This paper advances knowledge regarding how fathers and mothers perceive and experience flexible working opportunities. It does this through applying the theoretical concept 'belonging', to 'Parsonian' classifications of parenting and work. In so doing it makes transparent the misconceptions and inequities which exist among parents and their organizational environments.

Focusing initially on a qualitative study of fathers' experience of working flexibly, the paper shows how fathers felt marginalized from the possibilities of flexible work, due to line-managers' assumptions that men belonged to an 'instrumental', economic provider group. The paper contributes a new angle to debate by articulating how fathers perceived employed mothers as belonging to an 'expressive', child-oriented group, with privileged access to flexibility.

However, drawing upon a study of maternity and flexible work the paper queries fathers' assumptions that flexibility was easily available to mothers, suggesting that fathers' perceptions of maternal privilege were misconceived. While mothers were categorized as belonging within an 'expressive' group associated with child-care, they were nevertheless discouraged from accessing flexibility. Inequities between women and men (with regard to flexibility) thus appeared less significant than fathers supposed.

Introduction

Scholarship on parenting and work-life balance has proliferated over the last decade. Yet some questions about relationships between parenthood and access to flexible working remain unresolved. In particular, the positioning of fathers as unwelcome participants in work-life balance initiatives has been identified by Özbilgin *et al.* (2011) as requiring further investigation.

Research on fatherhood undertaken since the 1990s is consistent in showing how employed fathers are increasingly child-oriented (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Holter, 2007; Miller, 2010, 2011). In theory, discourses of involved fatherhood are welcomed by governments, and health and social agencies (Collier, 2001; Miller, 2011). Yet paternal needs are still identified as unfulfilled within work-life balance research (Özbilgin *et al.,* 2011). While this apparent neglect of paternal child-orientation has been linked in part to historic, gendered (and increasingly inaccurate) organizational views about parenting practices (Miller, 2011), reasons why fathers should still be marginalized within work-life balance initiatives remain unclear (Burnett *et al.,* 2012). While lack of paternal access to flexible work has been the subject of prior theorising (see for example, Holter, 2007; Tracy and Rivera, 2010), relationships between mothers, fathers and employment remain hard to disentangle. In the context of gendered inequalities, limited research exists comparing how fathers perceive and experience access to flexible working in comparison with mothers, and vice versa. Consequently, it has been argued (Özbilgin *et al.,* 201l) that studies on work–life

experiences of both women and men should be developed for the purposes of understanding better the gendered inequities in the organization of 'life'.

It has been argued that fathers are discouraged from accessing flexible work due to organizational assumptions that men neither need nor desire to work flexibly - even though such beliefs are at odds with increasing paternal involvement with childcare (Holter, 2007; Miller, 2010). Post 2000, opportunities to work 'flexibly' (e.g. part-time; remotely from home, or with full-time but compressed and/or flexible hours, Lewis and Cooper, 2005) are apparently, offered to 'parents' of both genders. In practice, however, such initiatives are found to be identified primarily with motherhood (Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012). As a result, the inference within work-life balance research (including the authors' own: Burnett *et al.,* 2012), has tended to assume that mothers may access flexible work more easily than fathers (Hochschild, 1997; Lewis *et al.,* 2007).

Yet as Janasz *et al.* (2011) observe, the situation is complicated because perceptions among workers (and perhaps scholars) about who receives privileged access to flexible working (and who does not) may differ from what individuals are experiencing, and perceiving, in practice. Workers may thus '*feel* different from the category in which they *fall'* – or are placed (Janasz *et al.,* 2011: 15, italics in the original, see also Eddleston and Powell, 2008). The complex potential for inequities and misconceptions between and among employed parents and their colleagues has led to calls for greater transparency within debates on fathers, mothers and flexible working (Holter, 2007; Janasz *et al.,* 2011[1]; Kossek *et al.*, 2011; Özbilgin *et al.,* 2011; Tracy and Rivera, 2010).

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[1] Although the focus of this study is on parents it is important to note that Janasz *et al's* 2011 study also encompasses the experiences of workers who do not have children

In response to these calls, through developing ideas about child care, economic provision and belonging (based on research by May, 2011), our paper offers greater transparency regarding how fathers and mothers may perceive and experience the categories in which they fall, with regard to flexible working opportunities. Empirically, it draws on two qualitative studies on fathers and mothers respectively. The first of these: *Study 1: Fathers* (conducted by all four authors of this paper and described below), considers 100 employed fathers' experiences of accessing flexible working. It affirms theoretical understandings that men may face barriers to working flexibly. The paper then contributes a new angle to debate, articulating how fathers perceived maternal access to flexible work to be unfairly privileged, believing that employed mothers were given better access to flexible working than men.

In order to achieve greater transparency regarding mothers' situation, the paper then draws upon a separate study conducted by Gatrell (*Study 2: Mothers)*, investigating mothers' experiences of flexible working. In so doing, the paper reconceptualises predominant assumptions, both among fathers in *Study 1* and within some fatherhood research (e.g. Holter, 2007) that fathers may be disadvantaged in comparison with mothers, on the basis that flexibility is 'largely constructed ... as a women's issue' (Lewis *et al.,* 2007: 364). The experiences of 37 employed UK mothers from *Study 2: Mothers* throw doubt on such beliefs, suggesting that ease of maternal access to flexible working is less rosy than fathers imagine.

