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## Caregiving Dads, Breadwinning Mums: Pathways to the Division of Family Roles Among Role-Reversed and Traditional Parents

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the circumstances and considerations that lead to the allocation of family roles among male carer/female breadwinner families in comparison to traditional parents. A sample of 236 parents with children from birth to 5 years old completed extensive questionnaires about their daily routines and perceptions of their division of responsibilities. Economic considerations or labor market constraints were mentioned as main reasons by parents in both traditional and role-reversed arrangements, however, parents in traditional roles were more likely to mention suitability for the role as a key consideration. The results further showed that main caregivers—fathers and mothers alike—had a higher perception of choice over the allocation of roles and were significantly more satisfied with their division than main breadwinners. The majority of breadwinners wished they could work fewer hours, and breadwinning mothers, more than fathers, wished their partner could work more hours. The findings also shed light on the relationship between perception of choice, satisfaction with the current arrangement and preference for a change in the future.

### KEYWORDS

breadwinning mothers; caregiving fathers; childcare; choice; family and work; role-reversed parenting

Parents' struggle to find the right balance between fulfilling work and family responsibilities has been amplified in many countries over the last decades (Sullivan, 2019). The increase in employment-related demands, such as working hours, alongside greater expectations of intensive parenting have intensified the struggle to negotiate working and parenting commitments (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996; Korunka & Kubicek, 2017). For many families, the solution to reconcile both domains involves the mother opting for part-time employment or having a career break to become the main caregiver (O'Brien & Wall, 2017; Warren et al., 2010). In the UK in particular, the male breadwinner/female caregiver model is dominant, with 53% of British mothers of preschool children working part-time and 26.2% of

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mothers staying home to provide childcare (Office for National Statistics, 2018, 2019). This unequal division of family labor disadvantages women in the workforce and contributes to the stability of the gender pay gap (Sullivan, 2019).

While a growing body of research has attempted to understand the barriers to greater gender equality in the division of labor (Risman, 2004; Sullivan, 2019), findings also point to a slow but steady change in men's participation. Cross-national evidence suggests that men have increased their involvement in childcare in nearly every country (Geist & Cohen, 2011; Hook & Wolfe, 2012; Kan et al., 2011), resulting in a growing convergence in men's and women's family work over time (Sullivan, 2006, 2019). While there is an ongoing debate as to how much and under what conditions this change occurs, some scholars have called for a shift in focus from the persistence of gender inequalities to the interactive processes of change (Deutsch, 2007; Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Risman, 2009).

The current study responds to this call by focusing on parents who reverse family roles so that the father is the main caregiver and the mother is the main breadwinner. Although still statistically rare, role-reversed parenting constitutes a growing phenomenon of theoretical and practical importance (Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Latshaw, 2011). For example, in the USA the proportion of fathers who started taking care of the home and children as a reason for not being economically active increased from 4% in 1989 to 24% in 2016 (Livingston, 2018). These numbers substantially underestimate the prevalence of male caregivers as they do not include fathers who care for their children while working part-time (Latshaw, 2011).

In moving beyond gender as an organizing system (Lorber, 2005, 2012), parents who reverse roles resist conventional images of motherhood and fatherhood and normative pressures toward a gender-based division of roles. Examining the reasons that guided their decision-making process would advance our understanding of the conditions that enable couples to downplay gender-based considerations in the division of family responsibilities.

Given the relative recency and rarity of role-reversed parenting, the body of research on this phenomenon is relatively small, and almost all evidence comes from small qualitative samples (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004). The literature is further limited by the lack of comparison to more traditional parenting arrangements, which could illuminate the unique paths and experiences of role-reversed parents. Finally, most of the studies have focused on either the experiences of breadwinning mothers (e.g., Blom & Hewitt, 2020; Chesley, 2017; Medved, 2016a) or those of caregiving fathers

(e.g., Doucet, 2004; Lee & Lee, 2018; Lee & Lee, 2018; Medved, 2016b), despite them often being complementary parts of the same phenomenon.

This study aims to investigate the experiences of parents who reverse roles compared to those who maintain a traditional division of family work. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of British parents with young children, it seeks to gain insight into their considerations, subjective perceptions of choice, and satisfaction with their arrangement. In particular, it explores the reasons that lead parents to reverse roles, the extent to which they view their arrangement as resulting from a conscious intentional choice or external constraints, and the extent to which their family roles and perceptions of choice determine their satisfaction with the division of roles and their desire to change it.

### **Subjective perception of choice**

Evidence from qualitative research suggests there is a large variability among primary caregiving fathers in their subjective perception of choice. Some fathers feel that they intentionally chose their role (e.g., Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Kramer et al., 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018) whereas others feel they had no other option, being “forced” into the role rather than freely choosing it (Barker et al., 2012; Doucet, 2004; Heppner & Heppner, 2009; Latshaw, 2015; Merla, 2008). Fathers who choose their caregiving role indicate high costs of daycare, partner’s higher earning potential and partner’s educational and professional achievement as some of the reasons behind their choice (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Kramer et al., 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018). They also refer to their desire to directly care for their child and the importance of being at home raising their children (e.g., Kramer et al., 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018).

Research found further that caregiving fathers who felt they had consciously chosen their role carried out a greater share of the housework and childcare, particularly conventionally feminine tasks, compared to those who felt they had been forced into their role (Latshaw, 2015). In addition, caregiving fathers who entered the role reluctantly, spent shorter periods of time in this role and were more likely to express a preference for returning to full-time employment, contrasting with fathers who felt they chose the role and did not have concrete plans to return to the labor market in the near future (Latshaw, 2015).

Within role-reversed arrangements, mothers’ perception of choice in becoming the main breadwinner for their family has been less researched. A study by Chesley (2017) indicated that breadwinning mothers with stay-at-home partners did not have a very clear perception of making a conscious choice over their role. They seemed to “fall into” the role by chance

rather than plan for it (Chesley, 2017). Other findings suggest that bread-winning mothers view their careers as an important part of their lives and seek a solution that allows them to pursue their career while providing quality family time (Rushing & Sparks, 2017).

### **Reasons for the division of family roles**

Individual and structural factors might facilitate or constrain family decisions and parental involvement in housework and childcare. Parents' involvement in childcare can be influenced by their working hours, income and education (e.g., Deutsch et al., 1993; Fox et al., 2013; Gaunt, 2005; Pinho & Gaunt, 2019, 2020). For example, lower involvement in childcare is related to fathers' longer working hours and higher income, while their partners' longer working hours can increase fathers' participation in childcare (Deutsch et al., 1993; Gaunt, 2005; Pinho & Gaunt, 2020).

The literature has identified several reasons that lead couples to opt for a division of roles where the father is the main caregiver. The most cited ones are economic reasons, where the mother has greater income or earning potential (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2018). In situations where the mother earns the higher income or has the potential to earn more and accomplish higher growth and success in her career, couples sometimes opt for prioritizing the mother's career progression while the father assumes the role of a primary caregiver and either reduces his working hours or takes a break from his career (Doucet & Merla, 2007; Merla, 2008).

