

## **Parenhoods**

### **Setting the Contemporary Context**

*I was the first person out of my friends to have a child and I remember saying to them it's brilliant, it's the best thing in the world, but it's harder than what people say. (Joe, Fatherhood study)*

*It's the scariest job in the world, but it's the best job in the world. (Felicity, Motherhood study)*

Becoming a parent changes lives in all sorts of unexpected and predictable ways. Across the chapters in this book, everyday experiences of parenting are explored through a focus on the micro-processes of daily family living as parenting experiences unfold. The book explores later episodes of parenting experiences in the United Kingdom as children begin primary school (aged 5–6 years) and the later teenage years – aspects of parenting not included in transition and early parenting research. The question of what constitutes parenthood at these various points in parenting journeys, along with contemporary understandings of 'parenting responsibilities' and daily caring practises, will provide recurrent themes across the chapters. The scrutiny of parenthood, gender and caring as concept and practise is timely and coincides with significant shifts in women's and men's lives, for example labour market participation, increased family fluidity and new theorisations of gender (Bryson et al, 2012; Dermott and Miller, 2015; Grunow and Evertsson, 2016; Harden et al, 2014; Sparrman et al, 2016). In the United Kingdom, most parents are now working parents. However, these shifts have been accompanied by an intensification of expectations associated with 'good parenting', bolstered by recent political preoccupation with neuroscience and its application to parenting behaviours and child development (Allen, 2011; Craig et al, 2014; Edwards et al, 2015; Hays, 1996; Lee et al, 2014; Lowe et al, 2015; Wall, 2010).

In this climate, parental responsibilities can be seen to have increased, as 'risk management' and responsibility for 'maximizing' a child's potential are taken as measures of 'good' parenting (Wall, 2013). Further evidence of this can be seen in the proliferation of parenting advice, early-years interventions, educational demands and other forms of parental and child monitoring, which move the political focus to individual (and apparently 'poor parenting') endeavours. Clearly parenting experiences are varied, shaped by personal and household circumstances, age and number of children as well as material and structural factors. In contrast, neoliberal ideals of the 'good parent' are narrowly defined and practicably onerous or unachievable. Contemporary parenthood thus occupies a confounding position, with caring for our children being both the most important relationship parents can come to experience ('the best thing in the world'), yet something continually undervalued and increasingly regarded as a problematic sphere of social life.

At the outset, it is important to make clear which aspects of the terrain of parenthood are explored in this book and which are not. The subjects of parenthood and parenting are vast and have garnered critical attention from academics and others working from different disciplines and political perspectives. Popular media are also fascinated with these topics, with publications telling people how to parent, how not to parent, how to be a 'tiger mom', 'tiger parent' or 'conscious parent', about 'attachment', 'bonding', 'positive' parenting, raising a 'successful' child, 'training' and 'taming' children as well as evocations to display and share images of motherhood (and increasingly fatherhood, e.g. see Swedish Dads at [www.johanbavman.se](http://www.johanbavman.se)) via social media forums (e.g. Facebook-motherhood challenge). Parenting now requires routines such as scheduling of 'play dates' and

other planning activities, which in previous generations did not require such explicit or detailed organisation (Mose, 2016). Activities of parenting may also persist over a longer and more intensive period in the form of so-called helicopter parenting, which, it has been argued, impedes the child's or young adult's development of independence (Willoughby et al, 2015). In contrast, and rather than problematizing individuals who are parents, this book looks at how a group of mothers and fathers manage the daily activity and responsibilities of caring for their children (in couples and alone) alongside other aspects of their lives. It focuses on aspects of gender, parenthood and family-care work practises and relationships through the individual narrations of women and men as daily experiences unfold. This focus includes caring for children over time, and the term 'parenting' is taken to convey the activity and thinking aspects of caring for children; the term 'parenthoods' (acknowledged as plural) conveys the 'institution' and societal expectations in which parenting occurs in the same way that Adrienne Rich distinguished between mothering and motherhood (Rich, 1976). This institution of parenthood perpetuates an 'intensive parenting culture' (Lee et al, 2014), which forms a powerful backdrop of political rhetoric and dominant, increasingly expert 'knowledge', against which parenting efforts are undertaken.

Clearly these terms are not neutral and in their examination of the language of contemporary parenting; Lee et al (2014) note the growing 'targeting of parental behaviour as deficient', increasingly requiring surveillance (both of oneself and other parents) and the 'watchful gaze of experts' (p. 8). But this gaze is also more likely to be focused on some parents and their 'wrong type' of parenting practices than others, as assumptions about parents according to class and material resources, age, race, sexual orientation and gender are made (Dermott and Pomati, 2016; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Duncan et al, 2010; Featherstone et al, 2016; Gillies, 2007, 2008; Golombok, 2000, 2015; Jensen, 2010; Macvarish, 2016; Reynolds, 2005; Wastell and White, 2012; Utting, 2007). The term 'parenting' also implies gender-neutral engagement in caring activities (see Chapter 2) that, given the gendered and daily aspects of caring histories, both within families and beyond, is problematic (Daly, 2013; Miller, 2013b; Ranson, 2015). Of note too is the issue of parenting responsibilities linked to the perceived needs and 'cultivation' of a child, which are currently 'central to parenthood' but, at different periods, have historically been assumed and practised in very different and gender-unequal ways (Fox, 2009:288; see also Bailey, 2012; Sparrman et al, 2016). Just as conceptualisations of 'childhood' have fluctuated, so too have ideas of children's status and their care and educational needs (Davidoff et al, 1999; Hendrick, 2016; James and James, 2004; Kehily, 2013; King, 2007). The terrain is complex, contested, changing and increasingly seen to hinge politically on narrowly construed opportunities, for example the very early years, in which parents can get parenting 'right'.

