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Understanding 'Gender Equality': First-Time Parent Couples' Practices and Perspectives on Working and Caring Post-Parenthood

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Abstract

This article explores the ways couples making the transition to parenthood think about, practise, and assess 'gender equality'. The analysis draws on data from two qualitative, longitudinal projects in the UK with 36 mixed-sex couples, grounded in the sociology of intimacy and parenting culture respectively. Both projects explore gender relations at the transition to parenthood, with recent changes in UK parental leave as a backdrop, to interrogate couples' ideals and practices. In this article, we outline four configurations of equality articulated by couples: 'symmetry', 'breaking gender stereotypes', 'fairness', and 'equality as respect', which were developed through collaborative analysis. We explore how different configurations shape gendered practices in early parenthood. The analysis provides novel insights into the ways in which 'gender equality' is differentially defined and practised; shaped by the political and cultural context in which parents live; and relational in nature – thereby contributing to debates around equality in gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work.

Keywords

gender equality, intimacy, parental leave, parenthood, parenting culture

Introduction

Within feminist scholarship, there are many debates about how best to define and measure gender equality, but a dominant framing, particularly in studies around divisions of domestic labour, is that of a 50–50 division of paid and unpaid work as the most 'equal'

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option (Doucet, 2015; Orloff, 2009). However, even putting aside the practical (and analytical) difficulty of accounting for every household or care task, more parity between these tasks does not necessarily mean more 'equality' – nor disparity, less equality. Reflecting on her research with stay-at-home fathers, for example, Doucet (2015) notes a sharp division in paid and unpaid work (albeit along non-traditionally gendered lines), which is coupled with egalitarian practices around, for instance, the sharing of decision-making in the family. Considering the value attached to forms of labour and the different affordances that they confer, Doucet argues that more attention needs to be paid to the meanings and consequences of divisions of labour: that is, whether and how differences in labour participation are implicated (or not) in gendered inequalities.

Certainly, our analysis demonstrates a gap between the bulk of gendered division of labour studies, which focus on a '50/50' sharing of paid and unpaid work as the ultimate goal (Orloff, 2009), and the diversity of ways in which mixed-sex couples articulate and practise equality. Outlining four 'configurations', we show how equality may be differently understood, as well as how these definitions shape experiences of the transition to parenthood. This is important since with a focus on a 50/50 division of labour as the ideal, scholars are potentially missing different lived experiences of 'equality' among men and women. Here, we follow couples from before the birth of their first child – a major transition point in gendered practices and one where physiological (re)gendering is typical (Faircloth, 2021; Yavorsky et al., 2015) – to up to 5 years later. This longitudinal approach means rather than relying on parents' retrospective accounts of already gendered practices, we can track initial practices, desires and plans, and how these may shift over time. This helps explain divergent findings around the relationship between divisions of household labour and relationship satisfaction and longevity (Faircloth 2021; Pina and Bengtson, 1993) offering greater understandings of the 'stalled' or 'uneven' revolution (Sullivan et al., 2018) in gender relations. This work therefore contributes to methodological and theoretical developments in research on gender, as well as to policy debates about how best to tackle gendered inequalities (Singley and Hynes, 2005).

Contextualising the couple relationship and 'gender equality'

Equality, as an expression of a move away from 'traditional' or patriarchal couple relationships, is frequently understood as key to a fulfilling and 'intimate' relationship with a partner (Jamieson, 2011; Twamley, 2012; Van Hoof, 2011). 'Intimacy' refers here to the 'quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality' (Jamieson, 2011: 1). However, this ideal of equality can clash with a contemporary parenting culture, which validates intensive, gendered forms of care (Faircloth, 2021) and UK work–family policies which support traditional divisions of paid and unpaid work (Twamley and Schober, 2019). Indeed, time-use studies consistently and across a wide variety of contexts show that mothers do more unpaid work than fathers, especially housework (Sullivan, 2019). More difficult to measure are the allocation of *responsibilities* in care and house work (Doucet, 2015). Qualitative work shows that women take on the bulk of this work too, the 'mental load' as it is often called (Daminger, 2019, Doucet, 2006). Such inequalities are regarded as one of the main barriers to women's labour-market

careers, and thus are often a focus of policy interventions and public discourse (this recent BBC digest is simply titled 'Thinking of Everything Holds Mums Back'),[1] as well as prompting a huge number of studies attempting to understand these enduring divisions.