Another main reason that has been identified in a number of studies refers to the father's health or labor market constraints (Chesley, 2011; Deutsch, 1999; Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2018). Facing a chronic disease or disability that prevents the father from paid work can drive him to undertake the role of main carer for his children. More often, fathers' labor market constraints, mainly unemployment, change couples' social and financial situation, and present fathers with an opportunity or necessity to transfer their role from breadwinners to carers (Deutsch, 1999; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Kramer et al., 2015; Merla, 2008; West et al., 2009). Times of economic recession may be particularly significant, as many fathers who lose their jobs become main caregivers to avoid the economic burden of childcare services. Some scholars argue that the 2008 recession in the US and Europe played an important part in the rise of role-reversed arrangements over the following years (Allegretto & Lynch, 2010; Boyer et al., 2017; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Locke, 2016).

Parents' individual characteristics and beliefs, such as gender ideologies, essentialist perceptions, ambivalent sexist attitudes and maternal

gatekeeping, can have an impact on their division of family roles and childcare tasks (e.g., Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Gaunt, 2006; Gaunt & Pinho, 2018; Macon et al., 2017; Pinho & Gaunt, 2020). The decision of becoming the main caregiver can be shaped by couples' perceptions of their ability as parents, meaning that they see one partner as better suited for the role (Deutsch, 1999; Chesley, 2011). Previous findings indicated that primary caregiving fathers and their partners seem to believe that men are equally capable of nurturing and meeting children's needs (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Solomon, 2014). When opting for a nontraditional arrangement, couples mentioned the father's attributes that made him better fit for the caregiver role, for example, being more patient with the children or being better at performing childcare tasks (Chesley, 2011; Deutsch, 1999; Dunn et al., 2013; Lee & Lee, 2018; Rushing & Sparks, 2017). On the other hand, breadwinning mothers also described themselves as well-suited for the role of breadwinner (Medved, 2016a).

Partners' incentive and encouragement of fathers to assume the main caregiver role is another influential factor in parents' decision of their family arrangement (Doucet & Merla, 2007; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Rochlen et al., 2010; Rushing & Sparks, 2017). Fathers who have support from their partners are more likely to become main caregivers than those whose partners do not support them or do not see caregiving as appropriate or fit for a man (Merla, 2008; Rochlen et al., 2010).

The importance of having one at-home parent and not relying on "strangers" to provide childcare, added to the lack of extended family to rely on, is also mentioned by parents who reverse roles, either in itself or together with other considerations (Deutsch, 1999; Lee & Lee, 2018; Merla, 2008; Rushing & Sparks, 2017; West et al., 2009). Some parents explain that having one parent at home allows them to address the child's individual needs, tailoring their responses to the child's characteristics.

### **Satisfaction with the division and preference for change**

Studies suggest that the main caregivers' experiences of providing childcare are similar regardless of their gender. Both mothers and fathers express tedium, boredom, the feeling of being undervalued or sometimes losing their patience (Barker et al., 2012; Latshaw, 2011). A number of studies indicate that primary caregiving fathers feel isolated, lonely and unsupported (Lee & Lee, 2018; Rochlen et al., 2008, 2010; Rushing & Powell, 2015), however similar experiences of loneliness were reported by primary caregiving mothers (e.g., Zimmerman, 2000). Despite facing challenges, primary caregiving fathers report high levels of satisfaction with their role (Lee & Lee, 2018; Rochlen et al., 2008).

Main breadwinners, both mothers and fathers, report similar experiences of stress and pressures associated with the responsibility to financially provide for their families (Chesley, 2017; Kaufman, 2013). Nonetheless, breadwinning mothers sense a complex dynamic of feeling empowered while suffering conflict between their breadwinning and mothering roles (Chesley, 2017; Dunn et al., 2013). Additionally, breadwinning mothers are a target of judgment by society (Chesley, 2017). On the other hand, they express great appreciation of their caregiving partners and feel supported by them (Dunn et al., 2013; Rushing & Sparks, 2017). Overall, breadwinning mothers tend to exhibit satisfaction with their arrangement as it allows them to feel secure in maintaining their job and at the same time knowing that their child is well cared for by their partner (Rushing & Sparks, 2017).

### **Overview and rationale**

The existing literature shows that subjective perception of choice varies among primary caregiving fathers. While some feel they were forced into the role, others feel they intentionally chose it. Higher subjective perception of choice is linked to fathers' greater involvement in childcare and long-term commitment to the role of caregiver. Less is known about breadwinning mothers' perception of choice. It appears that breadwinning mothers with stay-at-home partners do not feel like they chose their role deliberately. In order to enhance our understanding of role-reversed parents' subjective perceptions of choice, the present study addressed the following question:

- To what extent do role-reversed parents feel that they consciously chose their division of roles or that they were forced into it? Compared to traditional parents, do role-reversed parents have a higher or lower subjective perception of choice?

Drawing on the literature reviewed above, it is clear that couples refer to a range of reasons that led them to an unconventional division of roles. The main reasons mentioned by couples relate to economic considerations, health and labor constraints, their perceptions of their abilities and suitability for the role, and their preference for parental care over non-parental care. To better analyze the reasons/considerations that lead parents to role-reversed arrangement, the second research question was:

- How do parents describe the reasons that led them to their division of roles? Do role-reversed parents differ in their reasons compared to

traditional parents? Do parents with high subjective perception of choice give different reasons than parents with low perception of choice?

Regardless of gender, parents in the same role (caregivers or breadwinners) report similar experiences. Primary caregiving mothers and fathers express tedium, the feeling of being undervalued or sometimes losing their patience. Despite facing challenges, primary caregiving fathers indicate satisfaction with their role. Primary breadwinning parents, both mothers and fathers, describe similar experiences of stress and pressures associated with the role of main financial provider for their families. The third research question was designed to investigate parents' satisfaction with their current allocation of roles:

- To what extent are role-reversed parents satisfied with their division of roles or would prefer to change it? Compared to traditional parents, do role-reversed parents have a higher or lower satisfaction and desire to change the division of roles in the near future?

These questions were explored in a sample of British parents with at least one child aged 5 years old or younger. The child's age was limited in order to capture the life stage when childcare needs are most demanding and work-family conflict is highest. The United Kingdom has one of the highest employment rates in Europe for women (Eurostat, 2020), however, a very high percentage of it is part-time employment (Office for National Statistics, 2020). These patterns can partly be explained by the high costs of childcare services in the UK (OECD, 2017) and social disapproval of full-time employment for mothers (Phillips et al., 2018). Therefore, British parents' decisions about work and childcare are constrained by complex internal and external factors.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Data were collected from 369 British married or cohabiting heterosexual parents with at least one child aged 5 years or younger. Within this sample, 236 (128 women and 108 men) reported a division of labor in which two distinct family roles could be identified and were therefore retained for further analysis. Primary caregiving parents were defined as working at least 10 weekly hours less than their partner and providing at least 10 weekly hours of childcare more than their partner. Primary breadwinning parents



were defined as working at least 10 weekly hours more than their partner and providing at least 10 less weekly hours of childcare.

