

***“She has mellowed me into the idea of SPL”*: Unpacking relational resources in UK couples’ discussions of Shared Parental Leave take-up**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines couple interactions and negotiations around questions of parental leave in qualitative interviews, in a bid to understand how some couples divide leave more equally than others. A more equal division of parental leave between men and women has the potential to transform gendered home and work practices (Gornick & Meyers, 2009). Fathers’ uptake of leave is associated with higher levels of men’s involvement in childcare and housework (e.g. Schober, 2014; Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007) and higher participation of women in paid employment which in turn can reduce the gender pay gap (e.g. Anderson, 2018). Previous research on parents’ uptake of leave has focused on individual motivations and barriers, how the leave is configured, or the context within which individuals work. This paper extends current research by examining the interpersonal realm in which leave is negotiated.

Based on her collaboration with Orly Benjamin, Oriel Sullivan (2006) states that we need to take account of the ‘tools and skills of daily interaction and negotiation’ (p91), as well as the broader social context, if we are to fully understand the possibilities for change in gendered practices. They argue (1999) that ‘relational resources’ are skills which can be drawn upon in helping women negotiate more equal divisions of household and care labour. Such skills intersect with gender consciousness and material circumstance to strengthen a woman’s negotiating position. Their approach is unique in attempting to take account of the everyday

interactions which men and women rely on as they work out decisions and practices around care and work. However, they are vague in what exactly the skills and tools of relational resources may be, giving only two examples: *'the ability to express thoughts and feelings more clearly, and the controlled use of anger in conflictual situations'* (1999, p 798). I aim to examine the kinds of skills and tools that can be observed when parents discuss their parental leave decisions, and how effective are they. I do this by analyzing in-depth couple interviews with two first-time parent couples in the UK as they discuss and negotiate decisions around planned parental leave. These have been selected from the overall sample of 21 couples. The study focuses on parents who are most able to take on new opportunities in parental leave, participants of broadly privileged backgrounds – dual-earner couples, mostly white and university educated, many in professional or managerial positions (Twamley & Schober, 2019) – who are also those most likely to be exposed to discourses around 'relational resources' (Benjamin and Sullivan 1999).

Parental Leave in the UK

The UK is an example of an Anglophone country, characterized by low levels of statutory leave provision for mothers and even less for fathers (Baird & O'Brien, 2015). Maternity leave is relatively long at 12 months, but poorly remunerated - paid at 90% of earnings for the first six weeks, a flat-rate payment of around £140 a week from week seven to 39; and the remaining 13 weeks unpaid. Two weeks of paternity leave are paid at the same flat rate level. Some employers offer enhanced pay to their employees during leave – around 28% top up maternity leave pay and 20% paternity leave pay (Chanfreau et al., 2011).

Since April 2015, mothers can transfer their maternity leave to their partners from two weeks after the birth or adoption of a child through ‘Shared Parental Leave’ (SPL). Figures released by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) estimate that between 2 and 8% of UK parents took SPL in 2016¹, while a survey of expectant mothers in London found that around 8% of eligible parents were intending to take SPL (Twamley and Schober 2019). Fathers taking SPL can have access to the maternity pay entitlement, but from six weeks only, by which time it is a low flat rate. A directive from the EU also provides for a non-transferable parental leave entitlement of up to 18 weeks (a maximum of four weeks can be taken per year), which is unremunerated. This paper focuses on negotiations around SPL, since participants had very poor or no awareness about other parental leave availability. Given that SPL functions through a maternity leave transfer mechanism², discussion or negotiation on the part of the couple is particularly merited, in contrast to countries where fathers have their own individual right to leave (though even in those countries there is nearly always also a gender-neutral parental leave on top of the ear-marked leave).

Research on parental leave take-up and negotiations

Studies on parents’ divisions of parental leave have tended to focus on structural constraints, such as the organisational and policy context in which leave is enacted, and the personal motivations and barriers reported by parents around their leave decisions. This evidence suggests that high remuneration and ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ policies are the most effective in promoting fathers’ take-up of leave (Blum, Koslowski, Macht, & Moss, 2018). Fathers’ employers and their own gender

egalitarian ideology and support for leave also promote uptake (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Reich, 2011). In the UK, barriers to take-up of SPL are parents' lack of knowledge of eligibility, financial constraints, and worries about the impact on men's careers were reasons for not taking up SPL (Twamley & Schober, 2019).