The tendency for second-wave feminist researchers to focus 'more on childbirth than parenthood' has been noted by others (Fox, 2009:285), with a more general concentration of research on transition and the first year of mothering or fathering being apparent in any review of the literature (Arendell, 2000; Coltart and Henwood, 2012; Grunow and Evertsson, 2016; Habib, 2012; Ives, 2014; Nilsen et al, 2013; Oakley, 1979; Thomson et al, 2011). Having also focused on transition and early experiences of motherhood and fatherhood in earlier publications, the chapters in this book now follow later experiences, but of the same parents followed in these earlier books as their children have grown. Taking this approach, the focus is on individual narratives of daily caring, familial relationships and paid work and how these are made sense of and managed (Andrews et al, 2013; Frank, 1995; Miller, 2017a; Riessman, 2008). Individual narrations are theorized using the lens of gender and presentations of self (what can and cannot be narrated and by who), paying particular attention to shifts between historically narrow and binary concepts of gender, 'choice' and power, and recent, more nuanced theorisations of gender and notions of choice and responsibility.

This chapter provides the theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework for the remainder of the book. Across the following sections, the contemporary and historical contexts are examined to show how the category of parenthood and expectations of parenting have been configured and conceptualised and family life theorised. This backdrop illuminates the context against which to explore individual experiences and everyday practices of parenting and is illustrated through data collected in two qualitative longitudinal research studies. Earlier phases of data collected in these two studies have reported on transition to first-time motherhood experiences (Miller, 2005, 2007) and transition to first-time fatherhood experiences (Miller, 2010, 2011). Now, using later phases of the data, parenting experiences as children reach school age (in the Fatherhood study) and the teenage years (in the Motherhood study) are examined. These later episodes of data provide unusually rich, longitudinal sources through which to explore how parenting is understood, negotiated, practiced and reflected on over time (Henwood and Shirani, 2012; Miller, 2015; Neale, 2015). For example post-separation parenting arrangements are (unexpectedly) captured through this longitudinal lens as once-hopeful couple relationships have broken down (see Chapter 5; Phillip, 2014; Philip and O'Brien, 2012; Smart and Neale, 1999). Further information on the qualitative longitudinal research design and participant details are provided later in the chapter.

### **Setting the Broader Neoliberal Context: Family Change and Continuities**

In the sections that follow, the changes and continuities that have patterned practises of parenting and constructions of parenthoods in recent years – including neoliberalism as political ideology, family change, understandings of gender and care – are discussed. This begins with a focus on 21st-century neoliberal restructuring and the 'transformation of the administrative state, one previously responsible for human well-being', to a state in which individuals are 'reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives' (Davies and Bansel, 2007:248). In relation to family lives, political preoccupations have emerged, including an (over)emphasis on the cultivation and production of the competitive, individual worker-citizen, with a corresponding emphasis on more intensified parenting, parenting education and the imperative of success for children at school (Davies and Bansel, 2007; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Jensen, 2010). This has included a discursive and conceptual move away from notions of 'child-rearing' to a preoccupation with parenting, which as noted earlier narrowly links 'certain parenting behaviours' to particular 'outcomes for children' (Daly, 2013:162). The cultural preoccupation with uncertainty and individual control apparent in neoliberalist ideologies increasingly regards families and family life as an acceptable focus for policy intervention (Daly, 2013). Through interventions such as parenting programmes, governments are increasingly extending their reach into areas previously regarded as primarily private and a family responsibility (Edwards and Gillies, 2011; Featherstone et al, 2016). But the focus on 'the family' in neoliberal restructuring and interventions does not pertain in equal ways to all families; rather, policies have been shaped by middle-class values and then rolled out as interventions for 'troubled', 'failing', 'feckless' and 'feral' families (Crossley, 2015; Gillies, 2008; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Klett-Davies, 2010; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013). For, as Crossley (2015) notes, 'official categorisations and policies serve to discursively and symbolically privilege certain types of family as more natural and acceptable than others' (p. 12, emphasis in the original), while others observe the ways in which 'affluence protects' and deflects scrutiny (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). In addition, the current preoccupation with parenting education and the professionalization of parenting takes no account of the social and material contexts in which

parenting is lived and undertaken, but rather assumes child-rearing to be 'practised independently from the social context' while privileging idealised versions of middle-class<sup>1</sup> parenting (Fox, 2009; Gillies, 2008; Jensen, 2010; Tyler, 2008). However, even though not so centrally targeted on some mothers, or parents, the intensified gaze and discourses associated with modern parenthood can be pervasive, leading to a general sense of surveillance and practices of self-scrutiny.