The allocation to study groups was validated through self-identification, by asking participants to report who is the primary caregiver in their family (on a scale from 1 = *My partner is the primary caregiver* to 5 = *I am the primary caregiver*) and who is the primary breadwinner in their family (on a scale from 1 = *I am the primary breadwinner* to 5 = *My partner is the primary breadwinner*). Participants also reported the percentage of family income they contributed relative to their partner (on a scale from 0% to 100%).

Participants' self-identification confirmed their classification to the study groups, with those classified as primary caregivers based on time investment also reported that they assume this role in their family ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) while those classified as breadwinners reported that their partners are the main caregivers ( $M = 1.70$ ,  $SD = .79$ ),  $t(233) = 26.76$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, those classified as breadwinners also reported that they assume this role in their family ( $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = .56$ ) and earn a larger proportion of the family income ( $M = 86.09$ ,  $SD = 17.78$ ) while those classified as caregivers reported that their partners are the main breadwinners ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) and that they earn a smaller proportion of the family income ( $M = 17.99$ ,  $SD = 16.55$ ),  $t(233) = 26.76$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $t(225) = 31.04$ ,  $p < .001$  for breadwinner role and proportion of income respectively.

Participants' socio-demographic characteristics can be found in [Table 1](#). The age of the youngest child ranged from one month to 5 years ( $M = 1.80$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and the number of children in the family ranged from 1 to 5 ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = .78$ ) (see [Table 1](#)).

Although the sample represented a broad range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, most participants identified as white (92%) and the sample included an overrepresentation of educated parents (84% had an academic degree).

## **Measures**

### ***Time investment***

To allocate participants to one of the four gender X role study groups, time investment in work and childcare was assessed. Participants were asked to indicate the number of hours they and their partners worked for pay per week, and the number of weekly hours in which they and their partners were the sole care providers for their child. Participants who worked at least 10 weekly hours less than their partner and provided at least 10 weekly hours of childcare more than their partner were assigned to the primary caregiving group. Participants who worked at least 10 weekly hours

**Table 1.** The demographic characteristics of the participants.

	Women		Men	
	Primary caregivers ( <i>n</i> = 71) <i>n</i> (%)	Primary breadwinners ( <i>n</i> = 57) <i>n</i> (%)	Primary caregivers ( <i>n</i> = 56) <i>n</i> (%)	Primary breadwinners ( <i>n</i> = 52) <i>n</i> (%)
Age of youngest child				
1	57 (80%)	28 (49%)	26 (46%)	28 (54%)
2	11 (16%)	12 (21%)	15 (27%)	12 (23%)
3–5	3 (4%)	17 (30%)	15 (27%)	12 (23%)
Number of children				
1	37 (52%)	24 (44%)	26 (47%)	19 (39%)
2	29 (41%)	21 (39%)	23 (42%)	23 (47%)
3–5	5 (7%)	9 (17%)	6 (11%)	7 (14%)
Age				
22–34	38 (54%)	21 (37%)	20 (36%)	17 (35%)
35–40	27 (38%)	28 (50%)	24 (43%)	20 (41%)
41–49	6 (8%)	6 (13%)	5 (9%)	11 (22%)
50–59	0	0	7 (12%)	1 (2%)
Education				
Less than high school	0	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)
High school diploma	3 (4%)	0	5 (9%)	1 (2%)
Some college education	11 (15%)	4 (7%)	5 (9%)	2 (4%)
Academic degree	57 (81%)	50 (91%)	44 (80%)	43 (92%)
Annual income				
≥£7,000	3 (4%)	0	14 (26%)	0
£7,001–£17,400	17 (25%)	4 (7%)	7 (13%)	2 (4%)
£17,401–£24,200	6 (9%)	10 (19%)	6 (11%)	10 (21%)
£24,201–£31,200	9 (13%)	7 (13%)	8 (14%)	14 (29%)
≤£31,201	34 (49%)	33 (61%)	20 (36%)	22 (46%)

more than their partner and providing at least 10 less weekly hours of childcare were assigned to the primary breadwinning group.

### **Family roles**

To validate the classification of the two distinct family roles, participants were asked to indicate who they identified as the primary caregiver in their family. Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 = *My partner is the primary caregiver*, 3 = *Both of us equally* to 5 = *I am the primary caregiver*. Participants were also asked who they perceived as the primary breadwinner in their family. They indicated their response on a scale ranging from 1 = *I am the primary breadwinner*, 3 = *Both of us equally* to 5 = *My partner is the primary breadwinner*. Subsequently participants' responses, their time investment and percentage of family income they contributed relative to their partner were analyzed. As the majority of participants' identification was consistent with their time investment they were allocated to one of the four study groups accordingly. In the five cases where discrepancy between participants' responses and their actual involvement was found, the allocation criterion was made based on participants' report of time investment

rather than self-identification, as their behavior did not coincide with their views.

### ***Subjective perceptions of choice***

Based on a review of the literature related to the subjective perception of choice over the division of family roles (Kramer et al., 2015; Latshaw, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018), a measure was developed to assess participants' perceptions of the extent to which they felt the current division reflected their choice. Participants were asked "*To what extent do you think that this division reflects your own choices and to what extent do you feel you were forced into it?*." Responses were indicated on a bipolar 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *We were definitely forced into this division* to 5 = *We definitely chose this division*.

### ***Reasons for the division of roles***

The considerations taken as part of the decision-making process that led participants to their current parenting arrangement was assessed by an open-ended question: "*What do you feel were the reasons that led you and your partner to your current division of roles?*." Participants were free to give any reasons and to raise any other issues that they considered relevant to their decisions. All these responses were carefully examined, a thematic analysis undertaken and a coding scheme developed that could be incorporated in the analysis. The scheme included six different categories (economic reasons, health or labor market constraints, fit for the role, importance of having one parent at home or other reasons) and reflected a variety of categories identified by the literature (Chesley, 2011; Deutsch, 1999; Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Kramer et al., 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018). Members of the research team independently engaged in an open coding process. Subsequently results were compared and discrepancies in judgments were discussed and resolved. Inter-coder agreement for this measure was very high (92% kappa statistic). Dissimilarities among participants with different perceptions of choice with regards to the reasons that led to their current division of roles were also explored. To this end, participants were split into two groups: those who scored high on the subjective perception of choice measure (selecting either 4 = *We somewhat chose it* or 5 = *We definitely chose this division*) were classified as high perceived choice; participants who scored low (selecting 1 = *We were definitely forced into this division* or 2 = *We were somewhat forced*) were classified as low perceived choice. Participants who indicated 3 = *Not sure/both* were excluded from the analysis that explored different perceptions of choice concerning the

reasons that led to their current division of roles as they did not manifest a clear opinion either way.

