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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Balancing caring and paid work in the UK: narrating ‘choices’ as first-time parents

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Paid work is generally accepted as an important dimension of hegemonic masculinities and men’s identities, which can become heightened when they become fathers. Changes in global economies together with educational shifts and other demographic patterns mean that paid work has become a significant feature of many women’s lives too. Increasingly across Europe women who are mothers combine caring, domestic chores, and paid work. Using data from a qualitative longitudinal study on women’s experiences of transition to first-time motherhood in the UK, this paper will explore how women narrate and reconcile their decisions either to return to paid work or not to, following the birth of their first child (Miller 2005). These findings are considered alongside a companion study on men’s experiences of transition to first-time fatherhood (Miller 2011). The comparison shows that women articulate work and caring decisions in narratives which convey a sense of ‘guilt’, whilst the men are able to talk more freely – and acceptably – about ‘career progression’ and the importance of work to their identity and their new family. Even though recent research points to some changes in men’s involvement in caring and women’s increased activities in the work-place, particular aspects of these arrangements remain seemingly impervious to change.

Keywords: motherhood; fatherhood; gender; caring; work-life balance; narratives

Background: the changing context

The changing demands of globalized economies and consequent work practices have resulted in ‘work and family imbalance’ for many women and men (Hobson and Fahlén 2009, p. 215, emphasis added). The back-drop is a complex and varied one encompassing shifts – and continuities – at societal, policy, family, and individual levels across Europe (Wall 2007). For example, whilst a commitment to increase levels of women’s employment is now ‘a European policy objective’, men who are fathers are expected to be more emotionally and practically involved in family life (Crompton *et al.* 2007, p. 1, Dermott 2008, Miller 2011). These shifts are facilitated by European and national-level policies which address issues of gender and equality across a range of employment and other areas. At the policy and discourse level across (some) European countries women’s capacities to engage in paid work and men’s to care are much more apparent, for example in Northern European countries: but at the everyday level practices are often more complex and not experienced as equal or ‘balanced’ (Miller 2011). Changing normative ideas can be a slow process,

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and so whilst mothers are increasingly expected to, at some level, combine caring and paid work,¹ they have also been the ones expected to work flexibly, fitting their work around family needs (Perrons *et al.* 2007). Meeting family demands and so needing to ‘balance’ work and family life is most clearly triggered when parenthood is experienced for the first time in dual-earner households. This transition can crystallize the ‘gendered division of labour’ by revealing how policies related to maternal, paternal, and parental leave construct caring and work norms and how individual behaviours are enacted in these contexts (Sanchez and Thomson 1997, p. 747). So how do new parents contemplate and subsequently navigate and narrate their work and caring ‘choices’ – in their attempts to achieve a work-life balance? This paper will draw upon data from two qualitative longitudinal studies from the UK in order to address questions of ‘choice’ and decision-making in relation to working and caring (Miller 2005, 2011, Hobson 2002).

The term ‘work-life balance’ is used in this paper but other constructions – ‘work-family balance’, ‘family-friendly working’, ‘work-family reconciliations’ – could similarly have been used (Gatrell 2005, Hobson and Fahlén 2009). These terms have ‘come to the forefront of the social and policy agenda’ across Europe and reflect neo-liberal discourses of autonomy, individualism, and choice (Fagnani 2007, p. 59). But posing the question of *who* is actually expected or enabled to work flexibly in the contemporary European context requires that notions of individualism, family lives, policy shifts, and societal constructions of motherhood and fatherhood are more closely scrutinized. Cross-cutting each of these areas are normative gendered ideas which pattern men’s and women’s lives. These gendered arrangements are a powerful ‘organizing strategy’ against which historical precedent and associated normative ideals can be difficult and slow to change. In relation to ideas around how work and caring responsibilities are organized at the everyday individual and family level, for example, reveals how entrenched ideas can be: the ‘hard labour’ of combining work and caring falling too often to women (Lupton and Barclay 1997, p. 12, Björnberg and Kollind 2005, Gatrell 2005, Wall 2007, Thébaud 2010). So whilst European policy directives encourage women’s and mothers’ increased participation in the work-place, and discourses of involved fatherhood are more in evidence, actually realizing the changes implied in these directives and discourses can be difficult to achieve at the individual/household level. This is because amongst other factors the ‘choices’ and micro-negotiations involved in managing work and family life are not made in a vacuum, nor are they value-free, especially in relation to caring for babies and young, dependent children.

