

Chapter 1: Introduction

Abstract: This chapter sets out the rationale for the study, arguing that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between two competing discourses: those around ideal relationships, and those around ideal parenting. On one hand, they must be committed to egalitarian ideals about being ‘equal partners.’ On the other, they must be parenting ‘intensively’, in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, and which makes paternal involvement in particular more complicated. Drawing largely on the narratives of couples who have faced relationship difficulties, the book points to the social pressures at play in raising the next generation at material, physiological and cultural levels. These are explored through concrete practices, linked to physiology by varying degrees: Birth, feeding and sleeping, three of the most highly moralised areas of contemporary parenting culture.

Key words: Parenting, Couples, Gender, Equality, Intimacy

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 40 years, suggesting that raising children has become, culturally at least, a more demanding and complex task.

So far, the majority of research in this area has looked at the effect of these changes on individuals, and particularly on women. Mothers (more than fathers) are recognised 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). No research to date, however, has explicitly looked at the impact of these changes on *couples*.

Focusing for the first time on couple relationships in the context of an intensified parenting culture, this book reports on a longitudinal study with 20 couples becoming parents (in London, UK) over a five-year period. This is a particularly interesting historical moment at which to observe couples’ experiences of the transition to parenthood as, at the policy level, there has been a growing commitment to gender equality, especially in so far as childcare responsibilities relate to men and women’s career prospects and ‘work-life-balance’ (see Miller 2017). Parental leave and ‘flexible working’ are two of the key policy responses, under the auspices that sharing the responsibility for childcare traditionally assumed by women will reduce gender differentials in terms of career progression and pay (O’Brien and Wall 2016). The couples are all professionally employed, and the vast majority are heterosexual first-time parents, one of whom were still at the stage of ‘trying’ for a baby. However, five of the 20 couples had a deliberately different profile: some were second-time parents, one couple had twins, another were in a co-parenting relationship as a gay-couple with a ‘single’ mother, and the last were a lesbian mother family (Figure 1 in Chapter 3 explains this further).

The research shows that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between two competing discourses: those around ideal relationships, and those around ideal parenting. On one hand, they must be committed to egalitarian ideals about being ‘equal partners.’ On the other, they must be parenting ‘intensively’, in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, and which makes paternal involvement in particular more complicated.

Relationships end, but children are 'forever'

Drawing largely on the narratives of couples who have faced relationship *difficulties*, this book points to the social pressures at play in raising the next generation at material, physiological and cultural levels. As Collins has noted, there is a contradiction at the heart of many couple-relationships, and therefore many contemporary families: a tension between the aspiration for self-realisation through individualism (the freedom to 'be myself') on the one hand, and commitment through coupledness and parenthood (a desire to 'make a life' with someone) on the other (Collins 2003).

Before children, couples are arguably temporary; individuals are more important than relationships, which exist – in theory at least – only as long as they work (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). But children are 'forever'. The extraordinary cognitive dissonance provoked by having a child, and the sense of being tied into something permanent understandably takes some acclimatisation. Furthermore, as one mother in this study said, it was birth and early motherhood that made her 'see' her gender for the first time, in that her bodily difference to her husband suddenly seemed to 'matter' more than it had in the past. Indeed, whereas physiological difference or roles associated with specific genders might potentially be down-played in the time before children arrive, during the peri-natal period each parent is likely undergoing a deep (re-)gendering. All of these factors considered, it is not surprising that the transition to parenthood creates a complex of feelings on both sides, bound to cause at least some disruption.

This is not a new subject for academic research. Indeed, the idea that parenthood disrupts marriage and is incompatible with romantic relationships goes back at least to LeMasters in 1957, and there was a large body of work on the transition to parenthood beginning at around that time, much in the USA but also in the UK. Perhaps most famous in the UK was the work of Ann Oakley in the 'Becoming a Mother' study which commenced in 1974. The resultant books, *From Here to Maternity*, published in 1979 and *Women Confined: Towards a sociology of childbirth*, (1980) highlighted the 'shock' of childbirth in forcing couples, especially women, to acknowledge the divergence between expectations and reality, and to realise that equality between men and women did not exist. *Women Confined* in particular examined the theme of shock and analysed it in relation to women and the diagnosis of postnatal depression, contextualising it thus:

the crushing numbness that can follow a birth over which a mother feels she has little control; the cumulative insult of multiple, poorly explained technical procedures; the extraordinary (but yet ordinary) isolation and exhaustion of finding oneself suddenly in charge of another human life (Oakley, 2018 [1979]: vii)