Gendered ideas about appropriate caring roles also shape parental leave divisions, often negating any explicit 'decision' at all, since both men and women simply assume that the mother will take all or the bulk of parental leave (Cannito, 2020; Kaufman, 2018; McKay & Doucet, 2010; Romero-Balsas, Muntanyola-Saura, & Rogero-Garcia, 2013). These studies demonstrate how partners may implicitly influence one another in their decisions around leave. For example, McKay and Doucet (2010) found that fathers reported self-excluding from parental leave, prioritizing mothers' access to leave and her caring role (see also Twamley, 2019). Employment status and earnings can disrupt these gendered assumptions, though to a limited degree (Beglaubter, 2017; Yarwood & Locke, 2015). For example, in Canada Beglaubter (2017) wrote that when men's parental leave pay was topped up, or when women expressed strong attachment to their careers, this could offer an opportunity to negotiate increased leave for men.

It is clear that partners often play a role in decisions around parental leave take-up, though not always explicitly. This study attempts to examine how negotiations between parents actually play out, of which little is known (McKay & Doucet, 2010; Schmidt, Rieder, Zartler, Schadler, & Richter, 2015). The interpersonal realm is widely understood as contributing to how gendered roles and identities are 'done' and 'undone' in everyday interactions (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987), but few researchers attempt to unpack the actual mechanisms through which

these processes may occur. Prior research examining couple communication more generally has found that the ability to communicate can act as a source of relationship power (DeTurck & Miller, 1982) and may contribute to challenging hegemonic masculinity (Peukert, 2018). There is some evidence that women make strategic use of communication skills with their partner to negotiate for improvements in their intimate relationship (Moor & Kanji, 2019). Drawing on the concept of ‘relational resources’, I attempt to unpack the kinds of ‘skills and tools’ which parents draw on, and to what end.

METHODS

The first part of the study was a survey of expectant parents in antenatal clinics in two hospital trusts in England (Twamley and Schober 2019). A sub sample of 21 heterosexual couples (42 parents) were recruited from the survey participants for a longitudinal qualitative follow-up. All were dual-earner couples, first-time parents, university-educated and in white-collar occupations. The average age was 35. Salaries varied across the sample, but no individual earned less than the UK median wage, and many earned significantly more. Half of the couples are using Shared Parental Leave and half are not. Of those taking SPL, in all but two cases the mother took more leave, with men taking an average of 3.5 months and women 8.5.

The parents were interviewed together as a couple when the mothers were eight months pregnant, when the babies were six months old, and then individually when the babies were approximately 14-18 months old – that is after the UK leave period is over. Additionally, the parents kept individual weeklong diaries at four different time points over the study period. Ethical guidelines from the British

Sociological Association were followed. All participants are referred to by a pseudonym.

As this article focuses on the negotiations of decisions around leave, I draw mainly on data from the first couple interviews, when the mothers were still pregnant. Interviewing couples in pregnancy enables an examination of decision-making which is likely still in flux, as well as the social context that shapes these negotiations. While explanations for taking particular leave patterns may shift over time, as parents' experiences influence their assessment of the leave (O'Brien & Twamley, 2017), plans are rarely changed. In that first interview, the couples were asked to describe their family story, including how they got together as a couple; their pregnancy experiences so far; decisions around leave; current divisions of household tasks (drawing on the household portrait (Doucet, 2006/2018, 2015)); future expectations around divisions of care; and whether and how they see themselves as 'feminists'.

Couple interviews give an opportunity to observe interactions and negotiations between partners, allowing an examination of both 'narratives of practice and practices of narrative' (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013). However, the discussions observed in the interviews are also a negotiated performance in front of me, and I attempt to take this into account in the analysis and interpretation. In doing so, I am attentive to how the participants positioned me and the research project, as well as to how the data collected in other forms differed, where more individualised accounts sometimes emerged.