In our evaluation of the two studies we explore the impact, on parental access to flexible employment, of what Gatrell (2005) terms 'Parsonian' classifications of parenting and work. We reflect upon how today's fathers are often still classified within organizations as falling in to, or 'belonging' within an economic provider group defined by post-war American sociologist Talcott Parsons as 'instrumental' or work-oriented; while mothers are identified as belonging to an 'expressive', child-oriented group (Parsons and Bales, 1956). We analyse these reflections in relation to the concept 'belonging' through applying May's (2011)

proposals (described below) to our understanding of how parents perceive and experience flexible work.

Parsonian classifications of parental responsibilities

The locating of mothers and fathers as belonging within gendered 'Parsonian' social groupings harks back to the 1950s and 1960s, when research by Talcott Parsons offered Anglo-American policy makers an ideal 'blueprint' for household structures (Gatrell and Cooper, 2007; Featherstone, 2009). Parsons' 'structural functionalist' approach was associated with theoretical notions of social stability, shared values and social order (Turner, 2008) which were (and arguably still are) appealing to governments, institutions and organizations (Featherstone, 2009; Lewis, 2009). Within this 'Parsonian' scenario, family structures were understood in terms of the gendered division of domestic and economic labour. Parsons' family research focused on heterosexual men and women and he anticipated that most adults would marry, produce children and earn income – assumptions which supported UK and US economic policies at that time (Gatrell and Cooper, 2007).

Fathers as 'instrumental' economic providers

According to this Parsonian scenario, most fathers were classified as 'instrumental' economic providers within households, while mothers were classified as 'expressive' parents with responsibility for child care. Belonging to the economic provider group required men to take the lead in status-giving and income-earning for their families, focusing primarily on the public world of employment and organization (Lewis, 1986). Parsons and Bales described how, in the 1950s, the 'role of the adult male [was] … anchored in the occupational world, in his job' (1956: 14-15).

Parsons was writing and theorising in the 1950s – 70s, when employment patterns and economies were different from the present day (see Bernardes, 1997). Nevertheless, it could

be argued that his interpretation of fathers as belonging within an 'instrumental' economic provider classification has had far reaching consequences for men. Contemporary fathers may feel locked into economic roles due to social and organizational pressures on them to prioritise occupational over paternal status (Crompton and Lyonette, 2010; Dermott, 2008; Holter, 2007, Tracey and Rivera, 2010). Some research on fatherhood and work goes so far as to suggest that Parsons' blueprint contributes to the perpetuation of constraining links between paternity and economic provision, at the expense of some men's desire to engage with children's lives. For example, in 1987, Horna and Lupri stated: "Parsons…has lent credence to [organizational assumptions] that … fathers' contribution to child-rearing consists largely of providing a strong economic base for the family's survival…[and that men's] actual involvement in nurturing…is limited" (1987: 54, see also Dienhart, 1998; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Holter, 2007).

More recently, Holter (2007) and Tracy and Rivera (2010) re-emphasise continuing resistance to involved paternity within organizational settings where masculinity is associated with high work-orientation (Holter, 2007). They argue that despite 21st century trends towards relationship breakdown and single parenthood, alongside women's increased labour market participation, organizational classifications of men as belonging within the instrumental, economic provider group remain stable. Thus, while increased desire among some fathers to be classified as engaged parents was observed as early as 1995 (Burnett *et al.,* 2012; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; see also Dermott, 2008; Holter, 2007; Milner, 2010), it nevertheless appears that paternal desire to belong to the 'expressive' social group remains unfulfilled (Holter, 2007 and Miller, 2010). As Özbilgin *et al.* (2011: 5) observe, 'men are experiencing growing tensions between work and family responsibilities'.

Mothers as 'expressive' childcarers

While Parsons' research classified employed fathers as belonging within an economic provider category, it appears that women continue to be positioned within an 'expressive' group, with responsibility for children's emotional and physical needs (Gatrell, 2005; Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Featherstone, 2009; Miller, 2005; Morgan, 1996). Parsons (1956: 163) defined 'the adult feminine role' as 'anchored … in the internal affairs of the family as wife [and] mother'. Studies on maternal employment post-1999 suggest that mothers continue to be positioned in an 'integrative-supportive' familial role' (Parsons and Bales, 1956: 314; see Miller, 2005) in which they are 'expected to develop the skills in human relations which are central to making the home harmonious' (Parsons and Bales, 1956: 163). Thus, even post-divorce, it is usually women who are expected to take responsibility for maintaining emotional stability within families (Smart and Neale, 1999; Neale and Smart, 2002). Yet women's position within labour markets has changed dramatically over the past thirty years and they are increasingly likely to be main breadwinners. For example in the UK, in around 20% of heterosexual households women earn more than male partners (Ford and Collinson, 2011).