As noted by Doucet (2023) – in part due to the legacy of radical feminist work around domestic inequality and the value accorded various forms of work (Toupin, 2018) – whether they look at 'practical' or 'mental' tasks, these studies take *divisions* rather than relationships and relationalities as the theoretical starting point. This situates couples in a combative framework and does little to help us understand *how* gender equality intersects with intimacy. For instance, a common theoretical explanation for unequal divisions of labour is that they are shaped by the relative resources of individuals in a couple, such that the person with lower earnings is less able to negotiate their way out of domestic work. This focus on intra-couple bargaining is widely applied, but has not been able to fully explain disparities in unpaid work, in particular childcare (Deutsch and Gaunt, 2020). Such theories fail to take into account the different attractions and affordances of housework and childcare (Oakley, 1974), often in fact conflating them (Doucet, 2023). But increasingly men (and women) aspire to more father involvement in *care* work, without necessarily holding a concomitant desire or practice of gender equality in *housework* which is valued less highly (Eerola et al., 2021; Twamley, 2019), or indeed in paid work, which is valued more highly (Sullivan, 2019).

More nuanced research attempts to unpack the gap between apparent ideals of equality and practices of inequality within couples. Many show that women (and men) in mixed-sex relationships report divisions of labour as 'fair' even when women do disproportionate amounts of domestic labour (see, for example, Gager, 2008; Major, 1993; Nyman et al., 2018; Orgad, 2019; Van Hoof, 2011). What emerges is that *perceptions* of divisions of labour may be as important as *actual* divisions, and 'how this is reconciled with discourses of equality' (Van Hoof, 2011: 21).

Other research explores how unequal emotional expectations of men and women in relationships shape divisions of care, showing that women often take on the bulk of emotion work within couples (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995; McQueen, 2022). This translates to more care work conducted by women (Hodkinson and Brooks, 2020; Twamley, 2019) and is based on stereotypes of women as more emotionally competent and caring (McQueen, 2022).

In theorising the 'gap' between discourse and reality in research with couples, Hochschild and Machung (1989) note that some men report 'on top' ideologies (of egalitarianism), but their practice belies a different approach ('underneath', as more traditional) (p. 16). Any discrepancy between ideologies and practices is reconciled via 'family myths', overlooking inequalities in divisions of household labour.

In general, these studies focus on post hoc rationales for uncovered inequalities in couples' divisions of paid and unpaid work. In this article, we follow participants from pregnancy (before labour divisions are likely to become excessively gendered) examining participants' imagined and preferred parenting lives, and then follow them over time to understand what happens to these imaginings. In this sense, we aim to unpack the 'myths' that Hochschild and Machung (1989) discuss or the 'rationales' noted by Van Hoof (2011), considering to what extent participants have achieved or not their stated

desires before having children and their evaluation 1 or 5 years later. By a close analysis of our participants' data, we attend to their articulations of what matters to them, intentionally seeking out whether and how 'equality' is sought in their relationships and the ways this may be understood, beyond the typical focus on 50-50 *divisions* of household work, care work, and paid work.

The studies

Both studies sought to explore gender relations at the transition to parenthood, with recent changes in UK parental leave as a backdrop to interrogate couples' ideals and practices. Leave for fathers is considered a potentially transformative policy measure in tackling gendered inequalities (Gornick and Meyers, 2009) since differences in mothers' and fathers' access to paid time off from work can consolidate (or disrupt) gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work (Rehel, 2014; Singley and Hynes, 2005). At the time of Charlotte's project, in 2011, Additional Paternity Leave (APL) was introduced, offering mothers the opportunity to transfer some of their maternity leave to their partner from 6 months after the birth or adoption of a child. Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was introduced 4 years later, when Katherine began her project. SPL extended the potential transfer of maternity leave, allowing fathers to take up to 12 months of leave. Both APL and SPL have had low up-take (of less than 10% – see Twamley and Schober, 2019), and it remains mothers who take extended periods of maternity leave. The design of these leaves as a transfer of mother's maternity leave, combined with low remuneration for the leave, are considered prime reasons for the low uptake (Banister and Kerrane, 2022; Twamley and Schober, 2019). The attraction of such policies was interrogated in both studies, though with differing theoretical frameworks informing this endeavour.

Methods

Study 1: parenting: gender, intimacy and equality

Charlotte Faircloth's study was designed as a longitudinal project, which consisted of repeat in-depth interviews with 30 participants (15 first-time parent, heterosexual, dual-professional couples) over a 5-year period (2011–2017). These interviews were part of a wider mixed-methods study into shifts in parenting culture (see Faircloth, 2021). Overall, the project aimed to explore the implications of competing expectations around personal and family life.