In the analysis, I followed the Doucet's approach to the 'Listening Guide' (Doucet, 2006/2018, 2018). The Listening Guide is a narrative form of analysis which was first devised by Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown in the early 1990s (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), and was further developed by Mauthner and Doucet, who both

worked with Gilligan when they were doctoral students (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Doucet and Mauthner 2008). ‘Listening’ refers to the multiple readings “each time listening in a different way” (Brown, 1998:33) and also *listening* to the recording of the interview. The approach attends to the relational underpinnings of the participants’ narratives, but also in its attention to the co-construction of data between participant and research. I conducted three reading-listenings of interview transcripts. The first is a reflexive reading, attending to the employment of stories or narratives from the participant, as well as how I guided / provoked such employment. The second reading attends to my reading of the person’s narrated identity – that is, how the participant refers to her/himself, or the couple. I examined when and how they spoke of themselves and what this could tell me about how they saw or wanted to be seen within that moment. The movement of pronouns (i.e. from ‘me’ to ‘you’ to ‘we’, and so on) was used to explore how decision-making was presented or enacted – such as who appears to dominate or lead particular perspectives or decisions or what are seen as universal or obvious ‘choices’ or practices to be enacted - eg ‘You always take as much leave as you can.’ The third reading sought out the sociocultural and political narratives that were drawn upon by the participants (and myself in asking questions), as well as how these related to the structural context in which the participants live. Given the focus of this article, a fourth reading focused on communication strategies employed by women and men. This was a largely iterative process, however, I specifically sought out how and whether individuals expressed clearly their position to one another (Benjamin and Sullivan 1999); as well as the kinds of discourses which participants drew on in ‘making their case’ for a particular kind of leave division.

FINDINGS

In this first section I give a general description of the couples and their divisions of parental leave, and then I examine in detail data from two couples: one where the woman apparently tried to convince her husband to take SPL, but was largely unsuccessful, that is Beth and Bart; and one where the woman successfully convinced her husband to take leave, Emily and Edward. I focus on these examples in attempting to understand better the potential to transform gender relations, and as couples who were emblematic of the kinds of strategies used in negotiations across the wider sample. The two cases reflect relational resources differently drawn on, and with different implications, giving the reader an insight into the variety of approaches used, as well as whether and how they fall short of their intentions.

Table 1 around here

Negotiations across couples

In Table 1, I group the couples according to who apparently initiated the idea of SPL (mother, father, both or neither) and whether the couple ultimately took SPL. Three couples are intending to take SPL, as initiated by the mother, and three initiated by the father. More commonly, both members of the couple presented themselves as keen to take SPL, though in two cases they were ultimately ineligible.³ In three instances, mothers were keen to take SPL, but were not successful in convincing their partners to take SPL. In no case did a father want to take SPL when a woman did not want to share. These quantitative differences are of little importance in such a small sample, but there are also qualitative differences across these groups. Negotiations to take SPL initiated by mothers were often fraught and drawn out, while where the father

initiated the idea of SPL, mothers apparently acquiesced immediately. These differences suggest a power differential between men's and women's negotiating positions that are not entirely explained by salary disparity, nor by differences in employer benefits received during leave. On the other hand, where couples were aligned in their desire to not share leave, they reported little to no discussion about parental leave. They told me things like 'we never really talked about it'. The transfer mechanism of the policy is likely to contribute to this - the default of the leave policy is that the mother takes maternity leave and the father a short paternity leave.

Beth and Bart

In this section I describe in detail the interactions observed between Beth and Bart, who did not share leave. I first met Beth and Bart in an antenatal clinic while I was handing out surveys. Bart is a university senior researcher, in a position which is contingent on finding funding for his research. He has, however, been in the same university for several years, which gives him a degree of stability and employee rights.⁴ His being a researcher, he and Beth reported, was the main reason that they participated in the research – because he knows study recruitment can be difficult. Beth works in PR in a very small firm, but she is the most senior person in the company, besides the company owner. She describes her position also as precarious, since it is possible that the company could collapse if a series of contracts fall through. They earn similar amounts and neither self-subscribe to the term 'feminist', but both consider themselves 'egalitarian' in their outlook and practices.