### ***Satisfaction with the division and preference for change***

To evaluate participants' satisfaction with their current division, they answered the question "*How satisfied are you with the current division of responsibilities?*" on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *Very dissatisfied* to 5 = *Very satisfied*. A desire to change working hours was evaluated on a scale from 1 = *I wish I could work much more (and earn more)* to 5 = *I wish I could work much less (and earn less)*. Similarly, a wish to change the partner's working hours was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *I wish my partner could work much more (and earn more)* to 5 = *I wish my partner could work much less (and earn less)*. The extent to which participants would like their division of roles to change in the coming year was measured by one item: "*To what extent would you like this division of roles to change in the coming year?*" Answers were indicated on a 5-point from 1 = *Very much* to 5 = *Not at all*.

### ***Socio-demographic variables***

Participants indicated their age, occupation, level of education and ethnic background. Gender and age of the participants' youngest child, as well as the total number of children in the household were also assessed. Participants also reported the percentage of family income they contributed relative to their partner and their individual annual income on a nine-point scale ranging from 1 (*less than £7,000*) to 9 (*more than £52,000*). Some individual income brackets represented a very small percentage of participants, thus they were grouped into five categories only, illustrated in Table 1.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were recruited through advertisements in children and community centers, playgrounds and playgroups across the United Kingdom. Recruitment was also made online through numerous parenting websites, web forums, blogs and social media. Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire on the ways in which families organize work and childcare. To determine their eligibility, the participants indicated if they had children, how old their youngest child was and if they lived together with their child and the other parent. Participants who had more than one child were asked to answer the questions regarding their youngest child. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The completion

**Table 2.** Means and standard deviations in degree of perceived choice, satisfaction with current division of roles and preference for change in the future.

	Traditional		Role-reversed	
	Caregiving women ( <i>n</i> = 71)	Breadwinning men ( <i>n</i> = 52)	Breadwinning women ( <i>n</i> = 57)	Caregiving men ( <i>n</i> = 56)
Perceived choice				
<i>M</i>	3.73	3.17	2.79	3.52
<i>SD</i>	1.11	1.25	1.54	1.38
Satisfaction with current division				
<i>M</i>	3.76	3.29	3.19	3.71
<i>SD</i>	.98	.83	1.04	.97
Preference for change in the future				
<i>M</i>	3.52	3.31	2.86	3.25
<i>SD</i>	1.04	.98	1.16	1.21

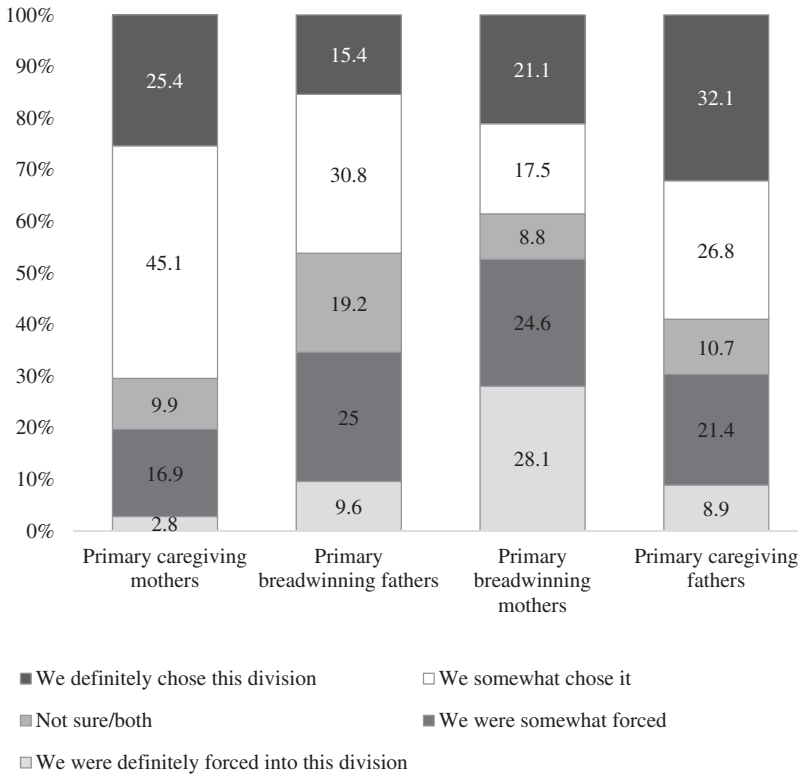
of the questionnaire took 20 minutes on average. Participants were then thanked and debriefed.

### **Analytic strategy**

As a first stage, parents' perception of their degree of choice in forming their current division of roles was explored by examining the differences between male and female caregivers and breadwinners. A normality check of the numeric data revealed that it did not meet the parametric assumptions of normality. The differences in participants' perception of choice across the study groups were therefore examined using a Kruskal-Wallis test. Perception of choice reported by parents in traditional and role-reversed arrangements was also compared using a Mann-Whitney test.

Next, a thematic analysis was conducted examining the reasons that lead parents to their current division of roles. As a first step the research team familiarized themselves with the data, reading through all the answers in order to become aware of all aspects. An initial production of codes was generated identifying interesting characteristics of the data. Once all the answers were initially coded and organized, a list of the different codes identified was produced and relevant coded data extracts were sorted into themes. Subsequently, themes were refined and discussed among the research team to form a coherent pattern and resulted in the final six categories used to analyze the data. Different reasons mentioned by participants who felt forced into their division of roles and who felt they chose their division were also examined using Chi-square tests.

Finally, participants' satisfaction with their current division of roles and preference for changes in the future was examined and the differences



**Figure 1.** Distribution of degree of perceived choice by study group.

between the four study groups were analyzed using Kruskal–Wallis tests. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS software.

## Results

### *Subjective perception of choice*

To explore how parents perceived their degree of choice in forming their current division, differences between male and female caregivers and breadwinners were examined. Table 2 presents means and standard deviations of participants' perception of choice. The analysis revealed a significant difference among study groups regarding their perception of choice,  $H(3) = 14.86, p = .002$  (see Figure 1). Due to the non-normally distributed nature of our data, post-hoc Mann–Whitney tests using a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of  $.017(.05/3)$  were used to examine role and gender differences in the participants' subjective perception of choice. The analysis showed that main caregivers perceived having a significantly higher degree of choice in their division than main breadwinners,  $U(N_{\text{caregiver}} = 127, N_{\text{breadwinner}} = 109) = 5,084, z = -3.62, p < .001$ . Perception of choice did not differ significantly between caregiving mothers ( $Mdn = 4$ ) and fathers

**Table 3.** Comparing traditional and role-reversed parents in the primary reason they report for their allocation of family roles.

	Traditional		Role-reversed		Percentage by reason ( <i>n</i> = 231)	$\chi^2$ (1)
	Caregiving women ( <i>n</i> = 70)	Breadwinning men ( <i>n</i> = 50)	Breadwinning women ( <i>n</i> = 57)	Caregiving men ( <i>n</i> = 54)		
Economic reasons	28.6%	34.0%	52.6%	46.3%	39.8%	3.52
Health or labor market constraints	30.0%	28.0%	33.3%	29.6%	30.3%	0
Fit for the role	25.7%	20.0%	1.8%	11.1%	15.1%	12.60***
Importance of having one parent at home	11.4%	12.0%	10.5%	5.6%	10.0%	1.09
Other reasons	4.3%	6.0%	1.8%	7.4%	4.8%	0.91
Total by study group	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	

\*\*\**p* < .01.