Participants were recruited via a range of antenatal groups. Most of the couples interviewed had higher educational qualifications and professions, were aged 34 or 35, white, heterosexual and living in long-term relationships. The household income for the group ranged between £30,000 and over £200,000, with the majority between £50,000 and £150,000. All couples were white, bar three. Couples were interviewed first before their child was born (both together and ideally also separately), and then jointly when their child was 1–2 months old, 6 months old, and then finally at 12–13 months old, when individual interviews were repeated where possible. Interviews focussed on the gendered

practices of 'parenting' (birth, feeding and sleeping) and how these intersected with ideas around equality. Couples were contacted (by email) for follow-up questionnaires when their first children were two-and-a-half and 5 years old. Eleven of the original 15 couples responded, by which point all of them had had at least one further child.

Study 2: choice, gender equality and intimacy in early parenthood

This mixed-methods longitudinal project, led by Katherine Twamley, set out to explore how understandings of intimacy in couple relationships intersect with ideals and practices around gender equality. The study was comparative in its design, aiming to explore differences and similarities in the experiences of those who do and do not take SPL. The first part of the study was a survey of expectant parents in antenatal clinics in England in late 2016 (see Twamley and Schober, 2019 for findings). A sub sample of 42 (21 mixed-sex couples) were recruited from the survey for longitudinal qualitative follow-up. These participants were all first-time parents, university-educated and in white-collar occupations with both members of each couple employed at the time of recruitment. All but two parents were white. The average age of the parents 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 were using 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 as a couple when the mothers were 8 months pregnant, when the babies were 6 months old, and then individually when the babies were approximately 14–18 months old (after the UK parental leave period is over). In addition, the parents kept individual weeklong diaries at four different time points over the study period. In the interviews parents were asked about decision-making around parental leave, perspectives on 'equality', divisions of paid and unpaid work, and reflections on the transition to parenthood.

We have focussed on interview data in this article which best illustrates perspectives on different forms of equality. In both studies joint interviews were conducted for the scope they offer in the analysis of how couples 'co-produce' knowledge, and to witness couples' interactions in confirming or contradicting accounts (Heaphy and Einarsdottir, 2012). The individual interviews allow participants to give a less couple-focused narrative. We bring together two studies giving us a greater pool of data and more diversity in couple practices for the analysis. The different time points of the data collection also highlight some small but significant changes over time (see below section on 'equality as respect'). The authors' methodologies are similar, as well as the samples in terms of their socio-demographic background. Both studies examine how those in society with the most plentiful resources (whether social, economic or cultural) still struggle to reconcile narratives of gender equality with early parenthood, indicating potential limitations for those with fewer resources. Similarly, this group often present the most powerful, visible and self-consciously articulated models, readily apparent in public discourse and policy and are therefore worthy of examination (Strathern, 1992).

The authors have different disciplinary backgrounds (Twamley in sociology and Faircloth in anthropology) and areas of expertise (sociology of intimacy and parenting

culture studies respectively) which we bring into conversation in our combined analysis in this article. However, an examination of parental leave and how this may disrupt or consolidate gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work was unpacked in both studies, with particular attention to differences in care work, housework and 'cognitive labour' (Daminger, 2019). Ethical guidelines from the British Sociological Association were followed in both studies and all participants are referred to by a pseudonym.

We have drawn on the 'Listening Guide' approach to analysis (Doucet, 2006, 2018), coupled with elements of thematic analysis. This is a relational and narrative approach, underscoring an interest in how family and intimate meanings and practices are negotiated with others. We appreciate that narratives are not a straightforward reflection of experience (Craib, 2004), but in line with an interest in 'identity work' we consider language and narrative to be an important element in the constitution of personhood. In the analysis we have focussed on how couples narrated ideals of equality, and how they 'accounted' for their practices within their respective partnerships. Drawing on the longitudinal nature of our studies, we analyse both anticipation and outcomes before and after children were born, thereby identifying how perceptions and practices may change over time.

