In fact, he suggested that family was what was keeping him at work, thus challenging Hakim's (1998, 2000, 2003b) reliance on a dichotomous conceptualisation of work-family orientation:

*[What work means to me] certainly has changed, whether or not that's... I don't know how much you can put down to family. I mean certainly having a family makes me realise that there is more to life than working and earning money and stuff. At the same time when you have a family is the exact time when you need money more than anything else. But equally I've also gradually and increasingly started to dislike my job, regardless of having children. I would feel this way regardless of having children, it's just the fact of having children makes it a bit tougher to decide to pack it in and do something else. You kind of become tied in and stuck with it.* Existing Father

Looking at what drove men's work-family preferences, fathers expressed fears about the effect that reducing their hours would have on their career and finances, as well as concerns that the stigma associated with part-time working may be stronger for men (Holter, 2007):

*I don't know whether it's just, that there's a less precedent of men working part-time and it would be a worry of how is that going to be viewed when I come to change job? I think that would be my major concern. I mean I wouldn't have a problem of going part-time in terms of enjoying it and being the carer, I would enjoy looking after the kids and stuff, it would just be the future beyond that, if I tried to go back up to full-time and also the financial situation we'd be in when I worked part-time, would be my main two concerns.* Expecting Father

*For me to be at home looking after the child would be, in my mind, a great honour and I'd love to do that. If we had enough to support us from my other half, then that would be fantastic.* Expecting Father

These examples indicate that men also experienced competing desires in relation to work and family and suggest that, in some cases, constraints may have prevented preferences for reducing working hours from being put into action.

Although many men expressed increased orientations to family, several fathers stated that their partner had more of a preference for childcare than they did and often gave this as a reason for her to be the one to adapt her working hours. As can be seen in the following extracts, the fact that men had spent limited time alone with their children (Chapter 5) and had returned to full-time work a few weeks after the birth appears to have contributed to the discrepancy in preference for childcare (Miller, 2005, 2011b; Wiesmann, 2010):

*It's more important to her to see the children every day, regardless. [...] I think it's partly because when they were very young she was on Maternity Leave, so she spent necessarily more time with them. Apart from my two-week parental leave, I was back at work. [...] I'm used to not seeing them all day every day. I think when [my wife] went back to work after Maternity Leave, the change from seeing them every day to going back to work was tough. And I think minimising that change was for her very important.* Existing Father

*I mean I'm already back to five days a week, so that's the situation now and when [my wife] goes back to work, it won't be as big a change for me at that point as it will be for her. So she is very keen not to go back to five days a week, whereas I'm sort of already there.* Expecting Father (follow up)

Given that mothers had acted as full-time carers during long periods of Maternity Leave and had had more opportunity to form a strong bond, it is understandable that women's desire to spend time with their children may have appeared greater than their partners'.

## **Return to work preferences at the couple level**

At this stage of making longer-term decisions about the division of paid work and childcare, women's preferences appeared to be largely prioritised by default because men's employment status was not generally a topic of consideration (Chapter 6). Furthermore, due to women's much longer periods of Maternity Leave, returns to work happened at very different stages for fathers and mothers, resulting in more limited direct interaction in preferences than for parental

leave. However, once again there was some indication that mothers were gatekeepers over part-time working and fathers were reluctant to voice their return-to-work preferences.

Unlike parental leave, where perceptions that mothers had greater entitlement to leave prevented fathers from expressing desires to share, in the case of return-to-work decisions fathers appeared to express ambivalence as a way of concealing more traditional preferences. This seemed to reflect a situation in which expressing desires for a male breadwinning scenario is less socially acceptable for men than women. As discussed in Chapter 6, since work-family decisions are perceived as affecting women more, it could be difficult for men to imply their highly educated partner should abandon her career. Some fathers indicated they were keen to be the breadwinner and would be pleased if their partner was a full-time carer, but stressed that they would have been open to alternatives:

*I guess retrospectively, if I look back on it, maybe I hoped that she would want to be a stay-at-home mum, but I wouldn't have been particularly wedded to it if she said she didn't. I was quite relaxed, reasonably ambivalent towards her concerns, but sort of pleased that that is what she wants to do.*

Expecting Father

*I would say my preferences ... I've never thought I want to be a stay-at-home dad, I suppose. Again, that might change, but I've not naturally ever been a kind of super... when I go round to friends' parties and they've got young babies, there are other people than me who are more naturally drawn to playing with the kids and things like that. So I suppose I've never really... When [my wife] said she wanted to be a stay-at-home mum that sat quite easily with me. But, of course, I would have been happy to share things more equally if that's the way she felt about it as well.* Expecting Father

In contrast, mothers appeared to feel more able to request that their partners support them financially, if their preference was to leave work and care full-time: *'I mean I'm probably a bit sexist [laughs], but I've even said to [my husband], "look I'm not going to be the breadwinner of this relationship" [...] I said it in a jokey way, but he knows I'm being serious.'* (Expecting Mother). Although women in these situations struggled with concerns about how abandoning their career would be perceived by others: *'I know it's really bad to be thinking like that these days'*. This suggests that it is more acceptable for men to take on a traditional breadwinner role, but there is greater pressure on women to balance earning and caring responsibilities. This is likely to be associated with the fact that moves towards greater equality have largely been from women changing their behaviour rather than men (England, 2010; Friedman, 2015; Haas & O'Brien, 2010).



Since it was generally only women who were expected to make changes to their working patterns, men implied that it was ‘the right thing to do’ to let her priorities take preference. As such, fathers may have felt that they *should not* let their preferences influence return to work decision making. This is reflected in the following comment from an Expecting Father in his follow-up interview, in which he notes that he was ‘*trying not to put too much pressure on*’ when it came to return to work decisions:

*I’m quite relaxed if [our daughter] is in [nursery] five days rather than four or three, in nursery or with other people, you know that’s great for her to interact with other people and that will just be our arrangement and it’s just whatever [my wife] wants to do. So, if she wants to stay at home five days a week that’s up to her, if she wants to work three days that’s up to her. Yeah, I’m just trying not to put too much pressure on.*

One area in which men tended to express their preferences more freely was regarding external childcare, perhaps because this did not directly affect their partner and so was perceived as more of a joint decision. Their desires in this regard reflected the hierarchy of preferred carers and some wariness towards formal childcare discussed earlier in this chapter.

It is important to note that there were some couples where both partners had strong preferences to share childcare and paid work equally. They tended to be in more egalitarian arrangements or had been in the past. These couples had often made sharing a priority from the start, reflecting findings in Chapter 6 and in the literature (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005; Wiesmann et al., 2008), that equality requires forethought and active discussion. These extracts from Existing Fathers who were or had been in dual part-time arrangements indicate that complimentary preferences also play an important role in ensuring that forward planning takes place and sharing is made a priority:

*We discussed it quite a lot, our beliefs. We wanted to share it, share the childcare for our benefit. Personally, I wanted to have the opportunity to spend time with him. We also wanted to bring him up in an environment where it was not unusual to be brought up by either of us. So he was used to being looked after by his dad as well as his mum.* Existing Father

*I think it was kind of part of what we agreed when we decided that we would have a child. We said, “let’s try and do this equally”. We both thought we’d like to spend time with the kids, not just at weekends, and we’d like to share that.* Existing Father

Looking at what had shaped the egalitarian preferences of these couples, one Existing Father who had worked part-time mentioned living overseas as a key factor, indicating that cultural influences were important:

*I guess one of our big influences was we lived in Holland for a few years and we saw slightly different arrangements to childcare over there. I guess it's much more normal, as we understand it, for mothers to go back to work much quicker over there, but for both parents to drop to being half time. I think at the time we weren't planning on having kids, but we said that if we did we'd do it that way. Because that struck us as a nicer balance.*

Cultural norms were also important for an Existing Mother in a dual part-time household who had declined her husband's request to share parental leave due to complications around the birth and concerns about having time to 'get into the whole mum thing', but said that her desire to avoid external childcare meant she was keen to adopt an egalitarian arrangement when she returned to work:

*At the time when I was going back to work it felt really awful to think she'd have to go to nursery four days a week. And then we sat down and worked out if we could afford for D to go part-time at 80% as well. And we could afford it so he thought he'd ask about going part-time.*

Initially this mother said that they had not used SPL for financial reasons and dual part-time working was explained as due to a 'combination of [my husband] being more open to a different way of living and the opportunities arising from work'. However, she also said that initially she was not sure that her husband's employer would allow him to work part-time even though they worked in the same industry and, according to the quote above, financial calculations about whether part-time work was affordable were made because she wanted to avoid nursery. This suggests that material constraints such as finances and employment were a secondary rather than a driving factor in these decisions. The culturally informed preferences, which emerged through the interview, appeared to have provided the motivation to investigate the feasibility of options and to weigh up the severity of material constraints. As suggested in Chapter 7, material constraints may therefore provide a simpler and more neutral rationale for behaviour that eliminates the need to explore more complex personal preferences, which appear to be strongly influenced by cultural norms.

Yet, even in more egalitarian households, equality was not necessarily the highest priority. One father had been in a part-time role, spending one day a week as primary carer, however at the

time of interview he had recently moved to a full-time role and he mentions that although equal sharing is important to him, the priority given to this is content-dependent:

*[Equal sharing] is something I aspire to. I suppose I can't see it as an absolute because I've just taken a full-time job [laughs]. I mean I think it's important enough I wouldn't have done that unless it was a really unmissable career opportunity for me to take this move. Yeah... [pause] It's important to me that I'm playing a significant role and I'm present as a parent, and I have quality time with them. I suppose it's not so important to me that I do 50/50 on absolutely everything.* Existing Father

This shows that preferences and priorities compete, change and are shaped by circumstances.

### ***Beyond the transition to parenthood***

As well as reflecting back on ideals and priorities at the transition to parenthood (i.e. the first year after birth), the sample of Existing Parents offered an insight into the ways in which preferences had developed a few years after 'anchoring' decisions (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014) about parental leave and return to work had been made. These parents of pre-schoolers were also asked about their current ideals for the household division of paid work and childcare and, once again, gender differences were observed.

### **Women's preferences beyond the transition to parenthood**

In contrast to women's preferences for long leave periods and eagerness to take on the primary carer role at the transition to parenthood, more established mothers appeared to have become increasingly ambivalent about elements of being the 'go-to parent' and the difficulties of juggling childcare with paid work, reflected in these quotes from two Existing Mothers:

*I have had a lot of thoughts, probably not fair thoughts, about the fact that I'm the one who thinks about making sure we've got food in and what meals we're going to have during the week and making sure that [child] has clean clothes and that our washing is done and the house is tidy. Yeah, I feel like I do all of that as well as work.*

*I think work in itself, in isolation, is fine and keeping the house together, in isolation, is fine. The two put together I have found difficult. The hardest thing has been the food and cooking, and getting the washing done, and just keeping the house running. [...] I don't know if monotonous is an awful word to use, but with the children at the age they are, every day is quite routine led because it has to be with three of them.*

Established mothers also expressed resentment at the career sacrifices they had made as primary carer, particularly when looking at the progress their partners had made at work during this period. The repercussions of increasing disparity in earnings and status on relationship dynamics and their own identities were difficult for these highly educated women to contend with, as can be seen in the following extracts from three Existing Mothers:

*I think I was happy to go part-time, and I am happy with it, I just think sometimes it would be nice to have... to feel a bit more support with that. And it just feels too easy for him. My career and life has changed completely, and his has changed, but not as much.*

*I look back at my pre-baby days and my job and I was on a career path to being more senior in the business, be on the board and have a bigger profile. [...] Then I had babies and I just kind of from a career ladder perspective sort of fell off the top and went quite crashing down, which felt at the time, and at times still, further down than I wanted to go. So from a pride, or from personal aspirations or previous aspirations, I'm not perhaps in the place that I thought I would be or wanted to be and perhaps I feel a little underutilised here.*

*You also feel like you do to an extent lose an identity, you become a mum as opposed to anything else. It's difficult, I've always earned money. It was a big adjustment getting to that stage of not... I know [my husband] and I are a team, but it's a very different thing to not bring any money into your household and be completely reliant on someone else.*

As such, over the long-term, part-time work was not necessarily the ideal compromise that women returning to work perceived it would be. This indicates that preferences change and ambivalence is commonplace, challenging Hakim's (1991) portrayal of static preferences and women being 'grateful' for reducing their hours in work.

For some women, this dissatisfaction translated into a desire for their partners to reduce their hours in paid work in order to share the load. For example, an Existing Mother of three in a 1.5 earner household said her ideal scenario would be for her husband to also work part-time, partly because she thinks it would be good for him and the children to have more time together, but also because she would like him to understand how hard it can be to look after three toddlers on his own. She pointed out that currently he does this rarely:

*Only when I work a Sunday or a late night, does he have to look after all three of them on his own. Part of me thinks that's good for him and the children to have that, but also thinks [laughs] he needs to know how bloody hard it is!*

However, for most, although there was a broad desire for ‘greater sharing’ there were no specific solutions put forward for achieving this. Since part-time work was rarely considered as a serious option for men, limited connections were made between these grievances and men’s employment status.