The significant variations found across Europe in relation to welfare regimes and policies to support working families are important to note (Fagnani 2007, O’Brien *et al.* 2007, Wall 2007). Within and across countries there are also important cultural and social class differences, which can limit opportunities and pattern daily practices for individuals and families (Gillies 2009). At the structural level, research across Europe has focused upon ‘taxation policies, childcare facilities, leave arrangements [and] the availability of part-time work opportunities’ in its consideration of how families combine paid work and family life (Den Dulk and Doorne-Huiskes 2007, p. 37, O’Brien *et al.* 2007). But less attention has been given to how mothers and fathers make and articulate their choices and rationalize their behaviours in this changing work-life context. As female employment rates across Europe continue to rise alongside recognition of some change in attitudes and behaviours, debates on

whether we are witnessing the ‘the unravelling of the male breadwinner model’ have ensued (Wall 2007, Crompton *et al.* 2007, p. 1). The evidence is that change across Europe has been uneven and that changing normative behaviours can only be achieved in combination with social entitlements which enable claims to be made ‘for time to care for family members’ as well as work (Hobson and Fahlén 2009, p. 229).

Work-life balance: the UK context

In the UK, men who are fathers are increasingly being encouraged to be more involved in hands-on, emotionally attuned caring as well as continuing to provide economically through paid work (Lewis 2002, Dermott 2008, Featherstone 2009, Miller 2011). A father’s statutory entitlement to two weeks paid paternity leave was introduced in 2003, and more recently changes in maternity/paternity leave were introduced in April 2011,² allowing fathers to share paid maternity leave up to a total of six months. Alongside these policy changes more nuanced understandings of ‘caring masculinities’ and associated discursive opportunities provide a back-drop which appears to make possible thinking and acting differently about how caring for children and paid work are organized and work-life balance achieved. Economic conditions are also an important aspect of this changing context, and ‘the restructuring of wages has decreased the capacity’ of many families in the UK to live on a single wage (Featherstone 2009). Alongside this, fathers in the UK also continue to have the longest working hours when compared to their European counterparts, and their involvement in domestic chores has increased only minimally (O’Brien and Shemilt 2003, Dermott 2008). At the same time women’s increased participation in the UK labour-market is characterized by inequalities both in terms of levels of pay and conditions and in the continued gendered division of labour in the home (Perrons *et al.* 2007, p. 135). Even though women who are mothers are now much more active in the world of paid work, they also continue to be primary caregivers in the home and/or to have primary responsibility for organizing care. The greater recognition of a discourse of gender equality found across Europe does not then in many contexts translate into equality in the division of working and caring (Björnberg and Kollind 2005, Torres *et al.* 2007, Vuori 2007).

The discernible trends in the UK are that policy changes providing new rights for (some) fathers ‘have not translated into significant increases in the take-up’ of parental leave, and women continue to be expected to take responsibility for reconciling *their* employment and family life (Hobson and Fahlén 2009, p. 217). This is not out of step with findings across Europe which report that ‘while aggregate measures suggest that the Nordic countries do “best”, at a more fine grained level, we still find that women do more domestic and caring work everywhere’ (Crompton *et al.* 2007, p. 236). Woven through this scenario in the UK are powerful societal ideas of what mothers and fathers ‘do’, set within particular – morally underpinned – normative constructions of motherhood and fatherhood. In the UK ‘good’ mothers are assumed to be selfless and available to meet their children’s demands, and ‘good’ fathers are still much more associated with economic provision. Indeed in policy and popular discourse a ‘bad’ father would be regarded as one who did not support his child financially (Lewis 2002). These societal, normative ideals of course do not concur with how many people live their lives, but they remain deeply etched and provide a complex context – as the data below will show – in which ‘choices’ around

work can be conceived of and articulated. Even though more women combine paid work and caring for children than ever before, some by choice and some because they do not have a choice, the breadwinner discourse in the UK is still more readily available to, and associated with, men even where a woman may earn a higher wage. The legacy of men being taken as the normative reference point – the ‘standard worker’ – with regard to employment and the work-place becomes clear in the men’s narratives, but encouragingly there is evidence of some change too (Crompton *et al.* 2007, p. 240, Miller 2011).

