Shared parental leave (SPL) - a catalyst for progressing gender justice or a reinforcement of the status quo? Exploring the disjuncture between parents' increased aspiration to share care and limited uptake of SPL in the UK

Clare Vanessa Fairfax Matysova

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Abstract

This thesis explores parents' decision-making when planning care for their child's first year and the disjuncture between aspiration to share parenting and low uptake of the UK's Shared Parental Leave (SPL). This thesis combines the Capability Approach (CA) to conceptualise what is of value to parents when planning care with a discursive conceptualisation of gender to explore how gender norms are constitutive of parents' care capabilities. Through seven online discussions with parents (36 in total) and 12 follow-up interviews, this thesis contributes to family leave policy and social justice debates, providing insight to interaction between parents' subjectivities, constitutive of gendered relations of power and couple relationalities, and to the role of the UK's SPL policy as a means to parents' care capabilities. Offering theoretical innovation which blurs distinction between gender norms theorised as a conversion factor and as constitutive of parents' capabilities, this thesis extends analysis of the UK's SPL policy as a means, differentially *accessed* by parents, to a means differentially *(co-) productive* of what is feasible and imaginable to parents. Normative constraints were illustrated through contradictions between gendered moral imperatives to treasure time with one's child and the de-valuing of care relative to paid employment. Interaction between masculine and feminine aspects of care illustrated greater value attributed to breadwinning, compared to caregiving, sometimes privileging fathers' greater decision-making power. Rather than providing the means for parents to imagine the feasibility of sharing leave, the UK's SPL policy entrenches default prioritisation of mothers to reproductive work and taking most available leave. Parents' navigation of work-family priorities exposed that more equally sharing leave involved sharing the risks, as well as the joys associated with care, contributing to debates that gender justice cannot be effectively achieved without invoking *affective* justice and challenging patriarchal values underpinning the UK's family leave policy.

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Abbreviations

APL	Additional Paternity Leave
CA	Capability Approach
DNA	Dialogical Narrative Analysis
EDI	Equality (or Equity), Diversity and Inclusion
EU	European Union
HRM	Human Resource Management
NCT	National Childbirth Trust
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SPL	Shared Parental Leave
UK	United Kingdom

1. Chapter One – Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

This thesis explores parents' decision-making in relation to planning care during their child's first year, what parents value in terms of shared parenting and how the United Kingdom's (UK) Shared Parental Leave (SPL) policy shapes, enables or constrains parents' aspirations and capabilities to share parenting during a child's first year as they would like to.

The impetus for exploring how the UK's SPL policy interacts with parents' decision-making is to understand its effectiveness as a parental leave policy in progressing gender equality. The UK has witnessed increased female labour market participation over the past fifty years (ONS 2018) and a transition away from a traditional gendered division of labour in which men's primary responsibility was to be the main household breadwinner and women's was to do the unpaid care work (Lewis and Giullari 2005). As such, increased female employment may be associated with greater gender equality, with positive shifts also noted in public attitudes in the UK towards more egalitarian division of caregiving responsibilities (Taylor and Scott 2018; Allen and Stevenson 2023) and a perceived social context that facilitates greater individual choice (Beck-Gernsheim 1998).

However, progress towards gender equality has been slower in the private sphere of family life, with greater gender inequality remaining in the division of unpaid reproductive work than in the division of paid work (Scarborough *et al.* 2019; Olsson *et al.* 2023). Fathers have become more engaged in childcare and household duties in families within the UK (Miller 2017; Wishart *et al.* 2019), but women are still more likely to do the majority of childcare and housework (Wishart *et al.* 2019; OECD 2021). Gendered parenting roles continue to be reflected in societal attitudes and 71 per cent of the population believe mothers of pre-school children should stay at home or work part time (Taylor and Scott 2018). Caregiving continues to be more synonymous with motherhood than fatherhood, with fathers tending to be seen as the second parent (Koslowski 2022) and breadwinner (Borgkvist 2022). A gendered normative framework of obligations and care continues to impact mothers' career choices and fathers' parenting choices (Duncan

and Irwin 2004; Lewis and Giullari 2005; Pocock 2005; Javornik 2014), and how parents make use of policy entitlements to balance work and parenthood (O'Reilly *et al.* 2014; Wielgoszewska *et al.* 2023). In the UK, based on data in 2022, women are three times as likely to work part-time than men (Buchanan *et al.* 2023). The high proportion of female part time workers is a manifestation of continuing greater family responsibility as part time work enables balancing paid work and familial care. Therefore, despite some evidence of a shift *towards* more equal division of labour and greater individual choice, this shift remains incomplete (England 2010). *Real* egalitarianism within households in the UK, in which reproductive labour is distributed equally, has not been achieved (Giddens 2003; Gregory and Milner 2009). Furthermore, the gender pay gap, and association between the gender pay gap and the transition to parenthood, persists (Grimshaw and Rubery 2015; Costa Dias *et al.* 2021; Joshi *et al.* 2021).