Findings

Across the two samples, most participants expressed equality as an important element of their relationship (both as an ideal and a reality), and a taken-for-granted component of contemporary relationships. Here we describe the four main configurations of this 'equality', as well as the consequences of each for couples' experiences of the transition to parenthood. The configurations are not exclusive; some couples aligned with one but many also emphasised another at a different point in their interviews. We also note *change* over time as an important aspect of our analysis, as these indicate both the changing views of parents over time (from pregnancy to taking care of a new-born or toddler) as well as the kinds of constraints which arise inhibiting parents from fulfilling their original stated goals.

Equality as . . . symmetry

In this first configuration, participants aspired to the dominant definition of equality reflected in academic literature around work-lifebalance/gender and work. They espouse the idea that both partners should do the same tasks to the same degree, with sharing leave often as a core aspect of this symmetry. These participants kept track of what each was doing on some level – either through an actual spreadsheet or just mental tabs as Helen here describes in relation to leisure time,

> As soon as the baby is born we're going to start taking note of how many nights or days of leisure time Henry uses um and to make sure that I also get that same time. Helen (Librarian) married to Henry (Accountant), [Henry took one month parental leave alone]

These couples aspired to dual-parent-working households with each doing similar amounts of paid and unpaid work. Helen and Henry's uneven division of leave was

sorely lamented by the couple (due to ineligibility to SPL). In the case of another couple, the woman reduced her work hours to be in parity with her husband who preferred a 4-day week, despite her personal preference to work full-time.

Participants in this category tended to describe themselves as feminists with a strong commitment to symmetry. A deeper look at times revealed something else. For instance, Claudia, a university academic, and Anthony, an IT manager at a bank, were very explicit in their first interview about their plan to split everything '50/50'. Claudia (who took 6 months of her maternity leave entitlement) said this about their plans to become parents:

> . . . the only reason that I said, 'yes I'll come off the pill', the main reason was because we had a conversation where Anthony said, 'I will do 50%' (other than the maternity leave, which we can't do anything about), and said 'I will do 50%'. So, he's going down to four days a week [after Claudia's maternity leave of 6 months] and I'll go down to four days a week . . .

In the end, however, Anthony argued that he could not commit to a 'symmetrical' division in practice, partly for reasons of personal preference, but also because of forces beyond his control: when he enquired with his boss about working on a 4 days a week contract he was made redundant, his boss citing 'lack of commitment' from him. When he managed to secure another job (on a 5 days a week basis) he did not enquire about the possibility of changing his hours, admitting that this suited him better. Barriers to men taking up flexible working arrangements or shared leave have been uncovered in several UK studies (e.g. Banister and Kerrane, 2022; Gatrell et al., 2014) and were not uncommon in our studies. However, some men persevered. To use Hochschild's analogy, Anthony's symmetry appeared to be more of an 'on top' ideology than one 'underneath', which was further consolidated by his work setting.

Consequences of symmetry. A quest for symmetry demanded quite a lot of effort and negotiation on the part of individuals, both in terms of dealing with policy and employment structures which do not lend themselves to such sharing of paid and unpaid work, and in terms of the internal couple negotiations necessary to keep on top of equal participation. Given these high demands, both partners must be highly committed to the project of equality for any chance of perceived success. Often understandings of equality were therefore negotiated well before the birth of a child or even during courtship of the couples.

In addition to being difficult to achieve, symmetry was the most readily recognisable by the couple as having failed. That is, with their tabs on who does what, these couples can easily see where and when they are failing in their endeavours. This ultimately leads to more disappointment and sometimes more friction between partners (see below). Where symmetry was felt to be achieved, paid work took a backseat to unpaid work, and the 'work' of negotiations was taken on by both members of the couples.

Equality as . . . breaking gender stereotypes

In this second category, participants emphasised above all how their divisions of unpaid work did not follow gender stereotypes as a sign that they were an egalitarian couple:

Sarah: We're not very gender stereotyped . . . it was Sam's idea to buy the sewing machine which he bought a year or so . . . And likewise I do lots of things that typically the man would do, like DIY and helping rewire / stuff and re, sanding down that shelf in the basement . . . Sarah (Lawyer) and Sam (Medical doctor) [Sarah took 12 months maternity leave]

Equal *time* spent on tasks was de-emphasised (though not necessarily ignored) by these couples. They often discussed the importance of demonstrating to their future child that the categories of 'girl' and 'boy' should not be limited by their sex. Women were more likely to emphasise this as important than men, as exemplified by John and Judy:

Judy: The one thing that I really detest is when people kind of think, oh it's a girl so everything must be pink / or if it's a boy everything must be blue, you know? Let them make that decision, not us, or not anyone else anyway.
John: Well we'll have to make it a few times.
Judy: Yeah but unisex.
John: Yeah, we've got a lot of all like nice, nice things, nice things not / stereotypical things.
Judy: /And boys and girls can wear jeans and trousers [pause] (short laugh). Boys can wear skirts but ah I doubt that (short laugh), I doubt that's ever going to happen.
John: So traditional clothing I think is fine.
Judy: Yeah, yeah.
Researcher: So why do you think it's important to have gender neutral clothing?
Judy: Um.
John: Just think it's less tacky.
Judy: I think it's, it's really important not to stereotype a baby and not to force a personality onto the baby. [. . .] I had micro trucks and Lego when I was younger. I also liked My Little Ponies and Barbies but my mum and dad didn't say 'oh no, that's for boys and that's for girls', you know? It's important to break those gendered stereotypes.
Judy (Administrator) and John (IT manager), [Judy took 12 months maternity leave]

John seems unconvinced by Judy's statements on the importance of gender-neutral parenting practices, finally suggesting that 'traditional clothing is fine'. He aligned more with 'equality as fair' overall (see below). Within their couple practices, John and Judy have very traditional gendered parenting roles, with Judy ultimately giving up paid work entirely to look after their son and John staying on as the primary earner. Like other couples in this group, such conformity to traditional gendered roles was framed as due to personal preferences, while instances of non-conforming gendered practices were called upon in demonstrating their commitment to gender equality.

Consequences of 'breaking gender stereotypes'. Concern with breaking gendered stereotypes could be construed as largely symbolic, rather than practice oriented, particularly when focussed on future generations. These participants show themselves to be free of sexism in their relationships via the conscientious display of non-conforming tasks. As exemplified in the case of Sarah and Sam, observing non-traditional practices in the couple is very gratifying to these couples. These out-of-the-ordinary practices were hailed as emblematic of the equality of the couple, even when overall divisions of labour fell along traditional gendered lines. This could also be seen in Twamley's study in the take-up of leave, whereby a short period of SPL taken by a father could be called upon to demonstrate a non-traditional parenting approach, even when post-leave, the couple fell back to more gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work (as discussed in Twamley, 2021).

Equality as . . . fair

These participants emphasised a sense of 'fairness' as important to them in their relationships, with an overall 'balance' in tasks being aspired to – more equity than symmetry. This narration of equality resonates with 'post-feminist' discourses since gender, as a marker of difference, was underplayed. Rather, equality was reported as a general principle in life and a 'fair' way to treat one's partner:

> If someone's [I'm] awake and they hear the baby crying and she [his partner] is out sparko and there is a bottle in the fridge then I can go and do it. We are definitely going to share it. Tim (Programme administrator) married to Pearl (Web-developer, took 12 months of maternity leave)

This 'gender-blind' discourse was more commonly apparent among men than women, though where men had no noticeable affinity with any egalitarian discourse, women were most likely to espouse 'fairness' as a general guiding principle.

Fairness could also be understood in terms of an overall balance between paid and unpaid work – that is, one partner does less housework or care work, but that this was nonetheless overall 'fair', because they participated in more paid work, or that their paid work contributed more via earnings. These couples emphasised equal contributions to the family, rather than symmetry in the kinds of contributions that each gave, as seen here:

> It's kind of always worked for us that like -I don't feel that Keith should have to do as much if he's working longer hours, I don't feel he should have to do fifty per cent of the housework. Kate (Advertising executive) married to Keith (Business Manager) [Keith took 3 months SPL and Kate 9 months of maternity leave]

This configuration then speaks to relative resources theories as a way in which some participants understand equality, but less in terms of 'bargaining power' and more in terms of their understandings of relative contributions to the household overall.

Consequences of equality as fairness. When participants draw on fairness in their understanding of equality, gender *per se* is not recognised as a structuring force. These couples were least likely to cast a critical eye on their situation and were also least likely to consider themselves feminist – in fact a few were actively anti-feminist. In this sense, proponents of this configuration were most likely to report feeling content with divisions of paid and unpaid work, even when from the outside these appeared highly gendered and uneven. Participants argued that divisions of paid and unpaid labour, which often (but not always) resulted in women taking on most of the unpaid work, was a result of personal choice and happenstance. Importantly, they also were adamant that their relationship was 'equal' – but 'equality' was stated as a cultural norm and indeed sexism was downplayed as either non-existent or only present in work scenarios, not in personal relationships. Unlike participants in the 'breaking gender stereotypes' group, women doing more feminised labour was not necessarily considered problematic, and the different affordances of various forms of paid and unpaid work were not discussed nor apparently considered of consequence. In some couples, men adhered to 'fairness' and women a different configuration, meaning the man was essentially denying the relevance of gender as a structuring force. In these situations, fatigue and frustrations were apparent, though the kinds of friction reported in 'symmetry' participants was not.