(*Mdn* = 4),  $U(N_{\text{caregiving mother}} = 71, N_{\text{caregiving father}} = 56) = 1,877$ ,  $z = -0.56$ ,  $p = .57$ , or between breadwinning mothers (*Mdn* = 2) and fathers (*Mdn* = 3),  $U(N_{\text{breadwinning mother}} = 57, N_{\text{breadwinning father}} = 52) = 1,252$ ,  $z = -1.43$ ,  $p = .15$ .

A Mann–Whitney test was used to compare the perception of choice reported by parents in traditional and role-reversed arrangements. The analysis showed that traditional (*Mdn* = 4) and role-reversed parents (*Mdn* = 3) did not differ in their perception of choice overall,  $U(N_{\text{traditional}} = 123, N_{\text{role-reversed}} = 113) = 6,151$ ,  $z = -1.57$ ,  $p = .12$ . However, as can be seen in Figure 1, mothers in traditional arrangements (*Mdn* = 4) had the highest perception of choice, contrasting with mothers in role-reversed arrangements (*Mdn* = 2) who had the lowest perception of choice among all the study groups,  $U(N_{\text{caregiving mother}} = 71, N_{\text{breadwinning mother}} = 57) = 1,329.50$ ,  $z = -3.43$ ,  $p = .001$ .

### Reasons for the division of roles

Five different themes emerged from the review of participants' written responses about the reasons that have led to their parenting arrangement (see Table 3). The range of categories mentioned by all parents reflects a complex process that despite its uniqueness appears to share some similarities across the study groups.

#### Economic reasons

From the analysis of participants' responses, a key pattern emerged that reflected economic reasons regarding the decision to enter the work-family arrangement. The following quotes suggest the mother's or father's greater income or career potential were a key consideration: "My husband earns

*more than I do, so financially it is more sensible for me to reduce my hours ...*” (Primary caregiving mother, 35), *“My spouse earns more money than I did ... We downsized our mortgage so that I could stay at home”* (Primary caregiving mother, 35) or *“My earning potential and the work I do - which allows me to work usual work hours... My husband had less opportunities to make the kind of money we need and was unhappy in the work he was doing”* (Primary breadwinning mother, 38).

### **Health or labor market constraints**

An additional pattern reflected situations where job loss or relocation, job dissatisfaction or instability occurred. For example, *“I had a self-employed business which I needed to keep running. It earned well and my husband wasn’t in a career as such. Made sense for him to reduce his hours and be the primary child carer whilst I returned to work ...”* (Primary breadwinning mother, 34) or *“I was offered redundancy at the time that my partner’s maternity leave finished. We decided that it gave a brilliant opportunity for me to spend time with our daughter so I accepted it”* (Primary caregiving father, 26). Additionally, some participants also mentioned health limitations as the reason for their unemployment or their partner’s inability to work: *“My partner has health issues and is unable to work so I’ve had to”* (Primary breadwinning mother, 32).

### **Fit for the role**

The responses under this category referred to the greater suitability of one of the parents to either the caregiving or breadwinning role a main consideration in the decision process. The following quotes from main caregivers are examples that embody their self-perception as better fit for the role: *“Natural decision for me (Mum) ... that’s the way it should be isn’t it?! I spend more time with our daughter so she is more emotionally attached to me ...”* (Primary caregiving mother, 28), *“I am the more natural parent (by my wife’s admission, not just mine)...”* (Primary caregiving father, 38) and *“My husband hated his job and I got bored of the same routine. I studied and a job came up that I’m passionate about, and my husband longed for more family time ...”* (Primary breadwinning mother, 35).

### **Preference for parental care**

Some parents also mentioned their desire to avoid non-parental care as the reason for their decision: *“Our main priority was to ensure either myself or my husband look after and bring up our daughter. We didn’t want to put her into childcare or rely on family to help. We do occasionally get babysitting help from family”* (Primary caregiving mother, 32) or *“We initially*



**Table 4** Comparing traditional and role-reversed parents in the reasons they report for their allocation of family roles by degree of perceived choice.

	High perceived choice (n = 128)	Low perceived choice (n = 77)	$\chi^2$ (1)
Economic reasons	32.8% (n = 42)	53.2% (n = 41)	0.01
Health or labor market constraints	25.8% (n = 33)	35.1% (n = 27)	0.60
Fit for the role	19.5% (n = 25)	7.8% (n = 6)	11.65*
Importance of having one parent at home	16.4% (n = 21)	1.3% (n = 1)	18.18***
Other reasons	5.5% (n = 7)	2.6% (n = 2)	2.78

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*planned to put our son into nursery when my wife's maternity leave came to an end. However having read up on the potential negative effects of daycare on young children, we decided that we were not comfortable leaving him with anyone. We therefore simply had to decide who gave up work to look after him full time...*" (Primary caregiving father, 35).

An additional category was created to represent all the answers that did not fit into any of the previous categories (e.g., "A combination of practicality and idealism") or were only mentioned by 1–2 participants (e.g., "My spouse ending up quitting work to become the primary care for our child as he needs constant care"). For example, two participants mentioned their children requiring constant care due to developmental or health problems as the reason that influenced their decision.

Overall, economic considerations (39.8%) and health or labor market constraints (30.3%) were most frequently mentioned as the main reasons that led the participants to their current division of roles. Chi-square tests were used to compare between parents in traditional and role-reversed arrangements in their tendency to mention various reasons (see Table 3). Interestingly, the two groups only significantly differed in mentioning *fit for the role* as the reason that led them to their current division of roles,  $X^2(1) = 12.60$ ,  $p < .001$ . The analysis revealed that *fit for the role* was mentioned considerably more by traditional parents than role-reversed parents, indicating that traditional parents viewed the mother as more fitted to provide care and the father to provide economic security.