The status of their jobs and their ambition to have 'successful' and fulfilling careers, shape their approach to work, in that both work long hours, investing in their

long term goals, which for Bart means a permanent university faculty position, and for Beth so she can start her own PR firm.

When I asked about their leave plans in our first interview, Beth leads the discussion, using 'I' pronouns around her decision-making, and telling me 'I guess this is more about me'. She says she intends to take six months maternity leave but, perhaps reacting to the UK norm of mothers taking nine months or more (Chanfreau et al., 2011), immediately accounts for this 'short' leave period. She explains that since she works in a very small organisation she feels that more than six months would not be tenable with her job. Throughout the interview she repeated over and over that six months was not long enough for a child to have a parent at home and that she would like Bart to take the second six months. Bart did not respond to this overtly but did emphasise that they had found a good nursery and that he would work compressed hours to spend one day a week with their daughter after six months. He also says, '*If ah Beth needs to go back ah after six months and we feel that ah the baby is not ready yet I don't exclude to take a month after.*' Note that he does not approach the six months which Beth repeatedly refers to, and his take-up of leave is contingent on Beth not being able to take more maternity leave. He uses 'we', inferring that both must feel the baby is not ready for him to take more time off.

In relation to his paternity leave, which is his own personal leave (unlike SPL), Bart told me he will take the 'normal two weeks', but then adds:

I don't feel the need of officially taking something, because I can go or I can keep working from, from home.

In fact, he says, he will probably have to travel during the two weeks paternity leave for a seminar he has promised to give in another part of the UK. Here all 'I' pronouns

are used again, suggesting two separate decisions from each partner around leave and separate individualized responsibility for leaves. SPL decisions do not appear to be anyone's clear responsibility.

If we think about relational resources, Beth is appealing on behalf of the child, drawing on ideas that six months is 'too young' to enter nursery, but not ever *directly* negotiating with her husband. In Benjamin and Sullivan's terms, she expresses clearly her position but not to Bart (more to me). Bart does not express 'clearly' his position, in that he doesn't directly respond to her, and the reasons behind his reluctance are difficult to grasp. His ability to not directly respond to her, is facilitated by the fact that she doesn't directly speak to him. Bart emphasizes that they need not make the decision now, thus not specifically opposing the idea, while also emphasizing that his flexible work means that leave will not really be necessary, nor the best way to alleviate Beth's concerns, since he can work and look after the baby at the same time.

Near the end of the interview, however, I asked whether they had considered a different parental leave plan, at which point Beth reasserted, but this time directly to Bart, that she would like him to take six months SPL:

Beth: I mean I would like that for example if it would be, that if we can stay with the child for a year / but

Bart: / Mmhmm.

Beth: if ah half a year / is a mum

Bart: / Yeah.

Beth: because also the breastfeeding and all that stuff, if it basically works, and the other / other half

Bart: / Yeah.

Beth: of a year is dad but still it's a parent with the baby, and then the baby goes to the nursery.

Bart: Yeah.

Beth: So both of us have experience, both of us take care and can bond with the, the baby, and then after a year I feel really, I would feel really more relaxed to=.

Bart: = send her to nursery.

Beth: Yeah, to the nursery. But, that would be ideal but obviously I don't know how that's, how practical is that or how possible is that?

Bart: Agreed.

At this point Bart stood up and (rather dramatically) shook Beth's hand. The topic was in this way cut off and after a few tense moments, I moved on to something else.