Nevertheless, despite such major social changes in maternal labour market participation, the 'Parsonian' blueprint of work-oriented fathers, and home and child-oriented mothers, appears to remain popular among policy makers and employers. Its far-reaching influence may still be observed within right wing media and among some industrial lobbying agencies such as the UK's Institute of Directors (Gatrell and Cooper, 2007). Perhaps this is because Parsons' blueprint for family life portrays a sense of stability in which gendered parental roles, characteristics and responsibilities have become institutionalised (see Miller 2005; 2010). As health sociologist Porter (1998) has observed, such institutionalisation implies shared 'common foundational values' avoiding situations where common values are disrupted or cease to exist, thereby facilitating compliant populations. Porter notes how: 'societies in

which roles are highly institutionalised enjoy a great deal of consensus among their members', resistance to such social structures resulting in 'anomie' (1998: 23). Under such circumstances, perhaps it is not surprising that employers, governments and policy advisors cling to a Parsonian 'blueprint' which positions fathers and mothers as 'belonging' respectively to instrumental and expressive social groups.

Thus, as Acker (1990) observes, social structures and processes within organizations continue to maintain divisions of labour along gendered lines, both in relation to occupational segregation (where women are concentrated in lower paid roles such as care work) and within organizational hierarchies, where fewer women than men reach higher levels (see also Catalyst.org., 2013). Such hierarchies are gendered due to persistent assumptions that male workers (even those with children) are committed primarily to paid work, while women, especially mothers, may be presumed to divide their commitments between paid work and family, (Acker, 1990, see also Hakim's 2010 report which portrays mothers as more family than work-oriented). Such gendered images do not reflect changes in social practice, and limit the desire, among some parents, to step outside the social categories in which they are assumed to 'fall' (Janasz *et al.*, 2011: 15, see also Miller 2011; Ladge *et al.,* 2012). Thus, despite new public discourses of caring and involved fatherhood (Miller, 2011) and organizational contexts of women's increased labour market participation, parental choices regarding opportunities to 'disrupt gender norms' (Miller 2011: 1094) may feel constrained (see also Hochschild, 1997).

Belonging and the Parsonian blueprint

The concept of parents apparently 'belonging' within instrumental and expressive groups is important because it facilitates greater transparency in understanding how gendered assumptions about child- and work-orientation affect managerial classifications of individual

parents, in relation to flexible working. Below, we interpret 'belonging' through building

upon generic proposals by May (2011) and applying these to illuminate connections between

individual parents and their wider organizational environments. Drawing upon May's

proposals as a foundation facilitates our analysis of how easily (or otherwise) employed

fathers and mothers in *Studies 1 and 2* accessed flexible working opportunities. This enables

us to contribute to theoretical understandings of relationships between mothers, fathers and

their organizations, in the contexts of belonging and social change.

May's theory of belonging

In keeping with May's (2011) proposals, we conceptualize belonging in four inter-related

ways: belonging as *person-centred*; belonging in relation to *selves and wider social (in this*

case organizational) environments; belonging in the context of *social interactions*; belonging

as a *dynamic* concept.

Understanding belonging as *person-centred* is helpful because it enables analysis of parents'

individual experience within the context of Parsonian 'expressive' and 'instrumental'

classifications. It is relevant to conceptualize belonging in terms of relationships between

individual parents (*selves*) and their *wider organizational environments* as this allows

exploration of how shifts in personal situations (e.g divorce) might alter relationships with

employers (Smart and Neale 1999). Understanding belonging in the context of parents'

interactions between, respectively, 'unofficial' and 'official' spheres of home and work

acknowledges that such interactions are complex and might change depending, for example,

on the ages and needs of dependent children (Miller, 2011). Finally, *dynamic* qualities of

'belonging' facilitate our examination of interactions between parents and organizations

within wider changing social contexts, for example increased labour market participation

among mothers (Powell, 2011). Our interpretation of May's 2011 theory of belonging, in relation to our findings, is shown in Figure 1, below (page x).

While our views are developed specifically in relation to May's (2011) discussion, they also reflect the approach of family sociologists Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Miller (2011), who analyse the tensions experienced among parents attempting to balance personal, work, and family needs. Our application of 'belonging' to parenthood and flexible working responds to and extends scholarship by Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999; Gershuny *et al*., 1994; Crompton and Lyonette, 2006; Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis *et al.,* 2007; Özbilgin *et al.,* 2011, all of whom identify the need for further investigation of how changing social practices affect working parents.

We thus draw upon concepts of belonging to enhance understandings of how fathers and mothers experience and perceive access to flexible working, in the context of 'Parsonian' classifications of paternal and maternal responsibilities. Our research offers a UK perspective, however, research on parenthood and work-life balance suggests that while parents' experiences may differ depending on location (e.g.Europe, Holter, 2007; Scandinavia, Ellingsaeter and Leira, 2006; the United States, Hochschild, 1997; Kossek *et al.,* 2011), there exists a common view that further research is required to explore relationships between gender and flexible working.

Methods

The collecting, analysing and writing up of qualitative data can be complex due to lack of what Pratt (2009) describes as a standardized 'boilerplate' for explicating qualitative research. While qualitative research is not designed for repeatability, it is important that such research is rigorous and transparent. Here, we follow the example of Corley and Gioia

(2004) giving detailed accounts of our data collection and analysis so our methods may be followed. Both our studies were undertaken in keeping with the ethical protocols of the University (and in the case of *Study1: Fathers*, also in keeping with the ethical protocols of participating organizations).

Study 1: Fathers was undertaken in the UK between 2009 and 2011, and explored fathers' experiences of accessing and utilizing flexible working. Fathers were drawn from two UK based organizations (one public, one private sector) which operate from multiple sites and between them employ over 40,000 staff at a range of income levels. Both organizations offer an apparently generous range of flexible working opportunities, which are theoretically available to all 'parents'. Such arrangements include home working, compressed and/or flexible hours, and part-time working.