The discursive and practical importance of education also runs through neoliberal ideologies as 'competition and an emphasis on individual success measured through endless work and ostentatious consumption' is both prioritised and prized (McGregor, 2001). Education of parents (to parent) and parents ensuring educational success of their children are associated with neoliberal concerns for 'the development of a skilled population' and notions of self-reliance and 'future social stability' (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011, 2014). Family responsibilities to produce and nurture the competitive individual has a central focus for neoliberals as ideals of collectivism and any sense of the community are supplanted. These responsibilities are considered further in later chapters as experiences of school, work and family are explored in fathers' accounts of their primary school-age children (Chapter 3) and mothers accounts of their teenage children (Chapter 4). How are notions of parental responsibilities and 'success' configured, 'felt' and narrated in these accounts?

It becomes clear then that ideals of intensive parenting, especially in relation to time-intensive activities associated with measures of 'successful' parenting, for example 'concerted cultivation' of children and their success in the education system, are increasingly expected to be part of everyday family practises; but this is a time too when most parents are also employed outside the home and increasingly report feeling time-poor and 'stressed' (Harden et al, 2014; Henderson, 2012; Irwin and Elley, 2011; Lareau, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2007). Significant research has accrued since American sociologist Sharon Hays coined the term 'intensive mothering' more than twenty years ago, drawing attention, among other things, to 'the tensions between the values of parenthood and the values of the market place' (Hays, 1996). In the intervening years feminist and other scholarship has continued to examine, problematize and critique the contours and practises of intensive mothering, and more recently fathering too: the focus on an 'intensive parenting culture' underscores the need for such continued endeavours (Craig et al, 2014; Jensen, 2010; Lee et al, 2014; Shirani et al, 2012). In political terms, 'good' parenting requires intensive amounts of time to be spent on child cultivation to ensure healthy emotional and psychological development and attachment, whilst inculcating competitiveness and producing a 'successful' individual worker-citizen (Dermott and Pomati, 2016; Irwin and Elley, 2011; Jensen, 2010; Lareau 2003). But parents are also expected to be productively engaged in paid work.

The framing of parenting in this way has been influenced by 'developments' in brain science, which have further concentrated political interest in intensive parenting 'to optimize child brain development' and reduce costs to government of 'failing' children and parents (Wall, 2010; Wastell and White, 2012). Increasingly, brain science is argued to play a role in reshaping the relationship between parents and the state, both in the United Kingdom and in other Western countries. Yet questions about the scientific credibility and 'truth' of findings have also been raised, as have concerns about how findings in neuroscience are being translated into professional parenting advice,

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<sup>1</sup> The samples were all white, heterosexual women and men (some in ethnically mixed couples). In many ways this sample conforms to normative ideals of the 'good parent', as they were predominately middle class, white, and either married or in partnerships. Yet the longitudinal data have revealed diversity and complexity as caring and working relationships have unfolded even in this apparently homogeneous group.

especially in relation to early years interventions and 'poor' child-rearing practises (Bruer, 1999; Edwards and Gillies, 2011; Lowe et al, 2015; Wastell and White, 2012). Encapsulating the concern expressed by commentators and practitioners, Wastell and White (2012) note that while 'there is much to commend a "progressive" agenda of help for the most disadvantaged children', the rush to interventionist policies based on 'pseudo-scientific expertise' and misperceptions about brain development and 'the first three years' is clearly not the way to support such children or their families (p. 398; Featherstone et al, 2016). There are then myriad contradictions and inequalities embedded in the ideology of intensive parenting, which, together with social class bias, have more profoundly affected women who are mothers than men who are fathers. However, this is a more fluid situation than in previous times and, as Shirani et al (2012) note, if a 'maternal lens' is revoked, 'the ways in which parenting may become differently intensive for men' becomes more apparent (p. 37; see also Dermott and Miller, 2015; Doucet, 2016). But this remains a contested area, and a finer focus on individually perceived mothering and fathering 'responsibilities' in relation to care for their children, over time, is explored in greater detail in the subsequent chapters of this book. In particular attention will be given to the question of gendered and/or moral orientations to care and, in particular, how the 'mental work' of more intensified parenting becomes taken on, by whom and how practiced? (Walzer, 1996).