1.2. The transformative potential of parental leave policies

Social policy (or state intervention) has transformative potential through setting the rules of the game (North 1990; Javornik 2014) and, indeed, parental leave policies have been found effective in progressing gender equality in some countries (Koslowski 2022). For example, recent analysis of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data finds that countries with more than six weeks of paternity leave, in comparison to countries with less than six weeks, have four percentage points smaller gender wage gap (OECD 2022; Fogden *et al.* 2023). Parental leave provide a means for parents to take time off work to care for their children and to reconcile paid work and caring commitments (Busby and James 2011). Parental leave policies can also facilitate more equal sharing of care during a child's early years, providing possibilities to progress a more equal gendered division of reproductive labour, in the private sphere of family life, and to improve wellbeing of parents and children in the postnatal period and beyond (Heymann *et al.* 2017; Goodman and Dumet Poma 2023). More fundamentally, parental leave policies provide possibilities to reduce the negative impact of maternity leave on women's career continuity and progression, to create

opportunities for fathers to engage with their children and for children to be cared for by both parents (Kurowska and Javornik 2019).

However, the UK's family leave policies have been slow to provide parents opportunities to share leave and, specifically, fathers' possibilities to take leave. Having lagged behind more advanced (or supportive) European parental leave policy development in the 1980s and 1990s, the UK was found to have the least father-friendly policy in Western Europe in 1997 (Smith and Williams 2007), only introducing leave specifically for fathers in 2001 (Kaufman 2018). The UK parental leave policies evolved from a focus on legal protections for women taking time off work following childbirth and responding to the physiological demands of pregnancy and breastfeeding (Baird and O'Brien 2015). Initiated in 1975, maternity leave and pay policy has gone through various extensions and amendments to eligibility criteria and entitlements. Since 2007, all pregnant and adopting employees have been entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave as a day one employment right, 39 weeks of which are paid, dependent on meeting eligibility criteria (Mitchell 2022).

Fathers' entitlement to parental leave was introduced much more recently in the UK. As of April 2003, fathers were able to take up to two weeks' paid paternity leave following the birth of their child (Atkinson 2017; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019). During the same period that paternity leave was introduced and enhanced (2001-3), maternity leave was also extended from 18 weeks to 52 weeks (Kaufman 2018), perpetuating the gender gap between leave opportunities. From April 2011, fathers were able to take up to six months Additional Paternity Leave (APL) during the child's first year from 20 weeks after the birth or adoption of a child, if the mother returned to work before the end of her maternity leave (Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019).

The UK's Shared Parental Leave (SPL) policy was introduced in 2015, superseding APL and increasing the transferable leave period to 50 weeks, which can be shared at any time in the child's first year, following the two-week compulsory maternity leave period. SPL has been articulated by the UK Government as providing parents greater opportunities to share parenting during their child's

first year, to 'share the joy' (GOV.UK 2019). Specific policy objectives[1] include giving parents greater choice and flexibility in how they care for their child during their first year and encouraging fathers to take a greater caring role (Gov.uk 2015; Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b; Working_Families 2023). SPL, therefore, provides parents opportunity to share care more equally, which responded to parents' increased aspirations to share care and to facilitate greater father involvement (see for example: Working_Families 2017; Chung 2021). Yet, despite parents increased aspiration to share parenting, and public opinion in the UK having become more supportive of parents sharing care (Jones *et al.* 2019), there has been limited uptake of SPL. Latest figures published in 2022 show that less than four per cent of eligible families have taken up SPL (Fatherhood_Institute 2022), and only one per cent of eligible mothers and four per cent of eligible fathers have taken up SPL (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b). This exact disjuncture between parents' increased aspiration to share care and limited uptake of SPL in the UK is the policy problem explored through this thesis.