Bart clearly did not want to discuss his taking of leave and avoided or cut off the discussion where possible. While it is likely that my presence affected these discussions, data collected through other means and in later interviews, demonstrated that leave continued to be a sensitive topic, while other matters, such as feeding for example, were discussed more readily, even when these resulted in conflict. Bart appears very reluctant to take leave, pulled between the many relational responsibilities at work – with his students, other postdocs and so on - and his wish for a permanent position, with Beth's desire for him to spend time at home with the child. This context ultimately shaped the position he was taking, which was constructed as 'wait and see'. In response, Beth appears to avoid conflict by largely framing discussions around leave as general statements of desire, and by including a potential 'get out' for Bart in her final discussion around leave - 'I don't know how possible that is'. This ultimate statement allowed Bart to agree with Beth, without

making any firm commitment. Beth's apparent unwillingness to enter into conflict, meant that he was not pressed any further. This indirect, albeit persistent, pursuit of Bart's participation in leave is ultimately only partially successful. Beth extends her leave to nine months, and Bart takes three weeks annual and employer-provided parental leave. He invites his mother over for two of these three weeks so that he can continue to engage with work at the same time. Nonetheless, one year later, Bart and Beth report sharing more household and care work than most other couples in the study. His flexible work conditions are now drawn upon by Beth after the leave period as a reason for him to take charge of the nursery pickups and drop offs, and to (informally) compress his work days from five to four days a week.

Edward and Emily

As with couples who ultimately did not take SPL, couples who do take SPL may also have areas of tension and 'no-topic', indicating what can and cannot be negotiated around. This was the case for Emily and Edward, where Emily was intending to take ten months leave, and Edward two. Emily is a lawyer in a large international firm and Edward works as a sales executive for an up-market antiques company.

From the very beginning of their interview, Edward tells me that Emily convinced him to do SPL, and that before meeting her, he would never have considered such a thing as he is quite 'traditional'. When I ask how the decision to share leave came about, the following interaction ensues:

Emily: So I, well we originally had a conversation, which I'm sure you won't remember (short laugh), um on our honeymoon about it.

Edward: Woah, no idea (K laughs).

Emily: = And we were on a hike. I knew you wouldn't remember this (both short laugh). [...] Um I'd seen like so many of my friends where the mother is the only person who knows, you know, which nappy can be put on the baby or like, and then like, you know, which food they're able to eat or which one they're not. And if the father takes, you know, if they go out for the day as a sort of family then the mother's doing all the packing and everything because the father doesn't, you know, is, loves the child and is, you know, has, I'm sure has a wonderful relationship but it's the mother who all the burden of all the practical stuff falls on. Um and I think it must've been around then, and I just thought, wouldn't it be nice if like Edward had had a few months with, or some time with the baby to sort of actually know the routine and get to know the baby properly so that it's actually a genuinely shared enterprise that we're doing, and it's not like something that I'd start getting annoyed with Edward because he doesn't know something or whatever.

Interesting here is that Emily recalls exactly when she first brought up the topic, several years previous to the interview. Mostly 'I' pronouns are used as she presents her perspective, including how she wants to avoid being annoyed with Edward, and how she thinks it will be 'nice' for him to spend time with the baby. She clearly presents her position both now, and seemingly then. Interestingly, however, Edward very quickly refuted this portrayal, saying he took leave in order to bond with the baby and to ease Emily's transition back to work, not to create a 'shared enterprise'. She 'corrected' herself then, saying that yes, she had always known that he would pull his weight in childcare, and that it was about his bonding. This very quick shift after her initial quite drawn out narrative, demonstrates in itself her negotiating skills. Emily responds to and feeds into Edward's preferred narrative of their leave division – she drops equality as a

motivation, even though in a survey taken immediately after this interview Emily writes about leave:

I think it will (and has) been good for our relationship to think about parenting, and leave, as such a joint enterprise. I think it will be good for my relationship with my child that Edward will have leave as we may be a more balanced family.

The references to 'joint enterprise' and 'balanced family' echo her original reasoning on shared parenting, later reiterated in an individual interview, but which was sidestepped in conversation with Edward.