We sought fathers' views via telephone focus groups (hereafter referred to as tele-conferences), recruiting 100 fathers from the two organizations. These audio-only tele-conferences were arranged because concerns about preserving anonymity had been identified as barriers to paternal participation. Only first names (or pseudonyms) were required, to preserve anonymity. Fifteen tele-conferences were run for each organization (30 tele-conferences in all) and were conducted separately; i.e public sector workers did not join in tele-conferences with private sector workers and vice versa.

These audio-only discussions proved attractive to men from both organizations, and between two and eight fathers took part in each. Tele-conferences were recorded with permission from participants and were chaired by members of the research team who took responsibility for outlining and managing the proceedings. If participants chose to leave the focus group by ending their call the electronic equipment would then announce fathers' departure to

remaining participants (i.e. 'John has left the conference'). To protect anonymity we did not ask for personal details, thus while some respondents volunteered information about salary (which indicated a range across low and higher incomes) we did not ask about age, ethnicity, seniority or (dis)abilities. However, it was known to us that all those employed within the public sector organization were in white collar jobs. Of those based in the private sector, all but four appeared to be in managerial or administrative roles. Many fathers indicated they were, or had been in, heterosexual relationships. Some were in blended or single households (which might mean sharing childcare with ex-partners), two self-identified as gay fathers and one as widowed. Through the tele-conferences we enquired how, in practice, fathers accessed and utilised the flexible working options offered by their employers. Questions began with a broad invitation to fathers to tell us about their experience of combining fatherhood with employment. Fathers were then asked how they experienced flexible working, as well as the attitudes of colleagues and line-managers towards flexibility.

Analysis

Each tele-conference was transcribed and analysed following methods outlined by Corley and Gioia (2004) in relation to rigorous collection of data (see also Lincoln and Guba 1985). Although the research team are conversant with literatures on fatherhood, we sought to conduct the analysis using an inductive, interpretive approach. i.e. not making assumptions in advance regarding how fathers might report their experiences. The reason for our inductive/interpretive approach was because, in line with Hamilton (2006) and Pullen and Simpson (2009) we regarded our research as socially situated. By this we mean that we understood respondents' views to be shaped by differing experiences over time (e.g. the impact on fathers of separation/divorce).

Using Nvivo software, Burnett and Gatrell searched for relationships between and among categories and observing the emergence of three key themes, listed below. In the manner of Corley and Gioia (2004), we 'meticulously managed' our data, collating electronic voice files, interview transcripts and field notes in a shared folder. We used peer debriefing (in which a research colleague not involved in data analysis discussed emerging patterns with the team) and Gatrell then analyzed a sub-set of the data (four tele-conferences from each organization) using electronic 'cut and paste'. Each month, a meeting of the full research team was convened to consider research themes and progress, this providing an audit trail of our 'empirical processes' and ensuring that our data were 'dependable' (Corley and Gioia 2004:173).

The emergent key themes centered on: paternal-child orientation; the relationship between fatherhood and economic provision, and the negotiation of unofficial and official home-work boundaries (including access to flexible working) and men's perceptions of maternal privilege regarding access to flexible working (which we did not anticipate).

In considering these themes, and their relationship with extant literature, we observed how relationships between *self and organizational environment* (in our case fathers and mothers and their workplaces, see Figure 1 below) were complex and hard to disentangle. We observed how, consistently, men in *Study 1: Fathers* framed their understanding of paternal access to flexible working, and their *interaction* between unofficial home and official work spheres, in the context of what they regarded as persistent and gendered organizational assumptions about motherhood. In our desire to better understand and analyse these paternal assumptions, we sought to evaluate fathers' views about motherhood in the context of

empirical data about maternal experience. We therefore drew upon *Study 2, Mothers* which investigated mothers' experiences of flexible working.

It is acknowledged, here, that combining two independent studies is unusual. However, we considered this to be methodologically justified, given that fathers had identified mothers as accessing privilege opportunities to work flexibly.

Study 2: Mothers

Study 2: Mothers was a separate qualitative research project conducted by Gatrell between 2008 – 2011. The similar timing of Studies 1 and 2 was serendipitous, and occurred because funding for Study 1 came through at the same time as Gatrell was conducting Study 2. However, given the aim of this paper to make transparent the misconceptions and inequities which exist regarding flexible working, we felt justified in combining the two studies, this enabling us to compare fathers' perceptions with mothers' experience. Our desire to advance debate through combining two studies is in keeping with the Burke Johnson *et al.*'s (2007:116) defence of mixing methods, if this facilitates 'significance enhancement' of understanding through 'augmenting interpretation and usefulness of findings'. It also accords with Cresswell's (2003) observation that research designs should prioritise the purpose and intended consequences or research, rather than methodological purity. Thus, although the operationalization of research methods was different, the purposes of Studies 1 and 2 (to discover parents' experiences of accessing flexible work) were aligned, and combining them thus felt justified among the team.