Envisaging enactment of preferences for greater sharing was made even more challenging by the hurdles that mothers encountered when trying to share childcare after years of taking on primary responsibility. Echoing studies on maternal gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Hauser, 2012; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015; Williams & Chen, 2014), mothers said they were reticent to give up control of parenting because they did not feel their partners would achieve the same standards, claiming, for example, that they would dress their children in the ‘wrong’ clothes or feed them the ‘wrong’ food. However, some Existing Mothers suggested that, although it was difficult to let someone else take over, there could be benefits to sharing the load and letting fathers do childcare ‘their way’, even if this meant lowering their standards or expectations:

*I’m really terrible, like when he does do stuff he often does it wrong and then rather than just saying, “oh well it doesn’t matter” or “thanks for trying”, I’m always like, “oh no you forgot the rice” or whatever it might be, whereas I should bite my tongue. I mean I’m very aware of that, but I rarely actually manage to do it. So it’s probably really annoying for him.*

*I know that some people find it difficult to relinquish control and their husbands might not do things as they would, but actually you’ve just got to suck it up. As long as it’s done, it doesn’t matter how it’s done and my way is not always the best way, but he is perfectly capable, you just have to relinquish control.*

However, mothers’ ambivalence towards sharing was not only a matter of differing opinions about parenting standards. To begin with, mothers felt an emotional attachment and ownership over the role of primary caretaker. One Existing Mother stressed that her husband was very capable and recognised that ‘giving up’ the primary parent role would help her get back on track for promotion, but also acknowledged that this came with emotional difficulties:

*You’ve got to be prepared emotionally that he will perhaps be, I don’t know, the one that the kids go to or the one that’s there for certain milestones and something like that. You slightly have to be emotionally prepared for that and that is, that tugs at the heartstrings.*

Also, as mentioned in Chapter 5, mothers were overwhelmingly responsible for the ‘mental load’ associated with childcare and housework (Meier et al., 2006; Offer, 2014; Walzer, 1996). Women therefore worried that if their partners were responsible for childcare, essential housework and forward planning for the next day would be overlooked and left for them to pick up. Wearing

the 'wrong' clothes was not only a question of aesthetics, but also concern about the mounting pile of laundry and a desire not to use up the only clean clothes available for nursery the next day. Unaccustomed to routine daily childcare, Existing Mothers commented that their partners lacked the foresight to anticipate tasks that needed to be completed in advance or were unaware of the implications of focusing on the 'fun' aspects of care:

*I realised I was leaving instructions behind for that day, including swimming lessons and all sorts of things, but [my husband] did it his way and it was no less great for [our son] [...] and everything was fine. But he didn't put any washing on and he didn't go to the shops and buy any milk or bread or all the things I would incorporate into my day, I suppose. He was very focused on enjoying his time with [child], whereas I'm probably more thinking about the whole mix of it, as in I want to enjoy my time with [child], but I also know that if I don't buy any milk today, then we're not going to have any for breakfast tomorrow. Whereas I don't know if [my husband] thinks ahead like that.*

*It's all the thinking ahead. So even if say to him you do pickup today, I've then got to typically have thought about what they are going to have for dinner and put it in the fridge otherwise he gets home and there's no dinner in the fridge and what am I going to feed them and then they've got nothing but baked beans for dinner, or something I wouldn't have given them.*

Arguably, the only way for fathers to acquire an awareness of the mental load and learn about the consequences of missing important tasks would be to take on primary responsibility for childcare for a sufficient amount of time to experience the repercussions (Miller, 2011b). However, mothers' reluctance to let their partners learn from their mistakes was also shaped by cultural constraints, discussed in the previous chapter, whereby women were held to more stringent expectations about their parenting (Lupton, 2000; Yarwood & Locke, 2016). Existing Mothers described concerns about what other mothers or nursery workers would think if their child was given an unhealthy packed lunch or arrived at a party without a present. They said these things did not concern their partner, but also acknowledged that their partner would probably 'get away with it' if they did fall short of perceived standards. One Existing Mother mused that if her child told nursery that his father had fed him fish fingers for a week, the nursery worker would probably be impressed the father had been looking after them at all! The comments from mothers above suggest that when fathers 'get it wrong', it is their female partners who encounter stigma due to the perception that they 'allow' this to happen, further encouraging women into gatekeeping behaviours.

## Men's preferences beyond the transition to parenthood

While established mothers were keen to share more of the hard work of childcare, in contrast to the enthusiasm some Expecting Fathers showed for sharing leave and their resentment at being relegated to the role of secondary carer, established fathers appeared more comfortable to let mothers take the lead in childcare. By this point most fathers had become accustomed to being the primary earner and taking on a secondary parenting role. Work was often portrayed as a sanctuary (Hochschild, 2001) and, as reflected in the following extract, several Existing Fathers were reticent to prioritise family over their career:

*If I'm being brutally honest, I think I place my career more important than seeing the kids every day. [...] In an ideal world, I think I would obviously have a career that enabled me to see the kids - all this is not to say that I don't want to spend time with the kids - but if I don't have the choice then at some point I have to decide between work and career.*

Comments from Existing Fathers about the hard work and boredom associated with childcare imply that breadwinning may be perceived as the easier, more stimulating and, therefore, preferable option:

*I mean to be honest I would be a bit kind of worried [if my partner wanted to swap roles] and probably be clinging onto some kind of bit of work. [...] It wouldn't be missing the specific jobs that I'm doing, it would be missing some sort of glamorous fantasy of a job that I always feel that I'm about to get, you know. [...] I suppose as well is would I be bored, it's very boring looking after a small child. (Laughing.) Sometimes. It's fun of course, but you know really it can be very mind-numbing and isolating.*

*I think it was during Paternity Leave, I think it took me about six hours to empty the bin because I'd do a bit and I'd have to go up, and then I'd move the bin to the door and there was crying, and then the child had brought something up or she was sick. Hard to get anything done! So I think I'd need a bit of time for general life maintenance and house maintenance and stuff. I think I'd get frustrated at not making any progress if I was full-time looker-afterer.*

It is important to bear in mind here Miller's (2011b) observation that gendered parenting norms may allow men to voice these kinds of preferences whereas women may not even feel able to admit such feelings to themselves.

The following extracts also indicate that fathers perceived themselves as less skilled and therefore considered their partner to be better suited to taking on caring responsibilities.

Although there are also comments, such as these from two Existing Fathers, which imply resentment at partners micro-managing their parenting:

*She's more organised, she probably wouldn't trust me to do it because I would forget to put it into my diary and forget about it.*

*I've got [my daughter] a little seat on the back of my bike, so I take her out on bike rides. [My wife] doesn't really like going on a bike, but I think now she's going to follow on to supervise because I don't think she likes the idea of me driving off with her on the back of a bike. So, we'll end up doing that all together.*

Despite Existing Mothers' insinuations that fathers are shielded from policing of 'bad' parenting, some Existing Fathers also showed awareness of stigmatisation: *'peer pressure on parents is surprisingly strong I've discovered'*. However, few indicated that they felt pressure to try and avoid this. An exception was the Existing Father who said he wanted to teach his daughter to follow his instructions because *'you kind of get this feeling that you don't want to be judged as a bad parent if your child's misbehaving'*.

When Existing Fathers were asked specifically how they would currently prefer to organise employment as a couple, imagining an absence of constraints, about half said they would prefer to work full-time in a traditional 1.5 earner setup. The other half said a dual part-time working arrangement would be their ideal, however many said they would prefer to have their day off on the same day as their partner so they could have more time together as a family. When women said their preferred arrangement was dual part-time, they generally specified that this was a way of reducing the need for external childcare and so they envisaged having a different day off to their partner.



## **Preferences beyond the transition to parenthood at the couple level**

So far, we have seen that beyond the transition to parenthood established mothers expressed increasing desires to share earning and caring responsibilities, while established fathers were becoming more satisfied with a traditional male breadwinning scenario. For mothers and fathers, awareness of the hard work involved in childcare had grown and being primary carer was less likely to be portrayed as a privilege. Spending time with children was perceived in less competitive terms and women were resentful of the widening gap between their employment prospects and those of their partner. Paid work was sometimes perceived as a refuge (Hochschild, 2001) and a preferable option for many of these high educated professionals (who may well have felt quite differently if they were in less rewarding lines of work).

Comparing interactions between men and women's preferences at this stage to those during the transition to parenthood indicates that women's preferences no longer took precedence and were less easily realised. Increasing sharing means letting men do parenting 'their way', but this puts women at risk of taking on extra burdens in the form of neglected chores and social stigma. These factors limited women's ability to enact desires for more equitable sharing. Fathers also benefitted from the priority given to their careers and were not keen to suffer any penalties by reducing their hours. Furthermore, when men wished to avoid the monotonous aspects of care, unlike their partners this was not generally combined with concern about stigmatisation for being a bad parent or strong emotional ties to a primary carer role.

To some degree women's reduction in agency was a knock-on consequence of earlier decisions to take long Maternity Leaves, suggesting that there may be short-term benefits to women avoiding SPL, but negatives may be experienced over the longer term. However, established mothers who were disillusioned about the unequal division of labour appeared to make limited connections between early maternity decisions and these later outcomes. Echoing earlier findings that naivety contributed to limited negotiation at the transition to parenthood (Chapter 6), there appeared to be a lack of awareness that reluctance to share parental leave and the primary carer role could result in resentment about overload and career sacrifice for women in later years<sup>21</sup>. This suggests there is a lack of consideration about the long-term implications of work-family

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<sup>21</sup> This echoes Giddens' (1986) notion that through the aggregation of many individual and intentional acts, unintentional social outcomes can occur: 'the eventual outcome is neither intended nor desired by anyone. It is, as it were, everyone's doing and no one's' (1986:10). Although these individual actions may be rational, the accumulative effect may lead to irrational outcomes for everyone, what Giddens refers to as 'perverse effects'.

decisions, which is echoed in research by Hacothen et al. (2018). These findings also provide further context to observations from Birkett and Forbes (2019:217) that second time parents were more aware of the benefits of sharing parental leave and ‘often talked about a realization of the importance of both parents spending time with their young child, based on their previous experience’. However, the experiences of these Existing Parents suggest that sharing for subsequent pregnancies is likely to be less effective. By this point the status quo has changed and the financial disincentives for sharing are greater due to increasing disparity in earnings and parenting skills.

## Summary

This chapter focused on the third research question, investigating the preferences that drive work-family decision making and the extent to which parents are keen to contribute equally to childcare and paid work. A longitudinal methodology revealed that while many men and women in this sample of highly educated professionals expressed desires for egalitarian arrangements, preferences changed over time in response to shifting circumstances and often a traditional setup was described as more appealing. This contrasts with reports of increasingly egalitarian attitudes among this demographic (Scott & Clery, 2013; Taylor & Scott, 2018), however the use of a mixed methods approach here indicated that responses to GRA survey questions were often more reflective of what was tolerated in others rather than personal preferences. A number of parents appeared to combine strong support for those who choose an egalitarian arrangement with firm beliefs that a more traditional gendered division of household labour is best for them. These findings indicate that there is less reason to expect a relationship between attitudes and behaviour than frequently made comparisons in the literature would suggest.

The findings also provide empirical evidence to support theories of preference as adaptive and shaped by constraint (Elster, 1983; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Leahy & Doughney, 2006) even within a relatively privileged demographic of highly educated professionals. For example, women’s preferences for taking long Maternity Leaves and aversion towards SPL were related to the format of UK parental leave policy; the physical aspects of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding; and normative pressures for mothers to prioritise family above all else. As such, although parents’ accounts gave support to Hakim’s (2003c) argument that preferences should be considered distinct from attitudes, they fundamentally challenge her essentialist understandings of preferences as fixed and the notion that parents in the UK have genuine

freedom of choice when it comes to household divisions of labour (Hakim, 1998, 2000, 2006). Furthermore, as well as changing over time, preferences were also hard to pin down and define due to competing desires and the difficulty of separating contextual factors. This ambivalence is an indication that it is problematic to label parents according to a dichotomous work or family orientation. For example, fathers who claimed they were more orientated towards family than work did not necessarily want to care for children alone or for a whole day, or reduce their hours in paid work.

Along with stability in clearly defined preferences, Hakim's (2000, 2003b) theory also implies that mothers and fathers have compatible orientations to employment and family. However, her work gives little consideration to men's preferences, how couples' preferences combine in practice and what happens if they conflict. By interviewing both members of cohabiting couples across the transition to parenthood, this study is able to reveal that partners' preferences interact in complex ways that shift over time. Conflicting preferences were commonplace since prior experiences, cultural norms and material constraints made sharing appealing at different points in time for men and women, with men more likely to express preferences for sharing prior to birth and women once parenting routines had been established. These desires for sharing also tended to coincide with men and women having less agency in couple decision making meaning that, when it counted, preferences were rather traditional. The failure for egalitarian preferences to synchronise in this way and the process by which this interacts with changes in agency provides an explanation for the persistence of traditional behaviour that has not been identified in the literature to date. However, partners were not necessarily well informed about each other's preferences, with men's work-family desires particularly overlooked. This is associated with the lack of discussion and active negotiation revealed in Chapter 6 and adds further support to the claim that discussion is an important part of achieving more egalitarian divisions of labour (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005; Wiesmann et al., 2008).

These nuanced understandings of parental preference also challenge assumptions implicit in bargaining explanations for divisions of household labour that partners will always negotiate to reduce their share of household responsibilities when they can (Blood & Wolfe, 1965; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). Most of the women interviewed for this study were high and sometimes higher earners and they did appear to have strong bargaining power in decisions, particularly relating to parental leave, however they negotiated to take *more* leave and do a *greater* share of childcare at the transition to parenthood. This may explain the lack of association between relative income

and the division of childcare in the UK (Schober, 2013b). Furthermore, these findings support the theory that bargaining perspectives on housework cannot be applied to childcare (Bianchi et al., 2012; Gracia & Esping-Andersen, 2015; Offer & Schneider, 2011; Sullivan, 2013) since spending time with children was often portrayed as a privilege that parents competed for rather than an undesirable chore, especially in the early stages of parenthood.