## **Gender, Work and Doing Family Life**

Regardless of political invocations and increased development of models of 'good practice' and programmes to 'train' parents, at the everyday and household level mothers and fathers get on with the daily practises of 24/7 caring for their children in various ways and in increasingly varied family formations (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010; Dunne, 2000; Golombok, 2015; Herrera, 2013). Here too, various shifts, for example in reproductive technologies and legal arrangements (e.g. surrogacy, sperm donations, embryo donation, divorce, shared custody) have changed possible routes into and out of more traditional family arrangements and increased the diversity of family types (Golombok, 2000, 2015; Herrera, 2013; Murphy, 2016). Family formations now encompass same-sex, never-married, separated, adoptive, lone and co-parenting family relationships (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Duncan et al, 2010; Jones and Hackett, 2011; Philip, 2014; Philip and O'Brien, 2012). Not surprisingly, one effect of these changes has been to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions around how caring for children is organised in families and how maternal/paternal/familial responsibilities are thought about (or not) and practised (see Chapter 2). Other changes contributing to shifts in family lives and practices have included labour market participation so that increasingly in the United Kingdom and more widely across Europe, it is clear that there is no longer one dominant model of employment arrangements in couple households as most children 'are being brought up by parents who are engaged in some form of paid work employment outside the home' (Connolly et al, 2016; Harden et al, 2014; Office for National Statistics, 2013). For example, recent research shows that almost one-third of working mothers (30%) across all age groups, income groups, and family types are 'earning as much as or more than their partners' (Ben-Galim and Thompson, 2013) and so are 'breadwinning' in ways previously exclusively associated with men and fathers. But even though the increase in maternal employment is a significant trend, a gender pay gap and 'motherhood wage penalty' continues to shape experiences, both in the workplace and caring arrangements in the home (Ben-Galim and Thompson, 2013; Budig and England, 2001; Costa Dias et al, 2016; Perrons, 2009, 2010). Recent research in the United Kingdom reports that following the birth of a child, there is 'a gradual but continual rise in the wage gap and, by the time the first child is aged 12, women's hourly wages are a third below men's' (Costa Dias et al, 2016:2). Research also indicates that some

behaviours and practices may be more resistant to change than others, for example the division of domestic labour in the home (Ekberg et al, 2013; Miller, 2011; Norman and Elliot, 2015). I return to this in later chapters (see Chapters 3 and 4).

Alongside the intensification of parenthood ideals and workplace demands, expectations around men's involvement in their child's life provide another dimension of change. Even though mothers have been assumed as 'the main audience' for the policies and programmes increasingly being rolled out by successive governments, these are framed as gender-blind (Daly, 2013:172). However, developments in theorisations and practises of gender demonstrate that some shifts have occurred in relation to parenting and care work (see Chapter 2). Theorisations of gender that capture more fluid and contingent understandings of femininities and masculinities – and so gendered possibilities – have been associated with pockets of significant global change in countries where gender-equality policies are a central concern (e.g. Finland). Even though claims around biological predispositions and determinism continue – and may indeed be claimed by fathers ('it's kind of instinctive'), other research continues to challenge biological determinist arguments, especially in relation to capabilities to care (see Chapter 2). In earlier periods bringing together reproductive, caring realms, and facets of hegemonic masculinity would, in many Western societies, have felt contradictory, but more nuanced theorisations of pluralities of masculinity have challenged earlier hegemonic constructions and/or at least indicate new possibilities in relation to how masculinities are understood and lived (e.g. Anderson, 2011; Brandth and Kvande, 2016; Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Elliott, 2015; Flood 2002; Johansson and Klinth, 2007; Kimmel et al, 2004; Messerschmidt, 2009; Murphy, 2016). For example, even though the normative worker may continue to be presumed as masculine, notions of 'caring masculinities' and examples of stay-at-home dads who may assume characteristics and activities once defined as feminine, also co-exist (Doucet, 2006, Elliot, 2015; Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Ranson, 2012, 2015). Similarly, research has shown the simultaneous ways in which both 'doing' and 'undoing' gender may be enacted in masculine practises of caring for children (Deutsch, 2007; Miller, 2011; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Change, then, may not be radical but piecemeal and co-exist in hegemonic displays and caring practises.

The concept of 'caring masculinities' has more recently been subject to further theorisations. For example, Elliott (2015) has drawn upon feminist care theory in claims to 'reveal new ways of thinking through masculinities' (p. 17). Through the development of a practicebased framework, Elliott recasts 'caring masculinities' as encompassing a 'rejection of domination' and the integration of 'positive emotion, interdependence and relationality' in place of traditional masculine values such as protection and provision (2015:2). Such theoretical developments – Elliott brings together critical studies of men and masculinities and feminist care theory – illuminate the ways in which practices and categorisations of gender require continual monitoring and reflection, both as everyday practises and broader, global processes. Even so, in the United Kingdom there is no national data collected on fathers, which means even basic demographic information is not available (Burgess et al, 2017). Similarly, fathers have been less likely as a group to be a focus in many publications except as figures bearing an economic responsibility if no longer living with their children, and/or positioned as figures of 'threat' and 'risk' (Featherstone, 2003, 2009).

But evidence of changing masculine practices in relation to behaviours once exclusively associated with femininity and nurturing capacities raises new questions in relation to the organisation of family lives. For example, questions about 'gatekeeping' and the taking on or giving up of responsibilities in relation to our children. To date theorisations of 'maternal gatekeeping' have been overly simplistic, failing to adequately take account of the historical legacy of gendered

arrangements, how ‘preferences’ and ‘choices’ emerge and how power might operate (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Hakim, 2000; Lewis et al, 2008; McBride et al, 2005; Puhlman and Pasley, 2013; SchoppeSullivan et al, 2008). But as theorisations of gender challenge previous arrangements, what are the implications? How far might ‘paternal gatekeeping’ come to feature as a strategy – or constraint – in caring too? These questions are returned to in subsequent chapters (see Chapters 6 and 7).