The research studies

This paper draws upon data from two qualitative longitudinal studies carried out in the UK which focused on women’s and men’s experiences of transition to first-time parenthood. The first of these focused on women’s experiences of transition to first-time motherhood. In this initial study 17 women were followed through a year in their lives in which they became mothers for the first time. The iterative research process involved interviewing the women on three separate occasions, followed by an end-of-study postal questionnaire used to collect demographic data and feedback on their experiences of participating in the study. Semi-structured interview schedules were designed for each of the three interviews. The schedules covered areas around expectations, birth, mothering experiences, information seeking, perceptions of self and others, and work intentions. The first interview was timed to take place antenatally, between seven and eight months, once the pregnancy was well established. The second interview took place between six and eight weeks postnatally, and the final interview was carried out between eight and nine months postnatally. In the first interview participants were asked to begin by describing how they had felt when they found out they were pregnant. In the subsequent interviews participants were asked to begin by describing what had happened since our last meeting. This approach gave the women the opportunity to produce their accounts of anticipating and later experiencing mothering and motherhood in the ways they wished. The participants were accessed using snowballing, which involved asking other mothers at a local school to act as potential gate-keepers.

The sample consisted of white, heterosexual women, and the mean age of the participants was 30 years at the time of the first antenatal interview. This was slightly older than the national average age for first births in the UK but typical of the trend among professional women to delay decisions about reproduction. In many ways, this sample conforms to stereotypes that are held in wider society about those who are positioned as good mothers. These women were predominately middle-class, white, and either married or in partnerships. Yet the data revealed how diverse and complex early mothering experiences can be even amongst an apparently homogeneous group (Miller 2005, 2007).

Interviews took place in the home of the participant or at a location of their choosing. The longitudinal design of the research mirrored the period of transition, giving the data collection period fluidity not achieved in one-off, ‘snapshot’, interviews. Emerging concepts were explored across the data collection periods. The interviews were all tape-recorded with the participants’ permission, and at the end of the study, following verbatim transcription, the tapes were given to those participants who wanted them. During analysis, the complexity of the narrative enterprise soon

became clear as the data revealed the ways in which individuals react to pressures to conform to dominant social narratives (Andrews *et al.* 2000, for further details of the process of analysis see Miller 2005). As the data were analysed over the course of 49 interviews,³ the most striking contrast was between the anticipatory narratives collected during the antenatal interviews and data from the final interviews, which were carried out between eight and nine months after the birth. For all the women, transition to motherhood was different to how they had envisaged it – often harder and lonelier.

The companion study on fatherhood was carried out after the motherhood study (between 2005 and 2007) and followed the same research design but ran for one year longer, over two years (Miller 2011). The sample also consisted of 17 men who were becoming fathers for the first time, and 57 interview transcripts were generated. The mean age of the participants was 33.7 years at the time of the first interview; ages ranged from 24 years to 39 years. The men were employed in a wide range of skilled jobs that would mostly position them as middle-class; they were partnered (some married), white (several in ethnically mixed partnerships/marriages), and heterosexual. Their socio-economic location (by occupation) and corresponding choices could be argued to be greater than those less advantaged groups might enjoy. Both samples were from dual-earner households. The samples from the two studies were not related in any way, but both groups were recruited from across southern England.

Findings and discussion: an overview

Whilst other research has focused on the ways in which mothers organize their work lives and caring arrangements (for example, Perrons *et al.* 2007), this paper is able to provide insights into how new fathers as well as new mothers articulate their ‘choices’ and practices around paid work and caring decisions (Miller 2011). Taking this longitudinal and comparative stance enables the durability of gendered assumptions and behaviours to become apparent. These become visible as expectations and choices are narrated in the antenatal interviews, when parenthood is anticipated, and then as choices and behaviours unfold in the weeks and months following the birth. In the antenatal interviews both groups of participants spoke of their intentions to share the caring for their unborn child in ways they envisaged as different to previous generations. Amongst the fathers-to-be this involved anticipating sharing caring for their child in ways sometimes described as ‘equal’, but (mostly) this did not involve changing their existing work hours. In the interviews following the birth (at 6–10 weeks) the most significant difference between the participants in the two studies was that the new fathers had returned to their jobs outside the home and the new mothers had remained at home on statutory maternity leave,⁴ as the primary carer, becoming gradually practised in that role.