This 'extraordinary (but yet ordinary) isolation and exhaustion' resonates with other work in the area since (see for example Asher 2011, Maushart, 1999, Miller 2007, 2017 and also Fox's *When Couples Become Parents: The creation of gender in the transition to parenthood* (2009) to which this book pays homage by echoing the title). The original 'Becoming a Mother' study was repeated 37 years later with many of the same women, which prompted similar interesting temporal comparisons about changes in the management of childbirth as women reflected on how different things were (or are) for their own daughters, as well as around the sociology of memory (Oakley 2016). Whilst much had changed about motherhood (mothers in general being older, a higher proportion of same-sex couples and a more routine use of technologies such as ultrasound and caesarean section) it was notable how much had stayed the same. Feelings of alienation due to the medicalisation of childbirth and the 'shock'

many women experienced seemed uncannily similar, a feature that was ‘just as prominent in the second study as in the first’ (2018 [1979]: ix).

Another important theme to emerge from these later studies was around the shifting role of the partner. Whilst there was a great degree of continuity in the views expressed about partner relationships in the studies, there was greater surprise in the later ones at how the addition of a baby changed many partner relationships towards more traditional gender roles (around the division of labour; paid employment; personal interests and so on), something that was not always anticipated or welcomed by the women in an era of supposed ‘gender equality’ (see also Miller 2017). In line with this, there was an increased emphasis on the lack of independence, which many women described as frustrating (Brunton et al. 2011: 24). As such, this study recognises these historical continuities around the transition to parenthood, at the same time as calling attention to changes in the conception of both parenting and personhood which might make this shift more acute today.

Certainly, tensions around lack of independence might be said to be a reflection of shifting conceptions and expectations of personhood, or indeed womanhood itself. As numerous scholars have discussed, our biographies in recent years have increasingly become ‘choice biographies’, as part of an era in which an over-arching discourse of individualism within wider society, where individuals are increasingly expected to ‘fulfil’ but also regulate themselves through carefully curated life trajectories, behaviours and choices (Butler 2020, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, Faircloth and Rosen 2020). This can create discord when it comes to couple and family relationships, in that there can be difficulty in reconciling tensions between partnering and parenting which are based on investments and commitments *beyond* individual choice. That is, whilst becoming a parent can be read as an exercise in ‘self expression’ (particularly in the current historical moment), but it is also about a moral responsibility beyond the self (Ruddick 1995, see also Doucet 2015). To this end the book takes a relational perspective in understanding subjectivities within a family context, to try and take a holistic view of how, why, when, and with what implications people within families make decisions that they do.

Certainly, a tension between the desire to ‘be oneself’ and ‘make a life’ with someone is as difficult to resolve, if not more difficult, for contemporary ‘equal partners’, than ever. All of the couples I spoke with in the course of the research would describe themselves as committed to gender ‘equality’ (or rather, none would say that they were against it). But what was interesting was that, in spite of this, all of them were ‘gender traditional’ in that mothers tended to take longer periods of leave than fathers, and scale back working commitments further down the line – and this is in spite of the fact that the period in which these couples became parents for the first time was during the advent of first ‘Additional’ Paternity Leave and then ‘Shared’ Parental leave (see discussion in Chapter 2). Paying close attention to how they talked about and understood equality in their relationships, I outline a typology in development with Twamley (see Twamley 2020, Faircloth 2020) to suggest a loose grouping into those couples who talked about equality in terms of ‘fairness’ (a general principle as to how to treat a partner) and ‘balance’ (in an overall sense, including cases where each member of the couple ‘takes turns’ to take the lead on respective roles of working and caring). These are in contrast to those who talked about it as ‘breaking gendered roles’ (for example, men doing care work) or ‘50/50’ (with each member of the couple doing the same tasks to the same degree.) Those in the latter group were *most* likely to talk overtly about their commitment to equality, and relatedly, about their desire to split their parental leave, for

example, so that each member of the couple took some sole responsibility for childcare (even if this did not actually materialise in practice).