Criteria employed to evaluate social policy design varies and may focus on achievements in facilitating collective possibilities, such as to progress gender equality, and / or the extent to which a policy facilitates an individuals' capabilities, such as to share care as they aspire to (Yerkes *et al.* 2019b). The Capability Approach (CA) – an approach employed to critically analyse policy - has been adapted within social policy scholarship to evaluate work-family policies and understand the disjuncture between individual aspirations and achieved capabilities (Hobson 2014; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b). Explaining the disjuncture between parents' aspiration to share parenting and the gendered imbalance in parental leave uptake maybe attributed to personal choice (individual), ineffective policy (structural) and

[1] The original policy objectives of SPL scheme were to:
• Give parents more choice and flexibility in how they care for their child in the first year by increasing the share of leave fathers can take, thus enabling both parents to retain a strong link with the labour market; • Encourage more fathers to play a greater caring role (pre-birth and in the first year) via longer, more flexible shared leave; • Increase flexibility for employers and employees to reach agreement on how best to balance work and domestic needs without state interference. See: Department_for_Business&Trade (2023b) *Shared Parental Leave Evaluation report*, available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1166383/shared-parental-leave-evaluation-report-2023.pdf [accessed 01.07.2023].

persistence of gendered parenting norms (cultural), which the CA has been designed, as a multi-layered framework, to encapsulate (Hobson 2014). Evaluation of the UK's SPL policy to date has drawn on international policy comparison and empirical research to highlight (structural) policy features, which potentially constrain parents' choices to share care as they aspire to, thereby partially explaining the disjuncture between parents' aspiration to share parenting and low uptake of SPL in practice. This thesis examines the role of culture, specifically social norms, in contributing to this disjuncture and examining whether gendered parenting norms are constituted in and reconstituted by the UK's SPL policy.

1.3. Understanding the policy problem

Parental leave design varies considerably across countries. The configuration, scope and even the nomenclature used within leave policies is complex and diverse in terms of leave and pay entitlements, eligibility, and the balance between transferable and non-transferable leave available to parents (Koslowski *et al.* 2022). These represent policy features which variously impact parents' capabilities to make use of the policy provision (Gornick and Meyers 2003; Javornik 2014; Javornik and Kurowska 2017).

As introduced above, in the UK, all employees who are expectant mothers or primary adopters are eligible to 52 weeks (*unpaid*) leave regardless of length of service or the number of hours worked. However, eligibility to statutory (and, often, employer enhanced) *paid* leave (maternity, paternity and shared) is based on continuous employment with the same employer for a minimum period. 39 weeks of the UK's 52 weeks maternity leave is *paid,* six weeks of which are 'well-paid' (Koslowski 2021) and the remaining paid at a flat rate (approx. £170 per week in 2023); this is roughly equivalent to 40% of the UK national living wage (the minimum hourly wage set by the UK Government for over 23-year-olds (GOV.UK 2023)). Employees who are expectant mothers or primary adopters and ineligible (due to changing employment or being self-employed) may be eligible to maternity allowance for 39 weeks at the statutory flat rate (Mitchell 2022) – as summarised in table one.

The UK's SPL provides parents with the possibility to share up to 50 weeks of the mothers' 52 weeks maternity leave in their child's first year. To be eligible to share parental leave, both parents must meet eligibility criteria based on length of employment and earnings thresholds (equivalent to maternity allowance eligibility) - as summarised in table one. If the mother does not meet the minimum employment and earnings threshold, their partner is unable to access shared parental leave (Working_Families 2023). Sharing of leave involves mothers' curtailment of up to 50 weeks of their 52-week maternity leave entitlement, and transfer of this curtailed maternity leave to the father / partner as shared parental leave. As such, a father or partner's entitlement is based on the mother's commitment to ending their maternity leave early, and the length of leave depends on the extent of curtailment of the mother's maternity entitlement (Javornik and Oliver 2019; Koslowski *et al.* 2022). The UK's SPL is paid at the equivalent statutory flat rate yet should curtailment of a mothers' maternity leave happen in the first six weeks, there is no statutory '*well-paid*' element within the UK's SPL that is equivalent to the first six weeks (1.4 months) of UK's statutory maternity pay (Koslowski *et al.* 2022) – see table one for summary

Extensive research has been undertaken to evaluate effectiveness of parental leave policies that cross-nationally range from conservative to liberal policy designs. Research has highlighted criteria associated with increased take up of leave by fathers in other countries, criteria which include non-transferable individual rights to well-paid job-protected 'use it or lose it' leave allocated to .fathers, implemented alongside proactive promotion of active fathering (see Castro-García and Pazos-Moran 2016; Karu and Tremblay 2018; Birkett and Forbes 2019; Javornik and Oliver 2019; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019; Koslowski *et al.* 2022; Kvande 2022). Reflecting on and evaluating these policy features in turn - eligibility to leave rights, transferability and levels of wage replacement - within the UK's SPL policy highlights possible explanatory factors for low uptake of the UK's SPL.