Equality as . . . respect

Some participants argued that divisions of household and care labour were less important in demonstrating equality than other aspects of their relationship, or mentioned these elements in addition to the above. These participants discussed equality in perceived value and influence within the couples – what Connell (1987) refers to as cathexis and power:

> Um . . . in the . . . , the sort of, the power dynamic always doing what one person wants um having things set up that, that benefit one person but they're, they're less good for the other um, yeah. Tom (IT consultant, took four weeks SPL with Tara)

> Katherine: And what do you mean by 'egalitarian'?
>
> Peter: I expect um [. . .] my perspectives to have ah an equal weighting to Pippa's ah in, in how we kind of mobilise our resources at home, you know? The decisions that we make on how we spend our time, our money, um the efforts that we make um is, is, is all equally balanced and I think we've got a good deal of respect for each other in that sense. Peter (Accountant) married to Pippa (Administrator) [Pippa took 12 months maternity leave]

Likewise, Winnie said it was important to her that she and her husband Weston were on an 'equal footing' in their relationship. They had similar jobs with similar salaries, but Weston worked longer hours and generally participated less in housework and childcare than she did. She also reduced her paid work hours after her maternity leave. They

emphasised that such a situation arose after consideration over which career to prioritise with no *a priori* assumptions about who would take a greater role in unpaid work. An important aspect of equality for these couples was that no one is 'forced' or put under pressure to take particular roles. Nonetheless, some women expressed ambivalence about their situations. Tara (Musician), for example, said 'I am not living my best feminist life' upon reflecting that she had taken on the bulk of the mothering role, which clashes with dominant feminist discourses emphasising the importance of equal divisions of labour.

This configuration was less evident in Faircloth's study, but where it was most visible was among the accounts of mothers who were fully committed to a more 'traditional' set up. We understand this difference between the two studies as an artefact of the different contexts: In Faircloth's study, there was a reduced pressure in terms of the moral accountability around why parents did *not* take up the offer of dividing parental leave, unlike in Twamley's where this was increasingly being seen as a (progressive) norm.

Consequences of equality as respect. This configuration puts less emphasis on inequalities in household tasks and more on mutual respect and equality in decision-making. Consequently, imbalances in divisions of labour are not problematised and inequalities can be justified as chosen, since the partners are 'respecting' preferences or rational arguments (see Faircloth, 2021 who develops this 'double bind' for fathers 'supporting' mothers further). This iteration has some overlap with 'fairness', in that gendering of labour is not interrogated, however, unlike the configuration of fairness, gender *is* recognised by these participants as societally present as a structuring force. These participants argue that through mutual respect and negotiation, individuals may overcome these forces. Moreover, these couples were likely to present their current divisions as unfixed and open to change. Therefore, there is the possibility of future rebalances. So, while this configuration seemed less concrete than others, gender consciousness was high and there is seemingly high potential for transformative practices.

Shifting and combining configurations. As noted above, some participants did not fit neatly into one configuration, but drew on two (rarely three) in their discussions with the researchers and their partners. For example, Sarah and Sam adhered to both 'breaking stereotypes' and 'fairness', leading to an overall largely egalitarian set-up. In general, those that only espoused to 'fairness' were the most traditional, perhaps since gender was denied as of any consequence. However, it is also important to remember that for some participants, a configuration could be held 'lightly' – as with the case of Anthony. In these cases, participants appeared to be appeasing and/or taking on configurations more readily espoused by their partners. This chimes with the work of Hochschild and Machung (1989) who argued that in understanding these as 'on top' or 'underneath' ideologies. However, this also demonstrates the negotiated and multiple ways in which equality can be used and understood.