As we move on in the interview, Edward expands on his reluctance to take SPL – he says it was an ‘alien’ concept to him, but the more he thought about it, the more fun he thought it might be. Emily demonstrates sympathy towards his reluctance to take leave, and reminds Edward that he was never really on board with the idea of taking leave until he realized that the leave period would fall over the least busy period of his work. There are no remonstrations about this, indicating to me (and Edward) that this is a valid reason to not want to take leave. His work, while of less economic value to the family than hers (he earns considerably less than she does), is given equal (or even more) weight. The proposed leave period is unpaid whether taken by Emily or Edward, so the potential wage loss is greater if Emily takes these two months. Yet they tell me that money was not a consideration in their decision. This is completely unlike other couples where the man earns more and/or has perceived better earning prospects, in those cases his job is explicitly focused upon in accounting for leave decisions. This is not to discount the different pressures that Edward may feel around paid work, but to demonstrate Emily’s ‘mellow’ approach (a term Edward uses – “she has ‘mellowed’ me into the idea of SPL”). She appears to put no explicit pressure on Edward to take

leave, despite her own motivations for him to do so. She says, *'it was still kind of just an idea until he said he wanted to do it [SPL].'*

In this instance, Emily is materially more powerful in the relationship, but treads carefully not to make this part of their negotiation. There is a careful presentation of events here to me and to one another – the leave is not about ‘equality’ per se. In fact, in a later (individual) interview, Edward tells me that ‘equality’ is of little importance to him in his relationship. Perhaps since this is not a framework that Edward aligns with, Emily puts little emphasis on it, even though she herself tells me that having an egalitarian or feminist partner is very important to her, *'believing that in your partnership the two of you are equal, and in life, is a fairly fundamental unquality I think,'* (again in a solo interview). The exclusion or avoidance of her own motivations around the sharing of leave, positions Edward as the ultimate decider in whether to take shared parental leave, and indeed the thrust of the whole of this interview is around whether and how Edward decides to take leave, and then how much to take. Nonetheless, my understanding is that Emily has convinced Edward to take leave, and while he may not agree with her motivations, he does say *'I would never have taken it if it weren't for Emily.'* Ultimately, he expresses joy and pride in his experiences of leave and suggests that he will take two months leave again should they have a second child.

DISCUSSION

Interplay Between Social Context and Negotiations

In both of the cases above, we see how women use repetition, an emphasis on child bonding and nurturance, and an overall low-pressure approach with their partners in

discussing leave. Emily in particular is seen to be empathetic to her partner's doubts and concerns around leave, demonstrating that she listens by repeating his concerns. This appears to encourage Edward to consider leave. They both use 'I' language in framing how they would 'ideally' like parental leave to be divided, but Emily is more direct in her conversations with Edward and couches SPL in terms that Edward will find agreeable. Emily's success, however, seems to hinge quite significantly on the happy coincidence that Edward's leave would fall during a not-busy period, while Beth's 'failure', was ironically to do with the extreme flexibility and freedom though precarious nature, of Bart's work. Ultimately, Bart convinced Beth that his continuation of work was more efficacious overall, than his sharing the 12 months leave with her. These two examples emphasize how strongly the work context can shape negotiations in the home, even when both men describe their work contexts as broadly supportive of men taking leave. Nonetheless, it's likely Edward would never have taken leave if Emily had not encouraged him to do so (a fact which he attests to himself). Previous research said that women's commitment to their career may disrupt taken for granted assumptions about who takes leave (Beglaubter, 2017; Yarwood & Locke, 2015), this is not particularly borne out here, but Emily does earn more than Edward, while Beth earns a similar salary to Bart. Thus 'material resources' may place a role in strengthening negotiations, but they are not foregrounded in the discussion.

As Emily describes, men taking leave is a 'bonus', for her, for him, and for the child, but certainly not a necessity or a given. This reflects the cultural context in the UK, where men are expected to engage in paid work, with the option to care, while the reverse is true for women (Neale & Smart, 2002). Mothers in paid employment often continue to understand themselves primarily in relation to their maternal role –

and continue to be held morally responsible for children's upbringing (Miller, 2017). This is further consolidated by the maternity transfer mechanism inherent in SPL. Fathers meanwhile report being primarily judged by their breadwinning ability, and report facing extra barriers to work-family integration policies (Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2015). Even when fathers want to be more involved in a hands-on way, it is may be easier to 'fall back' into traditional roles (Miller, 2011, Faircloth 2020). Nonetheless, overall, women in this study displayed little guilt in transferring their leave, while most of the men showed a reluctance to take leave from work. This perhaps indicates a shifting dynamic in the moral context of parenting, whereby a mother returning to work is more acceptable if her partner is taking over the care work. It also reflects the subordinate status accorded to unpaid work relative to paid work.