Eligibility to parental leave is an important differentiating feature between policies internationally. Analysis of parental leave eligibility criteria highlights social (as well as gender) inequalities, for example, eligibility criteria conditional on

(continuous or stable) employment (Dobrotić and Blum 2019). As noted above, eligibility to *paid* parental leave policies in the UK is based on employment and reflects combined basic citizenship-based parental leave benefits and more generous employment-based parental leave pay. Eligibility to paid leave is limited for parents without continuous employment or moving between, for example, precarious contracts.

The proportion of transferable shared leave and untransferable (or individual) leave also varies between countries. Most of the UK's maternity leave or shared parental leave (if maternity leave is transferred to the partner) is transferable from mother to father or partner. The non-transferable proportion of leave for each parent is a minimal two weeks - for both maternity and paternity / partner leave. In comparison, greater provision of non-transferable individual leave rights is a feature of family leave policies in other countries – for example, 60 days non-transferable leave per parent in Slovenia, two months non-transferable parental leave for fathers in Germany, six months individual leave for each parent, six weeks of which transferable, in Iceland (Koslowski *et al.* 2022). Non-transferable fatherhood leave 'quota', a hallmark of Norway's welfare-state contribution to mobilising fathers as carers, offers one of the longest individual well-paid leave entitlements to fathers', which is *equivalent* to mothers' leave and approximately one third of the total parental leave entitlement. A further 16 or 18 weeks of the family entitlement may be taken by either parent (Kvande and Brandth 2017; Koslowski *et al.* 2022). Data shows that approx. 70% of fathers in Norway take up their 'quota' entitlement. In contrast, in the UK, mothers continue to take the majority of transferable leave that is eligible to be shared between both parents (O'Brien and Wall 2017; Fatherhood_Institute 2022).

Wage replacement also varies across countries and ranges from unpaid to a flat or statutory rate to 'well-paid' (defined as over two thirds wage replacement) and some countries parental leave policies provides combinations of unpaid, statutory and 'well-paid' leave (Koslowski 2021). The UK's six weeks of 'well-paid' maternity leave compares more favourably to, for example, zero weeks 'well paid' leave for mothers in the United States and Australia, which exemplify the lowest entitlement cross-nationally. However, it compares less favourably with longer

periods of well-paid leave offered in other countries. For example, the 15 to 19 weeks 'well-paid' leave entitlements in Norway represents one of the longest periods of well-paid leave (Koslowski *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, neither the UK's paternity leave nor SPL includes a statutory 'well-paid' element.

In the UK, employers can and do enhance parental leave entitlements, both length of leave and wage replacement; enhanced employer entitlements vary considerably. The share of employers who enhance pay is increasing (Bright_Horizons 2023) and some now offer enhanced (and non-transferable) leave with lower eligibility threshold criteria flexibility for parents - such as Aviva, Diageo, and Proctor & Gamble (Koslowski 2021) – summarised in table one. Yet, despite the UK's SPL being recommended as a possible employer strategy to help tackle the gender pay gap (GEO 2019), employer enhancement of SPL entitlements, as well as proactive implementation, has been limited (Forbes *et al.* 2021). From a sample of 500 employers in the UK (of varying size), employers more commonly enhance maternity leave (72%) than paternity (64%) or shared (43%) parental leave (Bright_Horizons 2023).

In summary then, several policy design flaws have been highlighted with reference to limited eligibility, low well-paid leave, and transferability of SPL. The UK's SPL eligibility criteria have been found to favour those in permanent and long-term employment (Atkinson 2017; Javornik and Oliver 2019; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019) and low wage replacement entitlement for SPL is a barrier to take up (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019). Consequently, higher SPL uptake correlates positively with specific demographic characteristics such as education level and higher household income (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019). Unequal take up is also attributed to the gender pay gap on the basis that uptake of low paid leave by the lower paid partner in the couple, often the woman, will result in a smaller income loss for the household (Javornik 2014; Javornik and Oliver 2019). Employer implementation of SPL policy has also been found important (Ndzi 2017; Birkett and Forbes 2019; Forbes *et al.* 2021). For example, take up has been higher in central Government organisations and those with a union presence (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b). Lack of awareness, policy complexity and

concerns regarding continuing gender discrimination in the workplace have been shown to negatively impact take up (Ndzi 2017; 2021). While the UK's SPL policy is articulated through a rhetoric of promoting parents sharing of care, this rhetoric is not aligned, therefore, with viable policy features that facilitate sharing of care in practice.