Participants who sought symmetry in their relationship nearly always only adhered to that configuration, which given its all-encompassing nature is not surprising. However, several of these participants shifted over time, from a configuration of symmetry to that

of fairness. These ‘transitioning couples’ argued in their final interviews that symmetrical divisions of labour were not feasible, mostly because dual full-time work was not compatible with parenthood and/or dual part-time work was not compatible with financial and career goals. Helen, like Claudia, for example, (both mentioned earlier) expressed a very strong attachment to the ideal of symmetrical roles in her first interview. Over the course of the study, however, it became apparent that their partners were doing significantly less childcare and housework than they were, despite their detailed plans to avoid this. Such discrepancies between original goals and later practices could be very difficult to accept, often creating relationship difficulties between the couple – in Claudia and Anthony’s case, eventually leading to separation. In another case, Olly (Lawyer) struggled with the lack of say over his daughter’s care which his wife Olivia (Accountant) argued was not feasible given her greater knowledge of their child after 12 months of maternity leave. More commonly, women rather than men expressed frustration about the failure to achieve symmetry. In the following extract, from Helen’s final interview (alone), she attempted to reconcile her situation, whereby she undertakes the bulk of the cognitive and other household labour:

> I think we had to renegotiate what our ideas of family life looked like and certainly we’re very determined to be fair, but we kind of both have to be a bit more realistic about what fair looks like [. . .] Like there, the intricacies of fair are so complicated, I’d say for one thing flat out Henry does not do as much as I do, he just does not. He would live in squalor so much more happily than me though, so where does that fit into it, his standard of living versus mine, and what’s fair about me making him live at my standard? Helen (Librarian, husband took one month parental leave alone)

What is interesting about this quote is the identity work that Helen does to account for and accept her husband’s lower participation in care and household work. This demonstrates her ongoing care for Henry, despite these perceived inequalities (which Henry attests to). She goes on to argue that Henry offers other things in the relationship which she values, such as emotional stability. Nonetheless, the situation is not resolved as such. She ‘accepts’ that she must take on the management of the household but she also says that it is the ‘death of romance’, and longs for a different kind of division of labour. Across the couples it could be seen that those who ‘transitioned’ to a discourse of fairness did not claim to be ‘gender blind’ in the same way that those who consistently subscribed to fairness. Rather, gendered policies and other structures were understood to overshadow and constrain their ability to practise symmetrical divisions of labour.

Discussion

All women and most men in the studies expressed some sense of equality as an important element of their relationship, even when they did not describe themselves as feminists. This concurs with research which shows that ideals of equality and intimacy are often linked (Jamieson, 2011; Twamley, 2012). A minority of men saw equality as a secondary matter or were primarily concerned with equality in divisions of childcare (and not housework) (see also Eerola et al., 2021; Romero-Balsas et al., 2013). Greater

involvement in childcare may afford parents a closer/more intimate relationship with children, and is certainly one validated by wider shifts in cultures of parenting (Dermott, 2008; Gabb, 2008; Lee et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, non-normative divisions of labour (in whatever way this was assessed) were a dominant way in which participants interpreted and sought 'equality' in their relationship. This may well have been influenced by the remit of the studies, but is also a pertinent area of focus at the transition to parenthood (Fox, 2009) and has been a major focus of popular feminism and policy in tackling gender inequality more broadly. Unlike Hochschild's (1989) study with couples in the late 1980s though, while some of our participants might be considered to practise traditional gendered parenting roles, all in one way or another presented equal status in the relationship as an important element of intimacy.

Still, our article shows that notions of equality are neither uniform nor stable. More men than women aspired to 'fairness' and more women than men were committed to 'breaking gender stereotypes'. This appeared to be a result of a generally higher consciousness of gendered structures reported by women than men in our studies. Some participants combined configurations, while others shifted over time. Moreover, understandings of equality were often seen to be worked out between partners demonstrating the relational nature of 'equality' as a concept. Those who described themselves as feminists, for example, who also usually espoused symmetry as a goal, claimed to have had many previous conversations about equality, the sharing of household tasks and the potential for sharing leave. These couples reported the *most* concurrence, though in some cases this fell apart over the course of the studies resulting in deep distress.

Of the four configurations, only symmetry lives up to policy and scholarship ideals which present 50–50 splits as the normative goal (Orloff, 2009). This is also the most difficult configuration to achieve – both in its required attention and monitoring and, as participants commented, in that current employment and policy structures do not readily facilitate such an arrangement. These couples were most likely to identify their divisions of labour as unequal, not necessarily because they were more likely to be, but because the bar was higher and more visible when not reached. This is concerning since as noted in previous research, a gap between spouses' gender-equal ideals and practices results in a higher risk of partnership dissolution (Oláh and Gähler, 2014).