Chi-square tests were conducted to examine whether participants who felt forced into their division of roles gave different reasons than participants who reported that they chose their division (see Table 4). The findings indicated that overall, parents with a higher perception of choice tended more to cite one parent being better fitted for childcare as the reason that led to their decision, than parents who felt forced into the division,  $X^2(1) = 11.65$ ,  $p = .001$ . However, the perception of mothers as more suited than fathers to provide childcare was mentioned as a reason for being a primary caregiver both by women who felt forced into this role and women who felt they chose it. The following two quotes exemplify that contrast: one mother perceived to choose it "... *It was me that was*

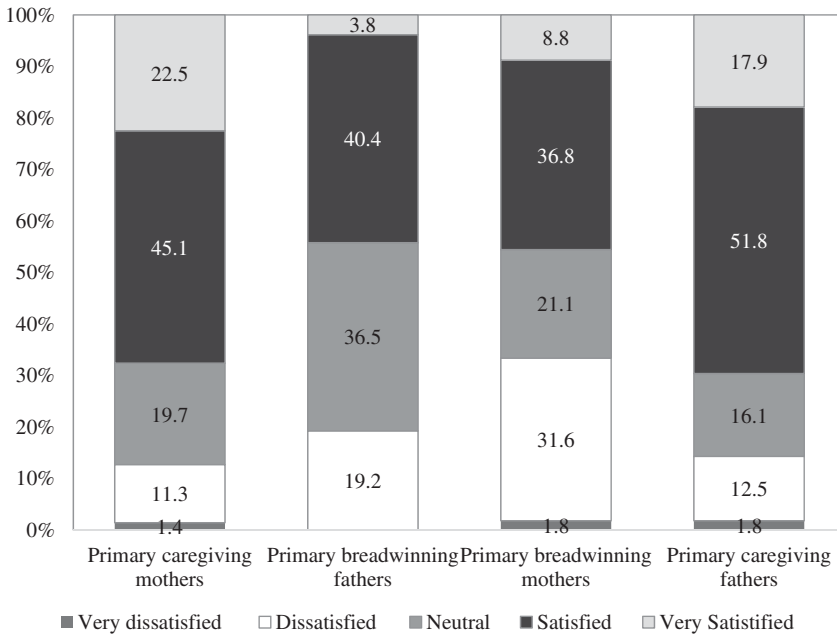
*pregnant and because we wanted to breastfeed and nurture through the early years (only realistic for mum to do when breastfeeding) we choose to encourage my husband's career and for me to nurture the family...*" (Primary caregiving mother, 31); contrasting with the other's perception of being forced to it "*I still breastfeed so when ill, in night and to sleep automatically fall to me due to that. My spouse is self-employed farmer so his hours mean I must do things while he is working*" (Primary caregiving mother, 32).

Parents' preference for parental care was also mentioned notably more by parents with high perceived choice than by parents with low perception of choice,  $X^2(1) = 18.18, p < .001$ . That is, parents who perceived that they have chosen their arrangement based their decision more on the benefits of their child receiving constant parental care than parents who felt they were forced into it. For example, "*We both wanted our children to grow up with one of us looking after our children all day every day*" (Primary caregiving mother, 28), illustrates how parents with higher perceived choice gave more weight to the benefits of having one parent home.

Interestingly, economic reasons were mentioned both by participants with a high and those with low perception of choice, but were framed differently as enabling or constraining respectively. For example, participants who had a higher perception of choice referred to economic reasons such as "*I earn more and she wants to be at home*" (Primary breadwinning father, 31), while participants who felt forced into their current division mentioned economic reasons such as "*Disparity in income - it made far more sense for me to reduce my hours than for my partner to do so. Bigger house, bigger mortgage, couldn't afford to do it any other way*" (Primary caregiving father, 38). Similarly, reasons related to health or labor market considerations were framed as an opportunity by participants with high perception of choice, "*I gave up my job to stay at home, partly because I disliked my job and took voluntary redundancy... so it made sense for me to be at home*" (Primary caregiving mother, 31) and as a constraint by participants with low perception of choice, "*Husband forced not to work due to immigration issues*" (Primary breadwinning mother, 34).

### **Satisfaction with the division of roles**

To gain a better understanding of the participants' satisfaction with their current division of roles and preference for changes in the future, differences between the four study groups were analyzed using Kruskal–Wallis tests as the normality assumptions for our data were not satisfied (see [Table 2](#), and [Figures 2 and 3](#)). A significant difference was found regarding satisfaction with the division of roles,  $H(3) = 16.62, p = .001$ . As our data were

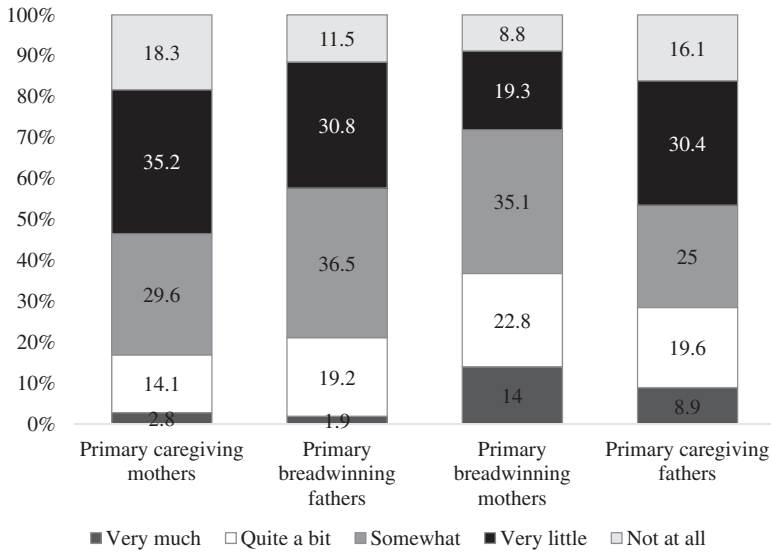


**Figure 2.** Distribution of satisfaction with current division of roles by study group.

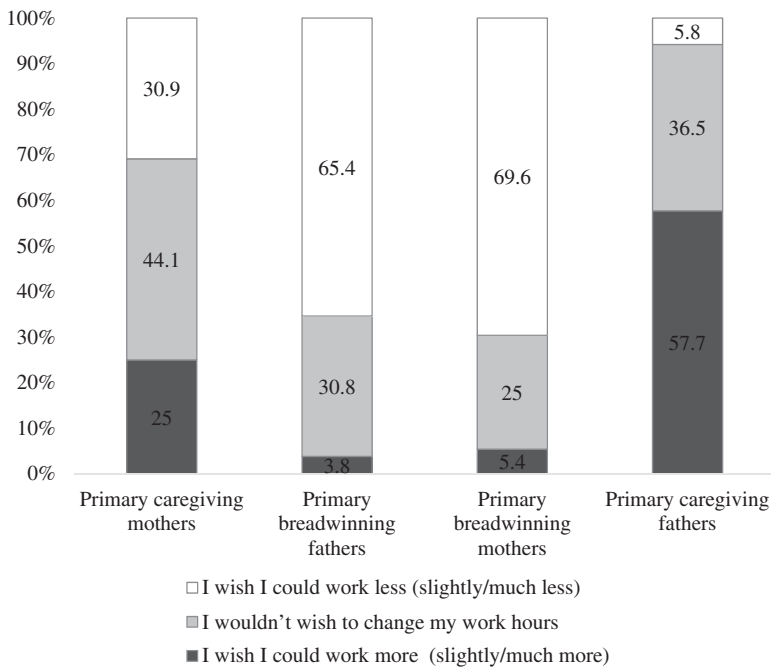
not normally distributed, post-hoc Mann–Whitney tests using a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of  $.017(.05/3)$  were used to compare roles and gender differences in participants' satisfaction with their current division of roles. The analysis indicated that main caregivers were significantly more satisfied with their current arrangement than main breadwinners,  $U(N_{\text{caregiver}} = 127, N_{\text{breadwinner}} = 109) = 4,909.50, z = -4.07, p < .001$ . Caregiving mothers ( $Mdn = 4$ ) and fathers ( $Mdn = 4$ ) did not differ significantly in their satisfaction levels,  $U(N_{\text{caregiving mother}} = 71, N_{\text{caregiving father}} = 56) = 1,940.50, z = -.25, p = .81$ . Similarly, breadwinning mothers ( $Mdn = 3$ ) and fathers ( $Mdn = 3$ ) did not differ in their satisfaction levels,  $U(N_{\text{breadwinning mother}} = 57, N_{\text{breadwinning father}} = 52) = 1,408.50, z = -.47, p = .64$ .