Questions asked of mothers were similar to those asked of fathers in *Study 1* and included a focus on the experience of combining motherhood with employment and how mothers accessed and experienced flexible working, including attitudes of colleagues and line-

managers. All mothers worked in white collar jobs within a mix of private and public sector organizations purporting to offer flexible working. General information was requested regarding maternal occupations, however to preserve anonymity, precise details about employers, salaries and job titles were not sought. Occupations included junior administrative and more senior managerial work, teaching and health work (including clinical and administrative jobs). Mothers were not asked about ethnicity, however two self-identified as British Indian, one as Irish and one as Jewish. One self-identified as in a lesbian partnership, and three as single. Others indicated that they were in heterosexual relationships (though not necessarily with the father of their children). Like the fathers in *Study 1*, some women reported themselves as being in blended families and sharing care for children with ex-partners. Although Gatrell is familiar with literatures on motherhood, the analysis for *Study 2* was undertaken using an inductive, interpretive approach (as in *Study 1*) this facilitating the collecting and analysing data using fresh eyes.

Each interview was transcribed and analysed electronically, using 'w-matrix' (similar to n.vivo but with an added facility for 'word clouds', Rayson 2008).

Subsequently, in order to enhance trustworthiness of the data, Gatrell analysed each manuscript manually, using template analysis (Cassell *et al.* 2005) to affirm key themes which were similar to those in *Study 1* and centred around; maternal-child and work orientations; relationships between motherhood and paid work, and the negotiation of unofficial and official home-work boundaries (including access to flexible work arrangements), and challenges of managing maternal bodies within workplace including career constraints (which might have been anticipated from extant literature) and problems accessing flexible work (which were greater than we had anticipated)

Gatrell then manually analysed and compared key findings from Studies 1 and 2. She evaluated mothers' experiences of flexible working in the context of fathers' perceptions that mothers belonged to a privileged social group, with better access to flexible working opportunities than men. Finally, Gatrell and Burnett jointly considered the inferences drawn by Gatrell from the combined data sets. Key themes were then discussed with other team members.

Given the qualitative focus of this paper, we do not attempt to make generalizations about fathers, mothers and flexible work (See Mason, 2000; Stead and Elliott, 2009). However, given the value of evaluating fathers' perceptions about mothers' access to flexible working in relation to how mothers experience flexibility in practice, we do seek to offer new insights into flexible working and belonging.

Findings: Fathers, employment and belonging

Fathers' views about, and experience of, accessing flexible working were explored drawing upon the concept of belonging. We illustrate our findings in Figure 1, which applies the four interrelated interpretations of 'belonging' specifically to the situations of fathers and mothers studied. Our findings – which both affirm and offer new direction to debate, are now considered in detail, drawing upon our interpretations of May's conceptualizations of 'belonging' as: *person-centred*; reflecting relationships between social *interaction* and *self and organizational environment*; and *dynamic*, as fathers and mothers experience belonging regarding work and family within *changing social contexts* such as increased divorce rates.

Figure 1 here

Study 1: Fathers revealed two key findings which merit further discussion. The first of these relates to the difficulties faced by fathers attempting to access and utilize flexible working.

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This finding is perhaps unsurprising, as it corroborates recent empirical work-family research including studies by Burnett *et al.* (2012); Holter (2007); Miller (2011) and Tracy and Rivera (2010).

Advancing debate on parenting and flexible working, however, is our second finding which shows how some fathers resented and resisted organizational expectations that they should 'fall back in' to 'normative patterns of gendered behaviour' (Miller 2011: 1105 - 1106). Fathers observed a disparity between organizational promises of flexible work and their own experience. They interpreted their own position, in relation to belonging and gendered Parsonian classifications of responsibility for economic provision, as unfair. In particular, men placed at mothers' door their resentment at being located, by line managers, as belonging within an 'instrumental' economic provider group, while mothers were afforded membership of the 'expressive' child-oriented group. Managers' interactions with fathers were *person centred*, in that they dealt with paternal requests for flexible working on an individual basis (see figure 1). However, managers' persistent classification of fathers as 'instrumental' impacted on men's *interactions* between work and home spheres. In fathers' views mothers were, by contrast, classified as belonging to an expressive child-oriented group which offered privileged access to flexible working. As a result, regardless of *person-centred* circumstances such as divorce, men felt occluded from access to flexible working.

Fathers and child-orientation

Building on existing research and in keeping with accounts by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995); Gatrell (2007); Holter (1997); Kimmel (1993) and Miller (2011), fathers in *Study 1* expressed both desire and need to be involved with children's upbringing. Paternal desire to engage with children went beyond practical requirements of sharing responsibilities with employed partners (or managing alone, in the case of single fathers). Men expressed deep

commitment to children's lives. Almost without exception they reported occasions when children came higher on the list of priorities than paid work. As private sector father Nick explained, when under pressure to work long hours, his time with his children came first and was valued above workplace requirements:

> *The most important thing to me is the children. I didn't have children just as you would acquire ... another new car. They are the most important thing to me. So I'll do my hours to the best of my ability, but then I'm off. And if the phone's ringing, it's not going to get answered.*

Attitudes such as Nick's are at odds with Parsonian anchoring of fathers as belonging within instrumental, occupational roles, a classification which appears still to be echoed among line-managers such as those in Tracy and Rivera's (2010) study and within some policy research (Hakim 2010). In keeping with observations by Holter (2007) and Miller (2011), men in *Study 1: Fathers*, demonstrated affinity with the 'expressive' social group, seeking to spend time with children not only through necessity, but because they wanted to.

