

# Families, Relationships and Societies

## When equal partners become unequal parents: Couple relationships and intensive parenting culture --Manuscript Draft--

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## **When equal partners become unequal parents: Couple relationships and intensive parenting culture**

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### **Abstract:**

Based on longitudinal research with (heterosexual) couples in the UK, this article tracks their experiences of becoming parents for the first time. The suggestion is that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between competing discourses around ideal relationships and those around ideal parenting. On the one hand, they must be committed to egalitarian ideals about the division of care. On the other, they must be parenting 'intensively', in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, and which makes paternal involvement more complicated.

Drawing on accounts of relationship difficulties, elicited over a 5-year period, the article demonstrates the incommensurability of these ideals at physiological, material and ideological levels. As a contribution to the body of work known as Parenting Culture Studies, this article brings, for the first time, an empirical focus to the question of how an 'intensive' parenting culture affects *couples*, rather than just mothers or fathers.

### **Key words:**

Couples, Equality, Gender, Mental load, Parenting.

### **Word count:**

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## **Introduction**

Changes to what has been termed 'Parenting Culture' have now become a well-established field of social science scholarship (Faircloth 2013, Hays 1996, Hendrick 2016, Lee et al. 2014, Nelson 2010). This scholarship, largely based on research in Euro-American settings, has called attention to an 'intensification' of parenting in the last 30 years, suggesting that raising children has become, culturally, a more demanding and complex task.

So far, the majority of this work has looked at the effect of these changes on individuals, and particularly on women. Mothers (more than fathers) are recognized as increasingly 'torn' by the competing expectations to parent intensively on the one hand, whilst participating in the labour market on the other (Hays 1996, Miller 2005). More recent work has documented the experiences of men grappling with shifting ideals of a more intensive 'involved' fatherhood (Dermott 2008, Miller 2011, Shirani et al 2012).

Focusing for the first time on couple relationships in the context of an intensified parenting culture, this article reports on a longitudinal study with first-time heterosexual parents (in London, UK) over a five-year period. The article reviews the literature on contemporary relationships and parenting culture, before turning to look at the tensions that occur when couples become parents. The suggestion is that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between competing discourses around ideal relationships and those around ideal parenting. On the one hand, they must be committed to egalitarian ideals about the division of care. On the other, they must be parenting 'intensively', in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, and which makes paternal involvement more complicated. Drawing largely on the narratives of couples who have faced relationship difficulties, the paper points to the social pressures at play in raising the next generation at material, physiological and cultural levels.

### **Couple relationships and ideals of equality**

Work by Giddens (1992), Bauman (2003) Beck (1992) Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and others (Illouz, 2007) has explored shifting relationship patterns in the contemporary age. Broadly speaking, this body of work argues that, in an age of 'reflexive modernisation', there had been a shift away from traditional, patriarchal couple relationships, based on an inherent inequality between men and women, toward a more equitable, mutually fulfilling model, accompanied by the rise of a more 'plastic' sexuality in particular (Giddens 1992). Giddens argues that in the late twentieth century, in the place of traditional patterns of marriage, for example, individuals have become more aware of the need for a fulfilling relationship, based on 'confluent love'; one that is active and contingent. As part of a wider culture of 'individualisation', independence within relationships is highly valued. The 'pure relationship', which is not bound by traditional notions of duty and obligation, has come to depend, instead, on communication, intimacy and a sense of equality.

This discursive shift has been matched by growing legislation in social life (in the UK) around gender equality, which has been concerned to protect individual rights in matters such as pay, political representation and family life (Browne 2013). Parental leave has been one key area for the promotion of gender equality (Gornick and Meyers 2009), with the idea that extending leave alone to fathers eases a gender imbalance by promoting their involvement in childcare and housework (Kotsadam and Finseraas, 2011, Schober, 2014).

In the UK at the time of initial interviews for this study (2011/2) employed women were entitled to 12 months of maternity leave (paid at 90% of their usual earnings for six weeks, and then at a statutory rate of approximately £140/week until the baby was nine months old, unless topped up by the employer). Replacing an older system in which employed fathers were only granted two weeks of paternity leave, changes to the law in 2011 meant that mothers were able to 'transfer' all or some of the second six months of their leave to their partners, under a system of 'Additional Paternity Leave'. As of 2015, following calls for greater gender equity, a more flexible system of 'Shared Parental Leave' was introduced, so that eligible couples can now divide a year of parental leave as they see fit (although technically this is still a transfer of maternity leave from a mother to her partner). In theory a partner now has the option of taking an entire year of parental leave, or a couple can take six months consecutively, for example. However, whilst these ideals of both 'equality' are clear in the policy, figures released by HMRC estimate only a minority of parents 'share' parental leave, with only 2-8% of parents taking SPL in 2016<sup>1</sup>. Baird and O'Brien (2015) argue that this is due to an historical emphasis on men's breadwinning roles and women's caring roles in the UK (see also Lewis, 1997).