To compare parents' satisfaction in traditional and role-reversed arrangements, a Mann–Whitney test was used. Although there was no difference in satisfaction between traditional ( $Mdn = 4$ ) and role-reversed parents ( $Mdn = 4$ ),  $U(N_{\text{traditional}} = 123, N_{\text{role-reversed}} = 113) = 6,631.50, z = -.64, p = .52$ , role-reversed parents manifested a stronger preference for change in their division of roles compared to traditional ones,  $U(N_{\text{traditional}} = 123, N_{\text{role-reversed}} = 113) = 5,720.50, z = -2.43, p = .015$  (see Figures 2 and 3).

To understand more specifically the nature of change the participants wished for, differences between the four study groups in their desire to change their own work hours and their partners' work hours were analyzed

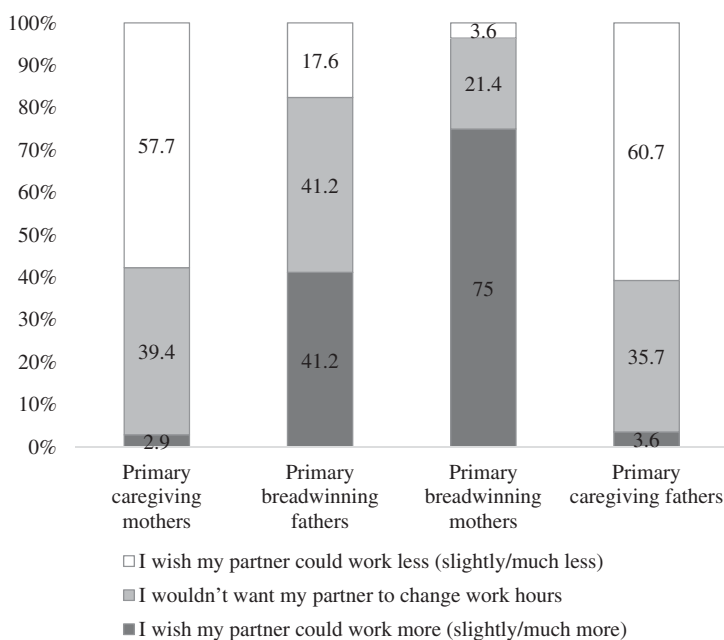


**Figure 3.** Distribution of preference for change in the future by study group.



**Figure 4.** Distribution of preference for participants' own work hours.

using Kruskal–Wallis tests (see [Figure 4](#) and [5](#)). A significant difference was found regarding participants' desire to change their own work hours,  $H(3) = 70.22, p < .001$ . Post-hoc Mann–Whitney tests using a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of  $.017(.05/3)$  revealed that main caregivers expressed a



**Figure 5.** Distribution of preference for participants' partners' work hours.

significantly higher preference to work more hours and earn more compared to main breadwinners,  $U(N_{\text{caregiver}} = 120, N_{\text{breadwinner}} = 108) = 2,940.50, z = -7.51, p < .001$ . Caregiving fathers ( $Mdn = 2$ ) expressed their desire to work more hours significantly more than caregiving mothers ( $Mdn = 3$ ),  $U(N_{\text{caregiving mother}} = 68, N_{\text{caregiving father}} = 52) = 1,048.50, z = -4.00, p < .001$ . In contrast, breadwinning mothers ( $Mdn = 4$ ) and fathers ( $Mdn = 4$ ) did not differ in their preference for reducing their work hours,  $U(N_{\text{breadwinning mother}} = 56, N_{\text{breadwinning father}} = 52) = 1,355, z = -.73, p = .47$ . Overall, while a quarter of the caregiving mothers and more than half of the caregiving fathers wished they could work more hours, the majority of breadwinners, both mothers and fathers, wished they could work fewer hours (see Figure 4). A Mann–Whitney test comparing preference for change in work hours among parents in traditional and role-reversed arrangements did not show overall differences between traditional ( $Mdn = 3$ ) and role-reversed parents ( $Mdn = 3$ ),  $U(N_{\text{traditional}} = 120, N_{\text{role-reversed}} = 108) = 5,667, z = -1.72, p = .09$ .

Participants' desire to change their partners' work hours was also examined and a significant difference was found,  $H(3) = 106.41, p < .001$ . Post-hoc Mann–Whitney tests using a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of  $.017(.05/3)$  were used to compare roles and gender differences within roles. The analysis revealed that main caregivers expressed a significantly higher preference for their partners to work fewer hours compared to main breadwinners,  $U(N_{\text{caregiver}} = 127, N_{\text{breadwinner}} = 107) = 1,944.50, z = -9.84, p <$

.001, with more than half of the main caregivers, mothers and fathers, preferring their partners to work less (see [Figure 5](#)). Caregiving fathers ( $Mdn = 4$ ) and mothers ( $Mdn = 4$ ) did not differ in their preference for their partners to work fewer hours,  $U(N_{\text{caregiving mother}} = 71, N_{\text{caregiving father}} = 56) = 1,848, z = -.76, p = .45$ . On the other hand, breadwinning mothers ( $Mdn = 2$ ) tended significantly more than breadwinning fathers ( $Mdn = 3$ ) to wish that their partner could work more hours,  $U(N_{\text{breadwinning mother}} = 56, N_{\text{breadwinning father}} = 51) = 859.50, z = -3.72, p < .001$ . As can be seen in [Figure 5](#), 75% of the breadwinning mothers wished their partners could work more, compared to only 41% of the breadwinning fathers. As a result, there was a significant difference between parents in traditional and role-reversed arrangements, with role-reversed parents ( $Mdn = 3$ ) wishing their partners would work more hours significantly more than traditional parents did ( $Mdn = 3$ ),  $U(N_{\text{traditional}} = 122, N_{\text{role-reversed}} = 112) = 5,668.50, z = -2.56, p = .011$ .

## Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the subjective perception of choice, reasons and satisfaction with the current division of roles comparing parents in traditional and role-reversed arrangements. The findings revealed that male and female caregivers had similar perceptions of choice and satisfaction with their division of roles. Main caregivers expressed higher perception of choice and were significantly more satisfied with their division of roles than main breadwinners. Such results provide support for a body of research that demonstrates that male caregivers intentionally chose their non-normative family role (e.g., Doucet, 2004; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Latshaw, 2015; Rochlen et al., 2010). Furthermore, the high level of satisfaction manifested by caregiving parents is presumably related with their higher perception of choice over entering the role of caregivers (Latshaw, 2015; Mathur, 2001). Previous research has also found a link between increased parental oxytocin levels and more affectionate and stimulatory contact behaviors with children (Apter-Levi et al., 2014; Feldman et al., 2010; Feldman et al., 2011). Therefore, caregiving parents' higher level of satisfaction with their role might also be explained by the higher levels of oxytocin that parents experience when consistently caring for their children.

Results revealed that among the four study groups, breadwinning mothers expressed the highest levels of dissatisfaction with their division of roles and lowest perception of choice, and indicated a higher desire to change their current arrangement. One possible explanation might be that the adoption of the breadwinning role does not necessarily coincide with some

mothers' gender ideologies. Previous research indicated that role-reversed couples or equal sharers do not always hold egalitarian values, holding on to traditional ideals of family life and are rather "forced" into the roles by structural or other external factors (Deutsch, 1999). In families where the mother's income is vital to maintaining the family's economic well-being, or where the father is unemployed, the mother's freedom of choice over the division of roles is very limited. External factors, such as being the only financial provider for their families, can restrict their decision making and their arrangement might not necessarily align with their values and ideologies, impacting their satisfaction with the division of family roles.

The findings also revealed preferences for the future were similar across the four study groups; breadwinners wished to work less and caregivers expressed the same wish for their partners. That is, regardless of gender, both main caregivers and breadwinners desired to reduce breadwinners' work hours. On the other hand, parents in role-reversed arrangements expressed higher preference for changing their division of roles in the future. Specifically, participants in role-reversed arrangements tended to wish the father could work more. This preference for change could be related to the higher unemployment rates and fewer work hours of caregiving fathers in the sample compared to caregiving mothers. Hence, participants in role-reversed arrangements may simply wish that caregiving fathers would be more involved in the labor market and make higher contributions to the family's overall income and not necessarily desire an inversion of roles.

The analysis of the open-ended questions about the reasons that led participants to their division of roles revealed four dominant topics: economic reasons, health or labor market constraints, being fit for the role and importance of having one parent at home; echoing findings from previous studies (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Dunn et al., 2013; Rochlen et al., 2010). The most frequently mentioned reason by both family arrangements was economic considerations. In the case of role-reversed couples, economic considerations drew on supporting, and in some cases prioritizing, women's career due to their higher potential for career progression and greater income, accompanied sometimes by caregiving fathers' discontent with their former job (Doucet & Merla, 2007; Merla, 2008). Health or labor market constraints were also one of the primary reasons stated by participants in both arrangements, a pattern consistent with previous research (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Deutsch, 1999; Kramer et al., 2015; Rochlen et al., 2010).

When asked about the reasons influencing their decision-making process, parents in traditional arrangements tended more than role-reversed parents to mention one parent being more fit for the role, implying that the mother is more apt for caregiving and the father for breadwinning. That contrasting perception of suitability for the caregiving role, ability

to care for the child and respond to their needs among traditional and role-reversed parents is a novel aspect that should be highlighted. The findings illuminate how families' transition to role-reversed arrangements appear to be mostly based on work circumstances and external factors, while down-playing gender-based considerations and traditional normative portrayal of motherhood and fatherhood. This is in contrast with traditional parents, especially caregiving mothers, who make their decision based on the belief that women are fitter for caregiving and possess a superior ability to respond appropriately to the child's needs. Traditional parents appear to assume that men and women are born with different predispositions for different roles (Gaunt, 2006; Rudman & Glick, 2008) and this belief seems to guide their division of roles and influence their involvement in childcare (Bulanda, 2004; Deutsch, 1999; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Gaunt, 2006, 2019). Women's beliefs regarding the relevance of the father's role are associated with more involvement of the father in childcare (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016; Fischer & Anderson, 2012) and their support is important to men assuming a caregiving role (Merla, 2008). Women in traditional arrangements attribute lower importance to the father's role and see the mother as the more natural caregiver than women in role-reversed arrangements. Consequently, such beliefs help shape couples' decision and extends into breadwinning women incentivizing their partners to provide childcare and appreciating their partner's role more (Merla, 2008).

Even when participants in different arrangements enumerated the same reason, a divergent underlying tone could be identified, from parents who felt they intentionally chose the role to the ones who felt forced into it. For example, economic considerations were presented by parents with high perception of choice as enabling conditions (e.g., one partner earns enough to enable the other partner to stay home), and as constraints by parents with low perception of choice (e.g., one partner earns less and hence forced to be the one who cuts work hours). Furthermore, parents with high perception of choice were significantly more likely to mention one parent being more suited for childcare and the importance of having one parent at home as the reasons that led to their decision, than parents who felt forced into the division. Despite the lack of significant differences, the distinctive nuance of answers within the same category and the pattern of answers reflected to some extent couples' perception of choice.

Although our study is among the first to investigate work and family experiences of British role-reversed couples, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the current sample was characterized by an over representation of middle class, well-educated parents, and the extent to which role-reversed parents included in the study represent role-reversed



families in the UK is unknown. The study also focused only on heterosexual married or cohabitating couples who were parents of a young child, excluding other family structures (e.g., divorced, single, same-sex parents, etc.), limiting the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings. Therefore, the results cannot be used to establish the prevalence of particular experiences in the larger population. The reliance on self-report measures represents another limitation as single-source self-reports could be affected by social desirability and are thus less reliable than observations or a combination of multiple sources of data.

Future research can build on these findings to examine how prevalent these experiences are among role-reversed and traditional couples by including a more representative sample of parents. It can also investigate links between perceptions of choice, satisfaction and preference for change current arrangement and ideologies, as well as work and family outcomes, such relationship quality or changes in job performance. Future studies might also benefit from exploring this topic by using in-depth interviews with parents, exploring in detail the concept of caregiving, general challenges of parenting and analyzing other factors (e.g., support system, employment policies) that might contribute to entering, maintaining or changing different family arrangements. Additionally, tracking role-reversed and traditional couples over time would contribute to a better understanding of the longevity and long-term implications of their decisions and satisfaction. The current COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on economic and employment conditions and further highlighted gender inequality in paid and unpaid work (Andrew et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020). Future studies could explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on possible family role changes and division of childcare and housework tasks among role-reversed and traditional couples.

Overall, the findings illustrate that primary caregiving parents are more satisfied with their division of roles and are less likely to feel pressured into entering the caregiving role. The results thus begin to unravel the mechanisms through which the division of family roles occurs and its relationship to choice, satisfaction with current arrangement and preference for the future. Illuminating the role of individual preferences for their working schedule and social structural constraints faced at the workplace may advance our understanding of the processes that prevent breadwinning parents from achieving a better work-life balance.

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