Taking a 'duality' perspective that preferences are not intrinsic or fixed, and are instead continually shaped by context, this chapter has looked at what makes more traditional or egalitarian arrangements appealing or unappealing. This exploration of how preferences are formed and shaped is developed further in the next chapter, which looks at the interaction between preference and constraint in parents' decision making

# 9. The Interaction Between ‘Preferences’ and Constraints

The findings chapters have so far provided answers to the first three research questions, which are outlined below. This discussion chapter goes on to tie these findings together and respond to the final research question: **4) How do preferences and constraints interact in decision making?** To do this, it draws on the theoretical frameworks of structure and agency as a duality and distinctions between material versus cultural constraint discussed in Chapter 2, and proposes that preference and constraint have a reciprocal relationship. The chapter concludes by considering how this relationship could be captured in frameworks of work-family decision making.

## Summary of Findings

While summarising the findings of this thesis, it is now possible to respond to the first three research questions:

**1) How do heterosexual, cohabiting couples in the UK make decisions about parental leave and the longer-term division of paid work and childcare at the transition to parenthood?** This question was primarily addressed in Chapter 6, which found that explicit decision making at the transition to parenthood was limited. Echoing studies conducted in the UK and beyond (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Rijken & Knijn, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989; Wiesmann et al., 2008), interviews revealed limited discussion about divisions of parental leave, paid work and childcare or consideration of alternatives from a traditional gendered division of labour. Instead, decisions were frequently based on assumptions and often made by women alone. This is surprising given the substantial long-term consequences of these decisions for both parents (Barnes, 2015; Grunow et al., 2012; Kan et al., 2011). These findings therefore challenge assumptions, particularly in the quantitative work-family literature (Blood & Wolfe, 1965; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996), that bargaining or rational appraisals of costs and benefits occur between couples regarding the division of household responsibilities. This thesis proposes that negotiation was limited due to naivety, lack of impetus, gendered expectations and conflict avoidance.

## **2) How do first-time parents think about and approach constraints to sharing in decision making?**

Chapter 7 revealed that, although common barriers to sharing were identified by parents, perceptions of these constraints varied and individuals in similar circumstances did not necessarily respond to constraints in the same way. Reflecting Giddens' (1986) theorising on the duality of structure and agency, some parents overcame barriers to achieve their desired outcomes and what was understood as a constraint by some was perceived as an enabler by others. Furthermore, constraints were often assumed and not verified. For example, echoing the findings of Kaufman (2018) and Brescoll et al. (2013) many fathers believed their employers would not let them work part-time, but few had actually asked if this was a possibility. These findings indicate that those who wish to understand work-family decision making should avoid absolute or objective notions of constraint and instead turn their attention to how material circumstances and the framework of possibility are *perceived* by individuals. Whether a context is perceived as more or less constraining appeared to be strongly influenced by individual ideals and priorities.

## **3) What are the 'preferences' that drive these decisions? To what extent are parents keen to contribute equally to childcare and paid work?**

Chapter 8 investigated couples' work-family preferences and found that most expressed desires to share. However, the longitudinal methodology revealed that priorities and ideals changed over time and desires for sharing tended to occur at different stages of the transition to parenthood for men and women. Changes occurred since preferences were shaped by prior experiences and the contextual factors identified in Chapter 7. This provides more nuance to understandings of why traditional behaviour persists, since desires for sharing rarely overlapped within a couple. Sharing preferences also tended to occur when men and women had less agency in decision making. These findings support notions of adaptive preference (Crompton & Harris, 1998; Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Elster, 1983; Ernst Stähli et al., 2009; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; McRae, 2003a, b; Yerkes, 2013) and challenge essentialist perspectives, such as those put forward by Hakim (1998, 2000, 2003b) in her 'preference theory' (see Chapter 2), which assume parents have genuine freedom to choose outcomes that align with fixed work-family orientations. However, the findings do support Hakim's (2003c) claim that preferences are not the same as attitudes. Justifications given in the interviews for responses to gender role attitude questions from the recruitment survey often referred to what is tolerated in others rather than what individuals wanted in their own households.

## Reciprocal Relationship

The main aim of this thesis is understanding how and why parents end up in particular household work-family arrangements at the transition to parenthood. In particular, it examines how preferences and constraints interact in these decision-making processes to fill gaps in understanding about the process by which parental desires are shaped by circumstances. The literature points to the adaptive nature of preference (Elster, 1983; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Leahy & Doughney, 2006) and the significance of constraints in the persistence of traditional divisions of labour (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Ernst Stähli et al., 2009; Fagan, 2001; McRae, 2003a, b; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 2000; Yerkes, 2013). However, research also indicates that even if practical constraints are limited or removed, behaviour remains traditional. For example, higher earning, full-time working women still do more domestic work on average than men (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Craig, 2006; Grunow et al., 2012; Lyonette & Crompton, 2014) and mothers take the majority of parental leave even in countries which offer generous gender neutral policies (Budig et al., 2012; Niemistö et al., 2021). This suggests that greater understanding is needed about how individuals respond to constraint and the ways in which this interacts with their goals and desires. This thesis sought to fill this gap by exploring what parents want at the transition to parenthood, how their work-family preferences are shaped and formed, and how they interpret and respond to constraint. Based on the findings above, it argues there is a reciprocal relationship between preferences and constraints.

As predicted by constraints-based explanations (Chapter 2), ‘choices’ were restricted by common constraints such as finances, employment, policy, reproductive bodies, location and gender ideology. Work-family preferences were also clearly shaped and changed by these constraining factors, since context affected the desirability of different courses of action and parents’ desires adapted to the options available (Elster, 1983; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Leahy & Doughney, 2006). The findings therefore point to a relationship whereby constraint influences preferences. As a result, they contribute to the substantial body of literature critiquing Hakim’s (1998, 2000, 2003b) ‘preference theory’ and provide compelling evidence that we should reject choice-based explanations for the persistence of traditional divisions of labour.

We might therefore assume, as many critics of Hakim have implied, that preferences are not helpful for understanding inequalities in work-family divisions. However, echoing the ‘feedback effects’ between internal and external constraints noted by Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) in their study of mothers’ decision making, the findings outlined above also point to a relationship in the

other direction - preferences influencing perceptions of and responses to constraint - which has received less attention in the literature. The parents in this study interpreted common constraints in different ways and their responses to barriers were not predictable. Although many said they did not share because it would not 'make sense', it transpired that this was a subjective concept. Even when sharing was financially advantageous, this was not necessarily perceived as the 'best' option and what was understood as best was strongly influenced by preferences and the cultural norms that shape them. Furthermore, constraints were often assumed rather than verified and parents regularly overcame practical barriers to realise women's desires for long Maternity Leaves and part-time working. Therefore, while acknowledging that preferences are contextually formed, this thesis argues that it is important for those who wish to take steps to increase gender equality to examine what parents say they want, since this gives an important indication of how context is perceived by individuals. Since preferences are not predictably shaped by constraint, parents' ideal scenarios in a given context should not be presumed. While responses to attitude questions indicate these highly educated individuals feel they *should* support equal sharing, discussions in the interviews indicated that many did not necessarily have a strong desire to do so. Furthermore, challenging Hakim's (1998, 2000, 2003b) assumption of complementary preferences, these findings have highlighted that desires can clash within a couple (Reynolds, 2014) and shown how this can prevent a more equitable division of labour. Studying parental desires is therefore likely to reveal the contextual factors that are most salient in decision making and thus identify where interventions are most likely to be effective (although, as discussed later in the chapter, 'preference' may not be the best framework for this).

In summary then, constraints affect what is feasible and desirable, while desires drive responses to constraints. This reciprocal relationship between preference and constraint echoes a dualist understanding of structure and agency, since neither one nor the other appears able to explain on its own why divisions of labour become more traditional at the transition to parenthood or how decisions are made at this time. Theories of duality claim there is a reciprocal and intertwined relationship between structure and agency. In his dualist theory of structuration, Giddens (1986) argues that it is reductionist either to assume that humans have freedom of choice and society is 'the plastic creation of human subjects' (1986:26) or that all human activity can be explained by social norms or structural constraints without regard for individual reasoning:

Structural constraints do not operate independently of the motives and reasons that agents have for what they do. They cannot be compared with the effect of, say, an



earthquake which destroys a town and its inhabitants without their in any way being able to do anything about it (Giddens, 1986:181)

Constraints-based explanations imply parents are at the mercy of context – passive with no agency. However, for these relatively well-off professionals there were some choices to be made, albeit within a landscape shaped by external constraints, and their various responses to constraint suggest that they met Giddens' (1986) definition of agency, since they were able to 'act otherwise'.

## **Cultural vs Material Constraint**

The nature of the relationship between preference and constraint can be further understood by drawing on debates about culture and structure. As discussed in Chapter 2, some constraints are more visible and concrete than others, which means they may operate differently to those which consist of less tangible social sanctions and norms (McRae, 2003b; Wood et al., 2018). As a result, many scholars have found it necessary to make distinctions between cultural constraints and more practical or structural barriers, what are sometimes called 'material' constraints (Risman, 2017). This distinction was helpful for interpreting the results of the present study. When considering the experiences of the parents interviewed here, the relationship between their preferences and the practical barriers they faced, such as finances and policy, appeared different to the one with cultural constraints, such as gender norms.

Material constraints appeared, at times, to provide a convenient 'common sense' and therefore relatively 'value free' excuse for not sharing. For example, parents often mentioned material constraints such as finances as reasons for not making use of SPL or dual part-time working. However, when asked whether they would want to share if these practical barriers were removed, conversation frequently turned to more complex and sensitive factors - such as traditional beliefs about men and women's 'roles', finding childcare boring or hard work; jealousy and reluctance to share the primary carer role; and fears of workplace penalties. These topics tapped into fears about social stigma and deviation from cultural norms, implying that material constraints may provide a convenient excuse for avoiding deeper investigation of more complex and emotional factors.

Reflecting findings by Twamley and Schober (2019) that parents are more interested in taking up parental leave if this is something their colleagues do rather than if financial incentives increase,

culture often seemed more confining for parents and appeared to shape preferences more than material constraints. Interrogating preferences revealed that desires to appear 'normal' and for women to spend time with children and be perceived as the 'better' parent were often more important in parents' decision making and responses to material constraint than analyses of the financial implications of various outcomes. Illustrating the reciprocal relationship between preference and constraint, these desires were clearly shaped by gendered parenting norms, suggesting that cultural factors may therefore be more salient in decision making. For example, in one couple where the wife was the higher earner, practical barriers to sharing were limited: they relied heavily on her income and both described her as more career driven, the husband said he did not feel a need to progress at work and his employer had actively encouraged him to make use of SPL. However, despite this context, the wife said she had not considered her partner taking extended leave or working part-time, and was not keen on the idea. She did not think her husband would be interested and was concerned about what others would think since *'that's not what people do'*. Meanwhile, in his interview, the husband expressed some interest in SPL, but said he had not dared to raise the idea of sharing leave since he did not want to upset his pregnant wife and did not want to take 'her' leave away from her (Brandth & Kvande, 2018). Hinting at the influence of hegemonic masculinity and the importance of breadwinning in traditional notions of fatherhood (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002), he said that even though it may have made more 'sense' for him to take on a primary care role, he wanted his wife to be *'comfortable'* and *'looked after'*. In another couple, the husband had actively discussed his preferences to take SPL with his wife and had attempted some negotiating, but she had a strong desire to take leave and they both described her as *'calling the shots'*. In her interview, the wife confided that she had been reluctant to share leave due to feelings of discomfort and insecurity that her partner initially took to childcare more easily than her, claiming that this was *'not normal'* and that she wanted time to get *'into the whole mum thing'*. The desires of both these mothers reflect powerful fears of stigma associated with not meeting 'good mothering' norms, which have fed into active or implicit gatekeeping behaviours.

Risman (2017) claims that more empirical research is needed to understand how material and cultural processes interact. This study has contributed towards filling this gap in knowledge. Echoing the findings of other studies (Budig et al., 2012), culture mediated perceptions of material constraint. For example, gendered expectations about part-time working affected whether it was perceived as a possibility for men and women. One Existing Mother worked in the same profession as her partner and both ended up moving to part-time contracts when they

had their first child. However, she mentions that initially she assumed it would not be possible for her husband to move to an 80% contract even though she had a clear intention to do this herself and had not questioned whether *she* would be able to. She feared her husband's employers would find the request unreasonable, which could have been a reflection of her own feelings of discomfort about not conforming to norms, which are reflected her comments about dual part-time not being '*the done thing*' and that they were '*trying their luck*'. The effect of culture on perceptions of material constraint was also apparent in contrasting assumptions about whether it 'made sense' for a higher earning partner to be the one to go part-time depending on whether they were a male or female. When men were higher earners, couples reported that it did not make sense financially for him to work part-time, reflecting a rational choice perspective (Becker, 1981). Conversely, when women were higher earners, some couples claimed that it made sense *for* her work part-time. In one case this was rationalised because she would still be able to bring in a reasonable income on part-time hours whereas her husband would not, and in another because the default for mothers was perceived as not working at all. Clearly then notions of material constraint and what 'makes sense' are shaped by cultural and gendered notions of who should be earning and caring.

Culture, in the form of gender ideologies, appeared to shape work-family preferences, practical barriers to sharing and decision-making processes. Given this pervasive influence, cultural constraints seemed to operate on a different level to material constraints. For example, gendered notions of good parenting (culture) contribute to UK policy decisions to give women greater access to paid parental leave than men (material constraint) and also to mothers' desires to maximise time with children by taking as much leave as possible and avoiding full-time work (preferences). Meanwhile, the reciprocal relationship between preference and (perceptions of and responses to) material constraint appeared to operate above this - both interacting with each other as well as being influenced by culture. For example, parents' preferences for taking time off work following the birth were shaped to some degree by (culturally-formed) material constraints of parental leave legislation, seen in women who stated that nine months was their preference because this is when statutory payments ended. However, at the same time (culturally-formed) preferences for maximising time with children encouraged mothers to overcome these material constraints to long Maternity Leaves by setting aside savings.