Heteronormativity in Negotiations

The couples' interviews also show how even in contexts where practices which have the potential to undo gender are being negotiated, on the performative level, couples are in fact re-invoking gender. The way in which leave is presented as the father's option or choice maintains heterosexual scripts of the man as active decision-maker, and the woman as passively reacting to him. Lamont (2014) argues that such dynamics emerge from gendered courtship conventions. Focusing on marital proposals amongst US couples, she argued that women who lead proposals are seen as coercive towards men and taking a step too far in transgressing gender roles. As such, women encourage marital proposals or made their enthusiasm for marriage known, but the official proposal is set up to be asked by him, symbolically upholding gendered roles in the relationship. Negotiations amongst some parents, such as Emily

and Edward, maintain gendered roles, at least symbolically, undermining the transformative potential of parental leave, while fitting in with expectations around appropriate heterosexual relationship practices. She positions him as the decider around leave, and he seemingly dictates if, when and how it is taken, as well as its meaning for their family.

As seen in the two elaborated cases, at no point do the mothers entreat the men to take leave as part of a shared responsibility to look after their future child (see also O'Brien & Twamley, 2017). 'Equality' or shared responsibility is downplayed in these couples' discussions and the balance of power in the decision-making around leave is tipped towards men. These findings concur with Schmidt et al's (2015) research around couples' decision-making around leave in Austria. The authors argued that decisions for and against sharing leave were father-centred, and that framing the sharing of leave in this way, reaffirmed hegemonic masculine ideals. Likewise, in Tichenor's research with couples where the women earned more than the men, she notes that, 'Instead of using their substantial resources to make claims to power, wives often defer to their husbands in the decision-making process. Even if wives disagree with husbands, they often seem reluctant to resist their husbands' wishes, or make their own opinions more clearly known.' (2005: 200). This would appear to reflect Emily and Edwards negotiations and other couples like them.

Beth is more persistent and overt in expressing her desires for Bart to take leave, but apparently retreats with any hint of conflict (though this may have been different when I was not present). In this sense, she is low in relational resources according to Sullivan and Benjamin's framework. Like Emily, Beth construes Bart's participation in SPL as his own individual decision, over which she has apparently little influence. It is perhaps Bart's relational resources which are more influential, as

he persuasively argues that work and care can be combined via the flexible work conditions offered in his workplace.

Gender Consciousness in Undoing Gender

West and Zimmerman's (1987) 'doing gender' perspective refers to the ways in which men and women are seen to continuously remake gender through their daily practices and interactions with one another. The counterpoint is 'undoing' gender (Deutsch, 2007), focusing attention on whether and how interactions may produce change in gendered behavior and expectations. Sullivan (2006) posits that gender consciousness is necessary in combination with relational resources for transformations in gender relations. In this section, I explore to what extent gender consciousness plays out in relations within the couples, and how this does or does not shape their leave practices.

Emily explicitly avoids gender equality as a framing discourse in the split of leave, but she privately relates the importance of this to her decision to want to share leave. Gender consciousness in this instance is a silent driver of leave negotiations. Although Edward only takes two months leave, previous research suggests that this is sufficiently long to undo gendered parenting practices (Rehel, 2014). Indeed, Emily attributes Edward's relative participation in housework and care work almost entirely down to SPL, while Edward claims he has a much closer relationship with his daughter than other fathers who take no leave. But despite taking SPL, Edward ultimately minimized the importance of feminism or equality in his relationship, and Emily notes in her final interview that she takes on the majority of household and care responsibilities, reducing her work days by 20% (though temporarily). Previous research has also shown that men's motivations to take parental leave are often more

about bonding with children than necessarily facilitating more equal relations with their partners (Romero-Balsas et al., 2013; Cannito 2020). More longitudinal research is needed to consider how fathers' motivations to share leave shape gendered divisions of labour.