Thus since the work by Giddens et al was published, scholars working in the field of personal life have critiqued concepts such as the 'pure relationship', arguing for a more nuanced perspective, grounded in the empirical realities of everyday experience, which is often less equitable than either theory or legislation might suggest (Smart 2007). As Gillies says, for example, concepts of 'individualisation' and 'democratisation' that underpin theories of intimacy are much debated, 'with many disputing the claim that personal relationships have become more contingent, negotiated and self directed.' (2003: 2). Certainly, a large body of research highlights the on-going and pressing nature of gendered and wider intersectional inequalities, both in matters of personal and public life (e.g. Browne 2004, though see Williams 2017 for a counterpoint to this). Thus whilst discourses around *ideal* relationships may have changed, practices have not kept pace (Jamieson 1998). In particular, research has shown that an imbalance in the gendered household division of labour correlates with relationship dissatisfaction, whether couples are parents or not (Bird, 1999, Kluwer et al 1996, Ruppner et al 2018, see also Illouz 2007).

Nevertheless, it has also been noted that parenthood is a 'pressure point' in terms of gender relations, and the time at which this inequality becomes more marked or correlated with relationship problems (e.g. Daminger 2019, Piña and Bengtson, 1993, Ruppner et al 2018) Collins (2003) has pointed out, for example, that in post-industrialised settings, whilst (some) couples might live relatively equal lives before having children, parenthood accentuates the sexual division of labour and still has the potential to divide egalitarian couples along more traditional lines. Where independence and equality might be hallmarks of ideal contemporary relationships, parenthood, instead, is marked by ideals of obligation and permanence (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). As Beck-Gernsheim argues, the understood irreversibility of a kinship tie with a child sits uncomfortably with a more 'plastic' approach to relationships. At the same time, in a culture which shuns permanence and commitment for the sake of self-fulfillment, there is something existentially appealing, relaxing, even, about a relationship that is beyond the remit of personal preference, and therefore the parent-child relationship is one suffused with deep meaning (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 1995, Ribbens-McCarthy and Edwards 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Although as Twamley and Schober 2019 point out this figure is slightly misleading as many parents are not eligible to take up SPL under the terms of the policy.

## Contemporary parenting culture

Across the world, and across history, parenting has always been subject to moralizing and guidance (Hardyment 2007, Faircloth 2013). However, the magnitude of the increase in expectations around raising children, particularly in the US and the UK and particularly since the mid-1970s – the fact that we even use the term ‘parenting’ as a verb at all – is striking: parenting classes, parenting manuals, parenting experts, and parenting ‘interventions’ are now so common-place as to be unremarkable (Faircloth 2013, Lee et al 2014). Rather than being something that is simple, straightforward or common-sense, parenting today is routinely presented as a task requiring expert guidance and supervision, fuelling a multi-million pound industry of advice and ‘support’ (Lee et al 2014).

Drawing on a developmental, psychological rationale, parenting is understood as the source of, and solution to, a whole range of problems – at both individual, and societal levels. The transformative potential of parenting to solve what might better be called structural social problems (such as the ‘obesity epidemic’), means parenting has been the subject of much policy intervention in recent years, especially in deprived communities (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley 2017, Macvarish 2016, Lee et al. 2014).

Recognizing the gendered dimension to these changes, much work has drawn on the concept of ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996) in understanding the experiences of contemporary women (Douglas and Michaels, Faircloth 2013, Lee et al 2014,). Hays summarizes the characteristics of intensive motherhood, as ‘child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive’ (Hays, 1996: 8). The ‘intensive’ mother is one who is considered responsible for all aspects of her child’s development – physical, social, emotional and cognitive – above and beyond anyone else, including the father (Hays, 1996:46). Ideally she demonstrates this commitment through embodied means, such as, for example, by birthing ‘without intervention’ or breastfeeding ‘on demand’, and no cost, physical or otherwise, is considered too great in her efforts to optimize her child (Wolf, 2011). As noted, fathers have not been immune from this trend (Dermott 2008, Collier and Sheldon 2008, Shirani et al 2012), although most scholars agree that it remains mothers to whom these cultural messages are largely targeted, and around women’s reproductive choices that the fiercest debates reign.

