

## **‘Utterly heart-breaking and devastating’: Couple relationships and intensive parenting culture in a time of ‘cold intimacies’**

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### **Abstract**

Based on longitudinal research with (heterosexual) couples in London, this chapter tracks their experiences of becoming parents for the first time. The suggestion is that new parents in the UK are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between competing narratives around two competing ideals: those around relationships and those around parenting. On the one hand, they must be committed to egalitarian ideas about the division of care, while at the same time parenting ‘intensively’, in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, both physically and in terms of their own ‘identity work’ (Faircloth 2013). Drawing on but extending the scholarship of Illouz (2007, 2012) with a focus on parenthood, the chapter points to the difficulty of reconciling tensions between partnering and parenting, particularly when these are based on investments and commitments *beyond* individual ‘choices.’

### **Introduction**

...it’s seen as a really, really bad thing to have anybody who’s dependent on you. So, in relationships, like with [my husband] and with...previous relationships and so on, and all my girlfriends and I would always establish this thing, ‘You must never have someone who’s dependent on you’, that’s a sort of the revolting thing to happen and [if it happens] 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 (Claudia, 32, expecting her first child).

Changes to what has been termed ‘Parenting Culture’ have now become a well-established field of social science scholarship (Lee et al 2014, Hays 1996, Hendrick 2016, 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, 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). No research to date, however, has 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 chapter reports on a longitudinal study with first time heterosexual parents (in London, UK) over a five-year period. The suggestion is that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between competing discourses of ideal relationships and those of ideal parenting. On the one hand, they are (or should be) committed to egalitarian ideals about their relationships. On the other, they aspire to parent 'intensively', in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, and which makes paternal involvement more complicated.

As Collins has noted, there is a contradiction at the heart of many contemporary family set-ups: a tension between the aspiration for self-realization through individualism on the one hand, and commitment through coupledness and parenthood on the other (Collins 2003). As this chapter explores, and indicative of what Illouz terms 'cold intimacies' (2007), this tension is as difficult to resolve, if not more difficult for contemporary 'egalitarian' couples, than ever. In an era where choice in partner is (apparently) more free and open, Illouz's work in particular points to the gendered nature of 'romantic suffering' such that women are disadvantaged by being more family oriented (2012). In part then, this chapter provides evidence for Illouz's assertion that 'love hurts' (2012) whilst also addressing the empirical lacunae around parenting in her work. At the same time, it points to the limits of her analytical focus on individual or self-reflexive 'choices', to bring tensions around partnering and parenting to the fore. Drawing largely on the narratives of couples who have faced relationship difficulties, the chapter points to the pressures at play in raising the next generation at material, physiological and cultural levels. These tensions are arguably not due to having more or less 'choice' in marriage or sexual markets, but a product of the difficulty in reconciling tensions between partnering and parenting which are based on investments and commitments *beyond* individual choice.

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

Work by Giddens (1992), Bauman (2003) Beck (1992) Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Illouz (2007), amongst others has explored shifting relationship patterns in the contemporary age. Broadly speaking, this body of work argues that, in an age of 'reflexive modernisation', there has 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 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.

In line with this thesis, but taking a more critical stance, Illouz has argued that this 'equality' has been modelled on rational, economic systems of bargaining and exchange, indicative of a 'cold' intimacy and a turn towards an 'emotional capitalism' more widely (Illouz 2007). This leads to what she calls 'romantic suffering', in that

wider social structures (including marriage) are in contradiction with the 'quest for love', and that this is internalised – by women in particular – as disappointment and personal failing. The separation of romantic relationships from wider social and moral structures, manifest in increasing freedom in our choice of partner, for example, means that even 'love' itself has become individualised, rationalised, an "object of endless investigation, self-knowledge and self-scrutiny" (2012:163) and a lonely site for self-validation.

A discursive shift around ideal relationships has arguably 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), as well as 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'. Parental leave has been one key area for this drive (Gornick and Meyers 2009), with the idea that extending leave alone to fathers promotes their involvement in childcare and housework (Kotsadam and Finseraas, 2011). However, 'Shared Parental Leave', the current policy iteration in the UK, has had notoriously low up-take amongst parents (Twamley and Schober, 2019), and it remains mothers who take extended periods of time away from work, or move to part-time hours, with only 2 to 8% of parents taking SPL in 2016 (HMRC figures in Twamley and Schober 2019, although the authors note that this refers to *all* fathers, rather than just those who are eligible to this leave). 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 the model of more 'plastic' relationships, arguing for a more nuanced perspective, grounded in the realities of everyday experience, which is often less equitable (and more dependent) 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). In short, whilst discourses around ideal relationships may have changed, practices have not kept pace (Jamieson 1998) – precisely the gap this chapter, and indeed this volume, seeks to explore.