As the men inhabit the familiar worlds of paid work and the newly unfamiliar home-with-baby, they report that their priorities have changed. Work outside the home is articulated as more economically important and at the same time as less significant – ‘work is a far lower priority and less of a preoccupation’. In contrast, the (previously employed) women’s horizons have receded as early mothering is largely restricted to the perceived safety of the home and new mothering is experienced as unexpectedly perplexing and often difficult and lonely (Miller 2005). By the time of

the second postnatal interviews (at 9–10 months) almost all the participants in both studies had returned to some type of paid work. But for the women in the transition to motherhood study their return to work is mostly part-time in order to accommodate the caring responsibilities which they have become more ‘expert’ at during the intervening months of their maternity leave. Across the unfolding data, decisions and practices of combining paid work and caring are articulated and rationalized in narratives that clearly reinforce and reproduce societal and gendered expectations of what mothers and fathers (should) do.

Anticipating parenthood: paid work and caring ‘choices’

The major focus in this paper will be on how work and caring choices are narrated and rationalized once the baby has been born. But it is also interesting to explore how ideas are articulated through particular discourses as first-time parenthood is anticipated in the antenatal interviews. In the motherhood study, where a potential return to paid work (usually part-time) is anticipated, the women narrate this in terms mostly of regret, economic necessity, or, with some reluctance, that this is something they want to do. The women’s antenatal narratives convey a very clear understanding of what they (and wider society) consider a ‘good mother’ to be and this includes ‘being at home’, ‘being selfless’, and not having children unless you are going to exclusively care for them yourself. Elements of an ‘intensive mothering’ discourse (Hays 1996) run through the women’s narratives and are captured in the extracts below as impending motherhood is contemplated:

I mean in an ideal world I wouldn’t go back to work, I mean I’ve always . . . before I got married I always said that I felt that a mother should stay at home. (Kathryn)

I will definitely return to work, but only part-time, because I think you should . . . I mean what’s the point in having the baby unless you’re going to look after it? (Sarah)

I didn’t particularly want my children to go to a childminder or a crèche or something. (Rebecca)

In contrast the men contemplating first-time fatherhood narrate their expectations drawing upon very different strands of discourse. In their articulations fatherhood – and so caring – will be ‘fitted in’ around paid work, on afternoons, evenings, and weekends. Being involved in hands-on and emotional ways is also envisaged by the men who are committed to doing fathering in ways that are different to their own fathers, as Nick makes clear in the following extract:

I think there is far more emphasis on fathers to be involved, fathers to be a primary carer rather than a breadwinner . . . I think it’s hugely, hugely different. I think when, I know when my mum was pregnant with me my father’s role was to make sure that we had enough income . . . and to every now and then stamp down an authority. (Nick)

But a shift in his sense of economic responsibility is also apparent in how Nick then talks about the changes that having a child will make to his responsibilities:

There hasn’t been a need for us [his wife] to provide for each other and now I have to provide for someone else, a child. (Nick)

Here Nick draws upon language more associated with traditional ideals of the breadwinner-as-provider father, implying this will be his responsibility. Sean also sees evidence around him of his fathering being done differently and talks about his brother's involvement in caring:

My brother takes his day off work a week [to do child-care] and I like that thought of having that time. It is just wanting to be involved, wanting to be there when they're growing up, to see things. (Sean)

Joe also talks of wanting to be involved but implicitly acknowledges that his wife's much longer, statutory maternity leave means this will not be possible:

I think I'll find it really difficult first of all once the baby is born when I go back to work after two weeks [paternity leave], because I'm going to be at work all day and Jane is going to be at home, I think I'm going to feel that I'm missing out. If it's up to me I would love to have the year at home with the baby and bring it up myself. (Joe)

The reality for the men is that from being in dual-earner households where partners have sometimes had the higher income they will now be the primary worker whilst their wife/partner is the primary carer. Even though they talk of wanting to be significantly involved in caring for their child they also seem to accept the constructions of motherhood and fatherhood that societal norms and maternal/paternal leave policies promote. It is anticipated that caring for the new baby will be 'shared' but also 'fitted in' around their perceived role as economic provider (O'Brien 2005, Dermott 2008).