One of the most illuminating aspects about the design of this study was being able to trace how expectations around parenthood and the division of care matched up with reality (or rather, did not). What emerged is that those couples who were most strongly committed to equality in general (and ‘50/50’ in particular) were also those who were most disappointed in terms of how things worked out in practice. Due to their resources – as households with comfortable incomes, professional, flexible jobs and with high levels of social capital – these are the couples who should be *most* able to balance these competing demands of discourses around ‘good parenting’ and ‘equal partnership’, and yet they, particularly the women, seemed to be the ones who are most exasperated by the situations they find themselves in. To put it another way, why was it that so many of the well-educated, professionally employed, middle class mothers I spoke to in the course of this research were so frustrated?

One idea explored in the book is that underlying ideas about equality (and particularly one concerned with ‘50/50’) is a highly individualised understanding of subjectivity, as opposed to a more ‘relational’ one. The suggestion is that this leads to a more ‘tit-for-tat’ rubric in relationships in terms of how fairness is understood, calibrated and processed. This is especially hard to reconcile in the period of early parenthood when gender difference is suddenly so ‘obvious’ and the edicts of a culture of intensive motherhood reign with such ferocity.

Overview

Throughout the book, extended vignettes from three first-time, heterosexual couples illustrate the larger themes around gender, intimacy and equality which are explored in the research as a whole. The vignettes sit outside the usual chapter-based structure and can be read separately from the normal narrative flow. Including these extended narratives in an unbroken fashion is one of the huge privileges of publishing research findings in a monograph rather than in shorter articles, building over the course of the book as a whole to provide an in-depth, rich and detailed picture of the workings of couple relationships over a prolonged and critical period. The couples featured are those who struggled the most to reconcile the competing narratives around relationships and parenting, and who suffered the greatest relationship breakdown. They are not intended to be representative of the sample, nor, as a qualitative study, is the sample intended to be representative of the wider population. Indeed, the accounts in this book are those of a highly privileged, largely white, middle-to-upper income group of participants, and the workings of intimacy and inequality in less privileged households cannot be extrapolated to here. However, given all of the resources at the disposal of the couples featured, these extended narratives arguably both magnify and clarify tensions faced by couples making the transition to parenthood today: the ‘ideal’ of the reflexive, pure relationship is revealed to be very hard work, particularly after the arrival of children, as it makes absorbing the practical difficulties – and joys – of life extremely difficult.

By way of background, the first chapter reviews the literature on current parenting culture and relationships, pointing to some of the contradictions between them. The second chapter gives an overview of the political context into which new babies are born in the UK, including the kind of parental leave or childcare their parents can expect (if any). This chapter also provides a discussion of the methodological design of the study, following 20 sets of

parents intensively during pregnancy and the first year of their child's life, and then intermittently for the next five years.

The three central substantive chapters – which draw on the accounts by all couples in the sample – take as a starting point the practices (and the issues which flow from them) of birth, feeding and sleep; three heated topics in contemporary parenting culture. These are 'practices' of parenting which to varying degrees are unavoidable, and on a sliding scale of physiology. Birth might be said to be nearly 100% physiological (particularly as all mothers in this sample were birth mothers, and no babies were adopted or conceived via surrogacy, for example). By contrast, feeding is only potentially constrained by physiology, if women are breastfeeding or expressing milk, or if doing either of these in combination with the use of formula milk. Sleeping practices, by contrast, are not necessarily tied to physiology at all – although often seem to be. As such, these three practices provide an interesting spectrum which are highly physiologically constrained at one end, and more socially constrained at the other (although of course these overlap, as will become evident). Secondly, these are topics that are discussed at length by professionals and experts, and which are central to contemporary social policy, connecting to debates around gender, workload distribution and intimacy. Finally, birth, feeding and sleep can also be seen as the first major parenting issues, again which are dealt with as varying matters of urgency. They are practices which help establish a pattern of behaviour between parents – namely who, how, when, and why one or other parent will respond. As work on the 'structuring principle' suggests, it is also the case that these early patterns can be extremely difficult to break (Searing et al. 1973).

By way of conclusion, the book returns to ideas about equality, subjectivity and relationality, pointing to some of the problems that arise when people (individuals, couples, or parents) have to live and create meaning in their lives when normative assumptions are contradictory.