Like work on intimacy and relationships, Parenting Culture Studies draws on concepts of individualisation and risk-consciousness (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). Indeed, a key assumption is that children are particularly vulnerable to risk in the early years, requiring protection and guidance. In a neo-liberal era, with its emphasis on self-management, ‘good’ mothers are reflexive, informed consumers, able to ‘account’ for their parenting strategies as part of their ‘identity work’ (Faircloth 2013, Murphy, 2003,). Of course, a Euro-American cultural script does not affect all individuals in the same way around the world – class, ethnicity and gender all affect its internalization, and there may be a curious combination of adoption, resistance or adaptation according to specific time and place (Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne 2013, Hamilton 2016). What is important, however, is that this globally circulating ideal script is widely recognized as the ‘proper’ way of ‘doing’ parenting, and an injunction to which individuals must respond (Arendell, 2000).

In a similar vein, Jamieson, for example, whilst a critic of Giddens’ argument around the emergence of the pure relationship, agrees that disclosing intimacy and equality is an *ideal* within contemporary relationships, through which individuals narrate and idealize in their own aspirations (Twamley 2012). This means, of course that, the transition to motherhood

and the return to so-called traditional gendered roles – even if only temporarily – can be felt particularly acutely by contemporary women; a trope common to much current sociological and popular literature (Cusk 2001, Miller 2005). As Roman observes in her study of couples becoming parents in Sweden, in a time of more ‘risk conscious’ individualized discourses, her study participants perceived children and parenting to be risk-filled projects in relation to self-realisation, but also the couple relationship (2014:454). To this extent, many couples are in the strange situation of seeing marriage, cohabitation and parenthood (and lack of opportunity for an ‘independent life’) as a threat to that very family life.

In sum, there is a contradiction between two ideals at play: couple relationships which value equality, intimacy and independence and parenting relationships which value a highly gendered, ever present, embodied form of motherhood. What implications does this have for couples themselves?

### **Methodology**

To explore the implications of competing expectations around personal and family life, this study was designed as a longitudinal one, which included repeat in-depth interviews with 30 participants (15 first-time parent, heterosexual, dual-professional couples) over a five-year period (2011-2017). Longer-form writing drawing on this research explores the longitudinal changes to couples’ accounts in more depth (such as around the shifting division of labour as children get older), but for reasons of space this element to the findings is not elaborated on explicitly here. Further, these interviews were part of a wider mixed-methods study into shifts in parenting culture, which also included one-off interviews with a further 10 participants (5 couples who were lesbian, gay, and/or second time parents), and a survey with a sample of 125 parents (distributed via *Qualtrics* to a demographically diverse panel of parents in the UK with children under a year old) although, again, those data are not referred to in this article.

Building on previous research (Faircloth 2013), the intention was to find parents who internalised the injunction to ‘parent’ intensively, and who consciously reflected on and articulated their decisions as an element of their ‘identity work’. Furthermore, the aim was to work with couples who were committed to, and might technically be able to afford an ‘equitable’ division of parental leave, even if they chose not to. Bringing together these objectives, parents were contacted through a range of antenatal education classes and courses in London – such as the National Childbirth Trust, recognised by a number of scholars (Thomson et al 2011) as being primarily made up of this higher-educated, dual-professional, middle class and high earning demographic.

Analytically and methodologically a largely narrative approach to research is taken here. Whilst appreciating that narratives are not a straightforward reflection of experience (Craib 2000), many scholars have emphasized the role of language in the constitution of personhood, and have argued ‘that human beings actually live out their lives as ‘narratives’, [and] that we make use of the stories of the self that our culture makes available to us to plan out our lives... to account for events and give them significance, to accord ourselves an identity’ (Rose 1999: xviii, Reissman 2008). Looking at how couples ‘accounted’ for the division of labour within their respective partnerships, and particularly the contradiction between ‘equitable’ relationships and unequal ‘intensive’ parenting, was the intention of the study, analysing both anticipation and outcomes before and after children were born.

Couples were interviewed in various areas of London. After meeting one or both of them at an antenatal group or similar, and a discussion with the aid of a study information sheet, they were asked to fill out a brief online survey (designed and administered via *Qualtrics*) to collect demographic data. These couples were then interviewed, usually in their homes, at times convenient to them. The first interview (both together and separate) was before their child was born, and then jointly when their child was 1-2 months old, at 6 months old, and then finally at 12-13 months old, when we also repeated the individual interviews where possible. Recordings were transcribed and coded thematically as a whole. However, to avoid fragmentation of the data too far, a 'listening guide' approach was adopted with a sub-sample of the transcripts (see for example, Doucet 2006) to try to grasp the 'deep' narratives in the accounts. This sub-set was determined by those couples (or individuals within them) who were particularly expansive with their responses, and whose accounts elucidated the identified themes from earlier analysis. Couples were contacted again (by email) for follow-up questionnaires when their first children were two-and-a-half and five-years-old. Eleven of the original 15 couples responded, by which point all of them had had at least one further child, and two of them had two more.