Early parenthood: paid work and caring 'choices'

In the data collected in interviews in the two studies following the birth, anticipation and expectations become everyday experiences. The following section begins with juxtaposed extracts from each study – Diane from the motherhood study and Nick from the fatherhood study. Although these extracts are not directly about work and caring decisions, they are included here to set the scene of how first-time parenthood is initially and differently experienced and the assumptions which are implicit in the language used. In these extracts Diane and then Nick reflect upon their experiences of parenting in the early weeks following the birth:

I just didn't really understand what was wrong with me. I didn't understand what she [baby] wanted. I'm thinking as a mother I should know is she hungry, wet, bored, what is it? ... You think other people will look at you and think you don't know your baby, there's something wrong with you ... It didn't come naturally. (Diane)

But it is more emotionally draining than I thought and at times I've found it less emotionally rewarding than I thought it was going to be. Actually when you get to the end of the day and he has screamed all day, I find it hard to think well you know that's been a good day ... but yes sometimes I've just thought it's not a very rewarding experience. (Nick)

It is highly unlikely that a new mother would use the language that Nick does to describe some of his early fathering experiences as 'less emotionally rewarding' than

he had anticipated. This is not because they might not have shared these very thoughts, but because voicing them would be interpreted as inappropriate maternal behaviour. Diane in the extract above also talks of her early baffling mothering experiences and admits that ‘it didn’t come naturally’ – a sentiment voiced *retrospectively* by most of the other mothers – but there is a distinct difference between these two extracts. It is not just that Nick is able to talk more freely about negative aspects of caring (without fear of moral sanction); it is also where they appear to locate the responsibility and the root cause of these experiences. Nick points to a screaming baby and a long day filled with screaming which – understandably – does not feel ‘emotionally rewarding’ or a measure of a ‘good day’. In contrast, Diane’s narrative is all about *her* failure to know what her baby wanted and so her assumptions that something must be wrong with her. These different responses provide an indication of the complex moral and gendered terrain against which participants narrate their intentions and experiences. These become particularly clear as the new mothers and new fathers justify their choices around and between returning to paid work and their engagement in child-care.

At the time of the early postnatal interviews the new mothers may contemplate a return to paid work, but they are not yet back at work. Their days are occupied with gradually coming to terms with the work – ‘job’ – of caring. As periods of paternity leave and/or holiday days end, the new fathers express a mixture of feelings on their return to work ranging from relief to sadness. A key concern is just how their wives/partners will be able to cope with the (still unpredictable) demands of the new baby *alone*. For all the participants the hard work and continual responsibility involved in caring for a young baby is acknowledged.

Late parenthood: paid work and caring ‘choices’

What becomes clear through comparing data from the later interviews (9–10 months following the birth) is that women feel compelled to justify their decisions whether they return to paid work *or not*. Societal expectations in the UK configure fatherhood differently, and so justifying going to work is unnecessary; indeed *not* working would require some justification. But expectations around what women who are mothers should do are more ambiguous. There are contrasting societal expectations which coexist in the UK currently regarding how far women who are mothers can also be ‘serious’ or committed workers – and whether they should be (Gatrell 2005, Perrons *et al.* 2007). But this is not to suggest that paid work and careers were not important to the new mothers – they often were – but the women could feel more inhibited by societal configurations of motherhood, and this shaped what they thought could be said. So, in the motherhood study the women describe decisions to return to work in narratives which convey a sense of ‘guilt’, whilst the men talk much more freely about their ‘career progression’ and the importance of work (sometimes using the term ‘breadwinner’) to their identity. Their perceived need to work harder (and so sometimes longer) to support their new family is evidenced by the costs of items for the new baby and the reduction in household income because one earner is on maternity leave.