With respect to parenthood in particular Collins (2003) has pointed out 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 and Beck-Gernsheim argue, the understood irreversibility of a kinship tie with a child – and indeed the fact that infants require supervision 24 hours a day – sits uncomfortably with a more 'flexible' 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, such that the parent-child relationship is one suffused with deep meaning (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 1995, Ribbens-McCarthy and Edwards 2002).

### **Contemporary parenting culture**

Across the world, and across history, parenting has always been subject to moralizing and guidance (Hardyment 2007, Lee et al, 2014). 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 (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’ (Faircloth 2013, 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 under the auspices of ‘early intervention’ in deprived communities (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley 2017, Macvarish 2016, Lee et al 2014). What scholars of ‘parenting culture’ observe is that the task of raising the next generation has become highly fragmented and detailed, with a keen focus on the everyday practices of daily life (such as eating or sleeping). Further, rather than ‘socialising’ children into a set of shared social values, a more individualised perspective means that the aim is to raise ‘successful individuals’ who are able to ‘be themselves’, at the same time as acting as an aspect of adult identity work (Faircloth 2013).

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 (Faircloth 2013). Arguing that the mother-child relationship represents a sacred bastion in a society otherwise governed by the pursuit of profit, 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.

As a body of work, *Parenting Culture Studies* draws on important traditions within sociology around not only the 'doing' and 'display' of family (Finch, 2007) but also individualisation and risk-consciousness (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). Certainly, a key assumption of contemporary culture is that children are vulnerable to risk in the early years, and therefore require protection and guidance. In a neo-liberal era, with its emphasis on self-management, 'good' mothers are therefore reflexive, informed consumers, able to 'account' for their parenting strategies (Murphy, 2003, Faircloth 2013).

Of course, the perception of what is a 'good parent' is largely culturally, historically and ideologically rooted, and thus in continuous change. 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 ideal script is widely recognized as the 'proper' way of 'doing' parenting, an injunction to which most people must respond (Arendell, 2000).

In a similar vein, Jamieson, 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, with 'real love' being particularly important for women in the quest for self-worth (where public forms of fulfillment, such as careers, remain more readily open to men) (Illouz 2012, 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).

In sum, there is a contradiction between two ideals at play: couple relationships which value equality, intimacy and independence and parenting relationships (seen as permanent and dependent) which value a highly gendered, ever present, embodied form of motherhood. What implications does this have for the lived experiences of 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). 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 those data are not referred to in this chapter.

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 2004), 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' (1999a: 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.<sup>1</sup> 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, using sections from the 2011 census as a template (e.g., age/marital status etc). 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, with the aid of relevant software. 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. 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.

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

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<sup>1</sup> The study was given ethical approval by the University of Kent Ethics Board, in line with BSA guidance

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 about work: childcare provision in the UK has been recognised as some 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 some 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, albeit with some concern about the feasibility of such provision, due to the on-costs to providers themselves, FCT, 2017).

## **Findings**

### *Introducing the couples*

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 (one couple had sought fertility treatment to this end).

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 (see discussion below). This is curious not least because these couples are those who are most likely to be literate about their own policy entitlements.

To give an example, 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, and spoke highly of their 'independent' social lives and equally active careers. 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.'

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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 (e.g. feeding, changing or scheduling activities), but take a more holistic approach to family contributions. However, the 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 11 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. Furthermore, they highlight the danger of focusing too much on suffering as the result of individual 'choice' (Illouz 2012), but show the need for a *relational* perspective on everyday constraints to combining partnering and parenting, which become far more enmeshed at the birth of a child. 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). <sup>3</sup>This reflects a gender pay gap across society as a whole (FCT 2017).

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<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</sup> See, however, Twamley on the 'twilight zone' that many similarly-earning couples enter when justifying women's extended maternity leaves, where an economic rationale is used to by families to

Heather, (29) is a PhD student and freelance teacher and David, (44) a free-lance 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 [my husband] did the other way round'. Because I couldn't really imagine not working (Heather, 29, one child)

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, although felt very grateful to be able to work from home so much.

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. 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 (the day-to-day care 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, something which many men are complicit with, consciously or otherwise (Dermott 2008, Gillies 2009).

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 who talks of the 'gentleman's agreement', above). What was also noticeable was the way in which many couples justified the mother's decision to work by their ability to pay for childcare with their own salary. This accountability strategy (Faircloth 2013) was noticeable by its absence in men's accounts. This yet again reflects Baird and O'Brien's assertion around the residual stereotypes around men and women's roles in society, such that care-giving and home-making should be a woman's first priority,

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account for women's desire to take longer periods of leave, even in cases where this would not actually result in a reduced household income (2019).

and if not, her responsibility to 'outsource', rather than a cost for the household (2015).