Table 1: Summary of the UK's family leave policy entitlements and eligibility criteria

	Eligibility	**Entitlement to well-paid wage replacement**	**Entitlement to flat rate (In 2023 £172.48 per week)**
Mother / Primary Adopter or Carer			
Maternity Leave	All employees are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave on giving birth to a baby, regardless of length of service or the number of hours worked[2]	NA	NA
Maternity Allowance	Must pass the ***'employment and earnings test'***[3] – i.e., have been employed and/or self-employed for at least 26 weeks in the 66 weeks up to the week the baby is due AND have earned on average at least £30 a week (gross) averaged over any 13 weeks within the 66 weeks.	None	for 39 weeks (at above flat rate) *(Remaining 13 weeks unpaid)*
Statutory maternity pay	At least 26 weeks' continuous service with employer at the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth.	90% wage replacement for first 6 weeks	then 33 weeks paid at statutory rate (at above flat rate) *(Remaining 13 weeks unpaid)*
Enhanced maternity pay	Varies – depending on employer in the UK context but often at least 12 months' continuous service is required. (72% of a sample of 500 surveyed employees of varying size enhanced their leave - as at 2023)[4]	Varies but commonly average 18 weeks' pay (depending on employer)	then 21 weeks' SMP (at above flat rate). *(Remaining 13 weeks unpaid)*
Father / Partner			
Paternity leave and pay (statutory)	At least 26 weeks' continuous service with employer at the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth	None	Two weeks
Shared parental leave and pay (statutory)	Mother primary carer must curtail or commit to curtailing their leave. / Parent taking SPL must have at least 26 weeks' continuous service with employer at the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth and mother primary carer and their partner must pass 'employment and earnings test' (see above equivalent for maternity allowance)	None	Statutory Shared Parental leave pay for up to 37 weeks depending on partners remaining maternity leave following curtailment (at above flat rate) *(Remaining 13 weeks unpaid)*
Enhanced paternity or shared parental pay	Varies – depending on employer (64% of employers enhance paternity, 43% enhance SPL as at 2023) [5] but often at least 12 months' continuous service is required.	Varies – but commonly two – four weeks enhanced paternity. SPL commonly matches maternity leave.	NA

[2] Working_Families (2023) *Shared Parental Leave: Sharing or splitting up leave*, available: https://workingfamilies.org.uk/articles/shared-parental-leave-sharing-leave-with-a-partner-or-splitting-up-leave/ [accessed 27 March 2023].

[3] Ibid.

[4] Bright_Horizons (2023) *Parental Leave and Family Support Benchmark*: Bright Horizons Family Solutions LLC, available: https://solutions.brighthorizons.co.uk/resources/research/parental-leave-and-family-support-benchmark-uk-2023 [accessed 20.08.2023].].

[5] Ibid.

1.4. The normative context

As well as the structural policy design flaws outlined above, there is also evidence that gendered parenting assumptions are constituted within the UK's SPL policy. A partner's entitlement to leave being based on maternal transfer of leave from mother (or primary carer) to the father (or partner) reflects normative assumptions that mothers are the primary carers (Baird and O'Brien 2015) and creates a barrier to SPL uptake (Mitchell 2015; Atkinson 2017; Sammon 2017; Javornik and Oliver 2019). On the one hand, curtailment of maternity leave (to enable transfer of leave to their partner) has been described as problematically leeching from the mother's entitlement, a "parasitic entitlement for fathers" (Javornik and Oliver 2019: 76). On the other hand, SPL policy positioning of mothers as the primary carer potentially exacerbates mothers' (perceived) roles as the maternal gatekeeper with whom the father must negotiate to access leave (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Javornik and Oliver 2019; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019). However, it has also been argued that low uptake of SPL potentially exacerbates, rather than challenges gendered parenting norms, because where unconstrained choice is assumed, such as a mother's choice to be the primary carer, social norms may become reinforced and further entrenched (Mitchell 2015; 2022). Understanding the relationship between policy, gender norms and couple relationalities, including parental gatekeeping, is therefore, key to understanding the disjuncture between aspiration to share care and sharing of leave in practice as situated within a couple dyad.