Clearly, interviewing couples together as well as apart presents some unique ethical challenges (Heaphy and Einarsdottir, 2012, Morgan et al 2013, Twamley 2012), not least because of the scope for participants to recognise accounts of their partner in any disseminated findings (i.e., whilst external confidentiality can be assured, internal cannot, Tolich 2004). However, joint interviews were felt to be critical to this study, for the scope they offered in analysis of how couples 'co-produced' knowledge, and to witness couples' interaction in confirming or contradicting accounts. The interviews (particularly those analysed with a 'listening guide' which pays special attention to, for example, use of pronouns like 'I' or 'we') therefore revealed interesting fault-lines within couples, especially when read against accounts in sole-interviews. Participants were reminded at the time of giving consent about the potential for recognition, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and also the opportunity for de-briefing or asking that particular sections of interviews were not mentioned in analysis. Interestingly, none took this option up, though many talked about how 'useful' they had found the interviews in helping them clarify issues that had been concerning them for some time; as is discussed further below, this was particularly the case when linking personal narratives with wider patterns of gender inequality in the division of labour (see, for example, Laura and Claudia below).

The majority of the couples interviewed were 'middle class' (in that they overwhelmingly had higher educational qualifications and professions), middle aged (between 45 and 29 though typically 34 or 35), white, heterosexual and married (all were living in long-term relationships, though if they were not married 'partner' is used, rather than 'husband' or 'wife'). The average household income for the group ranged between £30,000 (in the case of a couple where the wife was undertaking a PhD) and over £200,000, with the majority between £50,000 and £150,000. All interviews were conducted in English, though some participants were born outside the United Kingdom.

A final note on context before moving to the findings, which is important in understanding couples' accounts not only of parental leave but also decisions around work: childcare provision in the UK has been recognised as one of the most expensive in Europe (nearly £10,000/annum for a nursery place, or in the region of £25,00 for a full-time nanny, Family and Childcare Trust (FCT), 2017). Childcare therefore represents a major household outgoing second only to a mortgage for most couples, particularly if they have more than one child. There are no government subsidies to assist with this until children reach the age of three (or

two in means tested cases), at which point children are entitled to 15-hours of free care a week (which has recently risen to 30-hours for some families, FCT, 2017).

## Findings

Indicative of their age, class and educational capital (not to mention the availability of contraception and abortion), all couples were fully invested in their 'decision' to have children, and none of the pregnancies were unplanned or unwanted (although of course some happened faster than others, whilst one couple had had to seek fertility treatment).

Furthermore, parenting was understood as a 'fulfilling' and 'rewarding' activity that both parents were looking forward to, with fathers committed to being as 'involved' in as possible. However, despite a discursive commitment to equality, of the 15 couples none formally planned to split parental leave, and all stuck to the traditional division, with mothers taking longer periods than fathers. In fact, at the time of first interview, only three couples seemed to know about the possibility of splitting leave, but had decided against it as it would be financially too constraining for the family. This is curious not least because these kind of couples are those who are most likely to be literate in their own policy entitlements.

To give an example of this gap between discourse and practice, this couple, Laura (32, a teacher) and her husband James (a barrister, also 32) have been together since the age of 17, and are highly committed to ideals of equality. They had a 'gentleman's agreement' that they would have an 'equitable' division of parental leave, such that Laura would take an extended period away from work after the birth of their first child, whilst James would do so after the second, because Laura wanted James to 'experience the whole thing' and not set up 'damaging gendered patterns'. As Laura says, '[James] and I have been together for 14 years and we've grown up together, we've done everything together which may or may not be a good thing, but that's been what we've done. We're kind of intellectual equals, we're roughly at the same stages in our career. Then suddenly, kind of almost without us realising, we've made a mutual decision to have a child and now I feel like we're on these different paths, at least I guess until I go back to work.'<sup>i</sup>

There are clearly many ways of understanding equality in couple relationships, especially as they relate to parenting, and not all of them will be a straightforward '50/50' split of each task or activity, but take a more holistic approach to family contributions. Certainly, many couples in the sample talked about how with the birth of children, where mothers were doing the bulk of childcare related activities during the day (defined as feeding, changing, ensuring naps, preparing food, playing, appointments etc.), fathers would be expected to 'take over' for bath and bedtime (although usually whilst the mother cooked or 'caught up' on standard domestic tasks such as cleaning or laundry, which had also expanded), reflecting the fact that domestic labour actually increases with children as well as being divided differently.