The observed importance of culture in this study could be particular to the demographic represented here, since highly educated professionals may be less likely to experience material

constraints to sharing. This does not necessarily mean that policy and the removal of practical constraints have no role to play in increasing sharing among this group, but suggests that the greatest benefit of policy change is in its power to create and legitimise new norms. This is seen in the stark comparison between motivation for and discussion of Paternity Leave compared to fathers working part-time noted in Chapters 6 and 8.

Making a distinction between cultural and material constraints is also helpful for interpreting the implications of these findings because it appears that different strategies are required to tackle them. Culture seemed to be a more insidious barrier and harder to overcome for these parents since it was easy to overlook and went uninterrogated (Hays, 1994; McRae, 2003b; Wood et al., 2018). This can be seen in the following reflections from an Existing Mother in a traditional 1.5 earner household about the possibility of her husband working part-time:

*I really don't know why we didn't think about that, which makes me think that maybe we were more in that gender stereotypical mind frame than I thought. But it wasn't intentional, and I would be more than happy if [our daughter] had time just with him and I was at work and vice versa. I think she would have the best of both worlds then.*

By their very nature, cultural norms normalize behaviour and make it appear natural or intuitive, as a result they tend to go unnoticed (Barthes, 1957; McRae, 2003b; Wood et al., 2018). To be able to challenge a norm, individuals must first be aware of them. This requires the availability of alternative normative systems or reference points. Individuals must also be in a relatively privileged position, with high levels of self-esteem, to face the stigma that generally accompanies the transgression of social norms (Hochschild, 2012).

Specific recommendations for improving sharing given the reciprocal relationship between preference and constraint identified in this thesis and the importance of distinguishing between cultural and material constraints are offered in the subsequent concluding chapter. But first, it is important to consider how these findings should be taken into account when theorizing increasing gender inequalities at the transition to parenthood.

## **New Framework of Motivation?**

Since both choice and constraint-based explanations for the persistence of gendered divisions of household labour fail to capture the reciprocal relationship between preferences and practical barriers outlined above, an alternative framework is required that can accommodate the

importance of individual desires in shaping how context is perceived and navigated while also capturing the contextual nature of those desires.

One framework that captures constraint as well as agency, which has been employed by some work-family researchers, is Sen's (1992, 1999) Capabilities Approach. CA conceptualises agency as embedded in context and proposes that action consists of choice under constraint. Material constraints, represented as 'means to achieve', are also distinguished from 'freedom to achieve', which takes into account both personal factors (such as skills and knowledge) and social factors (such as cultural norms and power relations). However, although CA acknowledges preferences and includes them in models, they are depicted as independent from means and freedom to achieve (Kurowska, 2018:44). Furthermore, how they are formed and the way in which they interact with means and freedoms to achieve is not clearly defined. CA therefore currently struggles to capture the reciprocal relationship between preference and perceptions of constraint identified in this study.

Drawing on the work of Giddens (1986) and Heckhausen and Heckhausen (2008), this thesis proposes that a framework of 'motivation' is helpful for interpreting the work-family decision making processes observed in this study, since it captures the importance of individual desires and their relationship with responses to constraint. Heckhausen and Heckhausen's (2008) model of motivation implicitly acknowledges a reciprocal relationship between preference and constraint, although this is not something the authors note themselves. In this theory, action is dependent on expectations of achievement based on the person's assessment of the situation as well as the value the person places on that achievement. As a result, this theory of motivation is able to account for different perceptions of and responses to constraint:

Depending on the individual motive orientation, situations that appear similar to outside observers may seem radically different to the individual involved [...] in other words, whether or not achievement incentives are equivalent in enticing behavior is entirely dependent on the individual's achievement motive (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008:6)

This theory has not been applied to the context of work and family previously, and it is used only as a broad inspiration here. However, this thesis argues that the concept of 'motivation' - understood as the 'wants' which prompt action, following Giddens (1986) - is a more useful tool for capturing the structural and cultural basis of desires than 'preference'. 'Preference' has a tendency to be understood from an essentialist perspective (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005),

whereas ‘motivation’ implies the influence of external factors and context can be understood in terms of motivating and demotivating factors.

This thesis also argues that motivation is an essential part of understanding gender inequalities and the mere absence of material constraint is insufficient for sharing. Although the highly educated professionals in this study appear to be in a relatively favourable position to share and have means to overcome constraints, there is little to *motivate* them to do so. These parents were supportive of sharing work and childcare in theory, as seen in responses to the gender role attitude survey question, but in practice this comes with various costs - such as being perceived as less committed at work, missing out on a promotion, not having overseas holidays, being perceived as a ‘bad mother’ or less of a ‘man’, losing the status of being the higher earner, taking on the hard work and potential boredom of childcare and standing out from the crowd.

Although these couples may have been able to afford to share from a financial perspective (and, in some cases where mothers were higher earners, it may even have saved them money), in order for there to be motivation to share, it would have to outweigh these other costs. Crucially in this regard, the benefits of sharing were mentioned less frequently than costs in the interviews and came across less vividly in parents’ narratives. Also, as seen in the final findings chapter, when motivation to share did occur it was not necessarily present for both members of a couple at the same time. Fathers saw benefits to sharing leave in the early stages of the transition to parenthood, since this was their only means of spending time with their new baby. Whereas for mothers, who were all entitled to several months of Maternity Leave, there was less to motivate them to share at this stage. The benefits of sharing for women became more obvious later on when they were trying to juggle primary responsibility for childcare with paid work and could see the contrast in their partners’ career progression with their own.

The terminology of ‘motivation’ also highlights the relationship between an individual’s level of desire (how motivated they are) and their agency to achieve preferred outcomes (within the limits of capabilities) by putting up with cultural constraints and overcoming material barriers when motivation is high. Both men and women may want to take long periods of leave at the transition to parenthood, but women are likely to be *more* motivated to do so because they have always anticipated being able to take leave if they had a child and have planned accordingly; because they know their partners are unlikely to object; because they believe the law will be on their side if employers object; because it is what most other women do so they know others will not judge them harshly for doing so; and because they fear they may be perceived as a bad

mother if they do not. Men in contrast have many demotivating factors: they may cause friction with their partner by taking leave away from her; not prioritising their partner's preferences may be perceived as misogynistic; and friends, family and colleagues may judge them harshly for taking leave. One Existing Father in a traditional 1.5 earner household gave a clear example of the importance of motivation levels. He concluded, in hindsight, that it could have been more financially viable for him to work part-time rather than his wife, however he said it came down to organisation and suggested his wife was more motivated to talk to her employers than he was:

*I remember making the point to [my wife] that, if one approached it purely on financial grounds, she'd stay doing five days a week and I'd be the one dropping out. At the time her hourly rate was greater than mine, so on that basis that would have been the logical thing to do. As it happens I think it again comes down to organisation, because I think basically [my wife] got off her bum and talked to her bosses about it, whilst I was still procrastinating and so when it became clear that her employers were willing to be extremely flexible that guided the decision a bit if you like, or it made what we chose the easy decision if you like and anything else would have been an exercise in an uphill, not uphill, but would have involved extra effort.*

It is clear that 'preferences' on their own are insufficient to explain work-family divisions, but to improve gender equality following the transition to parenthood, looking at constraining factors in isolation is also unhelpful (Giddens, 1986). Constraining factors are externally imposed, whereas motivation is internally felt and the relationship between the two cannot be assumed. It is necessary to understand how context is perceived by individuals and form a holistic picture of what motivates them. By adopting a framework of motivation, the question shifts from why parents can't share to *whether* parents want to share, *how much* they want it (i.e. how motivated they are) and why? In this way, a framework of motivation offers a more positive outlook on the potential for 'undoing' gender if the factors that demotivate parents from sharing are addressed.

# Conclusion

This thesis set out to gain a better understanding of why those with apparently egalitarian attitudes end up dividing household responsibilities in traditional, gendered ways at the transition to parenthood. To remind the reader, as outlined in Chapter 1, the backdrop of this study is a context in which *attitudes* in the UK towards the household division of paid and unpaid work appear increasingly to reject traditional roles (Scott & Clery, 2013; Taylor & Scott, 2018), while *behaviour* remains remarkably gendered, particularly following the transition to parenthood (Andrew et al., 2021; Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; Dias et al., 2018; Martinengo et al., 2010; Schober, 2013b). So, what has it concluded? To begin with, a mixed methods approach comparing recruitment survey responses to in-depth interviews with 25 couples has revealed that attitude measures do not necessarily tell us very much about what people want in their own lives and so there may be limited reason to expect a relationship between increasingly egalitarian attitudes and behaviour. As one of the few studies to interrogate work-family decision making processes at the transition to parenthood, in the UK, since the introduction of SPL and from a couple perspective, this thesis found very limited consideration was given to alternatives deviating from a traditional, gendered division of labour. This was due to gendered assumptions and expectations, naivety about the risks of 'falling into gender' (Miller, 2011a), fears of causing tension within the couple relationship and a lack of external impetus. Although both men and women did express desires for sharing, these preferences were not necessarily expressed to each other and tended not to occur consistently throughout the transition to parenthood or overlap within a couple. Furthermore, when men and women were motivated to share, this tended to coincide with them having less agency in decision making. These fluctuations in preferences and agency were in line with changing circumstances, indicating that preferences and behaviour are shaped by context. Within this demographic of highly educated professionals, some factors made it difficult to share, while others made it unappealing. In this way context was also perceived through the lens of (contextually formed) preferences. Even when sharing was financially advantageous, this was not necessarily perceived as the 'best' option and what was understood as best was strongly influenced by preferences and the cultural norms that shape them. Furthermore, constraints were often assumed rather than verified and parents regularly overcame practical barriers to realise women's desires for long Maternity Leaves and part-time working. Constraints therefore affected what was feasible and desirable, while desires drove perceptions of and responses to constraints. This thesis concludes that it is not enough for parents to think sharing is a good idea in theory and for there to be an absence of practical barriers, parents also



have to see clear benefits to and motivations for sharing to undertake the active planning and discussion required for an egalitarian division of household labour.

## **Key Contributions and Recommendations**

Through these findings, this thesis makes some key contributions to work-family theory; understandings of work-family decision making, constraints and preferences; and methodological practices for studying these domains, which are outlined below. Included in this discussion are associated recommendations for how these findings can contribute to increasing egalitarian divisions of household labour at the transition to parenthood and beyond.

### ***Theoretical contributions***

As outlined in Chapter 2, existing explanations for the tenacity of traditional divisions of labour following parenthood have centred around a ‘choice versus constraint’ debate (Gash, 2008; McRae, 2003b; Yerkes, 2013), however, as few studies look in depth at work-family decision making processes, especially from a couple perspective, we have a limited understanding of how preferences and constraints are navigated in practice when divisions of labour are put in place at the transition to parenthood. This thesis has revealed a complex interaction between preferences and constraints in decision making. In keeping with the findings of existing studies (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Elster, 1983; Ernst Stähli et al., 2009; Evertsson & Grunow, 2016; Fagan, 2001; Leahy & Doughney, 2006; McRae, 2003a, b; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 2000; Yerkes, 2013), constraints shaped desires - what has been referred to as ‘adaptive preferences’ - but at the same time preferences also shaped how individuals perceived and responded to constraints, something that has so far received less attention in the literature (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004). What ‘makes sense’ was a subjective concept and there were several examples of parents overcoming practical constraints to achieve their desired outcomes when motivation was high.

As such, the thesis has made the novel argument that there is a reciprocal relationship between preference and constraint in work-family decision making. This contributes to theorising on gender inequalities at the transition to parenthood by indicating that it is important to examine what parents say they want since this gives an important indication of how context is perceived by individuals. Understanding these *perceptions* of constraint is vital since this is what appears to direct decision making and behaviour. Studying parental desires is therefore likely to reveal the contextual factors that are most salient in decision making and thus identify where interventions

are most likely to be effective. These findings suggest that making assumptions about parental preferences by studying attitudes or constraints is unlikely to give an accurate depiction of what parents want or what motivates them.

Exploration of this reciprocal relationship has also contributed to the debate about whether culture should be considered a part of structure (Hays, 1994). The findings of this study indicate that culture is an important part of the context in which decisions about work and family are made and therefore could be considered structural based on Hay's (2002) definition of structure as the *context or setting* in which social events occur and acquire meaning. However, the findings revealed culture operating on a different level to practical barriers (material constraints), such as finances and policy. Culture, in the form of gendered parenting and work norms, appeared to have a pervasive influence, providing the foundation that shaped practical barriers to sharing, work-family preferences and decision-making processes. Furthermore, cultural and material constraints appeared to shape decision making in contrasting ways and different strategies were required to overcome them. For example, material constraints often appeared to provide a 'common sense' and 'neutral' explanation for behaviour that concealed more complex and emotional preferences and concerns, which were shaped by cultural factors such as gendered parenting norms. This thesis therefore indicates that distinctions are important, whether this is between culture and structure or (as has been the approach here) between 'cultural constraints' and 'material constraints' (Risman, 2017).

The thesis has provided an alternative to existing theories of preference (Hakim, 1998, 2000, 2003b) that reflects the reciprocal relationship with constraint by employing a framework of 'motivation' to understand decision making. It argues that this term can capture the material and cultural basis of desires better than 'preference', since context can be understood in terms of motivating and demotivating factors. The terminology of 'motivation' also highlights the relationship between an individual's *level* of desire (how motivated they are) and their agency to achieve preferred outcomes (within the limits of capabilities) by putting up with cultural constraints and overcoming material barriers when motivation is high. This alternative to Hakim's (1998, 2000, 2003b) 'preference theory' recognises that work-family orientations are not fixed or created in a vacuum, while also acknowledging the impact of individual work-family desires on how contextual factors are perceived and addressed. In this way, it offers a more positive outlook on the potential for 'undoing' gender if demotivating factors are addressed.