Given fathers' desire and need to be actively involved in childcare, access to flexible working was important. Yet although employing organizations had in place a range of policies, men's access to these appeared limited, even in the context of *person centred* change, such as becoming single parents and/or sharing residency of children. Fathers in both public and private sector organizations explained how paper promises of flexible working did not reflect their experience of trying to access such opportunities. Eddy, for example, expressed frustration with his (private sector) organization, which has won national awards for the flexible working policies from which he was precluded:

> *The organization has loads of great policies, get loads of awards, but for people like me, well I am told I can't take advantage of them* [because I am needed in the office].

Similarly, Roger (public sector) observed how in his organization:

> *Oh, the [Organization] says a lot about its equal opportunities and gender but I really don't see that ... not from the way that I've been treated.*

Regardless of opportunities on offer, men's ability to *interact* between 'unofficial' home and 'official' work spheres, and to negotiate satisfactory relationships between their own *(self)* needs and the *wider organizational environment* was complex. For fathers trying to persuade line managers to allow flexible working, so that the needs of dependent children might be prioritised, organizational agreement had less to do with written policy and more with whether line-managers were supportive. As Peter explained, line managers were gatekeepers to the 'great' policies advertised by his private sector organization:

> *'I know we've got great policies because we get awards... But in the role I'm in, it's down to the manager. And there doesn't appear to be much scope for flexible working. The awards are probably issued for the paper documents, not the implementation of policy!*

Some men recounted experience of supportive managers but many found (in keeping with observations by Miller, 2010; Holter, 2007) that line managers could not envisage or understand fathers' need to work flexibly. Tom explained:

> *I think it depends upon the personal situation of the line manager. My boss... well, when you say you need time out to support your child, there's head scratching and confusion, and on balance it's a negative response.*

Feeling blocked from access to flexible working which appeared available in theory, but not in practice, caused frustration and was especially difficult during times of *changing personal*

contexts. For example, following a relationship breakdown, single father Paul (private sector) explained:

> *Being on my own is really hard. And you see these press clippings saying that [my organization] supports home-working and they support single parents and yet there is no support from above at all for me. I find it very hard indeed. And every time, I raise it, but it doesn't go anywhere. And then I start feeling ...you get a bit bogged down because you keep on asking to work from home, but this is refused.*

Fatherhood and economic provision

Fathers who found it difficult to access flexible working were asked to reflect on why this might be the case. In response, men related their experiences to line managers' gendered views about the respective work and child orientations of fathers and mothers. In keeping with observations by Burnett *et al.* (2012); Holter (2007); Özbilgin *et al.* (2011) and Tracy and Rivera (2010), men believed they were discouraged from working flexibly because line-managers considered flexibility to be irrelevant to fathers. While organizational policies might reflect changing social *dynamics* regarding men's desire or need to join/belong to the 'expressive' group (for example following separation or divorce), managers' attitudes demonstrated little acknowledgment of shifting social practices among mothers and fathers, in relation either to *person-centred* or wider social change. Managers positioned men as belonging within an 'instrumental' work-oriented group, with primary responsibility for economic provision. Little account was taken of *person centred* or wider social *dynamics* (e.g.relationship breakdown) which constrained men's *interactions* between home and work, effectively occluding them from flexible working opportunities (see Figure 1) and

maintaining 'normative patterns of gendered behaviour' (Miller, 2011: 1105 - 1106). Public sector worker Gary explained how:

> *In the issue we're trying to deal with, i.e. my daughter, there's no real recognition of the fact that I am a father. I am just seen as basically, as a male rather than a father and a parent. And putting my business case up to get the flexible working there was no consideration paid to it whatsoever at all. It was completely ignored. And I found that quite damning.*

Maternal privilege?

Like Gary, other fathers from both public and private sectors believed that while flexibility and work-life balance policies were, in theory, offered to 'parents' these were in practice often interpreted by line managers as being aimed at mothers. This finding builds on current research, which observes how shifts in male attitudes to child care are not reflected in working patterns (Miller, 2011).

What is new, here, is our articulation of fathers' beliefs that their access to flexible working is constrained by maternal privilege. Ron and David (respectively public and private sector) both considered mothers to be classified as 'expressive' at work. They saw this as disadvantageous to paternal *interactions* between home and work, when fathers sought to work flexibly:

> *It's mothers who are seen as the carers round here* (Ron)

There's more sort of stuff ... about mothers and maternity and all that kind of stuff,

they don't acknowledge men (David)

Some fathers in *Study 1: Fathers* felt resentful about what they perceived to be unfair privileges offered to mothers, on the basis of mothers' supposed membership of the 'expressive' social group. Private sector worker Matt recounted his own experience of being refused access to flexible working and asserted his view that, had he been 'female', things would have been different:

*I had a manager who is a single woman in her 50's ... and frankly was completely anti the idea of Dads working flexibly. In fact she refused to discuss it. And I was appalled. If I'd have been **female** it would have been different .... But of course the flip side is I'm a white male in my early 40's, so I didn't have a leg to stand on.*

Similarly, public sector workers Mick and Nigel expressed their view that fathers were treated inequitably by line-managers, with mothers afforded better opportunities than fathers to work flexibly:

*It's very much like, 'oh, you're a **mother**! Do you want to work flexibly?'* (Mick)

As a father you are completely out of the game. (Nigel)

Fathers who identified themselves as single felt acutely that classification of mothers as 'expressive' impeded the relationship between the paternal *self* and *wider organizational environments* by failing to acknowledge changes in men's circumstances, e.g. in situations where individual adult relationships break down, as outlined by private sector worker Jim:

I try to explain I'm on my own with two young kids, I should get the same [treatment]
as single mothers but mothers seem to have the priority as carers. Dads don't get the
same focus, that flexible working is also for the Dads, you know.