While social (family leave) policy has transformative potential (North 1990; Javornik 2014), prevalent social norms also influence, and so can constrain, policy design (Koslowski *et al.* 2022). The normative principles shaping the UK's family leave policy framework, which prioritises mothers as the primary carer, remains gendered and mother centered (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Koslowski 2022). Yet it is unstated and, therefore, unclear what the gender equality objectives of the UK's SPL policy are, whether focusing on increasing female labour-market participation only or extending to progressing equality in the division of labour at home. Meanwhile, the UK's predominantly neoliberal political ideological context places

emphasis on individual choice. There is tension, therefore, between emphasis on individual choice and normative expectations underpinning work family policy in the UK, including the UK's SPL policy, which assumes that mothers (should) do most of the caring. It is the impact of these prevalent social norms on the disjuncture, between parents' aspiration to share care and uptake of SPL, that have been less explored to date.

The national, historical, political policy context frames the policy problem in focus within this thesis, therefore, because it exposes policies as normative or value-laden (Javornik and Yerkes 2020), imbued with state, policy maker and employer priorities and social justice positionalities (Gornick and Meyers 2003; Morgan 2008; Lewis 2009). Parental leave policy development can be contextualised cross-nationally within increased welfare state intervention aimed at enabling parents work family reconciliation (Lewis 2009). Some consensus is found between countries' approaches to work-family, including parental leave policies, for example, as partially driven through broad directives from the OECD and the European Union (EU) (Daly 2021). However, parental leave policies have also been developed within specific historical national contexts in which parents' work family reconciliation intersects other priorities, such as childcare and labour market agendas (Daly 2021). This intersection means that the design, aspiration and remit of work-life policy instruments is underpinned by a hierarchy of priorities and compromises between policy goals (see: Gornick and Meyers 2003; Lewis and Giullari 2005; Korpi *et al.* 2013; Kurowska 2022). Furthermore, political, ideological and cultural context intertwines with social justice positionality, how inequalities (such as gendered division of labour) should be understood and what the roles of different players - welfare states, markets and families – should be in addressing identified inequalities. Parental leave policy's potential to progress gender equality may compete with alternative priorities, such as economic growth and increasing female employment rates (Lewis 2009). Social justice positionalities also reflect variable recognition of historical gendered or patriarchal norms and variable support for state intervention to challenge such historical gendered norms.

The role of employers in shaping family decision-making is also important in the UK's neoliberal context in which employment market competitiveness reflects

varying enhancement of family leave policy. As with statutory policy, employer motivation for implementing and enhancing family-friendly policies, which supplement existing legislation, varies. Employer motivations may be driven by competitive advantage where the benefits (employee recruitment and retention) potentially outweigh the costs (reducing turnover and enhancing recruitment) (Allen 2001; den Dulk 2001; Plantenga and Remery 2009; Forbes *et al.* 2021) and by varying social justice positionalities. Employers' approaches to parental leave policy differs both between and within countries, where some employers proactively implement family friendly policies and others do not (Evans 2002; Gerhart 2009; Plantenga and Remery 2009). Although in liberal welfare contexts, such as the UK, there is greater dependence on market-based solutions and potential for greater employer intervention (Hobson 2014; Petts *et al.* 2020; Koslowski 2022), less employer work-family interventions have been found in the UK (Plantenga and Remery 2009). Yet, both policies and workplace culture are needed to shift unsupportive workplace environments and change workplace attitudes and behaviours (Allen 2001; Burnett *et al.* 2013).

As well as evidence that policy, and employer implementation and enhancement of policy, potentially reconstitutes prevalent gendered parenting norms, there is also evidence that gendered parenting norms are reflected in the differential take up of (low paid) leave between mothers and fathers. The most recent comprehensive data on leave uptake collected in 2009 showed that 45% of mothers entitled to statutory maternity paid leave took over 40 weeks leave. For mothers not entitled to statutory paid maternity leave, 28% of mothers still took over 40 weeks of (unpaid) leave (Chanfreau *et al.* 2011; Koslowski *et al.* 2022). Leave take up duration is not routinely collected in the UK and more recent trends are unavailable (Koslowski *et al.* 2022). However, recently collated figures in the UK context for the period 2015 to 2022 show trends in uptake of (flat rate) maternity allowance exceeds men's uptake of shared parental leave by five times – 51,600 maternity allowance claimants in comparison to 9,800 male SPL pay claimants in 2021/22 (Dunstan 2022). Differential uptake of paid leave is also found between men and women in most other high-income countries, including Nordic countries which have well-paid and individual non-transferable leave rights. In 2005, fathers'

take up only exceeding 10% of parents' total leave take up in a few countries (Morgan 2008; Plantenga and Remery 2009). Although collection of leave take up is inconsistent, more recent international leave reviews continue to show higher uptake of leave by mothers than fathers, even for countries with family leave policies evidencing more supportive features (Koslowski *et al.* 2022).