On the other hand, Beth does not identify as a feminist, in fact she appears to recoil from the term when probed in the interview. Both her and Bart present themselves as 'blind' to gender issues, and claim that 'fairness' regardless of gender dictates divisions of household labour and care. This absence of gender consciousness shapes their deliberations: Beth's main posited reason for Bart to take leave was to avoid nursery. Once she is able to extend her leave beyond six months, there remains no reason for Bart to take leave. This concurs with previous research which has shown that without particularly favorable or exceptional circumstances to encourage men to take leave, couples are likely to fall back on gendered divisions of leave (Aunkofer, Meuser, & Neumann, 2018). This reinforces the perceived importance of men's attachment to the workplace, while also again untying the link between shared leave and its potential to undo gender. However, as discussed, ultimately Beth and Bart report sharing more household and care work than most other couples in the study in the period after leave, with his flexible work situation now a reason to more evenly share care work. This shows that parental leave is not necessarily 'indispensable' for more equal gendered relations, nor a panacea that can guarantee it (see also O'Brien & Wall, 2017).

Conclusions

This paper extends current scholarship which has tended to remain at the contextual or structural level, by bringing in detailed analyses of couple interactions and their

potential for ‘un-doing gender’ (Deutsch, 2007). Rather than focusing on individualized accounts or motivations for leave, the focus on encounters and discussions reveals how relationality shapes discourses and practices of care, as couples react towards and against one another. For example, both Beth and Emily draw on discourses around the father-child relationship, or the importance of parent care in making their case of sharing leave. These appeared to be drawn on as more acceptable motivations to share leave. Emily’s relative success in convincing Edward to take leave is due to a combination of factors, including her relational skills in presenting leave as something Edward will ultimately enjoy or benefit from (whereas Beth focused on the need for a parent at home). Both women position their partners as the deciders in leave, in an apparent effort to maintain his masculine identity. Material difference, such as Edward’s lower earnings, or Beth’s similar earnings, are explicitly excluded as of relevance. These practices position the fathers as more powerful in the negotiations, and potentially may encourage take-up of leave, but are not yet seen to have transformative effects on the sharing of household work (more so on care work).

I have not discussed negotiations of leave initiated by men, since these were presented as readily taken up by women, with little to no discussion or reticence on the part of women, indicating a generally favorable view of parental leave as a ‘good’ amongst the female sample, and/or the superior relational and other resources available to men. In other couples, where both members of the couple self-subscribed to feminism, negotiations were much more explicitly centred around fairness and equality. In these cases, women were more forthright and the negotiations appear more balanced, with more potential to ‘undo gender’ observed. This suggests that gender consciousness, particularly men’s gender consciousness, may be a prerequisite

for a truly transformational consequence from sharing of leave. More longitudinal research is needed to examine this.

Overall, the negotiations observed amongst the couples in this study are seen to be shaped by the cultural context in the UK, where mothers are expected to take the bulk or all of leave, where mothers are understood as the main and proper carers, and where a maternity transfer mechanism, rather than an individual leave entitlement for fathers, further emphasizes gendered parenting roles. However, the findings should be tempered by the limitations of the study – negotiations cannot be fully captured in discrete interviews and the researcher’s presence is likely to shape how parents interact. More methodological innovation is needed to capture these ‘relational resources’ in greater depth. Furthermore, parents from diverse backgrounds may exhibit different negotiations and desires. A literature search indicated that similar research with same-sex couples is sorely lacking.

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¹ The figures were obtained under a freedom of information request submitted by law firm EMW.

² The Czech Republic, Croatia, Israel and Spain also offer a maternity transfer leave policy.

³ In one couple the father had been too short a time in his job, and in the second couple the mother had not worked sufficient hours in the proceeding weeks.

⁴ In the UK, employees are moved to an open-ended contract after four years of continuous service, unless in very limited circumstances. An open-ended contract has no end date, but may lead to redundancy when funding or no other suitable position is available in the university.