Nevertheless, findings from across the sample point to a gap between 'ideals' around equality (expressed in current policy discourses, and indeed by many couples themselves) and the realities of caring for a small child. Perhaps not surprisingly, for those couples who were most explicitly committed to an 'equitable' division of labour, like Laura and James, navigating this gap was harder than for those who had anticipated a more traditional gendered set up, and it was their accounts that revealed the most tension and that are the focus here. Whilst the majority of the eleven couples remained together (i.e. those of the original 15 with whom follow-up was possible), two had separated (but one was making



attempts to stay together). Whether or not their relationships had suffered, all of the accounts pointed to the extent to which having children had re-entrenched gendered stereotypes around the division of labour, and the unique kind of pressure that had created in the context of an ostensibly 'egalitarian' relationship. This study therefore provides empirical evidence for Collins' assertion that equal partners can, in spite of their best intentions, become unequal parents. The findings are presented with a focus on material, physiological and cultural factors in turn.

### **1. Material barriers: Parental leave and social institutions of care**

In only one case was the female partner out-earning their male partner in this sample, and in no instance would it have made financial 'sense' for men to take longer periods of leave than women, particularly because at this point it was rare for the father's employers to offer enhanced SPL packages (meaning they would be only eligible to statutory pay). As noted, this is indicative of a gender pay gap across society as a whole (FCT, 2017).

Heather, (29) is a PhD student and freelance teacher and David, (44) a freelance web-developer. They are expecting their first child, and talk about how they would have liked to have divided childcare:

...I mean our original plan...I seem to remember as saying, 'wouldn't it be good if I worked two days a week and looked after the baby for three and [you] did the other way round'. Because I couldn't really imagine not working (Heather, 29, one child, joint interview)

Unfortunately, this was just not financially feasible, in part because if her husband were to take any leave (which would have to be unpaid due to the restrictions on SPL) she would not earn enough to cover their outgoings (unlike other couples in the sample who may have been able to afford it for a few months at least). Once the child was born she was therefore looking after it full time indefinitely, with some support from grandparents, something she described as a bit 'demoralizing' having just finished her PhD. This couple went on to have two other children within the next three years. Whilst Heather talked about the way in which David 'carries them' financially, he spoke about finding this responsibility a 'strain' and in a 'money-no-object' world, would like to have more time with the children.

Many critics point out that despite the ideological emphasis on equal parenting, the financial backing to make that a reality for couples is simply not there, particularly given the restrictions on SPL (Twamley and Schober, 2019). Instead, there is a tendency to advocate the importance of what Dermott calls the 'caring about' activities of childcare to men – swimming clubs, reading classes and so on (2008) rather than actually legislating to facilitate the 'caring for' activities such as feeding or cleaning that children require. Whilst *discursively* fathers may be encouraged to be 'involved' in parenting and take more of an equal load of childcare, in reality, it is women who continue to shoulder most of the responsibility for care (Dermott 2008, Gillies 2009).

This has knock-on implications in that male care-taking has a low social visibility: This was echoed by many men who felt uncomfortable when looking after their children in public – at the lack of changing facilities in male toilets, for example, or at being the 'only man in the room' at children's activities. There was also a recognition that childcare was a threat to notions of masculinity, in ways very different to femininity, which instead was bolstered by the activities associated with parenting (Mannay 2015). As Anthony, at this point 30 years old, working as an IT manager, said at our interview when his first child was a year old:

What I'm trying to say is I want to be able to do that [look after my son] and for society to afford me the same 'man' status. And I think society doesn't have a place for men who look after children full-time, it's more seen as 'soft men' or men who are actually doing 'women's work' (Anthony, 30, one child, joint interview)

At the same time, of course, there were also certainly cases where fathers would say they would *like* to spend more time with their children (for example, if facilitated by paid parental leave) but when pushed admitted that in fact 'just something like a month might be nice... but I couldn't be a stay-at-home Dad' and that 'my kind of work doesn't really allow [part-time working]' (James, a barrister, husband of Laura, above).

## **2. Physiological barriers to equal parenting**

Explicitly or otherwise, as the literature around intensive motherhood has argued (Hays 1996, Wolf 2011) it is women to whom the majority of messages about 'good parenting' are directed, not least because there is a physiological element to so much of what is considered appropriate care. This gendered, embodied ideal about good parenting is one which stretches from pre-conception well into a child's youth. A conception that is 'prepared for', in the form of the mother focusing on both her physical but also emotional health (Lee et al, 2014), or a pregnancy that is carefully monitored and well regulated (in the form of maternal diet, exercise and wellbeing) might be considered an extension of a more formalized 'parenting culture' which focuses around the avoidance of risks to the child once it is born. Later examples, such as play, or indeed sleeping habits which focus on creating secure attachments and establishing 'optimal neural pathways' were regularly mentioned, with many mothers attending classes such as 'baby sensory' or 'baby massage' under the same rationale (Macvarish 2016).