Moreover, higher take up of low paid leave by mothers in comparison to fathers suggests differential perceptions of acceptability to take low paid leave and that financial considerations are not gender neutral. Parents often consider their financial decision-making to be gender neutral, however, gender norms have been found to be more influential that financial earning (Zimmermann 2023). Women have been found more likely to reduce paid employment even when they have a higher wage than their partner (Andrew *et al.* 2021) and while financial restraints are commonly given as a rationalisation for men not taking low paid leave, mothers taking a financial hit has been found to be an expectation even when fathers earn less (Kaufman 2018). In the UK context, the gender pay gap significantly increases *after* the first child which makes finances, as driven by the gender pay gap, more likely to be a contributing factor for second or subsequent children (Costa Dias *et al.* 2018; 2021). Additionally, focus on financial disincentives for fathers taking low paid statutory shared parental leave, often without acknowledging the same (beyond the first six weeks) for mothers taking low paid maternity leave in the UK, potentially exacerbates the acceptability that mothers take low or unpaid leave.

Gendered uptake of (low or unpaid) leave may alternatively be attributed to physiological factors associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. However, recent research suggests that, when controlled for physiological factors, gender norms are entangled within parents' decision-making contributing to the unequal and gendered division of parental leave. Research comparing the differential impact of the transition to parenthood, between biological and adopting different-sex and female same-sex couples in the Netherlands, found lower impact on consequent pay gaps within same-sex couples suggesting stronger correlation between gender and pay gaps than parenthood (Machado and Jaspers 2022). A further study on differential leave periods between biological and adoptive parents in Sweden found a small (2%), though statistically significant, difference in leave

take up. The study concludes that while pregnancy and breastfeeding increases biological mothers' parental leave, it does not do so to the extent that reflects the difference in length of leave taken (Moberg and van der Vleuten 2022).

Exploration of the policy problem - the disjuncture between parents' increased aspiration to share care and limited uptake of SPL in the UK – requires, therefore, sensitivity to its embeddedness within a normative context. Evidence of gendered parenting norms at the analytical level of a specific policy instrument and within micro-level parent decision-making needs to be situated within the wider normative context because each level of analysis (policy instrument, employer implementation, wider work family policy framework and welfare state regime) contributes to our understanding of the *normative* element of the policy problem (Ciccia 2022). Furthermore, recognition that interpretation of needs, as in all societal contexts, involves a political struggle over which (family, gender equality, employment) needs are deemed worthy and how they should be responded to (Fraser 2013d; Tronto 2013), what Fraser (2013d: 55) terms the 'politics of need interpretation'. In the context of policies that do not enable individuals' care capabilities (for example, to share care as they aspire to), individual experiences may not coalesce into an effective political voice for reasons such as different experiences, "deliberate political obfuscation, mother-guilt, weaknesses in women's organisations, male dominated public life, neo-liberal labour market reform" (Pocock 2005: 46). Consequently, exploration of the contribution of gendered parenting norms to the policy problem in focus within this thesis requires nuanced reflection on what the policy problem is represented to be within its culturally specific context (Bacchi 1999) and with specific consideration from a social justice lens (Doucet and Duvander 2022).

1.5. Project aim and research questions

The central question of this thesis is: 'What do parents value when planning care during a child's first year and how (if at all) does the UK's SPL policy, and policy context, shape, enable, or constrain parents' aspirations and capabilities to share parenting during a child's first year as they would like to?'

I have unpacked this central question as follows:

- What do parents express as valuable to them when planning care during a child's first year?
- How do gendered parenting norms shape what parents express as valuable to them?
- How do gendered parenting norms shape couple relationalities and decision-making dynamics in the planning for a child's first year?
- Whether (if at all) SPL, and employers' implementation of SPL, provides (normative) means for parents to share parenting as they aspire to?