## ***Contributions to understandings of work-family decision making***

As outlined in Chapter 6, this study extends understanding of work-family decision making processes and, in particular, the context surrounding lack of active negotiation and discussion between couples. Among the handful of studies that have examined work-family decision-making processes in depth, a key finding is that active negotiation and discussion among couples about divisions of paid work and childcare is necessary for sharing but is very limited in practice (Dechant & Schulz, 2014; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Rijken & Knijn, 2009; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989; Wiesmann et al., 2008). However, according to the theory that explicit negotiation increases in periods of change and when decisions have major consequences, it has been assumed that ‘anchoring’ decisions will be made in a more explicit manner (Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). This thesis contributes to the debate by suggesting that this is not the case in the context of UK couples making anchoring decisions at the transition to parenthood, since explicit negotiation about divisions of parental leave, childcare and paid work was rare - indicating that active discussion of decisions should not be taken for granted even for decisions of considerable magnitude. As such, the findings also contribute to critiques of both rational choice and bargaining perspectives (see Chapter 3), since these are implicitly based on the assumption that active negotiation or weighing up of alternatives regularly occurs (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989).

Although negotiation was rare, as one of the few studies to focus on both parental leave and return to work decisions, this thesis was able to draw out distinctions between greater consideration of sharing parental leave compared to sharing of longer-term divisions of labour. Furthermore, by adopting a couple perspective, the thesis is able to offer something to the question of whether men or women have more agency in decision making, which has received conflicting responses in the literature (Garcia, 2015; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; Wiesmann et al., 2008). Interviews with couples of Expecting and Existing Parents found that women had more opportunity to lead decision making at the transition to parenthood and act without consulting their partner, since decisions about parental leave and divisions of paid work and childcare were seen to affect them more. Conflicting findings in the literature could be the result of the life stage studied. The arrival of children appeared to have a distinctive impact on the gendered dynamics of work-family decision making, which was linked to cultural perceptions of the primacy of a mother’s care; the physical demands of childbirth for women; and the peculiarities of UK parental leave policy. Beyond the transition to parenthood, women’s work-family

preferences were not prioritised in the same way and their agency to achieve the greater equity in divisions of household labour that they desired was limited.

The thesis also extends understanding about work-family decision-making processes at the transition to parenthood by proposing four key mechanisms behind the observed lack of negotiation and women's primary role in decision making: *naivety* about the difficulties of sharing household responsibilities following parenthood and the degree of active discussion required to maintain equity is commonplace among expecting parents; *gendered expectations* about parenting provide a default plan of action, giving the impression that discussion of alternatives is unnecessary and that decisions only affect women; *reliance on external catalysts* for decision making, such as requirements to report pregnancy to employers and long nursery waiting lists, means there is little impetus for couples to consider men's work-family arrangements; and *fear of creating tension* at a time when couples are especially reliant on one another means fathers, in particular, are wary of voicing their work-family preferences and mothers take the lead in decision making.

Addressing these factors could be key to encouraging more egalitarian divisions of labour at the transition to parenthood since active discussion appears to be essential for initiating and maintaining sharing (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009). With regards to gendered expectations about entitlement to parental leave and involvement in childcare, interviews suggested that these are difficult to change when parenthood is an imminent reality, since women had already invested emotionally in the prospect of long Maternity Leaves and had spent years anticipating and planning for shifting working patterns (Bass, 2015). Therefore, it is likely to be more effective if young women *and* men are actively encouraged at the beginning of their career trajectories (for example, in the later stages of school or at university) to anticipate sharing leave with their partner and to consider how they will adapt their working patterns if and when they have children. Alongside this, it is important to tackle naivety about the risks of 'falling into gender' (Miller, 2011a) at the transition to parenthood, by improving awareness among young people about the difficulties in maintaining equity in a relationship following the arrival of children and the long-term and accumulative impact of decisions made at the transition to parenthood. Encouraging proactive planning in this way is also likely to reduce the reliance on external catalysts for decision making at the transition to parenthood itself.

## ***Contributions to understandings of work-family constraints***

Chapter 7 set out a key contribution of this thesis in regard to understanding structural constraints, which is that *perceptions* of barriers are what matters in decision making. Echoing numerous studies on the drivers of work-family decisions, parents cited a number of common barriers to sharing that shaped preferences and contributed to their work-family decisions, such as finances, employment, policy, biology and gender ideology. Analysis of interviews also revealed a barrier that is less frequently identified in the literature: the impact of location and its association with the availability of networks that can offer childcare and/or social support when parents are caring. However, individuals in similar circumstances did not necessarily respond to or interpret these constraints in the same way. Perceptions of the severity of similar constraints differed, the interviews provided examples of individuals overcoming constraint when motivation was high and what ‘makes sense’ was a subjective concept shaped by culturally informed preferences and priorities. Furthermore, constraints were often assumed and not verified, for example echoing the findings of Kaufman (2018) and Brescoll et al. (2013) many fathers believed their employers would not let them work part-time but very few had actually asked if this was a possibility. Those who wish to understand work-family decision making should therefore avoid absolute or objective notions of constraint and instead turn their attention to how material circumstances and the framework of possibility are *perceived* by individuals and why.

Having investigated perceptions of constraint in work-family decision making, this thesis proposes a number of recommendations for increasing gender equality among parents. Reflecting the findings of existing research (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Twamley & Schober, 2019), participants described SPL policy as complex and misunderstandings that leave must be divided equally in two six-month segments were common. This indicates that government and employers need to communicate more effectively that leave can be shared flexibly across the year. Related to this, SPL pay structures need to be more attuned to preferences for dividing leave. When couples considered SPL, fathers were more likely to take up the latter portions of leave, due in large part to breastfeeding advice recommending a minimum of six months, however currently later months are paid at low statutory rates and the final three months receive no statutory pay at all. The findings of this study therefore indicate that a system where pay on SPL is related to the amount of leave each respective parent has taken would be more likely to facilitate uptake than the current system which relates simply to the time that has transpired following the birth. So, for example, each parent could be entitled to *their* first ‘x’ weeks of leave

at 90% of pay rather than simply the first 6 weeks following the birth, which are most likely to be used by women.

Examination of decision-making processes also indicated that campaigns to encourage part-time working for men could help tackle gender inequalities following the transition to parenthood. Although SPL was perceived as complex, awareness of this policy was widespread. In contrast, it was striking how often participants were surprised in interviews when asked whether they had considered the prospect of fathers reducing their hours in paid work. This indicates that legislation is important for challenging normative thinking and raising awareness of alternative modes of behaviour, which therefore implies that greater promotion of the possibility of part-time work for men would be beneficial. While SPL policy in the UK is rather limited and presents barriers to greater sharing of parental leave, the UK has relatively strong and accessible flexible working rights. Alongside this, it is important to make use of innovations that have been pioneered by mothers. These highly educated women came up with inventive flexible working solutions and negotiating techniques, suggesting that there may be scope for overcoming financial and organisational constraints to taking long periods of leave and working part-time in professional careers, even for higher earners.

It is important to note, however, that part-time work continues to attract penalties in the form of career progression and earnings, and can result in stigmatisation - regarding assumptions about levels of commitment, for example (Blackwell, 2001; Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Moen & Yu, 2000; Nightingale, 2018; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). The findings of this study and others indicate that these penalties and stigmatisation may be stronger for men (Allen & Russell, 1999; Holter, 2007; Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003). This has been explained through the notion of the masculinised ideal worker, meaning that men are transgressing gender norms as well as organisational expectations (Acker, 1990; Gascoigne et al., 2015; Hochschild et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2010; Williams, 2000). Therefore, these findings indicate that initiatives to challenge ideal worker norms and increase the visibility of fathers in the workplace are also important for encouraging more equitable divisions of labour.

### ***Contributions to understandings of work-family ‘preferences’***

The longitudinal and couple-based design of this study revealed a novel finding, discussed in Chapter 9, that while both mothers and fathers expressed desires to share childcare, this occurred at different stages of the transition to parenthood. Prior to the arrival of children, many

Expecting Fathers expressed enthusiasm for sharing leave and being involved with childcare responsibilities, whereas most Expecting Mothers were keen to take as much time off work as they could and so were less enthusiastic about sharing leave or the primary carer role with their partner. However, beyond the transition to parenthood, Existing Mothers appeared more ambivalent about prioritising family over work and expressed greater desires for more equal divisions of labour, while Existing Fathers' enthusiasm for sharing and adapting their working patterns was limited.

Analysis of interview data indicated that the reason for this contrast in preferences was contextual. Women's early reticence for sharing appeared to be driven by the limitations of current parental leave policy in the UK, which requires women to 'give up' their maternity rights in order for men to take more than 2 weeks of leave, as well as strong pressures associated with 'good mothering' norms and perhaps a sense of entitlement to benefit from one of the few areas where women's rights and desires appear to be privileged. Prior to the birth, the prospect of spending time with the child was portrayed as a precious and scarce 'commodity' that both parents wanted to benefit from, likely due to the excitement of a new arrival and some naivety about the 24/7 realities of childcare (Miller, 2017a). For men, sharing was their only way of accessing this 'commodity' whereas these women were in the position of being able to lead decision making and 'monopolise' time with the child due to their stronger leave entitlements.

However, as the transition to parenthood progressed, the hard work of childcare and the longer-term impact of taking on a primary carer role became more salient. Men's decreasing motivation for sharing at this stage may have been due to an increased awareness of the privileges associated with having a more established career and the ability to avoid the undervalued labour of childcare and associated domestic work. Meanwhile, more established mothers appeared to resent the inequalities in career progression and contribution to domestic life they experienced in their relationships. Yet, by this stage, roles and routines had been firmly established and mothers' desires were given less priority in couple decision making than when they were going through pregnancy and early motherhood, which was also associated with their decreased contributions to household income.

Longitudinal interviews and parental recollections therefore revealed work-family desires which changed over time and adapted to context, thus contributing further empirical evidence to the literature contesting Hakim's (1998, 2000, 2003b) notions of fixed, innate preferences. Thinking

in terms of preferences when examining decision making has also been a useful tool for providing more nuanced understandings of the mechanisms behind the persistence of traditional divisions of labour. Although both men and women may desire more equitable arrangements, gendered contexts mean that they are motivated to share at different times and so there is likely to be a lack of consensus in heterosexual couples about sharing. Motivations to share also coincided with men and women having less agency in decision making, which contributed to couples being more likely to opt for traditional arrangements.

In couples who had divided parental leave, childcare and paid work in more equitable ways, it was notable that preferences for sharing had coincided. Since women's preferences were overwhelmingly prioritised at the transition to parenthood in this highly educated demographic and they appeared to take the lead in work-family decision making at this time, enthusiasm among mothers for sharing parental leave in the first year appeared to be a particularly crucial factor in couples deciding upon more equal divisions of labour. Furthermore, the initial stages of the transition to parenthood set the scene for long-term divisions of labour since habits and skills are formed at this time. Women's experiences of leave taking indicate that if men were to also take extended periods of leave it could provide them with a catalyst to consider changing working patterns over the longer-term and a way of acquiring the skills, bond and mindset for longer-term sharing of childcare (Bünning, 2015; Haas & Hwang, 2008; Miller, 2005), thus creating a gateway to enduring equity within couples. As a result, a recommendation of this thesis is that addressing the factors that demotivate expectant and new mothers to share the primary carer role, such as transferal mechanisms in UK policy and restrictive norms associated with 'good mothering', should be a high priority for increasing gender equality at work and in the home, as well as increasing awareness of the long-term benefits of sharing parental leave for women. Fathers struggle to increase their involvement without the support of their partner and, at least in this demographic of highly educated professionals, it appears to be expectant mothers rather than fathers who are most wary of sharing leave. These findings also indicate that the government could do more to address fathers' lack of agency in work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood by reducing the competitive nature of leave and increasing non-transferable paternity entitlements.

### ***Methodological contributions***

The results of this study also highlighted the utility of a mixed methods approach for illuminating the experiences behind the figures. When common interpretations of survey



measures from the recruitment survey were compared with participant narratives in the interviews, it confirmed what many qualitative studies reveal – that it is very hard to capture the richness and complexity of lived experiences in a multiple-choice question. Surveys are invaluable for providing representative data on a large scale, but they are also artificial and force respondents to choose an option that best fits rather than giving a response that reflects their own narrative. Respondents themselves were aware of the restricted nature of research and the desire to simplify and categorise experiences, as illustrated by a mother with a complex work history who laughed when asked about her first Maternity Leave, saying *'I'm not going to fit into any of your tick boxes now'*. However, as well as highlighting the limitations of survey data in general, the use of a mixed methods design was also able to reveal more precise issues of validity in two specific measures.

In Chapter 5, empirical evidence was presented indicating that standard measures of employment status (whether someone is categorised as working full-time or part-time) based purely on working-hour thresholds may not reliably reflect common understandings or lived experiences, at least in a professional demographic. In-depth interviews revealed a recurring trend of parents working over standard academic thresholds for 'full-time' hours who described themselves as part-time workers and also appeared to be defined this way by their spouses and employers. This suggests we cannot be sure whether those who are currently defined in the literature as full-time are necessarily perceived as such in practice. This finding provides an important contribution to the methodological literature because distinctions between part-time and full-time work are frequently used across the social sciences to make assumptions about the prevalence of inequalities, as well as a whole range of experiences at home and in the workplace (e.g. Connolly et al., 2016). Part-time work is assumed to be more precarious than full-time work and is associated with lower wages, less responsibility, reduced opportunities for career progression and stigmatisation (Blackwell, 2001; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Nightingale, 2018; Walsh, 2007). Valid definitions of employment status that reflect lived experiences are therefore vital to ensure that we are able to accurately identify those who may be experiencing such penalties. A recommendation based on the findings of this thesis is that combined measures would provide a more nuanced distinction between full-time and part-time work. Interviews with parents added empirical support to Walling's (2007) claim that alongside absolute working hours, comparisons with colleagues, previous working hours and industry standards also play an important role in self-assessment and workplace understandings of employment status.