Claudia, an academic working at a London University, who is at this point 36, took six months of maternity leave with her first son and seven with her second. In both cases, her husband, Anthony (cited above) was made redundant whilst she was on maternity leave (albeit with a generous financial pay-off). Claudia was so strongly committed both to her career, and to ideals about equality that like Laura and James, her and Anthony made a 'pact', that the only way they would try for a baby would be with the agreement that it would be equally cared for. (This was one of the couples aware of the possibility of splitting parental leave, although this turned out not to be financially feasible in their case, due to the large discrepancy in their salaries at this point). The plan had been that when Claudia went back to work after maternity leave, they would both work a 4-day week, and only pay for 3 days of childcare. In spite of this, when her husband asked to have compressed hours he was made redundant (for the first time). This couple have separated several times since the birth of their second child, but are taking steps to stay together.

Like many other women in the sample, Claudia felt that the way she fed her children had a lot to do with the division of labour between her and her husband, and played a part their relationship breakdown after her second child was born. In the 'breast is best' culture that has been so widely written about in the UK (Faircloth 2013) many women felt that they were in a bind, in that they were on the one hand encouraged, as per the NHS guidance, to breastfeed exclusively for six months and for anything up to two years, or beyond, whilst at the same time aspiring to an equitable (and intimate) relationship with their partners. For this couple, these two things were difficult to combine, as feeding a baby had knock-on implications for other activities of care:

I breastfed Joseph [her second son] and we bottle-fed George. This was often used as a reason for [my husband] not being so involved or bonding with Joseph, and somehow was seen as me blocking him and used as an excuse ...for why he started resenting me... [but] it didn't actually make sense because yes I would feed him but that doesn't mean I had to be the one rocking him for hours on end to sleep... [my husband] gave up quite early on trying to get him to take the bottle...I breastfed Joseph until he was 18 months old and this was blamed by everyone for why he didn't sleep so well (he continued to not sleep well when I stopped, though), and I was told I had 'made my bed' so I deserved to be woken continuously by him...It was utterly exhausting and took everything out of me, and yet I was expected to be performing motherly duties to my other child, and on top wifely duties to my husband who complained of the lack of intimacy and I think justified him deciding to switch off entirely from our relationship and fantasise about being out of it and with other people. The whole thing has been utterly heart breaking and devastating (Claudia, 36, two children, sole interview).

There are several interesting points to emerge here. One, an obvious one that breastfeeding (or embodied forms of care, such as co-sleeping) might cause tension in relationships, not least because breastfeeding is so much more than about providing nutrition for a child, but has cascading effects on all sorts of parenting practices, including couple intimacy and individual's sense of personhood (Tomori 2014). Second, the point that because men *cannot* breastfeed there is no option but for the father or partner to 'do less' in terms of caring for the child, particularly in the early days (especially if the child, or indeed the mother, is unwilling to involve a bottle - as Claudia says, this sets up patterns well into children's infancies). In later interviews, many couples acknowledged that mothers were 'better' and 'quicker' at settling children at night, even once they had stopped breastfeeding, and even when both had returned to work). This will clearly sit uneasily with couples committed to '50/50 parenting'.

### **3. Cultural barriers: The intensive motherhood and the 'mental load'**

Many women in the sample said that although they were 'lucky' that their partners 'helped out' more than fathers in the past, they were still the ones who were expected to shoulder the burden of managing the household. In the majority of cases they had been doing this already, but, as noted, once children actually arrived, the scale of this task multiplied dramatically.

This was a typical response, from Laura (cited above). At this stage (the five year follow-up questionnaire) this couple have two children, aged five-and-a-half and two-and-a-half. She works four days a week, and looks after both children one day a week. (As her husband James says, 'I think both of us feel that it's not ideal to have a nanny bringing up [our children] more than is necessary', although he continues to work full time). They have a nanny the other days, who does the school-run for the older child as they often both have to leave the house by 7.30/8am and are not home until at least 6pm.