From a historical perspective, men’s increased emotional involvement in child-rearing and care work is still relatively novel, as understood in contemporary (sharing) terms (Bailey, 2012). Ideas about who should be engaged in child-rearing and who in paid work have of course fluctuated through history (Davidoff et al, 1999). Aspects of these family arrangements have been underscored at different historical moments, emphasising particular attributes of motherhood and fatherhood and their differences (Hendrick, 2016). For example, the period following the Second World War in the United Kingdom (1950s and 1960s) usefully illuminates the ways in which the categories of ‘motherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’ are socially constructed and culturally inflected at different historical moments. During this period, the emphasis was on mothers to be ‘homemakers’ and nurturers, caring for their family at home (rather than in the outside jobs they’d undertaken during the war years), while men recommenced their work outside the home, providing economically as the family ‘breadwinner’. Maternal and paternal responsibilities were further delineated (and separated) through the development of attachment theory and its emphasis on maternal bonding and associated maternal responsibilities (Bowlby, 1971). Here ‘the notion that continuous and solicitous maternal attention in the early years of a child’s life was crucial to the healthy emotional and psychological development of children’ was emphasised by the ‘experts’ of the day (Wall, 2010:254). Practises of maternal and paternal agency and ‘acceptable’ behaviours have then been etched through with historical precedent and shaped in modern times in relation to patriarchy and political ideology (Davidoff et al, 1999; Ruddick, 1997). But in many contemporary Western societies, both parenthood and paid work have become intensified and so pose daily challenges for mothers and fathers (and increasingly grandparents too) in how these competing demands are undertaken and ‘balanced’. Even so, in the United Kingdom women who are mothers are more likely to work flexibly, fitting their employment around the perceived needs of their husband/partner and children (Gatrell, 2005).

## **Working Parenthood**

Working parenthood has become the norm in the United Kingdom<sup>2</sup> (and across other European countries), and the political rhetoric of the ‘hardworking family’ has also become a mantra of the Conservative government elected in 2015. Politically the ‘hardworking family’ exemplifies the neoliberalist ideals of the productive worker-citizen and competitive, autonomous individual. However, managing, negotiating and reconciling the competing demands of paid work and family life leaves many working parents feeling time-poor and ‘squeezed’ (Harden et al, 2014:124; see Chapters 3 and 4 of this book). For example, gaps in childcare provision mean that many families can find themselves involved in piecing together informal care arrangements using grandparents, other

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015 in the United Kingdom 79.8% of people aged 16 to 64 with dependent children were employed. Those with dependent children make up 37.0% of all workers who were employed in 2015. Employment rate for married or cohabiting men was 91.8% and for women 72.9%. [www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/workingandworklesshouseholds/2015-10-06](http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/workingandworklesshouseholds/2015-10-06).

family members and friends and/or expensive, privately provided childcare services (Ben-Galim and Thompson, 2014; Lewis et al, 2008). Even though high-quality childcare provision should be a fundamental part of any state infrastructure, where families either economically have to, or want to, combine family life and paid work (e.g. as in Sweden), day-care provision in the United Kingdom is expensive and provision ad hoc. Recent research in the United Kingdom also shows that grandparents take on significant amounts of childcare and so play an important role in plugging childcare gaps for working families (O'Brien, 2009:209; see also Hoff, 2016; Lewis et al, 2008).

However, policies to 'support' hardworking families may in reality mean 'intervention' in the United Kingdom context, where standardised parenting programmes and models of compliance (for example in promoting appropriate parental interactions with schools) are used to '(re)skill or (re)train parents' (Daly, 2013:159). Less contentious forms of support to working families include policies regarding flexible working and parental leave. In 2003 paternity leave was introduced in the United Kingdom that for the first time allowed fathers (who were eligible) to take 10 days leave at or around the time of the birth of their child or at the time of an adoption. Subsequent initiatives (e.g. a right for a parent to request flexible working, fathers to take additional paternity leave) have culminated in the most recent Shared Parental Leave (SPL) policy, which came into operation in April 2015. This policy was heralded in some political quarters as a challenge to 'the old-fashioned assumption that women will always be the parent that stays at home', and claims to recognise that 'many fathers want that option too' (Clegg, 2014). The new policy (in theory) enables parents to decide together how to share care during the first year following the birth of a baby and provides some flexibility in relation to this ([www.gov.uk/government/news](http://www.gov.uk/government/news); Working Families Employer Briefing, 2014). Interestingly, a political intention to extend this leave to enable working grandparents to also share parental leave entitlement (from 2018) has also been mooted ([www.gov.uk/government/news](http://www.gov.uk/government/news), October 5, 2015). However, in the first year following implementation of SPL policy, take up has been disappointingly low and reflects a political naivety about the complexity of aspects of family lives and the possibility of 'choices' within pervasive cultures of paid work and care (Moss et al, 2012). In reality this is not surprising because a policy can signal change but not ensure its take-up (unless significantly incentivized), as new 'choices' and negotiations within families are engaged from pre-existing unequal relationships and assumed responsibilities around work and family. The gender pay gap and 'motherhood wage penalties' add a further dimension to household considerations as well as deeply ingrained work practices (Budig and England, 2001; Costa Dias et al, 2016). But over time, and drawing on examples from Nordic countries, change can be achieved, but only by making expectations and intentions explicit in policy and incentivising individual leave policies and entitlement appropriately (Miller, 2013b; Moss et al, 2012).