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Vignette 1: Anthony and Claudia

I first met Anthony and Claudia at their house in South London, when Claudia was eight months pregnant with their first child. At that time, she worked as an academic at a central London university, whilst Anthony worked in the city as an IT manager. They were a high-earning and well-educated couple, (Anthony earned more than Claudia, but their household income was around £150,000) who were highly reflexive. In our meetings (four in-person, joint interviews over the course of the next 12 months, followed up by email exchanges two-and-a-half, and five years later) they demonstrated time and again how central the issues of this study – gender, intimacy and equality – were to their everyday negotiations and conversations.

Anthony and Claudia met at university, and were together for a long time before getting married and deciding to have children; they felt that they had to ‘get over themselves’ as 30-somethings before they felt ‘able to accommodate somebody else in the relationship’. From the outset, it was clear that independence was something that they valued – they socialised separately a lot and as Claudia explained at our first meeting, the ideal of independence (which she held dear) was something that troubled her with regards to their imminent arrival:

I’m part of this generation...I suppose, who hate the idea of children. It’s sort of a disgusting thing that they’ll come and, you know, infringe on your life... me and my friends are all very sort of independent, and independence has been so valued through our childhoods... and so, and it’s seen as a really, really bad thing to have anybody who’s dependent on you. So, in relationships... and all my girlfriends and I would always establish this thing, ‘you must never have someone who’s dependent on you’, that’s the sort of the revolting thing to happen and you should get rid of them immediately. And as an extension of that it feels like you’re not really allowed to have children either because they’re also dependent on you and that’s like... not a very nice thing to happen.

This concern about maintaining independence segues into Claudia’s views on gender equality in the context of their relationship, which she saw as under threat from the heavier physical burden carried by mothers in terms of gestating, birthing and caring for children – albeit one which was ‘socially shaped’ in terms of the role expectations that came with it:

I mean we’ve definitely had a lot of discussions about how it works gender equality-wise and what gender equality actually means, because I’m carrying the baby and I’m allowed time off... And so, right from the start, you’ve got this gender imbalance which I really struggled with. You know... Anthony’s sort of point here [is] ‘well, of course you’re not equal because you are biologically different’. So then, what is equality in this instance? I’m still not convinced about how much of that is socially shaped, and how much of that is absolutely has to be that way biologically... at the beginning I was saying, well, ‘if we bottle feed the baby there isn’t any reason that he should be more dependent on me than on you because we’re both feeding him and what’s the difference?’, you know, we could say there is absolutely no difference, we could do exactly 50/50, or you could do more than me [to Anthony].

This concern with equality was baked into their plans to become parents – Claudia agreed to try to conceive a child if her husband signed up to the idea of ‘splitting things 50/50’ once she had returned to work after a six-month maternity leave, with each of them working a 4-day week and providing childcare on the fifth day. (Whilst this couple did know about the possibility of splitting parental leave, at this point it would have meant Anthony only being eligible for three months of statutory pay, with no top-up from his employer, and this was deemed unaffordable). Although Anthony was hesitant about the chances of his boss agreeing to him moving his role from five to four days a week, Claudia said that this arrangement was important, not only for equality reasons but also because:

I'm a kind of controlling person so I could end up just saying, 'that's not how you do it', if I'm there all the time, and I could end up like in that situation where I'm resenting Anthony and so on.... I am one of those high achieving people who probably would get... I have the potential to get very like 'into' it. So I have to – we have to – put in place things that will stop me from doing that and that will allow Anthony to have direct control over this situation as well.

During that first interview, just before the birth of their first child, this was a couple that was highly committed to ideals of equality, with the intention that care for the baby, including feeding, be split 'as evenly as possible', particularly after the initial period of maternity leave. In fact, even during this period, although Claudia thought there was too much 'propaganda' about breastfeeding, she intended to express breastmilk in parallel with breastfeeding, so that her husband could 'do his share'. Once they were both back at work, they would split everything at night (unless the other person is having a day 'off' with the baby the next day in which case that person would take the lead). As such this maps onto the '50/50' iteration of equality mentioned in the introduction. At the same time, Claudia also expressed an affiliation to the idea of 'breaking gendered roles' as a marker of equality – although interestingly, this was something which was more obviously a point of contention between them. Anthony said, for example:

And we were talking about things like, what colour would you paint the room? What would you dress them in? And, you know, you [Claudia] said, 'I don't, if we have a girl I don't want everything to be pink and ponies and stuff, it has to be, you know, allow them, not, give... and then I said 'I want them to have enough structure so they have something to work with. So, dress the boy in trousers, give him a train set but don't suppose that he's automatically going to want to play with a train set, he may want to play with an action man, or some sort of doll or, you know, be a, provide a kind of an expected structure but not necessarily hold him to it.