This thesis is also one of the few studies to explore participant justifications for responses to gender role attitude (GRA) survey questions (Behr et al., 2012; Braun, 2008) and has thereby also contributed to understandings about how these responses should be interpreted, providing much needed empirical evidence in Chapter 9 on their equivalence with personal desires or ‘preferences’. Several quantitative studies investigating links between behaviour, constraints and preferences on a large-scale have implied that attitudes are akin to personal desires (for example, Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Ogolsky et al., 2014; Stertz et al., 2017; Wesolowski, 2020), although these assumptions of equivalence tend to lack justification in relation to empirical data or theory. In some cases, studies have explicitly used GRA measures as a proxy for preferences, including some studies that have sought to directly critique Hakim’s (1998, 2000, 2003b) ‘preference theory’ (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; McRae, 2003b). In response, Hakim (2003c) has argued that attitude measures assess what is considered acceptable, good for society or ‘politically correct’ rather than individual preferences and has used this as a reason for dismissing the results of these critical studies. However, she presents very limited evidence to support these claims. The methodology of the present study gave the opportunity to empirically assess how participants interpret and respond to attitude measures by asking participants to reflect on their response to the recruitment survey GRA question in the interviews. Rationales for disagreeing that ‘a man’s job is to earn money and a woman’s job is to look after the home and family’ indicated that participants regularly drew on their feelings about what others do when responding to this question, claiming it was not the only way households should or could organise work and family, rather than what they desired for themselves. These findings therefore provide empirical support to the argument that equating attitude measures with personal preferences is problematic and indicate that this ‘benchmark’ GRA measure (Behr et al., 2012) might instead give a better indication of what is tolerated in society.

Although much qualitative research (including the present study) has provided empirical evidence that challenges Hakim’s essentialist notions of fixed innate preferences, in order to also provide a robust criticism of ‘preference theory’ from a large-scale, quantitative perspective it is necessary to use measures which explicitly measure preferences (Warren, 2011). It is important to point out that authors of studies which use attitude measures as a proxy for preferences have often acknowledged the limitations of using attitude measures and point to the lack of measures of work-family preferences in datasets (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005). Therefore, one of the recommendations of this thesis is that more survey questions that explicitly measure individuals’

own work-family preferences when it comes to divisions of household labour are needed. This is necessary to indicate to what extent there is a motivation to share paid and unpaid labour. Taking into account the adaptive nature of preferences and the impact of cultural and material constraints, questions should also focus on which factors increase or decrease motivation to share.

As well as providing more nuanced understandings of employment status and GRA measures, taken together, these two methodological contributions also provide a different way of interpreting the ‘incongruity’ between increasingly egalitarian attitudes and persistently traditional behaviour (Scott & Clery, 2013) that forms the backdrop of this study. To begin with, the observation of inconsistencies between academic and participant definitions of employment status indicates that behaviour could be even more traditional than assumed, which makes the discrepancy with attitudes more pronounced and therefore more puzzling. However, the finding that attitudes appear to reflect what is tolerated in society rather than what individuals desire for themselves provides an explanation since there is less reason to expect to find a relationship with behaviour and so the ‘incongruity’ becomes less remarkable.

## Limitations

While this thesis has furthered understandings of work-family decision making and the interplay between preferences and constraint, it is important to acknowledge the limits of its contribution and scope. Most notably this was a small-scale study, which investigated the experiences of only 25 couples. While it has sought to investigate assumptions about practice based on large-scale data by providing an in-depth snapshot of work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood, the findings are in no way representative and cannot be generalised beyond this sample. Furthermore, all participants were affluent, highly educated professionals in cohabiting couples where both partners were in employment. Some ethnic diversity was represented in the sample, participants worked in a variety of different sectors and couples came from a range of different locations in the UK. However, it is clear that the sample represents the experiences of a select and privileged demographic, while other socio-economic groups are likely to have different experiences of work-family decision making and be faced with a different set of cultural and structural constraints. The findings are also not generalisable even within the particular demographic studied here. Participants were self-selecting and are therefore likely to be particularly interested in work-family issues and may have less conflict and time demands in their

lives. Existing couples were also purposively selected by the researcher from a recruitment survey to represent a range of different household arrangements further distancing this from a random sample. However, although this study makes no claims to generalisability, it is able to highlight the diversity of experiences within this narrow group.

Interviews for this study were conducted with each member of a couple individually and took place over the telephone. Face-to-face interviews are more commonly used in qualitative research and tend to be considered as producing better quality data (Holt, 2010; Vogl, 2013), while those conducted over the phone are often considered second best as they do not allow for an appreciation of body language and setting (Burnett & Gatrell, 2018; Holt, 2010; Vogl, 2013). However, it was decided that for this research project telephone interviews brought the most practical and theoretical advantages since they offered more flexibility and control over time and location for busy parents (Holt 2010), as well as anonymity that could lead to more ‘frank’ discussions (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Burnett & Gatrell, 2018; Chesley, 2011) and reduce the potential for stereotyping and biases on the part of both researcher and participant (Holt, 2010). Yet, as in any qualitative research, the nature of the data collected is subjective and open to interpretation. Adopting an interpretivist and constructionist paradigm, interview data was understood as being generated in a collaborative process with the researcher and the way in which it has been interpreted necessarily reflects the researcher’s particular worldview and experiences. There is also the potential for social desirability bias, where participants may wish to present themselves in a particular way or may say what they think the researcher wants to hear (King et al., 2019). Following this interpretivist perspective, this research has not therefore aimed to access ‘true’ depictions of participants’ experiences, instead the data is understood as an *interpretation* of work-family decision making at the transition to parenthood in the context of these particular interviews. The qualitative and descriptive nature of this data also means no causal claims can be made about the reasons for a discrepancy in egalitarian attitudes and behaviour. Instead, this research aims to suggest avenues for further enquiry, identify possible causal mechanisms that large-scale data is unable to access, and explore whether assumptions about decision-making processes and motivations made in quantitative studies are reflected in individual narratives.

There are also limitations to the quantitative aspects of this study. The recruitment survey was not designed to produce a robust data set for statistical analysis. Instead, its purpose was to aid the selective sampling of Expecting Parents, however comparison between assumptions based

on questionnaire data and interview responses led to unexpected insights into the validity of employment status and gender role attitude measures. As such, only one 'benchmark' (Behr et al., 2012) measure of gender role attitudes was included, which does not reflect the combined measures of GRA that are frequently used in the literature. This means it is not possible to know how participants would have responded to other gender role attitude questions and categorisation of participants in this study as 'egalitarian' is limited. Furthermore, the observations made in this thesis about the interpretation of attitude questions and their equivalence with preferences cannot be generalised to other types of GRA question. However, as the findings of this study illustrate, GRA scales and the use of these to class individuals as traditional or egalitarian is a problematic concept in itself.

Another issue affecting the robustness of the quantitative data is that only men were invited to complete the recruitment questionnaire and were later asked if their female partners would like to take part in the interviews, since in its early stages this study was primarily focused on the perspective of fathers. Female partners who took part in interviews were asked to provide their own responses to relevant survey questions during the interview, but this does not provide an equivalent response format and couples were ultimately selected for interview based on the husband's responses to the survey and interest in the study. Studies on work and family typically find it easier to recruit via female participants (e.g. Twamley & Schober, 2019) so this recruitment strategy may have provided an alternative sample to those found in other research. If this study were to be repeated, a more developed survey including several measures of gender role attitudes would be sent to both men and women with partners also completing a survey before taking part in subsequent interviews. This would enable more robust claims to be made about the relationship between attitudes, behaviour and preferences. However, the findings generated from this mixed methods study are nonetheless able to provide an important illustration of the need for caution when analysing survey data and interpreting the meanings behind participant responses.

## **Future Research**

The findings of this study provide several avenues for future research. This was a longitudinal study that focused on work-family decision making in the early stages of the transition to parenthood. Many parents mentioned that they anticipated revisiting their divisions of labour when their children went to school, which indicates that this could be the next key stage for

studying the dynamics of making work-family ‘anchoring’ decisions. Therefore, now that three years have passed since the original data was collected it would be an ideal time to return to this sample for another round of follow-up interviews. Given recent events, it will also be important to understand how the global coronavirus pandemic has affected divisions of household labour and the wider impacts for gender equality. This cohort of parents offers a unique opportunity to compare divisions of labour and work-family decision making processes before and after the pandemic, and consider the long-term consequences for decisions about the division of paid work and childcare.

Given the unexpected findings that arose from this study regarding the discrepancy between academic and participant understandings of part-time and full-time work, future research should also explore the validity of employment status measures in more detail and on a larger scale. Are the discrepancies observed unique to this study or part of a wider phenomenon? Are discrepancies limited to the context of women employed in high pressure industries with long working hours following the maternal norm of reducing hours in work? This could involve analysis of representative data to identify incongruences between self-reports of employment status with definitions based on working hours to see where these occur and whether incongruence is unique to a particular group. Research could also look into the effect of other factors that appeared to be important in understandings of employment status from the interviews such as days worked, industry standards for working hours and individuals’ relative working hours pre- and post- children. Interviews with employers would also provide a more complete picture of how employment status is understood in practice.

Since several couples who appeared to be in more equitable arrangements according to their working hours were, in practice, dividing paid work and childcare in more traditional, gendered ways, the present study only included a handful of sharing couples. To identify mechanisms for increasing gender equality at the transition to parenthood, it would be helpful to investigate in more depth what decision-making processes look like in couples who have managed to share. Action research could also be undertaken to explore whether the recommendations above are able to increase sharing among expectant parents with egalitarian attitudes or intentions. For example, does encouraging couples to think about long term consequences and alternatives to traditional norms make them more likely to use shared leave and/or non-traditional work arrangements?

Future research should also examine work-family decision making processes in different demographics since, as mentioned above, the interplay between constraint and preferences may well be very different in other circumstances. Research with same-sex, single parent, unemployed and working-class parents, for example, would provide insight into whether the experiences and narratives documented here are represented in other groups.

## Final Concluding Thoughts

This thesis asked whether couples can't or won't share. Although the two paradigms of 'can't' and 'won't' are too clean and neat for the reality of work-family decisions, they provided a starting point in this thesis for approaching the complex issue of why heterosexual couples adopt traditional, gendered divisions of labour (or otherwise) at the transition to parenthood. The findings here have indicated that factors, such as finances, leave entitlements, work commitments and breastfeeding contribute to a situation where parents report they 'can't' share. Also, decisions are rarely made in isolation and couple preferences do not always align - a partner who 'won't' share results in another partner who 'can't'. To some degree parents 'won't' share *because* they 'can't' - preferences adapt in light of constraints. However, parents' perceptions of what they 'can' do appear highly subjective and shaped by culturally informed priorities and desires. Among these highly educated professionals, parents could overcome some constraints to sharing. So, depending on their perspective, perhaps these parents 'can' share, but this does not mean it is necessarily an appealing prospect. When these parents 'won't' share this in many ways reflects the stigma associated with transgressing gendered work and parenting norms and a lack of cultural incentives to sharing.

These findings reveal the complexities of sharing work and care, but they also indicate that there is potential for change. A number of specific recommendations have been included in the summaries of contribution above, but, overall, in-depth analysis of couple decision making processes has indicated that, in order to increase sharing of childcare and paid work, it is necessary to challenge what makes a 'good mother' and a 'good father'. In particular, the 'privilege' of the primary carer role for women and the commodification of motherhood need to be reframed. Increasing sharing also requires more long-term thinking and greater consideration of the consequences of decisions made at the transition to parenthood. Greater awareness is needed of the magnitude of these decisions and the important role they play in perpetuating gender inequality. This must involve challenging gendered expectations about parenthood in

young adults and increasing awareness of the repercussions of early divisions of parental leave, paid work and childcare on gender inequality and women's well-being, in particular.