Having spoken in earlier interviews about how they had expected to parent equally (above), when asked '*Do you and your partner parent equally? If so, how? If not, why not?*' Laura replied with the following (referring to a recent comic in the Guardian newspaper about the 'Mental Load' carried by women, which portrays all of the invisible labour of running a household):

This basically sums up my life! [James] helps out (and to be fair he does most of the cooking for us, not for the kids) but I am the one keeping the show on the road and keeping a vast amount of plates spinning in terms of schedules and just remembering all the hundreds of things that need to get done every day relating to the kids (clothes, school stuff, health stuff –doctor, dentist, injections etc), the house, the dog, the car, birthday presents, family commitments, social life, holiday planning etc etc.) This is of course on top of trying to keep two jobs going... I am mostly happy with my life (although I am cutting back on my school teaching hours next academic year as the sheer volume of what I was trying to do became untenable this year) but we are VERY far from having attained gender equality in terms of parenting and domestic life in general in this country. (Laura 37, two children, 5 and 2 ½ years old, by individual email)

The concept of the mental load (or ‘cognitive labour’ as used by Daminger, 2019) is therefore not just about the tasks of running a household or parenting specifically. Instead, it is about ‘anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress’, with women tending to act as ‘project managers’ for the household (Damingler 2019). Even when tasks are split 50/50 then, many women felt that they were still overseeing their management and delivery. In this sense, most couples generally agreed that the division of labour *was* unequal, and this had a correspondingly negative effect on relationship satisfaction (Ruppner et al. 2018, see also Pina and Bengtson 1993), Knowledge by participants that gender inequality exists not only within their own relationships, but within wider society appeared to be both reassuring but also deeply frustrating, particularly when women (and it was usually women) felt that they were unable to do anything else but to fall into gender stereotypes. For Laura, who was a member of an online feminist discussion group (which had shared this cartoon), this was particularly hard to account for, especially when she moved to part time work.

As numerous scholars have noted (Collier and Sheldon 2008) one of the consequences of a shift towards a model of ‘involved’ fatherhood is that breadwinning has been (ideologically, at least) downplayed as an important parental contribution. In its place, there is a greater cultural emphasis on the importance of ‘being there’ for the child, and of splitting the emotional labour of parenting with your partner, in, for example, sharing the wrangling over preferred parenting ‘path’ (as described by one participant). This ideological commitment to ‘being there’ however, has not been matched by men’s actions in terms of longer leaves or more flexible working, and breadwinning clearly remains central to men’s identity work (and indeed often crucial to family finances – see James’ comment above). In a joint interview when their child was a year old, Anthony and Claudia reflected on what ‘equality’ means in this sense. ‘[Anthony] was saying isn’t it really important that I’m bringing money into the house and I was like, “No, that’s not what matters to me,”’ says Claudia. Instead, what really seems to matter to is an equal division of the ‘thinking’ about parenting and household management.

Certainly, many men were aware of this imbalance, but did not see it as either desirable or feasible to ape their partners’ intensive interest in their children. Alex, the father in this couple – both working in the university sector – and that this point (the 2.5 year follow up) expecting their second child, says in response to the question ‘Do you and your partner parent equally?’ ‘Probably not – I imagine it’s [my wife] 60% and myself 40%... I am probably more willing to catch up with friends in the evening and at weekends, whereas [my wife] is often interested in spending every possible moment with the kids. I’d also say that [she] is more willing to assert her views and preferences when it comes to the children... whereas I

am more agnostic' (individual email).

This, of course, was the cause of much argument and tension amongst couples. Michael (currently with one small son, and another on the way, his wife is currently on maternity leave from her job in the city, where he also works) says: 'I feel [she] watches me intent on spotting the smallest error or point of disagreement, when I am taking care of our son... and mainly talks to me to offer criticism. She tells me I am not involved enough as a father, which has some truth to it – though I also feel I don't get enough recognition for the amount of cleaning and cooking I do'. In their study drawing on Swedish data around housework and rates of divorce, Ruppner et al (2018) make the important point that it is not the unequal division of labour between couples *per se* which causes conflict, rather it is the lack of *recognition* around that inequality which leads to lower relationship satisfaction. This clearly also chimes with work by Illouz on the 'cooling' of intimate life, and a more contractual approach to personal relationships (2007, Faircloth forthcoming).

### **Discussion: Couples and parenting**

As the accounts here point to, the emergence of a more 'intensive' mothering ideology has potentially had negative implications for couples. As in the example of Anthony and Claudia, breastfeeding is a particularly fraught example: In an intensive mothering culture which puts the child's needs at the centre, a partner's attempts to feed the baby with a bottle could be read as undermining a mother's very identity, at the same time as being 'unsupportive' by 'giving up' on the bottle too soon. Arguably, this culture has the potential to displace men and make it harder for them to know how to be 'involved' (and easier for them to 'check out') at the same time as heaping demands on women and leaving them overwhelmed

It is worth re-iterating the point that the couples who are the focus of this paper are not entirely representative of the sample. Many other couples did weather the 'ebb and flow' of day-to-day life without suffering from relationship breakdown, and spoke about the maintenance of family life in ways that were more affectionate in their narratives. Instead, ironically, it seemed to be those couples (or rather, women) who were most highly committed to ideals of equality (such as Claudia and Laura) who struggled the most.