Asked about plans for her maternity leave, Claudia said 'I guess we're just going to see... But [at least after these conversations] I think that I'm now in the position where I do genuinely believe that he really does want to be involved, because before I really was... I was like, yes, maybe you're just saying it and really you just want to recreate the scenario of your own childhood where your mum did everything'. They were hoping for a waterbirth in their local hospital, and to avoid 'too many interventions', particularly an epidural.

So what happened?

I went back to the house when their son – James – was 12 weeks old exactly. It was around 7pm at night, and Claudia held the baby throughout the interview, moving him to a sling at one point to help him sleep; his jabs that day had apparently made him a bit more cranky than usual. We started with the birth, which did not go as anticipated – but was in fact the only one in Claudia's NCT (National Childbirth Trust antenatal childbirth education) group of six mothers that did not end in Caesarean section or forceps delivery.

Claudia had a long labour, over 53 hours, which included an induction with pessaries and then a drip, an episiotomy and an epidural (something she felt 'guilty' about and which had added complications due to spinal fluid leaking so badly she had to stay prone for four hours). Shortly after the birth she haemorrhaged so badly she was rushed into emergency theatre – it turned out that some of the placenta was still inside her uterus. A few weeks later she developed an infection of the uterus in addition to a Strep B infection. She described these early days as a 'continuous physical onslaught'.

In the midst of the 'onslaught', feeding the baby was far from simple. She tried breastfeeding after birth, but her nipples bled so badly she had to express milk using the hospital pumps –

her milk came in early (on day two) but pumps were in short supply, her breasts became engorged, and she was sent home, with a view to being able to express better there (albeit with a question mark over her own need for a blood transfusion at this point). Her husband was very active in helping getting the baby latched on to feed in the early days, especially as Claudia was too weak to even sit up for long periods. However, she ‘persevered’ with breastfeeding through ‘tremendous pain’ (‘my whole body would... I screamed. Sometimes I couldn’t hold the head’) often expressing and bottle-feeding which was marginally less painful.

Even once breastfeeding was established, the baby was regularly distressed when feeding. On seeking support for these issues, the couple received a huge amount of conflicting advice as to the cause: Thrush and lip tie were diagnosed and treated to little effect; Claudia restricted her diet to control for intolerances such as dairy; Reynard’s disease was suggested, in conjunction with vasospasm, but the anti-hypertensive she was prescribed resulted in horrendous headaches. At nearly nine weeks in, she said it felt like things were ‘getting so extreme’ that they decided to give the baby some formula. However, being advised to try and wean their son off the bottles of expressed milk so that he more readily took the breast, at this point, the baby refused to take a bottle (of formula or expressed milk). His weight started to plateau.

In conjunction with a GP (‘the only person, really, who’s given any support to me, as an individual, not as a breastfeeding mother’) who told Claudia to try different types of bottle and different varieties of formula, they eventually managed to find some sort of compromise, and it turned out that the baby had a cow’s milk allergy coupled with possible reflux. At our 12-week interview, feeding continued to be a trial, with the baby fussing, back-arching and regularly upset. At this point, he fed at least eight times in 24 hours (every feed was logged in a spread sheet), though Claudia worried that she had created a ‘horrible environment’ for him, and ‘guilty’ about making this ‘awful awful decision’ to use formula. She was cross that this was something she was confronted with every time she looked at a packet of baby milk, where the law required a public health message about the benefits of breastfeeding be listed. She was also angered by well-meaning friends who asked if she had ‘tried a local breastfeeding café?’ or any implication that she had been ‘a wuss’ for ‘giving up’.