It is now well recognised that a country's policy framework, particularly the level of financial incentive, is a key variable in shaping fathers' propensity to take family leave (Feldman and Gran, 2016; O'Brien, 2009; O'Brien et al, 2015). It is clear that working parents – mothers and fathers – populate home and work spheres in ways that are less segregated than in recent historical times. Even though historically some mothers have always had to work through economic necessity – and this remains the case in many households up and down the country – other aspects of being in the workplace can be experienced as personally satisfying and/or rewarding. The workplace can be a setting for identity work, career development, economic growth and visible success, all aspects of the social world that have been much more associated with men's lives and successful and valued forms of hegemonic masculinity. Men, on the other hand, as they become fathers, have more opportunities (e.g. through policies) to engage in what have been maternally etched areas of the social world, the home, caring for children and domestic chores, all largely invisible, undervalued



and taken-for-granted aspects of the social world. But some areas are more impervious to change and the sharing of household chores remains a primary site of gender inequality (Norman and Elliot, 2015; see Chapter 2).

### **Researching Family Lives: Discourses, Narratives and Everyday Practices**

In contemporary society, individuals and couples come to be parents in a landscape that is more demanding and subject to new forms of surveillance than in previous times. As Ramaekers and Suissa (2012: vii) observe, 'parents today have various claims made on them in the sense that they are expected to perform in certain ways and to achieve certain outcomes'. Discourses around parenting, societal and personal expectations, the number of experts and amount and types of parenting advice has all burgeoned in significant and often perplexing ways. What sits at the core of broader macro and structural features are individuals and couples with children trying to manage family practises, relationships, caring and work in the best ways they can in different, and sometimes very difficult, circumstances. Even though managing these demands might seem daunting (or perhaps because they are), research continues to demonstrate that families 'remain of great importance to people, even as patterns of residence and family household arrangements are now more varied' (Charles et al, 2008:122; see also Edwards et al, 2012; Jamieson et al, 2014).

As a research focus too, families continue to provide a critical area of study for academics as family formations, relationships and their durability and complexity become more variable as well as increasingly subject to external surveillance. As a human activity, being a parent includes relational and intergenerational connections, obligations, responsibilities, love, frustration, disappointment and joy. But the claims of parenthood expressed in dominant discourses invoke morally, culturally and historically grounded expectations of parenting practises that are taken to constitute 'good' parenting. Yet ambiguity and contradictions run across these domains – the activity and discourses – reflecting the messy lived experiences that unfold in daily family practises (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012; Jensen, 2010). Mothers also continue to be held more responsible in parenthood discourses – and their practises – because fathers are still more able to acceptably prioritise paid work over care (Bass, 2015; Miller, 2017b). Although scholars have continued to examine the contours of family lives, there has been debate on the relevance and retention of the concept of 'family' and its ability to encompass the complexity and diversity of contemporary relationships and experiences (Edwards and Gillies, 2012; Edwards et al, 2012; Morgan, 2014; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). The increasing use of the language of 'personal life', 'intimacy' and 'kinship' are seen to potentially obscure 'other meanings and significances' that are denied or distorted through an individualist lens (Edwards and Gillies, 2012:67). Because the focus taken in this book is on experiences of parenting, family lives form a significant, variable and changing backdrop against which the mothers and fathers make sense of their unfolding parenting, working and everyday relationships. The participants are connected through families and wider/intergenerational familial networks (e.g. grandparents), their experiences are shaped by expectations – cultural and political – that permeate their lives through dominant and counter discourses. These discourses provide the discursive tools through which to narrate their selves as mothers and fathers in relational ways, which can reproduce and reinforce stereotypical modes of 'good parenting' and can (sometimes simultaneously) challenge and disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about parenting, parenthood and family lives.

Different discourses – for example discourses of parental responsibility – then provide different discursive resources and possibilities through which to situate (or not) experiences. Discourses are also morally and politically imbued and so can shape expectations and ways of telling in particular

'moral' ways (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003). In the data used in the subsequent chapters of this book, the ways in which mothers and fathers provide accounts of their experiences as these have unfolded is a particular focus (Miller, 2005, 2017b). Because the data used are longitudinal, attention is paid to time and the temporal ordering of events associated with unfolding experiences as parents of growing children provide accounts of these (Neale, 2012). This approach, and comparisons between the two studies, has importantly revealed the gendered aspects of behaviours and narrative possibilities: what can be said, when, and by whom as well as the obdurate assumptions that persist around paid work and caring. Philosophically this approach is located within traditions and debates about 'storied human lives' in which we 'are not only the actor, but also the author' (Frank, 1995; MacIntyre, 1981:198; Ricoeur, 1984). It is argued, then, that as human beings, we are storytelling animals. We act with intention and purpose and make sense of past experiences, present and future hopes and expectations, in relation to particular historical, cultural and social contexts. And it is this ability that provides us with an identity and a sense of existing through time and of acting with intention and purpose in the world. Taking a narrative approach in the study of subjective experience enables the researcher to access and explore individual identities: the ways in which social actors actively produce narrative accounts and present their selves to others.