It appeared, then, that the fathers in *Study 1* (and apparently, their line managers) positioned mothers as *'belonging'* to the 'Parsonian' expressive group. However, in contrast to feminist theorising on maternal employment, which has for years highlighted the career barriers facing mothers who are classified as primary child carers (see Blair-Loy 2003; Özbilgin *et al.,* 2011; Gunz and Peiperl, 2007), fathers regarded maternal belonging to the 'expressive' social group as advantageous in relation to the home/work *interactions* which facilitated maternal access to flexible working.

Maternal access to flexible working

Based on their assumptions that line-managers interpreted flexible working policies as directed principally *at* mothers, fathers perceived that accessing flexible working must, therefore, be a straightforward matter *for* mothers. These paternal views are in keeping with beliefs expressed within research that work-life balance policies were conceived mainly with mothers in mind (Scott *et.al.,* 2010; Crompton and Lyonette, 2010; Gregory and Milner, 2009; 2011; Tracy and Rivera 2010; Burnett *et al.* 2012).

The logical implication of this classification of mothers as 'expressive' would be that, if flexible working is more available to mothers than to fathers in *theory*, then it should consequently be easier for mothers to access and to utilize in *practice*. Yet for us, as investigators, especially given Janasz *et al.*'s (2011) assertions regarding the inaccuracy of workers' perceptions about access to flexible working opportunities, such assumptions rang a warning bell. We thus sought to query paternal perceptions that access to flexible working may be easier for mothers than it is for fathers. (Such perceptions may also be inferred within

research on fatherhood, see for example Holter, 2007). In so doing, we turn now to *Study 2: Mothers*, which throws into doubt the idea that mothers have it easier than fathers.

Study 2: Mothers

The experiences recounted by women in *Study 2: Mothers* were remarkably consistent between participants. However, these findings offer a redirection to debate, as they were at odds with the assumptions of fathers in *Study 1* that maternal access to flexible working must be unproblematic. Almost without exception, it appeared that mothers in *Study 2* faced difficulties if they attempted to access flexible working.

To begin with, like Eddy, above, mothers reported dissatisfaction with flexible working opportunities which appeared generous on paper, but which were in practice not *person-centred*: i.e., they were unavailable to individual women. Public sector manager Jane expressed her frustration on being denied access to flexible working because her supervisory responsibilities supposedly precluded her from this:

> *Oh I know they have all these policies on the web, but when I tried asking for it, it was 'oh, well **you** can't have it because you are supervising others'. So it all looks good from the outside but then they find reasons for saying 'no'.*

Similarly Maria, working as a teacher in a large high school with supposedly generous policies was threatened with downgrading, even though she sought to reduce her working hours by only half a day per week:

> *I only wanted maybe half a day which we could have covered but when I asked the Head she said: 'Well you need to decide if you are serious about your job or not. There isn't room for part-timers here. So if you want a job not a career that's up to you, but if you go part-time you won't be going anywhere in [this school].'*

Public sector administrator Tina, too, sought some flexibility on her return from maternity leave in order to accommodate breastfeeding, but was refused this, even though she offered to continue working full time hours, but flexibly:

> *I wanted to work flexible hours for like only six months so I could breastfeed my son but [manager] said: '**Breastfeeding?** That won't be acceptable here. And anyway we can't have you coming in at all hours.' So I am still working full-time non-flexible hours and [baby] has moved to bottles. It's unnecessary because I could do my job around the flexi-hours which are meant to be on offer so I resent it. But he wouldn't even discuss it.*

The experiences of Jane, Maria and Tina are thus at variance with assumptions made by fathers in *Study 1* that maternal membership of a supposedly privileged 'expressive' child-oriented group necessarily secured mothers access to flexible working. In practice, individual maternal *interactions* with line managers appeared similar to those experienced by fathers, showing a disparity between policy statements and what was offered in practice. This finding advances knowledge of parenting and flexible work by questioning assumptions that mothers have easier access to flexible working opportunities than fathers. Even if organizational policies appear to have been conceived to meet mothers' needs (Lewis and Cooper 2005), notions that mothers have privileged access to flexible working compared with fathers do not necessarily accord with mothers' experience.

To be fair, the accounts of mothers in *Study 2* did accord with fathers' assumptions that line-managers classified mothers as belonging, or 'falling' within an expressive, child-oriented social group (Janasz *et al.* 2011). However, mothers did not present their membership of this 'expressive' group as either privileged or advantageous in relation to workplace status. Rather, in keeping with observations by Gatrell (2013), Ashcraft (1999), Brewis and Warren (2001), Cahusac and Kanji (2013) Haynes, (2008) and (Mäkelä), 2009, mothers in *Study 2*

perceived that line-managers' association of maternity with childcare led to an underestimation of women's work-orientation. Changing social *dynamics* such as the increased likelihood that women need, and desire, to combine childcare with career appeared to be ignored (see Figure 1).