## ***2. Practical and 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.

As numerous authors have discussed, 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, such as co-sleeping, which centre around creating secure attachments and establishing 'optimal neural pathways' were regularly mentioned by my informants, with many mothers attending classes such as 'baby sensory' or 'baby massage' under the same rationale (Macvarish 2016).

Space does not allow here to examine fully the ways in which these discourses around 'optimal' or 'natural' care are highly gendered, or what their implications are (Faircloth 2013), but to give an example, this is the account of Claudia, an academic working at a London University, who is at this point 36. She took six months of maternity leave with her first son and seven with her second. In both cases, her husband, Anthony was made redundant whilst she was on maternity leave (albeit with a generous financial pay-off from his job in the City). 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). The plan had been, however, 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, as this mother discovered when she breastfed her second child, having formula fed the first:

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 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 (Claudia, 36, two children]

And whilst it was not typical of the majority of the responses, Ellen, 45, mother of two children, and separated from their father speaks about breastfeeding in ways that magnify several of the issues other couples mentioned. Ellen used to work as a digital marketing executive in London, but now lives in Denmark, where the family relocated because her partner (a Danish self-employed fashion designer) had been offered a job there, and the day-care system made their cost of living more reasonable:

Breastfeeding was extremely satisfying, fulfilling and comforting to me. I felt I was doing the best for my babies. It did serve to widen the divide with my partner. He felt I should wean earlier than I wanted to because he was pressuring me to find work and have the baby sleep through the night [Ellen, 45, two children]

There are several interesting points to emerge here. One, an obvious one that breastfeeding (as an embodied form of care) can 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 direct care for the child, particularly in the early days (although as Claudia says, this sets up patterns well into children's infancies). 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**

Clearly, although messages about intensive parenting and optimal child development are ostensibly directed at both mothers and fathers today, it is mothers who internalise this injunction more strongly, and who feel that they have ultimate responsibility for its delivery. To draw on Claudia's account again, there is a sense that by not engaging with children intensively and wholeheartedly that one is jeopardising their development.

... 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, 36, two children)

This 'self neglect' appeared very gendered, leading many women in the sample to talk about how they envied their husbands and their ability to 'shut off' their sense of self from their domestic or childcare obligations, at the same time as being frustrated by it. Indeed, most mothers 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 and family, something which they felt was both exhausting and unfair (at the same time, of course, as deriving a culturally sanctioned source of 'identity work'). Whilst they had – in the majority of cases – been managing the bulk of household tasks before the birth of their children too, once children actually arrived, the scale of this task multiplied dramatically.

This was a typical response, again from Laura. At this stage (the five year follow-up questionnaire) her and James 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 has not changed his hours from full-time since the birth of their first son). 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, 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 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 also have a nanny and a cleaner so I am not a domestic drudge but they also need managing and there is always extra housework to be done (which I invariably do). 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 ½ and 2 ½ years old)

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.

Certainly an ideological commitment to 'being there' 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 an interview when their first child was a year old, Anthony and Claudia reflect 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 is an equal division of the 'mental load', as well as splitting the *emotional* labour of parenting with your partner, and sharing the 'worrying enough' about a preferred parenting 'path'. So whilst it was not unusual to encounter couples in this sample who had spreadsheets divvying up household tasks (for example), Illouz's comments around 'emotional capitalism' are salient here, notably the assertion that techniques of rationalisation and standardisation have entered intimate relationships *psychologically* as well as practically (2012).

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, a father in a couple – both working in the university sector – and that this point (the 2.5 year follow up interview) 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'.

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'.

### **Discussion: Individuals, couples and parenting**

As the accounts here point to, the emergence of a more 'intensive' parenting (or, mothering) ideology has negative implications for couples. In the example of Ellen, where she talks about breastfeeding being 'extremely fulfilling', for example, the partner is arguably trying to 'de-intensify' his wife's mothering, in ways that he presumably believes to be beneficial to her, or them as a family (e.g. ceasing breastfeeding to make it easier to go sleep through the night and be able to work). In an intensive mothering culture which puts the child's needs at the centre, however, this can be read as undermining her very identity. A partner who is committed to ideals of 'good parenting' (i.e. breastfeeding) is meant to be 'supportive' of what his partner decides to do, and suggesting otherwise is a threat to her bodily rights and therefore 'pressuring' her. Arguably then, an intensive parenting 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', as in the example of Claudia and Anthony), at the same time as heaping demands on women and leaving them overwhelmed. Ellen writes in a follow-up questionnaire, five years after our initial meeting, for example:

*Given this research was originally titled 'Gender, intimacy and equality', how would you say having a baby has changed things between you and your partner, if at all?*

It has ended our relationship. Having children made clear to both of us how different we are and how we are complete opposites when it comes to raising children. Before children I had no idea about how I felt about parenting and I'm surprised at the path of parenting I prefer (respectful)... I do not recognise the man I spent 12 years together in a relationship with. (Ellen, 45, two children)

And Claudia says at the same point:

Yes definitely – intimacy is now a luxury, equality is far more acutely negotiated, and gender has become much more obvious in terms of expectations... There was a lot of dancing around issues and treading on eggshells with each of these issues you list: gender, intimacy and equality (Claudia, 36, two children)

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 intimate life without suffering from relationship breakdown, and spoke about the maintenance of family life in ways that were more affectionate in their narratives (see Twamley 2019). Instead, ironically, it seemed to be those couples (or rather, those women) who were most highly committed to ideals of equality (such as Claudia and Laura) who struggled the most.