In earlier episodes of the participants' experiences of becoming mothers and fathers, intentions, expectations and early practices were explored. These included expressions by the women of conventional expectations (especially in relation to mothers) of 'being there for others' (Adkins, 2002; Bailey, 2001). But the fathers also expressed intentions of 'being there' in physical and caring ways as first-time fatherhood was anticipated (Miller, 2010). However, daily practices did not necessarily map onto intentions and following the birth of a child, the new mothers and fathers typically assumed traditionally gendered behaviours despite their earlier intentions (Miller, 2011). The ways in which the birth of a first baby crystalizes gender differences in the home and paid work has also been well documented (Asher, 2012; Perrons, 2009; Sanchez and Thomson, 1997). Less so are the negotiations, or absence of these, that couples engage in as parenting practises and relationships with older children develop (Fox, 2009). How do parenting relationships and sharing of caring responsibilities and practices unfold as children grow and start school, become teenagers and anticipate their adult futures and as family contexts and parental relationships shift? The following section provides details of the study methods before the empirical data are examined across the subsequent chapters.

## **The Studies**

The two UK-based qualitative longitudinal studies that are drawn upon in this book have focused on women's and men's transition experiences as they became parents for the first time and has followed later, unfolding experiences of family lives, caring and paid work. The initial Transition to First-time Motherhood Study followed 17 women through a year in their life as they became mothers for the first time (Miller, 2005, 2007). The participants were interviewed on three separate occasions; before the birth, in the early weeks following the birth and at a later interview when the baby was approximately 9 to 10 months old. Semi-structured interview schedules were designed for each of the three interviews. Recruitment commenced in 1995, and data collection was completed in 1998 and analysed/reanalysed in subsequent years (2005, 2007, 2012). More recently it was decided to go back to the women in the original sample because their firstborn child would be approximately 18 years old. Going back would enable the capture of much later episodes of the women's experiences as well as their reflections – a longer view – on their mothering and

motherhood experiences. University research ethics approval, which had not been a requirement when the original study was carried out (Miller, 2012), was gained for this later data collection phase, and the 'Motherhood Revisited' study commenced in 2013. The hope was that these later interviews would facilitate data collection at another transitional stage in the women's lives as they care for their older, teenage children who will have reached early adulthood (18 years), where decisions about futures (e.g. education and work directions) and other more immediate concerns can occupy both young lives and mothering identities and experiences. The research would also gather participant's reflections on the ways in which their mothering 'careers' had unfolded and the ways in which these are/can be narrated (Ribbens, 1998).

The companion qualitative longitudinal Transition to First-time Fatherhood Study was commenced several years after the Motherhood study, with interview data initially being collected between 2005 and 2007. However, although this study followed the same research design as the earlier Motherhood study, once the study commenced it was decided to extend the time frame to include an additional (fourth) interview with the fathers, when their child reached their second birthday (Miller, 2010). The sample in this study also consisted of 17 men who were becoming fathers for the first time. During the interview carried out at 2 years with the fathers, the possibility of being contacted for a later interview when their children reached school age was discussed, and general agreement was expressed. In 2012 university research ethics committee approval was gained to re-contact the participants as their firstborn child reached school age (5–6 years of age). The rationale for keeping the study 'live' was both to add to a gradually growing literature on early years fathering experiences and to return to a sample seemingly comfortable ('socialised') with the qualitative open-ended and iterative interview format. It has been noted elsewhere that research on parents and parenthood has tended to focus on mothers because of their availability as main carers to provide details of family lives to researchers. It thus seemed important to try to add fathers' voices to these descriptions.

### ***Sample Details***

The sample in the Motherhood study consisted of 17 white, heterosexual women who had a mean age of 30 years at the time of the first antenatal interview. This was slightly older than the national average age for first births in the United Kingdom when the original data were collected (mid-to-late 1990s) but typical of the trend among professional women to delay decisions about reproduction. In many ways, this sample conformed to stereotypes that are held in wider society about those who are positioned as 'good' mothers. These women were predominately middle-class by occupation, 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). The sample of 17 men recruited in the second study, which focused on Fatherhood, had a mean age of 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 that less advantaged groups might enjoy. Both samples were recruited from dual-earner households. The longitudinal data have been collected through repeat face-to-face interviews, initially on three separate occasions across the first year of transition to parenthood (late antenatal period, early and late postnatal interviews), followed by an end-of transition-study postal questionnaire used to collect demographic data and feedback on experiences of participating in the transition studies. The data collected in these earlier interviews provide vital