Conversely, in keeping with Parsonian ideas about the gendered distribution of labour within households, mothers' *interactions* between home and work interfaces showed that maternal membership of the 'expressive' child-oriented group was correlated, by line-managers, with strong home-orientation. Yet women still experienced limited support for their need or desire to work flexibly. Administrator Kate (private sector) reflected on whether this might be due to a managerial view that mothers should be excluded from their workplace altogether (see also Gatrell, 2011):

> *I think the view is really if you want time out of the workplace, then the view is often*
> *that this is inconvenient – my manager actually said 'they are your kids, why should I*
> *support this?' what he means is, if you want to have kids, then stay at home.*

Where women were permitted to work flexibly they tended to be marginalized, or downgraded. This was deeply frustrating for women who regarded themselves as work-orientated, such as office assistant Jen (public sector) who observed:

> *I don't get any of the interesting stuff now, I never get invited to client-facing*
> *meetings, it's all just paper work. I never realised there would be such a price for*
> *being flexible you know? I loved my job before but now I feel stuck and sort of*
> *ground down.*

In keeping with observations by Lewis *et al.* (2007) and Blair-Loy (2003), it appeared that mothers who did work flexibly (and/or part-time) hours were often sidelined (see also

Acker,1990; Gatrell, 2005). Mothers expressed the view that non-flexible, full-time roles were associated with (by implication male) career paths, while mothers working flexibly were regarded as primarily child-oriented. Teacher Maria expressed her frustration that, while policy reflected changing social *dynamics* in parenting practices and within the female labour force, such dynamics appeared to have little impact on line manager's tendency to place individual women as belonging within a child oriented group:

> *At School we are giving girls all this career advice, you know. I find that depressing because even with all these policies its meaningless. Once you have a child, that's it.*

It would thus appear, that disparities between policy and practice, with regard to flexible working, were experienced by both mothers and fathers. The idea that motherhood enhanced access appeared to be misconceived, and (in keeping with Acker 1990) membership of the expressive group was perceived by women as a career constraint, but without offering compensatory access to flexible working opportunities. Thus maternal ease of access to flexible working was not nearly as rosy as fathers believed.

Conclusions

In applying May's (2011) theories of belonging (*personal; interactive; self and society; dynamic*) to parenthood and flexible working, our paper advances knowledge through making transparent the misconceptions and inequities which exist among and between individual parents' and their *organizational environments.* We offer new direction for debate through observing how fathers' assumptions about ease of maternal access to flexibility were misconceived, some mothers finding it just as difficult as men did to access flexible working. Inequities between women and men with regard to flexibility were thus less significant than fathers imagined, since parents of both genders were discouraged from working flexibly, and both observed disparities between policy and practice.

It was apparent that fathers and mothers sought to belong to categories which were different from those in which they were placed; they '*felt* different from the category in which they *fell*'. (Janasz *et al.,* 2011: 15, italics in the original). Men in *Study 1* regarded themselves as imprisoned within an out-moded 'instrumental' economic provider category, while mothers were seen (by both fathers and themselves) to be classified within an 'expressive' child-oriented category which neither accommodated mothers' work orientation, nor offered flexibility. In practice, fathers and mothers desired to belong to both 'instrumental' and 'expressive' social groups, especially if *person-centred* changes (e.g desire to breastfeed infants; relationship breakdown) triggered the need to renegotiate relationships between the *self* and *organizational environments* (see Figure 1). Our research thus indicates how Parsonian categories of 'expressive' mother and 'instrumental' father continue to endure within organizational practices, regardless of social and personal changes. We believe such stability contributes to the disparity between flexible working policies and parents' experience, and also to men's misconceptions about maternal experience.

Arguably, new ways of theorizing work and family are required in order to disrupt gendered classifications of paternal and maternal roles. One perspective which could facilitate a challenge to organizational assumptions about parental roles could be the concept of intersectionality (that is, the intersections between oppressed groups and the discriminations which they experience on multiple levels, e.g. race, class and gender, see Hancock, 2007; Hill Collins, 1999).

The present study suggests that workplace flexibility was regarded by fathers as a resource which they could obtain only through competing with (and classifying themselves as more oppressed than) mothers: what Hancock 2007 terms a kind of 'Oppression Olympics' in which the most oppressed groups win more resource. Paternal attempts to re-structure social classifications of fatherhood, so that men may be seen belonging to a group experiencing

greater oppression than mothers, are unhelpful. Such an approach fails to acknowledge patriarchal structures in relation to inequality of opportunity for women at work. It also seems unlikely to disrupt gendered organizational tendencies to classify mothers and fathers as either work or family orientated.

In order for such disruption to be achieved, the application of an intersectionality lens to research on parenthood and organizational policy could be a more effective device. Taking an intersectionality approach could facilitate the recognition of both fathers and mothers as having particular needs in relation to work and family, as well as contextualizing social shifts in respect of parental engagement with children and employment. A future agenda for work family research could, through an intersectionality lens, offer new perspectives on changing *dynamics* such as enhanced paternal-child orientation and maternal work-orientation.

As such, the application of an intersectionality perspective could open up possibilities for negotiation between individual parents and their *organizational environments* and offers the possibility of new perspectives in understandings of work and family.

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