The difficulties in achieving symmetry reflect a discourse-policy gap in the UK, in which the cultural acceptance of the principal of shared parenting is in tension with family and work policies, the gendered, physiological expectations of parenting (Faircloth, 2013), and indeed the personal preferences of couples. For example, UK parental leave policy encourages a mother's role in care work via a poorly remunerated maternity leave transfer mechanism of which very few men take-up (Twamley and Schober, 2019). After the leave period is over, (poorly) subsidised childcare does not begin until the child is at least two or three (depending on the income and working hours of the parents) signalling the low value placed on care. As noted by Baird and O'Brien (2015), such poor investment in family and work reconciliation policies is common in neoliberal contexts. In tandem, part-time work, while officially available to request by all working parents, is often only granted to women (as seen in the case of Anthony) and anyway is shown to

inhibit career progression (Gatrell et al., 2014; Yerkes, 2009). Such policies encourage one parent taking the primary care role and the other the primary earning role. This suggests that policy-makers, like parents, may have varied and at times incompatible configurations of equality at play (as well as other priorities).

For the other configurations, more symbolic or imprecise notions of equality allowed for sometimes very gendered divisions of labour to be presented or interpreted as 'equal' by participants. 'Fairness' as a configuration, which denied gender as a structuring factor, most often led to gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work if not combined with another configuration. These participants did not appear to recognise their divisions as embedded in gendered ideals of behaviour, even though successive research demonstrates that men's and women's narratives of choice differ substantially as they struggle to defend their decisions in relation to traditional expectations of a woman as carer and a man as provider (e.g. Miller, 2017). Ultimately any imbalance in divisions of labour is framed by these participants as due to individualised choices and preferences, echoing discourses of 'choice feminism' (Mannay, 2015; Orgad, 2019).

In the 1990s, Schwartz (1994) argued that couples who successfully shared paid and unpaid labour in a 'peer marriage' combined an equity (akin to fairness) and equality (aka symmetry) approach to their relationships. Such a combination recognises that a 50–50 split may not always be feasible, but that temporal imbalances are agreed and worked upon over time. This, she claims, helps couples maintain both a caring and fair approach to divisions of labour. We found no couples that combined a desire for symmetry with fairness, reflecting perhaps an increased polarisation between 'feminist' and 'post-feminist' conceptions of equality. However, we did see 'fairness' combined with 'respect' and/or 'breaking gender stereotypes', and these couples often did report non-traditional sharing of paid and unpaid labour and a reported satisfaction with their perceived couple equality. Either way, this does suggest that some level of consciousness around gendered structures (Sullivan, 2006) is necessary for any transformation in gendered divisions of labour.

Conclusion

The findings here demonstrate that while many couples aspire to 'equality' in their relationships, this is not necessarily the '50/50' symmetrical model that much literature focusses on as an ultimate goal. Instead, couples might prioritise an idea of 'fairness' which means each member of the couple contributes different activities in a more holistic way. At the same time, our longitudinal approach showed that some couples aspire to the 50/50 model but that work conditions and state infrastructures around parental leave and pay (as well as cultural ideologies of parenting and gender) do not allow for this belief to be supported – and as such, they move towards a form of accountability based around 'balance', which might be read as a means of justifying or disguising inequality. However, the findings should be tempered by the limitations of the study – the sample of participants are primarily white and university educated in mixed-sex live-in relationships. Moreover, the studies were designed to explore the transition to parenthood and how parental leaves shaped gendered parenting practices. This focus may explain in part the

emphasis on labour divisions in interpreting and understanding equality. However, the fact that even these couples (with so many resources) struggled to reconcile ‘equality’ in their relationships is notable and indicates how much harder it might be for those who have fewer resources. Future research should focus on participants from more diverse backgrounds and family set-ups, as well as from different points in the life course.

The varying iterations of equality discussed have important implications for researchers as they set out to explore the context within which more gender equal relations might flourish, as well as for policy-makers who either might not be aware of the subtle differences between types of equality, or are not attuned to the fact that people they are legislating for have different goals in mind. Offering a cultural contextualisation informed by scholarship into personal lives and parenting culture, this article shows the need for a refined analysis of exactly what ‘equality’ means to parents in practice and how they negotiate it in their everyday lives.

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Ethical statement

Ethical guidelines from the British Sociological Association were followed in both studies and ethical approval granted from the authors’ universities.

Note

1. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210518-the-hidden-load-how-thinking-of-everything-holds-mums-back.

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