These recommendations necessitate fundamental changes to the political, cultural and structural makeup of society and could therefore be considered unrealistic in their scope, however recent events have shown that such fundamental change is possible. As I complete this thesis, society is experiencing a global pandemic that has created a wholesale transformation in the way we live. The widespread closure of offices and schools has suddenly brought paid work and education into the home, thereby dismantling the boundaries between public and private spheres and making work-family conflict more visible than ever. As a result, parents around the world are being confronted with a new set of struggles and decisions to make about the division of paid work and childcare. At the same time, welfare policies that seemed impossible a matter of months before have been swiftly introduced to address these issues. Much of our social structure and cultural norms will no doubt be affected by this, in ways that could have both negative and positive repercussions for gender equality. Early analyses suggest that traditional gender roles may become more entrenched, with women taking on the brunt of extra childcare and home-schooling (Andrew et al., 2020). However, it is plausible that flexible and home working could become normalised for both men and women as a result of these experiences and couples could become more skilled and practiced in juggling work-family responsibilities together. Only time will tell what the long-term consequences of this pandemic will be for work-family divisions, and this will be an important topic for future research, but change of some kind will surely occur.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Participants

**Table 9.** Demographic information for all interview participants

<b>Couple</b>	<b>Recruited via</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
<i>Existing A</i>	Russell Group	3 children aged 3, 3, and 1	Him: Academic Her: Medical Worker	Him: 40 Her: 38	Him: PhD Her: Bachelors	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing B</i>	Russell Group	1 child aged 4	Him: Scientist Her: Academic	Him: 40 Her: 42	Him: PhD Her: PhD	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing C</i>	Plate Glass	1 child aged 2	Him: Nurse Her: Nurse	Him: 32 Her: 36	Him: Masters Her: Bachelors	Him: White Irish Her: White Irish
<i>Existing D</i>	Russell Group	2 children aged 3 and 1	Him: Management Consultant Her: Lawyer	Him: 39 Her: 35	Him: PhD Her: Masters	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing E</i>	Plate Glass	2 children aged 3 and 1	Him: Accountant Her: Civil Servant	Him: 35 Her: 36	Him: Bachelors & Professional Qualification Her: Bachelors	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing F</i>	Plate Glass	1 child aged 1	Him: Economist Her: Manager	Him: 40 Her: 37	Him: Masters Her: Bachelors	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing G</i>	Russell Group	1 child aged 4	Him: IT worker Her: Scientist	Him: 33 Her: 33	Him: PhD Her: PhD	Him: White British Her: White British

<i>Existing H</i>	Plate Glass	1 child aged 1	Him: Engineer Her: Teacher	Him: 34 Her: 32	Him: Masters Her: Bachelors & Professional Qualification	Him: White British Her: No data
<i>Existing I</i>	Russell Group	2 children aged 1 & 3	Him: Lawyer Her: Teacher	Him: 38 Her: 41	Him: Masters Her: Bachelors & Professional Qualification	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing J</i>	Plate Glass	1 child aged 3	Him: Manager Her: Not in employment	Him: 34 Her: 34	Him: PhD Her: Bachelors	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing K</i>	Plate Glass	2 children aged 1 & 3	Him: Actuary Her: Manager	Him: 41 Her: 35	Him: PhD Her: Bachelors	Him: White British Her: White British:
<i>Existing L</i>	Russell Group	1 child aged 3	Him: Civil Servant Her: Not in employment	Him: 45 Her: 37	Him: Bachelors Her: Masters	Him: British Her: Bangladeshi Asian
<i>Existing M</i>	Russell Group	1 child aged 2 and another child due	Him: IT worker Her: Maternity leave	Him: 37 Her: 36	Him: Masters Her: Masters	Him: White Irish Her: No data
<i>Existing N</i> (only father interviewed)	Russell Group	2 children aged 3 & 11 months	Him: Charity Director	Him: 35	Him: Masters	Him: White British
<i>Existing O</i>	Plate Glass	1 child aged 4	Him: IT Worker Her: Manager	Him: 38 Her: 39	Him: Bachelors Her: Bachelors	Him: Indian Asian Her: Indian Asian
<i>Existing P</i>	Russell Group	2 children aged 1 & 4	Him: Police Officer Her: Lawyer	Him: 38 Her: 37	Him: Masters Her: Masters	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Existing Q</i>	Russell Group	1 child aged 2	Him: Doctor Her: Doctor	Him: 34 Her: 34	Him: Masters Her: Bachelors & Professional Qualification	Him: Scottish Indian Her: British Indian

<i>Expecting A</i>	Russell Group	-	Him: Teacher Her: Analyst	Him: 33 Her: 33	Him: Masters Her: Masters	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Expecting B</i>	Russell Group	-	Him: Small Business Owner Her: Researcher	Him: 37 Her: 37	Him: Bachelors Her: PhD	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Expecting C</i>	Russell Group	-	Him: Engineer Her: Educator	Him: 29 Her: 29	Him: Phd Her: Masters	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Expecting D</i>	Plate Glass	-	Him: Actuary Her: Manager	Him: 29 Her: 29	Him: A levels Her: Masters	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Expecting E</i>	Plate Glass	-	Him: Project Manager (self-employed) Her: Administrator	Him: 36 Her: 35	Him: Masters Her: PhD	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Expecting F</i>	Plate Glass	-	Him: Manager Her: Administrator	Him: 35 Her: 30	Him: Masters Her: Bachelors	Him: British Asian-Pakistani Her: Asian-Pakistani
<i>Expecting G</i>	Plate Glass	-	Him: Advertiser Her: Maternity Leave	Him: 40 Her: 29	Him: Bachelors Her: Bachelors	Him: White British Her: White British
<i>Expecting H</i>	Plate Glass	-	Him: Accountant Her: Civil Servant	Him: 31 Her: 31	Him: Bachelors & Professional Qualification Her: Bachelors	Him: White British Her: White British

## Appendix 2 – Existing Parents’ Employment Status

**Table 10.** Comparison of Existing Parents’ working arrangements according to survey data and self-reports (discrepancies in bold)

Existing Parents	Based on survey		Based on interviews
	Current weekly working hours	Working arrangement assumptions	Self-classified working arrangement
<i>Couple A</i>	Him: over 40 Her: 16-24	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: 3 days)
<i>Couple B</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: 25-34	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5/ Dual Part-Time Earner (Him: 9 days a fortnight Her: 4 days)
<i>Couple C</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: evening and weekend shifts)
<i>Couple D</i>	Him: over 40 Her: 25-34	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: 3 days)
<i>Couple E</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: 3 days)
<i>Couple F</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: 25-34	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: 4 days)
<i>Couple G</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: none	<b>Male Breadwinner</b>	<b>Dual Full-time Earner (Both: 5 days)</b>
<i>Couple H</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: 3 days)

<i>Couple I</i>	Him: over 40 Her: 25-34	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: 3 days)
<i>Couple J</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: none	Male Breadwinner	Male Breadwinner
<i>Couple K</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: 16-24	Standard 1.5 Earner	Standard 1.5 Earner (Him: 5 days Her: 3 days)
<i>Couple L</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: none	Male Breadwinner	Male Breadwinner
<i>Couple M</i>	Him: 25-34 Her: none	Part-time Male Breadwinner	Part-time Male Breadwinner
<i>Couple N</i> (only father interviewed)	Both: 25-34	<b>Dual Part-time Earner</b>	<b>Standard 1.5 Earner</b> <b>(Him: 5 days</b> <b>Her: 4 days)</b>
<i>Couple O</i>	Both 35-40	<b>Dual Full-time Earner</b>	<b>Standard 1.5 Earner</b> <b>(Him: 5 days</b> <b>Her: 4 days)</b>
<i>Couple P</i>	Him: 35-40 Her: over 40	<b>Dual Full-time Earner</b>	<b>Standard 1.5 Earner</b> <b>(Him: 5 days</b> <b>Her: 4 days)</b>
<i>Couple Q</i>	Both: 35-40	<b>Dual Full-time Earner</b>	<b>Dual Part-time Earner</b> <b>(Both: 4 days a week)</b>

## Appendix 3 – Recruitment Materials

### *Email*

If you are a **father with a child under school age**, would you be able to spare **5 minutes** to complete this multiple-choice survey: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/work-familyox/22?> Your response will help my research enormously and advance understandings about how families manage paid work and childcare. I will also be inviting some survey respondents to take part in a voluntary follow-up interview and by completing the survey you agree to be contacted about this, although there is no obligation at all to take part in this element of the study.

I am also looking to interview **couples who are expecting their first child in the next 5 months**. Interviews will most likely take place over the phone, at a time convenient to you, and will last around 30 minutes. If you and your partner would be interested in taking part in these interviews and would like more information or if you have any queries about any part of the study, please contact me on [c.stovell@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.stovell@lancaster.ac.uk).

Many thanks

Clare



**Clare Stovell**

PhD Researcher, Leadership and Management Department

Lancaster University Management School

### *Social media message*

A PhD researcher at Lancaster University Management School is looking for **fathers with pre-school children** to spare 5 minutes to complete [this survey](#) for a study on work and family. She is also looking to interview **couples who are expecting their first child in the next 5 months** - please contact [c.stovell@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.stovell@lancaster.ac.uk) for more information

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 5

# Appendix 4 – Consent & Information Form



## Participant Consent Form

*Project Title:* Work-Family Decision Making

*Researcher:* Clare Stovell

*Email:* c.stovell@lancaster.ac.uk

*Supervisors:* Prof. David Collinson (d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk)  
Prof. Caroline Gatrell (c.gatrell@liverpool.ac.uk)  
Dr. Laura Radcliffe (l.radcliffe@liverpool.ac.uk)

Please take time to carefully consider the information that has already been provided to you about the study and the further details below, before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

### **How will my data be stored?**

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than the research team and any professional transcribers will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers.

I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

### **How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?**

I will use the data you have shared me for academic purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, such as journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic or professional conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. When doing so, I will only use anonymised quotes from the interview so that, although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications.

Please note, however, that if anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with a third party. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

### **Who has reviewed the project?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

### **What if I no longer want to take part in the study?**

Prior to an interview taking place, there is no problem at all if you decide you no longer wish to take part in the study. Just let me know and I will remove all your personal details from my records. If an interview has taken place and you decide you would like to withdraw from the study, as long as you let me know within two weeks of the interview I can remove all data relating to you.

### **What if I have a question or concern?**

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself or my supervisors using the contact details above.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

**Head of Department: Prof. Claire Leitch, [c.leitch@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.leitch@lancaster.ac.uk), +44 (0)1524 510933**

### **Sources of support**

It is not anticipated that the study should touch on any distressing topics, however the following organisations may be able to help if you require support or further information regarding work-family issues:

Working Families: legal advice for parents [www.workingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk) 0300 012 0312

Relate: counselling and support for couples and families [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk) 0300 100 1234

Samaritans: confidential emotional support [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) 116 123



**If you are happy to proceed and participate in the study, please read the following statements and delete as appropriate:**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided about this study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

YES/NO

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within two weeks of the interview date, my data will be removed.

YES/NO

3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.

YES/NO

4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.

YES/NO

5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.

YES/NO

6. I understand that anonymised data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.

YES/NO

7. I agree to take part in the above study.

YES/NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant                      Date                      Signature

**I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant will be answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.**

**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**A copy of this form will be kept by the lead researcher and oral consent will also be obtained at the beginning of each interview.**

# Appendix 5 – Survey

## Work and Family

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this survey, which forms part of a PhD research project on work and family at Lancaster University Management School.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee. If you have any queries about this survey or the study please contact the lead researcher, Clare Stovell, on [c.stovell@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.stovell@lancaster.ac.uk) or lead supervisor, Prof. Caroline Gatrell, on [c.gatrell@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.gatrell@lancaster.ac.uk). If you would prefer to discuss the matter with someone who is not directly involved in the research project, please contact Prof. Claire Leitch on [c.leitch@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.leitch@lancaster.ac.uk) or +44 (0)1524 510933.

At the end of the study you will be asked for your email address, as we would like to invite a few respondents to take part in a voluntary follow-up interview. Please be assured that your email address will remain confidential and will only be used by the lead researcher to contact you if you are selected for a follow-up interview. By completing the survey and giving your email address, you agree you may be contacted with further details about the interview process, however there will be no obligation to take part in a follow-up interview. You also agree that your anonymised responses to the other survey questions may be included in a dataset and used for academic purposes.

1. We are looking for respondents who meet specific criteria. Please tick the statements that are relevant to you: \*

- I am a father
- I have a female partner who lives with me
- My eldest child is not yet at school and lives with me
- I live in the UK

2. How many children do you have? \*

3. How old is your eldest child? \*

4. How many hours of paid work do you currently do in a week? \*

- None
- None (on Paternity Leave)
- Under 16 hours
- 16-24 hours
- 25-34 hours
- 35-40 hours
- Over 40 hours
- Don't Know

5. How many hours of paid work does your partner currently do in a week? \*

- None
- None (on Maternity Leave)
- Under 16 hours
- 16-24 hours
- 25-34 hours
- 35-40 hours
- Over 40 hours
- Don't Know

6. How many hours of paid work did you do in an average week before you had children? \*

- None
- Under 16 hours
- 16-24 hours
- 25-34 hours
- 35-40 hours
- Over 40 hours
- Don't Know

7. How many hours of paid work did your partner do in an average week before you had children? \*

- None
- Under 16 hours
- 16-24 hours
- 25-34 hours
- 35-40 hours
- Over 40 hours
- Don't Know

8. Who earns the most in your household? \*

- Me

My partner

Both equal

9. Who earned the most in your household before you had children? \*

Me

My partner

Both equal

10. Regarding the amount of time you spend at work or on your career, would you say it was: \*

Just right

More than I would like

Less than I would like

11. Regarding the amount of time you spend with your family, would you say it was: \*

Just right

More than I would like

Less than I would like

12. Do you agree that a man's job is to earn money and a woman's job is to look after the home and family? \*

No

Yes

Not Sure

13. What year were you born? \*

14. How would you describe your ethnicity? \*

15. What is your occupation? \*

16. What is your highest level of education? \*

Left school before 16

Secondary School

A-Levels

HND

Undergraduate Degree

Masters'/Postgraduate Degree

PhD

Other (please specify):

17. Which town do you live in? \*

18. How long does it take you to get to work? \*

- I do not work
- I work from home
- Under 10 minutes
- 10-30 minutes
- 30-60 minutes
- Over an hour
- Variable

19. Email address: \*

We request your email address because we would like to invite a few respondents to take part in a voluntary follow-up interview.

Please be assured that your email address will remain confidential and will only be used by the lead researcher to contact you if you are selected for a follow-up interview. Interviews will be entirely voluntary and will take place over the phone for about 30 minutes at a time convenient to the interviewee (or face-to-face if this is preferred).

Email addresses of those who are not selected will not be stored. By completing the survey and giving your email address, you agree you may be contacted with further details about the interview process, however there will be no obligation to take part in a follow-up interview. You also agree that your anonymised responses to the other survey questions may be included in a dataset and used for academic purposes.



## Appendix 6 – Interview Schedules

### *Existing Parents*

As mentioned previously I will be recording this interview, could you confirm whether you are happy with that?