As planned, Anthony continued to go to the office at similar hours to before, with Fridays at home where possible to ‘help’, but Claudia’s days had ‘no routine’ at all. She read numerous books and realised that the baby ‘should be sleeping in his cot’ for naps, but so far was only able to sleep in the sling that she wore, which felt like ‘a cheat’. Nights were very broken, and being so tired, she felt ‘no capacity to make any decisions at all’. She hated not being able to follow up with work requests about some of her publications more efficiently, and had several people waiting on her emails. Claudia’s mother was able to come to London one day a week to help, but she felt she needed ‘way more help than she realised’. Her in-laws offered, but this was not deemed a viable option.

One Friday when Anthony was at home, Claudia went to get her hair cut, only to receive a phone call from Anthony shortly into the appointment, saying that the baby would not take a bottle, and ending with Anthony driving down to the hairdresser so that she could (breast)feed him. This left her feeling ‘very much the key player’ in spite of their intentions to be ‘equal partners’, saying to her husband: ‘if you can’t look after him, you will bring him to me...I am in charge’. She commented (again, it is worth reiterating that this was an in-person, joint interview):

...it does feel so unfair that I'm at home and Anthony's not, particularly now when there's no reason that it could be either of us who's at home [now that the baby is on formula milk]. And I know that's a really horrible thing to say 'cause it makes it sound like I don't like being with James. But it's a really...it's really intense. It's really, really hard work. But it's really, really mundane and boring. It's really hard because it's unrelenting and you are completely out of control of it, which doesn't suit me.

Although the baby went on to sleep in a separate room (with a monitor on, always by Claudia's side of the bed), there was little time for intimacy; Claudia remained 'obsessed' by making sure the baby was asleep and 'obsessed' by 'how many mills [millilitres] of food' he had. 'Any intimate time...[would] distract me from my task at hand', she said. Anthony felt grateful for the 'redundant intimacy' that comes in long-term relationships: 'You know it's there but... you don't really have to work to maintain it' (to which Claudia replied, 'We're taking it for granted').

When I next saw this couple, James was six and-a-half months old. Claudia had returned to work, and the couple employed a nanny three days a week (rather than use a nursery as anticipated) – Claudia was using Annual Leave to look after the baby on Fridays, whilst her mother looked after him on Mondays. Anthony, however, was at home full time, having been made redundant shortly before Claudia went back to work. After requesting to move to a 4-day week, his boss felt that he 'didn't have the commitment he wanted from me' and he was told his position was impossible to accommodate in shorter hours. He received a generous financial package, and was taking some time off over the Christmas break before looking for a new job in earnest in the New Year. As Claudia said, they decided that they had to keep the nanny, who had just started before this news, because Anthony needed the time to apply for new roles, and in case he was offered something starting immediately. However, she had been 'feeling very jealous of this scenario because I didn't get to do any of this stuff [like play tennis, as Anthony now does regularly]'.

With her return to work on the horizon, and their nanny wanting to know what sort of routine James was on, the couple had decided that the 'sleep situation' was something they needed to tackle. James at this point was having four naps a day, for which he would need to be rocked to sleep, often for up to 30 minutes at a time, and often waking as soon as he was put down. During the night at around five months old he would wake up numerous times and 'we would spend an hour, sometimes two hours, each time he woke up in the night, holding him until he went to sleep. Put him down, he'd wake up, hold him again. Put him down. He'd wake up. Hold him again'. They undertook some 'sleep training' – a regimen with a basic rule that the baby needed to be able to settle himself to sleep from being awake. They read several books before finding an approach which suited them, and although it was 'awful', this resulted in much better sleep all round. Coupled with this, James had recently been weaned onto solids and seemed more settled digestively, although he still vomited regularly.

At our final formal interview, when James was just over a year old, things had changed again. Anthony had had six months out of paid work; seven including parental leave. He had a new job, for five days a week; whilst Claudia normally worked a four-day week as originally planned, with a grandmother taking care of James on a Monday, and a nanny-share for the three remaining days. She said:

[It's] just an unrealistic hope that Anthony could find a job that was going to fulfil him, which is still really important, and enable him to be able to do a four day week. It was a nice idea. I felt let down by it because I wanted Anthony to stick to it because that was our pact before we had a baby, that we'd do that, and I felt like

he was letting me down but having now seen how difficult the job market has been, how difficult it is to get any job, the fact that Anthony's got a job which is really good for him and is the ideal job, then it doesn't matter.