The majority of women (14/17) in the motherhood study returned to work even if this had not been their expressed intention in their antenatal interviews. The women describe their choices and decisions around whether to return to work, or not, in

tentative and very occasionally more instrumental ways. In the few cases where elements of their narratives appear more instrumental or challenging, this is because they can be seen to invoke individualism in ways more traditionally associated with masculine presentations of self and which run counter to ideals of selfless, intensive motherhood. Research has shown that mothers are the ones in families who are (implicitly) expected to work flexibly and take responsibility for organizing child-care (Gatrell 2005, Hobson and Fahlén 2009). This was borne out amongst the participants in the motherhood study who took responsibility for organizing child-care, sometimes changing their own work hours to part-time and on occasion even their jobs in order to accommodate caring responsibilities. The stress and time pressures they felt on combining working and caring was at times apparent, but so too was the importance to them of being back in familiar work environments – ‘I miss the office life’. Paid work was also equated with self-esteem and regaining a recognizable sense of a ‘pre-baby self’. But in the following extract Rebecca, a school teacher, recognizes that her own ambitions do not concur with some societal expectations:

I felt as though if I had a job I was doing something, whereas if I didn't, if I was just at home with baby, 'oh you're just a mother and a housewife'. And I know that's the wrong thing to think but you still can't help thinking it. (Rebecca)

Over the first year following the birth it became clear to both the new mothers and new fathers that caring for a baby was hard but largely undervalued and ‘unexceptional’ work, aspects of which could be enjoyable and rewarding, but which was evaluated differently to ‘real’ work outside the home. Another mother, Abigail, talked of her need to be a ‘professional person’ again, invoking the work-place as a different realm in which to be a social actor and in which to achieve. In the following extract she draws upon language more traditionally associated with masculine worker identities:

I do like being a professional person and myself ... I really felt by the end of my maternity leave that I was treading water and the whole world was getting on with their lives and mine was on hold ... Even if I was achieving something with him, I didn't feel it was enough for me. That might sound selfish, I don't know? I felt so trapped by the end of my maternity leave, I felt so isolated. (Abigail)

Abigail implies that her sense of self and identity as a professional person had become submerged into her role as mother during her maternity leave, but she also recognizes that it ‘might sound selfish’ to talk in such a way about choosing between caring for her child exclusively and paid work. In contrast in the following extract, Gareth, a father of twins, is not concerned that his ‘love’ of work rather than caring might be perceived as selfish:

I love going to work so, I mean for me obviously I love them but I love going to work more than I do sitting here all day looking after them ... I definitely see myself as a breadwinner. (Gareth)

Justifying choices to take on full-time caring rather than working was not something that the fathers (mostly) had to do.⁵ For the mothers who do not return

to work they – just like the mothers who do – feel compelled to justify their choices. As Faye says:

I sometimes feel a bit guilty about not going to work. I know . . . you know I worked for a long time . . . but sort of you feel a bit out of the world in a way because you're not getting up every day and going in to work and the normal things you know [. . .] But I mean we wanted to have her [baby] . . . we've been together a long time so we didn't rush into it or anything . . . [so] you know there's no point in having them and then palming them off to other people. (Faye)

Sarah, who had anticipated in her antenatal interview that she would return to part-time work 'for her sanity', now justifies changing her mind and talks of mothering as a 'job':

No, no, but you just put too much pressure on yourself. Surely *this* [mothering] is a job? . . . But I couldn't. I don't see the point in working to pay someone else to look after your child . . . I think it [mothering full-time] does drive you mad. (Sarah)

The idea of 'working to pay someone else to look after your child' refers, amongst other things, to the high costs of child-care in the UK; provision is also problematic. Those participants who had work-place nurseries available to them for child-care were in a minority, but these significantly reduced the stress experienced by those who had to make ad-hoc arrangements. In the motherhood study, Clare who is a school teacher is the first to return to full-time work at 13 weeks after the birth of her son. Like all of the other mothers who return to work, Clare takes responsibility for organizing the child-care provision for when she is at work. This task is described as 'a nightmare' and stressful by many of the women. In the following extract Clare describes the 'mixture' of arrangements she has put in place to enable her to return to her job which is also described as 'an economic necessity':