context and earlier episodes of intentions and unfolding experiences, against which the more recent data collection phase has been undertaken and the new data analysed. The subsequent interviews were conducted with the participants in the Motherhood study as their child reached their 18th birthday (see Chapter 4) and in the Fatherhood study as their firstborn child reached 2 years of age and again in the year their child started primary school (see Chapter 5). It is this later data that provide the major focus for the empirical chapters of this book (Chapters 3– 6). In the Transition to Fatherhood Study, 13 of the original 17 fathers were re-contacted (using existing contact details) about participating in the later (school-age children) interviews. Of these 13, 10 fathers 'opted in' to the new phase of interviews. In the Motherhood study, 17 years after the last interviews 10 of the original participants were traced (using a variety of means see Miller, 2015; Oakley, 2016) and invited to participate in a further interview. Of these 10, 6 women agreed and participated in a subsequent interview (for further details, see Chapter 4). Across the two studies approximately 200 hours of interviewing has been carried out (in 125 interviews) and inform the analytical and theoretical work undertaken in this and the two earlier (companion) books (see Chapter 7).

The practise of undertaking qualitative longitudinal research has grown significantly in recent years, becoming recognised 'as a distinctive mode of social enquiry' (Neale, 2012). Through its focus on unfolding experiences over time, the approach in these two studies has specifically examined the ways in which intensions, expectations, experiences and reflections in relation to motherhood, fatherhood, parenting, family care and paid work can be narrated.<sup>3</sup> Going back to participants can raise new issues for the researcher; for example the accumulation of new data may provide alternative and/or contradictory versions of earlier accounts and more broadly prompt questions of what constitutes 'the data' (Miller, 2015). Similarly, 'which versions of events carry authenticity' and what analytical insights and dividends may be gained through the analysis of cumulative (over a longer time period) and so more richly textured episodes of experience and narration (Neale, 2012:12)? Going back into lives and experiences that have unfolded in unexpected ways, and reminding the participant of an earlier version of their self, can enrich theorising of temporal subjectivity, but also unintentionally reinforce feelings of sadness or expressions of failure, for example when parents are no longer together (see Chapter 5). The accumulation and weaving together of episodes of experience gained through qualitative longitudinal research helps to illuminate – in these particular research projects – the 'tenuousness' of selves and selfhood, the ways in which powerful discourses associated with family lives and parenting shape what is felt to be permissible to say, when and what remains unspoken, such that earlier theorisations can be confirmed, re-evaluated and refined. The woven together accounts of everyday experiences, narrated in sometimes contradictory and edited ways, from different vantage points through parenthood journeys, illuminate subjectivity as fluid, recognisable and reflexive. Subjectivity is also narrated through particular discourses of parenting drawing upon available/acceptable storylines, aspects of which are gendered, classed and 'raced' and for some parents subjected to particular scrutiny (Gillies, 2008; Lash, 1994; Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2007). But the claims that are increasingly made about and on parents can be hard to escape and eventually come to shape ideas about parenting practises as the language of contemporary parenting is (imperceptibly) taken up.

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<sup>3</sup> For further details of taking a narrative approach see Miller (2005), *Making Sense of Motherhood* (Chapter 1) and Miller (2017a), *Doing Narrative Research*.

## Conclusions

It is clear that a dependent child has needs that must be met for survival, but the ways in which these are understood, regarded as individual and/or shared responsibilities and practically met, has varied historically, culturally and globally. In the Western world, the practices of meeting children's needs is generally and generically understood as parenting, but the rudimentary components of caring for a child, providing sustenance, shelter and love have become overlaid in myriad ways with additional demands of intensive, child-centred care in which children are positioned as more 'needy, vulnerable and dependent' than in previous times (Wall, 2013). Alongside this shift, parents in Western societies are now subject to an 'overwhelming array of advice on how to bring up their children', which continues to be disproportionately aimed at mothers and especially mothers living in circumstances where their choices may be more limited (Raemaekers and Suissa, 2012, viii). Contemporary discourses of parental responsibility invoke morally inflected, and at times, a gender-neutral language of parenting, where parenting is intensive and child-focused, yet research also shows that women are more likely to be primary caregivers as well as increasingly contributing to household incomes through paid work. At the same time, families have become a focus of political interest as successive governments 'cost' the apparent consequences of 'poor parenting' and front campaigns about the importance of getting parenting right in the first year, '1001' days, 3 years (Department of Health, 2016; Edwards and Gillies, 2011; Lee et al, 2014). There are various claims too that permeate the public sphere about parents and how parenting should be undertaken. Against this backdrop, how do the mothers and fathers followed in this book narrate their experiences of being parents and doing parenting? How do mothers and fathers manage the daily activities and the 'mental labor' of caring for their children (in couples and alone) as family lives unfold in unpredictable ways (Walzer, 1996)? What discourses are drawn upon to locate or challenge ideals of 'good parenting', and how are responsibilities divided? Is it possible to escape the dominant, contemporary discourses of intensive parenting and how/or are these experienced (differently) by mothers and fathers? At its core, parenting involves the daily activity and thinking responsibility of caring, including providing and protecting a child. This is often assumed to be and taken on as a primary responsibility, associated firmly with assumptions of maternal instincts and capabilities. But men can care too. So in the following chapter, a finer focus is taken on what care is, what it means and how caring comes to be practised.