James was sleeping better than he did before, and his problems with feeding had continued to settle. Claudia tended to attend to him in the night as she was 'better' at soothing James than Anthony, and because she had been at work she felt 'happier' to do it because she missed him. Claudia felt happy that Anthony has at least had some days (before starting his new job) where he had been in sole charge of the baby. This, however, was something Anthony struggled with, for fear that people would look at him and think, as he put it, 'why is that man pushing that pram and why the hell isn't he at work?'

Whilst they felt that time for 'intimacy' was lacking, with Claudia feeling 'alienated' from her body, the couple continued to be very communicative and reflexive about their relationship, especially around the question of equality. Claudia clearly had to do some cognitive work to reconcile her ideals around equality with the way things had worked out. Here, we see her shift her ideals around equality from '50/50' to one more aligned with 'balance', thereby maintaining the idea that this is an 'equal' partnership:

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'... That's not what makes you an active participant in terms of equality. What I had been saying before is equality is if you also feed James and do all of these things and then you know what it's like, then you can do the same thing... [now, I'm saying] what Anthony brings is a very different thing but it's still equally important.

I received no response from this couple when I checked in when James reached two-and-a-half years old; in time it emerged that they had given birth to a second son at around this time. At the five-year check-in, however, Claudia responded by email and told me that the couple had separated several times. She linked this to some of the feeding practices they followed with their second son:

I breastfed Alex [their second son] 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 and deserved to have to not only feed him but settle him, which would take 1-3 hours each time, after which he would only sleep for 1-2 hours. 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.

She also reflected on how much she 'gave' to the baby during this period, saying that she wished she had been a bit more *laissez-faire* with her approach to parenting:

... that's one of my regrets, when [my first son] was small, he could've sat in his bouncy chair and I could've done my hair but I didn't want to split my attention from him because I thought that would damage him for life. So it's just mental and you completely neglect yourself... [and] then you just judge everybody else because they've managed to put some makeup on!

Claudia linked some of their discord to the fact that, by this point, she was earning more than her husband:

... intimacy is now a luxury, equality is far more acutely negotiated, and gender has become much more obvious in terms of expectations... Anthony became very distressed because of my attention going to the children, and became resentful of me which created a very difficult atmosphere which affected not only our relationship but our family unit. Unwittingly, I think the children became competition for my attention in our relationship. It

remains unclear how women can live up to all the expectations, not just with work, but with partners who also need their support e.g. in periods of unemployment. I do feel this fell a lot on my plate as a woman – and was expected not only in our nuclear family but also by our own families, who continued to promote the idea that any father doing more than they did in the 80s was a bonus. Not starting from equality but from stark inequality. Like, ‘women working is a luxury and even a cause of the problem, being selfish’. While of course this was necessary financially but this somehow is hidden and unspoken because it is uncomfortable to talk about a woman being the breadwinner, even between us in our house. There was a lot of dancing around issues and treading on eggshells with each of these issues you list: gender, intimacy and equality. I think you anticipated exactly the key issues that can be faced, which are made very acutely problematic when we are in the employment situations of this time.

At a more recent check-in, while writing this book, I found that the couple were living separately, with Claudia looking after the children for a majority of the time.

Re-reading our interviews, it is striking how dominant Claudia’s voice is in the accounts – it is rare that her husband proffers an opinion on anything without taking the lead from his wife, or being contradicted by her when he does. Indeed, in the quotes, only a small number come directly from Anthony, and even then they are usually follow-ups to something Claudia has said. (As I explore further in the section on methodology, this may of course say something about the research environment and the gender of the researcher as much as the couple themselves.)

It is also noticeable here that the spoken commitment to ‘equality’ is not reflected by the contribution of both partners to their accounts of parenting. What this book tries to do is explore how ‘ideals’ of equality mesh with contemporary couples’ experience of becoming parents for the first time; how they weather the conflicts between ‘independence’ and ‘nurturing’ (as Claudia puts it), by looking closely at issues around birth, feeding and sleep; and how, therefore, the issues of gender, intimacy and equality play out in the lives of new parents.