We had a friend . . . she did Monday and Tuesday. And then my next door neighbour did Wednesday and Friday. She's got a one-and-a-half-year-old and she's quite happy with a bit of extra money and we knew her and I was really happy to leave her and glad that she could do that and my mum could have him on Thursday. We thought about nurseries but we thought maybe he was just a bit too young for there because he still liked the one-to-one. (Clare)

The difficulty of organizing – acceptable – child-care was also cited by the mothers as a reason to either work part time, or not to return to work. For some who worked part time husbands/partners or other family members were able to provide cover whilst the mother worked. In the fatherhood study it was notable how many wives worked outside the home at weekends or in the evenings, whilst the men took over the child-care on return from their full-time, Monday-to-Friday jobs. Family time *together* was said to be at a minimum as (often exhausted) parents swapped places. Working part time and/or flexibly and making the necessary child-care arrangements in order to be able to achieve this was almost exclusively undertaken by the mothers in both studies.

In the fatherhood study the men talked in various ways about reconciling their work and home life. This is described as being 'a juggling act the whole time' to being achieved without there being 'any conflict between work and home'. One of the

fathers, Ian, additionally takes ‘two weeks unpaid parental leave’ during the first year, which he says ‘would not have been an option’ had the couple not unexpectedly inherited some money. In the following extract Ian talks about his wife preparing to return to work:

She’s hoping to go back part time although that is not quite settled yet. Interestingly we haven’t talked about me going part time and Polly going back full time ... I think it could have been a consideration but I’m in a very small company and I’m very lucky that they are as flexible as they are. I couldn’t do the job I’m doing part time. (Ian)

Ian is grateful that his employers are ‘as flexible as they are’, whilst other fathers find out that having a company policy on flexible working and being ‘family-friendly’ does not mean that in practice this will be readily supported or facilitated. Similarly, some of the men, including Ian (who works for a small publishing company), did not think their jobs could be done part time, and he confirms that this had not been part of any discussion he has had with his wife. He comments earlier in his interview that his responsibility is to ‘keep bringing money into the house’.

Two of the fathers, Chris and Graham, do reduce their working hours, and their experiences of combining caring and work are mixed. For Chris it ‘is just about sort of manageable’, but for Graham it ‘has not proven all that successful’. Fitting everything in and lack of time are clear issues in most of the fathers’ (and mothers’) accounts alongside other concerns such as being seen as a committed worker by colleagues and employers. This is even the case when full-time hours are worked, but worked differently, for example full-time hours compressed into a four-day working week; perhaps this is because time spent at work can be taken as ‘a barometer of work commitment’ (Hobson and Fahlén 2009, p. 216). Being seen as a committed – serious – worker is, not surprisingly, much less of a concern in the women’s narratives where ideas of maternal femininities have traditionally been less associated with normative constructions of hegemonic masculinities and worker identities.

Across the data it becomes clear that time pressures and stress – rather than balance – are experienced to a greater or lesser extent by most of the participants in both the studies. Differences are discernible in how parental ‘responsibilities’ are either assumed or taken on; for example, the task of organizing child-care was an exclusively maternal undertaking. Another area of difference found between the two sets of data was in relation to how the mothers who were in full-time paid work emphasized the quality of their maternal caring *around* their work commitments; again this was not something the new fathers felt they needed to do. In the following extracts Clare and Rebecca talk in ways which demonstrate the quality time they share with their child outside work and the benefits to their children of being cared for by others:

But I mean I think the time we do have him, we just make a real effort because we don’t ... everything is him, we don’t do anything [else] when he’s awake, we’re just around him and at the weekends we’re with him *like all day* and *we make a big effort*. (Clare, emphasis added)

She [baby] goes to a nursery and she absolutely loves it and it’s, you know, *it’s a really genuinely good thing for her* ... I can drop her off and almost forget you know ... and then when it comes to 5 o’clock I’m out the door straight away and I kind of switch back into ... I completely forget about my job. (Rebecca, emphasis added)

Elements of a deeply embedded cultural imperative to be seen to be a ‘good’ mother are clear in these extracts as the women justify that this also involves working. Philippa also returns to her full-time job and draws upon different strands of discourse to justify her decision. In many ways these articulations illuminate glimpses of change in how women in professional jobs (can) draw upon elements of discourse more traditionally associated with hegemonic, worker masculinity. In the following three extracts Philippa initially grapples to find what she thinks will be an acceptable way to express her decision to return to work full time, but she concludes by stating that she is ‘committed to work’ and her employer (a large publishing company):

I don’t know that I’d find it stimulating enough [full-time mothering] ... well not stimulating enough but ... I don’t know really whether I would be good at it ... I need to do both anyway, I think.