Thank you, I have now started the recording. Could you also confirm that you're happy to take part in the interview? As I mentioned in my email, all the information you give will be anonymised and your details will be kept confidential. Anonymised quotes may be used in my thesis and for other academic purposes, such as conference presentations. If there are any questions you would prefer not to answer please do let me know and if you decide you no longer wish to take part in the study, you have the right to withdraw at any point. As long as you let me know via email within two weeks, your responses will not be included in the research project. Could you confirm whether you are happy to continue?

Thank you very much for participating. So, to begin with, can you remind me how many children you have?

How old are they?

#### **CHILDCARE PROMPTS**

Who looks after your children during the week? How involved are you in looking after your children? On a daily basis, who makes sure the family functions? And how did you work that out? Was it something you talked about, or did it just work out that way?

What do you and your partner do when it comes to childcare? Who does the most?

Thinking back to when you were younger, how did you imagine your family life? What did you think it would be like when you had a family of your own? And how did it work out in reality?

#### **PAID WORK PROMPTS**

Think back to when you were in school - what were your career plans at that point, or did you have any?

What happened after you left school - did you start working right away? [Follow up for major points in job history - any periods of unemployment etc.]

Did you take any parental leave when you had your child(ren)? Would you have liked more/less? Have you changed your work hours at all since you had children? If so how do you feel about that?

What's your job like now? How many hours do you work a week? What does work mean to you? Did work mean something different to you before you had children? What does the term "career" mean to you? Do you think of yourself as having a job or a career?

Who is more career focused, you or your partner? Why? Whose career would you prioritise? Why? Would you say your wife/husband thinks of herself/himself as having a job or a career?

All things considered, would you consider yourself more work-centred or family-centred? What about your spouse - is s/he more work-centred or family-centred?

How close is your current situation to your ideal? If you had complete freedom to choose (and money wasn't an issue) how much time would you like to spend at work a week? Would you work? What influences that preference? Has it changed at all? Do you feel you would be able to achieve this scenario? If not why not? If so what would you have to do? Would you be prepared to do that?

What's your partner's work situation like? How many hours do they work a week? How do you feel about that? In an ideal scenario, how much would you like them to work? Did your partner take any parental leave or change their hours since you had children? Would you have liked them to?

### **GENDER ROLE ATTITUDE PROMPTS**

Do you see your role as a parent being any different to your partner's role as a parent? What are the differences between being a mother and being a father? Do you think it matters [if it's you or your partner] who cares for your child?

What do you think is expected of you with regards to paid work and childcare? What do you consider to be your role? How did your own parents divide work and childcare?

You mentioned in your survey that you do not think it is a man's job to earn money and a women's job to look after the home. What made you say that? What do you think men and women's roles are with regards to work and family?

### **DIVISION OF CARE PROMPTS**

How did the split of childcare and paid work between you and your partner come about? Was it something you discussed? If so, do you remember who initiated the discussion?

Are you happy with the arrangement? What did you ideally want? Did you achieve that? What did you do to try and achieve that? Do you know what your partner ideally wanted? How much did that factor in your decision/own preferences? What happened if there were conflicts between yours and your partner's preferences?

What was your biggest priority when it came to deciding who was going to do what? How important were your preferences? What (if anything) was more important?

If financial and other practical issues weren't a consideration what would be your ideal childcare and work situation with you and your partner? In an ideal world, who would look after your child during the week? What is stopping you from having that arrangement?

That's been really helpful for my research. Are there any other thoughts you had, that you wanted to say, but didn't have the chance?

**Explain what the research is about - encourage discussion if they're interested:**

*I'm looking at how couples divide childcare and paid work. I'm particularly interested in the role preferences play in those decisions and whether couples are able to choose freely how they divide work and childcare or whether they're constrained in their choices. I was especially interested to talk to you and your partner because you have quite egalitarian attitudes about men and women's roles, but you and your partner currently have a fairly traditional arrangement. That's actually the most common situation in the UK and I'm trying to find out why there is often a difference in attitudes and behaviour.*

*I started looking at this because I'm interested in the gender pay gap. Obviously, a lot of women interrupt their careers to have kids and this can have a big impact on their salary and whether women are hired and promoted. I'd like to know why men don't tend to interrupt their careers. Is it because they don't want to, a question of different preferences, or because they're not given the opportunity?*

I just have a few, quick demographic questions. Could I ask your age?

Your highest level of education?

And how would you describe your ethnicity?

And what's your occupation?

Whereabouts do you live and work? How long does it take you to get to work?

How would you describe the split of earnings is between you and your partner? Is there a particular breadwinner or are you fairly equal?

And how about before you had children?

Well thank you very much, it's been really interesting to talk to you and I'm so grateful for your time. I'll be in touch about the possibility of a joint interview with you and your partner, but please don't worry if this is not of interest or convenient.

### ***Expecting Parents first interview***

As mentioned previously I will be recording this interview, could you confirm whether you are happy with that?

Thank you, I have now started the recording. Could you also confirm that you're happy to take part in the interview? As I mentioned in my email, all the information you give will be anonymised and your details will be kept confidential. Anonymised quotes may be used in my thesis and for other

academic purposes, such as conference presentations. If there are any questions you would prefer not to answer please do let me know and if you decide you no longer wish to take part in the study, you have the right to withdraw at any point. As long as you let me know via email within two weeks, your responses will not be included in the research project. Could you confirm whether you are happy to continue?

## **DECISION-MAKING PROMPTS**

So when's your baby due?

Are you working at the moment? What do/did you do? How many hours do you do in a typical week?

What are your plans for managing work and childcare once the baby arrives/after parental leave?

Have you considered using shared leave?

Are you planning on taking any leave? How did you decide on that?

How did you come to that decision? Was it something you discussed? If so, do you remember who initiated the discussion? What was the biggest factor in going for that arrangement?

Are you happy with what you have planned? If not, what would you like to change? Is your partner happy? Would they like to change anything?

Do you know what your partner ideally wanted? Did you know before you discussed these topics? How much did that factor in your decision/own preferences? What happened if there were conflicts between yours and your partner's preferences?

Thinking back to when you were in school - what were your career plans at that point, or did you have any?

What happened after you left school - did you start working right away? [Follow-up for major points in job history - any periods of unemployment etc.]

What does work mean to you? Has that changed? What does the term "career" mean to you? Do you think of yourself as having a job or a career?

Who do you think out of the two of you is more career focused? Whose career would you prioritise? Why? Do you think your wife/husband thinks of herself/himself as having a job or a career?

If you had complete freedom to choose how would you ideally like to divide paid work and childcare? (Do you think you'll do anything to get your desired arrangement? If so what, if not why not?)

Do you feel your preferences have been taken into consideration?

What was your biggest priority when it came to deciding who was going to do what? How important were your preferences? What (if anything) was more important?

How did your own parents divide work and childcare?

Thinking back to when you were younger, how did you imagine your family life? What did you think it would be like when you had a family of your own? Is having kids something you thought about often when you were younger? How did you imagine it would affect your work/career?

### **GENDER ROLE PROMPTS**

What are you expecting from your partner when it comes to dividing work and childcare?

Do you see your role as a parent being any different to your partner's role as a parent? What are the differences between being a mother and being a father? Do you think it matters [if it's you or your partner] who cares for your child? Is there anything you won't be involved with? What is a good father/good mother?

What do you think is expected of you with regards to paid work and childcare?

What do you consider to be your role?

What do you think men and women's roles are with regards to work and family?

NO? Do you consider your arrangement to be more traditional or modern? Why do you think you went for that kind of arrangement? Would you have considered... why/why not? How would you feel if your partner left their job to take on childcare full-time/part-time/took extended Paternity Leave?

Perfect. That's been really helpful for my research. Are there any other thoughts you had, that you wanted to say, but didn't have the chance?

### **Explain what the research is about - encourage discussion if they're interested:**

*I'm looking at how couples divide childcare and paid work. I'm interested particularly interested in the role preferences play in those decisions and whether couples are able to choose freely how they divide work and childcare or whether they're constrained in their choices. I am especially interested to talk to first-time couples like yourselves as you are right in the middle of making these kinds of decisions. I would be really interested to talk to you once you've had your baby to see how your plans are working out for you and whether any of the things we discussed have changed.*

*I started looking at this because I'm interested in interested in the gender pay gap. Obviously a lot of women interrupt their careers to have kids and this can have a big impact on their salary and whether women are hired and promoted. I'd like to know why men don't tend to interrupt their careers. Is it because they don't want to, a question of different preferences, or because they're not given the opportunity?*

I just have a few, quick demographic questions. Could I ask your age?

Your highest level of education?

And how would you describe your ethnicity?

And what's your occupation?

How would you describe the split of earnings is between you and your partner? Is there a particular breadwinner or are you fairly equal?

Where do you live?

How long does it take you to get to work?

## ***Expecting Parents second interview***

### **What's changed since I last spoke to you?**

How have you found the experience of becoming a father/mother?

Was it what you expected?

How have you found childcare? Describe a typical day. Who looks after the child during the week? Is there anything you do that partner doesn't or vice versa? Does it make a difference if it's you or your partner looking after your child?

Who does the housework? Has that changed? How did that division come about?

What do you see your role as in your new family? What sort of parent do you think you are?

Has the experience of becoming a parent been any different for your partner?

Do you see your role as a parent being any different to your partner's role as a parent?

### **How was paternity/Maternity Leave?**

How long did you take off in the end?

What did you do during that time?

What was it like going back to work?/Are you planning on going back to work?/How do you feel about going back?

How do you feel about the amount of time you had off? Was it the right amount of time?

### **What's work like now you're a parent?**

What impact has being a father/mother had on work?

How's it been combining work and family? Any problems?

How have employers responded?

What does work mean to you now/what place does it have in your life?

Do you feel any differently about work than before?

Has your working pattern changed at all? Would you like it to? How would you feel if it did?

**How about your partner? How have they found it becoming a parent?**

How did they find maternity/Paternity Leave and returning to work? [Is partner planning on going back to work?] how/why did you make those decisions?

Has their attitude towards work changed at all?

Who is more career focused? Would you consider prioritising one of your careers?

**What are your plans for the future with regards to dividing earning and caring?**

Happy with current plans? What would ideal be? Is it achievable? What about partner's ideals?

Is there anything you would have done differently this last year? Is there anything you feel you missed out on?

Knowing what you know now, would shared leave have worked as an option? Would it have been helpful or problematic in any way?

How would you feel if the current setup was reversed?

That's been really helpful for my research. Are there any other thoughts you had, that you wanted to say, but didn't have the chance?

**Demographic questions:**

Has your occupation changed?

Has where you live and work changed? If so how long does it take you to get to work now?

How would you describe the split of earnings is between you and your partner? Is there a particular breadwinner or are you fairly equal?

## Appendix 7 – Coding Hierarchy

- Type of Decision
  - Parental care
  - External childcare
  - Housework
  - Paternity Leave
  - Maternity Leave
  - Shared Leave
  - Working arrangement
  
- Behaviour
  - Who makes sure the family functions?
    - Father as helper
  - Prior to children
  - Impact of children
  - Working practices
    - Flexible working
  
- Decision Making
  - Led by whom?
    - Both
    - Husband
    - Wife
  - Level of discussion
    - Have discussed with partner
    - Haven't discussed with partner
    - Discussion with partner not considered necessary
    - Reluctant to discuss with partner
    - Interview process was therapeutic (haven't spoken about it before)
  - Perception of Constraint
    - Don't feel constrained
    - Feel constrained
    - Feel powerless
    - Evidence of overcoming constraint
  
- Factors Influencing Decisions
  - Availability of social support
  - Beliefs
    - Children too young for nursery
    - Hard for women to return to work
    - Parental leave is woman's right
  - Biology
    - Breastfeeding
    - Maternal Instinct
  - Children
    - Number
    - Missing them
      - Mothers
      - Fathers
    - Childcare boring/hard work
      - For men in particular
    - Sex of child influences parental involvement



- Childhood experiences
  - Finances
  - Naivety/lack of information
  - Employment
    - Type of Occupation
    - Portability of work/boundaries
    - Part-time or flexibility penalties
      - Not available
      - Part-time doesn't mean less work
      - How many days you work matters (rather than hours)
    - Part-time or flexibility stigma
    - Work Culture
      - Supportive
      - Unsupportive
  - Parental Leave
    - Allowance
    - Experience
  - Preferences
    - Partner's preferences or intentions
  - Peers (influenced by what they say or do)
- Gender Ideology
    - External childcare replaces who
    - Gender role attitudes
      - Caring – whose role
      - Earning – whose role
      - Role of mothers vs fathers
      - Survey question –answer and explanation
    - Feelings of shame or guilt
      - Associated with prioritising career
    - Identity
      - As a parent
      - As a worker
      - Expectations of change in identity (following birth)
    - How relationship perceived
      - Egalitarian
      - Traditional
    - What is expected of you?
      - Mothers
      - Fathers
    - What gives sense of achievement/purpose?
  - Intentions
    - Equitable
    - Traditional Separate Spheres
  - Preferences
    - Change
      - Awareness
      - Evidence
    - Depend on context
    - Desire for equity

- Desire for traditional
- Feelings about non-traditional arrangements
  - Reluctance for equality
    - Gatekeeping
  - Support for equality
- Ideal scenario
  - Want to change
  - Don't want to change
- Influenced by
- Ambivalence
  - Lack of preference
- Motivation levels
- Orientation to care
- Orientation to work
  - Changes after children
  - Meaning of work
  - Prioritising one person's career
  - Who is more career-focused?
- Partner's preferences
  - Level of alignment
  - Awareness
  - Taken into consideration
- When young
  - Influence on career
- Whose take priority?
  - Husband
  - Wife
  - Both