In her later work Illouz notes, 'much of the anger or disappointment in marriage has to do with the way in which marriage structures gender relations and mixes institutional and emotional logics: say, a desire for genderless fusion and equality, and the distance that inevitably emanates from the performance of gender roles' (2012: 12). She sees this as linked to our inability to reconcile an abundance of choice in (for example) partner, with ideals of romance, not least because these 'choices' are increasingly reversible ones: where once these decisions were influenced by wider, shared moral communities, backed up by external structures, they are more lonely and unstable now than ever. Furthermore, our 'choice' in relationship partner has become an 'interminable process of 'validation', part of the 'demand for recognition' and 'reconfirmation of one's own individuality and value' (2012: 119), or an 'anchor' in an individualised era.

This is gendered since women are more likely to engage in 'exclusivist' strategies of marriage (2012: 74) such that the pressure for their chosen partner to 'reflect back' their sense of self-worth becomes almost untenable. This leads to what she calls romantic suffering: we are told we are equal, but women are still expected to find solace in a market where men retain more power and control. Relationships are therefore inevitably about transactions (ensuring the 'best deal'), and calculated in 'cool' terms (see also Hochschild 2003). Thus an increasingly economic rationale of bartering and exchange has entered intimate relationships under the auspices of securing 'equality'. To follow this logic, in a contemporary culture of individualism which arguably devalues love and commitment to a partner in place of an orientation towards independence and self-reliance, there is a potential that the foundation for intimate relationships can be threatened – what Illouz might call a threat to the 'emotional glue' of society (2007).

However, whilst this analysis offers much in understanding the case studies of romantic disappointment presented in this chapter, it does not help us understand the way in which parenthood complicates the notion of suffering as product of individual 'choice' alone. The suggestion here is that a more relational perspective is required which foregrounds the fact of infant dependency such that couple relationships are not (only) about individual choice. 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).

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 had children, any resulting intimacy comes under pressure from the inescapable differentiation between the two sexes once there is a child.

Certainly, if maintaining a sense that relationships are fulfilling, equitable and intimate is not one which is helped by an approach to intimate life which is individualist and transactional, it is certainly not made any easier by the arrival of children, who, as Claudia says, require 24/7 attention, turn your time as a couple into 'a zero-sum-game' and become a form of 'competition' for intimacy. The precarity of the relationships highlighted here is not necessarily to do with the idea of finding a better romantic partner than, but rather about not being able to reconcile the tension of balancing ideal partnering with ideal parenting in material (and mental) realities. The suggestion is that the kinds of investments and commitments of parenting, which endure beyond individual self-reflexive choices, create novel kinds of tensions not accounted for in theories of romantic suffering *per se*. Indeed, what seems to emerge in these accounts is that as much as women want their partners to share in the 'mental load' of parenting – managing the activities of running a household – they also want them to recognise and share in the *anxiety* of parenting itself (Faircloth and Gurtin 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that there is an uncomfortable contradiction at the heart of many contemporary family set-ups. On the one hand, couple relationships are idealised as 'loose' equitable and intimate. On the other, parenting relationships are idealised as 'permanent', intensive and highly gendered. The tension between these ideals is uncomfortable for many couples, and this chapter has explored how these are played out at material, physiological and cultural levels. These were keenly monitored and sources of considerable strain, resentment and disappointment, particularly in the division of the mental and emotional load of parenting. In extending the work of Illouz to go beyond individual self-reflexive choice to consider the embodied and relational realities of parenthood we therefore see more clearly the toll of balancing partnering and parenting, particularly on women.

## **Afterword**

I'm a woman who is like a man because I've always looked after myself

financially, and I'm independent and I go and do my things and I don't have anyone dependent on me, except now I do, and now I suddenly have to be a woman *and* a man... I have to be loving and a mothering nurturing person ... and that's a massive conflict in my identity because that's something I've always shunned because I always wanted to be an independent masculine (essentially) woman!

...I don't know how that leaves us and that's probably why [my husband] is saying, "I don't really understand what 50-50 is because you're doing everything and now you want me to do everything that you're doing in the same way you're doing it but you seem to have everything covered."

But obviously I'm not actually coping (Claudia, 32, 1 child).

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