I did have the choice as well ... I mean so it wasn’t a financial decision which was quite good, it was actually something which I felt I wanted to do ... And I would have been giving up on quite a lot with my job, I mean both financially and in terms of my career and things ... so I kind of weighed up lots of different things ... I wanted partly the money to some extent ... but also I was feeling quite isolated at home ... I mean I needed to see other people, I needed to make new friends.

Because [colleagues] have waited around for me for 6 or 7 months ... I mean I shouldn’t make a decision based on that, but I do kind of think oh, I’m committed to work and to the people that I work for and things. (Philippa)

What is of interest here is the way in which Philippa articulates herself as a career woman and mother. She does not produce what would be recognized as a selfless narrative of motherhood, but one which is much more associated with autonomy (‘my career’), career trajectory, and individual control, using language that has historically been much more associated with hegemonic masculinities. Even though Philippa is reticent at first as she describes making the decision to return to work – ‘I don’t know really whether I would be good at it [full-time mothering]’ – she ends by talking about her commitment – and implicitly her responsibilities – to her colleagues and employer. Changing normative language and behaviours around parenting and work have been noted in other research. For example, in ‘Sweden and Norway, men who take time off to care for young children are no longer the exception, but the norm’ (Hobson and Fahlén 2009, p. 217). Whilst the ways in which choices and decisions have been articulated in this paper imply some incremental shifts in normative behaviours, there is a considerable way to go.

Conclusion

This work provides an important contrast to larger-scale quantitative research on trends in work-place participation by illuminating aspects of decision-making and behaviours at the individual level. What the research shows is that, optimistically, there is evidence of some change, even if this is mostly at the level of talk (and intentions), with discourses being more fluidly drawn upon by some of the participants. But the findings also show how slow change can be – especially in relation to societal and individual expectations of how caring and work should be organized. Encouragingly, recent research on dual-career couples with preschool

children in the UK has reported that ‘fathers demonstrated a higher level of involvement with children than might have been anticipated’ given earlier findings (Gatrell 2007, p. 360). Similarly, the now normative practice of men caring for their children in Sweden and Norway is also evidence of cultural and social change. But some things are slower to change: for example, across Europe women still do more domestic and caring work *everywhere* (Crompton *et al.* 2007, p. 236, emphasis added). In the UK, policies related to maternal (up to 52 weeks’ leave), paternal (2 weeks’ leave), and parental leave have consequences for how norms and individual behaviours are culturally perceived and enacted around work and caring practices. But as is also clear from multiple research findings, addressing and reconciling matters of gender and equality and/or convergence in relation to caring and paid work is not just a matter of getting the right legislation in place. Policies have to be normatively recognized and entitlements economically sufficient and comprehensive enough to be taken up in order to promote and support flexible arrangements that can facilitate work-life balance. But ‘policies do not change structures’ (Crompton *et al.* 2007, p. 237), and the complex relationships between policies, normative and gendered societal expectations, and individual intentions and practices need to be considered further in future research.

Notes

1. It is important to note that paid work is not always a choice for mothers but an economic necessity. This has been the case for ‘less privileged women (for instance, immigrant women, women of color) who have historically been important economic actors both inside and outside the home’ (Segura 1994, p. 47).
2. See: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Moneyandworkentitlements/WorkAndFamilies/-Paternityrightsintheworkplace/DG_190788.
3. The fatherhood study included a fourth interview with nine of the original participants at two years following the birth of their child.
4. Statutory maternity leave policy in the UK currently entitles women to up to 52 weeks’ leave. Levels and lengths of pay will depend upon length of employment conditions being met.
5. Although two participants in the fatherhood study do eventually reduce their working days (concentrating their working hours into shorter working weeks).

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