In her study, *When Couples Become Parents* based on interviews with couples in Canada, Fox observed changes in couples' relationships as they made the transition to parenthood. In nearly half of her sample relationships deteriorated, and were 'riddled with tension and worn down by the upset and anger of one or both partners' (2009:252). This was 'fostered by the gender-based divisions organising their daily lives and sometimes enhanced by the insularity of their families... men's detachment from the care of their babies and the dramatic differences in the men's and women's daily experiences – especially when the women were home full-time – were usually what undermined mutual understanding and often support. When both parties were stressed by the high demands of their daily work, that stress could further erode empathy, negate any hope of mutual gratitude, and produce considerable anger' (2009:265, see also Ruppner et al, 2018 on recognition, above)

Writing about the emergence of the 'companionate marriage' (as opposed to the more traditional patriarchal one), Collins (2003) notes that the 'keywords of companionship were intimacy and equality. Intimacy was at once achieved and expressed through privacy, closeness, communication, sharing, understanding and friendship' (2003:24). However, he identifies a problem with this once children come along: parenthood accentuates the sexual division of labour and has the potential to divide companionate couples every bit as profoundly as their patriarchal counterparts. Whereas spouses are able to live 'almost

identical lives' before they have children, any resulting intimacy comes under pressure from the inescapable differentiation between the two sexes once there is a child, not least because the child itself becomes a form of 'competition' for intimacy, and a barrier to individual autonomy.

Some critics have argued that current policy measures around work-life balance are less about trying to effect gender equality than promoting an intensive parenting agenda, and trying to encourage *both* parents to spend more time with their children (Faircloth 2014). However, as the narratives here demonstrate, it's not entirely clear what this means in practice (Dermott 2008). Indeed, what seems to emerge is that as much as splitting the practical tasks of childcare, women want their partner to share in the 'mental load' of parenting (at the same time that they might recognise this is unhealthy and unsustainable, or might even 'gate-keep' access to this load when it is seen as a threat to their identity).

Arguably even if 'involving' fathers in family life would go some way towards easing the burden of care many women shoulder, the extension of an intensive parenting to men might actually leave them in a similar 'cultural contradiction' between the worlds of work and home. One solution, suggested by Hays (1996), is to take greater *social* responsibility for raising children, through greater investment in and acceptance of childcare. This would certainly go some way to challenging the intensive, privatised, individualist (rather than shared, public or stratified) approach to parenting, which can result in huge pressure on individual parents and couples, left trying to balance the pulls of intensive parenting and egalitarian intimacy within the confines of their own relationships and households.

Clearly, one limitation of this article is that it has focussed on the accounts of dual earner, heterosexual, professional couples in the main, and particularly those with 'egalitarian' ideals. The larger research project, which uses survey research as well as interviews takes into account wider intersectional concerns around sexuality, ethnicity and class (including the way this affects access to shared parental leave, for example) as well as profiling accounts from those couple with more 'traditional' and arguably less antagonistic approaches to the gendered division of labour. However, as Daminger says, qualitative, longitudinal and in-depth research can be valuable here: 'A long line of research has analyzed how couples accomplish the physical work required to run a household and raise children. True understanding of gender inequality in the household sphere, however, requires consideration of physical, emotional, *and* cognitive labor. While the invisible and abstract nature of much non-physical labor presents a challenge for researchers, this should be understood as an opportunity to innovate—to ask new questions, design new measurement tools, and apply new lenses to data analysis— rather than as an insurmountable obstacle.' (2019: 22)

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that there is an inherent paradox at the heart of many contemporary family set-ups. On the one hand, couple relationships are idealised as equitable and intimate. On the other, parenting relationships are idealised as intensive and highly gendered. The incommensurability between these ideals is uncomfortable for many couples, and this article has explored how these are played out at material, physiological and cultural levels. Whilst equality between men and women can be seen as a social or political ideal, what emerges is that for many of these couples it is as much about the realities of interpersonal relations, behaviours and the division of the 'mental load', which were sources of considerable strain and resentment. The toll of this on couples, and especially on women, in balancing ideals of

intensive motherhood and relationship equality, should not go unnoticed in our discussions around reproduction and care for the next generation.

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<sup>i</sup> Sadly, in part due to post-natal depression, this 'gentleman's agreement' did not come to fruition, with Laura taking 12 months of leave with their second child, and also the one working part-time; further discussion about this couple is included below.