This thesis, therefore, examines how gendered parenting norms shape parents' decision-making in relation to planning care for their child's first year, from a perspective which recognises that what parents value and parents' (micro-level) decision-making is embedded within normative workplace (meso) and policy and social justice (macro) contexts. There are, however, challenges in conceptually disentangling gendered parenting norms from parents leave taking behaviours; for example, in disentangling what an individual values or sees as feasible and imaginable because what is valued (or not) is embedded within settings impacted by the social norms we are trying to explore, making individual reflexivity difficult. As Hobson asks how can we know, what is imaginable in the context of social norms or "what an individual would choose if she is unable to imagine the alternatives and opportunities open to her" (2014: 22)?

1.6. Conceptual framework

There are various ways to understand gendered parenting norms and their contribution to the policy problem - the disjuncture between parents' increased aspiration to share care and limited uptake of SPL in the UK. How gender, social norms and the role of social norms, specifically gendered parenting norms, are understood influence how we interpret and explore these in relation to the policy problem. As such, conceptual specificity is required in how we understand what is of value, gender, the role of social norms, the interaction between individual agency and structure, all of which may vary from different metatheoretical positionalities.

In this thesis, I employ the CA to conceptualise parents' valued functionings to be and to do when planning care for their child's first year to scaffold an "evaluative space" (Robeyns 2017: 38) in which what is of value to parents, as differentially constituted by gender norms, can be explored. I conceptualise gender as normative and discursive (Butler 1990; 1993), to examine, through a social constructivist lens (Cunliffe 2011), how gender norms are constitutive of parents' subjectivities, interactional processes and productive of gender relations of power (Siltanen and Doucet 2017). As such, this thesis examines how gender normatively and discursively shapes parents' capabilities to share care as they aspire to and the role of the UK's SPL policy as a (normative) means to parents' care capabilities, both differentially *accessed* by parents and as differentially *(co-)productive* of parents 'feasible' and 'imaginable' valued functionings. Moreover, it contributes insight into interaction between parents' subjectivities and gendered relations of power as constitutive of couple relationalities and decision-making dynamics when planning care (Doucet 2023).

I situate consideration of the normative focus on individuals' capabilities to pursue what is of value to them from a critical social justice lens (Fraser 2013e), mindful that parents' decision-making is embedded within a patriarchal normative context currently, not a neutral normative vacuum. I draw on the CA as employed to conceptualise parents' valued functionings from a normative standpoint that recognises value pluralism. I also draw on Fraser (2013a) and feminist ethics of care (Tronto 1993; Fineman 2008) respectively to critically expose prevalent patriarchal gender norms and examine how societal value attributed to feminine, reproductive work, and masculine, productive work differentially shapes parents' subjectivities and, in turn, couple relations of power. As such, in examining how gendered parenting norms manifest in relation to the UK's SPL uptake, this thesis also considers whether the gender justice assumptions underpinning SPL are sufficient to erode the impact of such entrenched norms on choice and decision outcomes (Arruzza *et al.* 2019). I situate utilizing a critical social justice lens in this thesis within gender justice debates that variously prioritise equality of opportunities, recognition of gender differences and the criticality of underlying gendered normative values. I use the term gender justice throughout this thesis, rather than

gender equality or gender equity, both in recognition of variation in terminology usage and of variation in how gender justice is articulated and, consequently, how progress towards gender justice may be enacted, which will be explicitly explored and discussed as a central line of inquiry in this thesis.

This thesis contributes a qualitative exploration to what underpins parents' aspirations to share parenting (or not) or to share leave during a child's first year in order to assess *how* gendered parenting norms shape parents' decision-making interactions and relationalities. Earlier quantitative research with parents has suggested that mothers' unwillingness to share their maternity leave, fathers' unwillingness to take leave and financial constraints have been barriers to take up of SPL (My_Family_Care 2016; Ndzi 2018; Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b). For example, a recent UK Government survey based on a representative sample of approx. 3000 parents in 2019, found that 25% of mothers did not want to share parental leave, 7% of mothers and 12% of fathers reported that their partner did not want to share or take shared parental leave and 25% of mothers and 30% of fathers reported financial constraints as the main reason for not taking SPL (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b). However, survey-based explorations of parents' decision-making would not enable more nuanced exploration of the *normativity* of gender, within the context of a couple dyad, because surveys do not facilitate socially produced data that would enable examination of social interactions and relationalities. Focus on mothers' unwillingness to share leave and fathers' unwillingness to take leave from the perspective of individual (unconstrained) choice, without understanding how gendered parenting norms shape couples' decision-making, risks obviating normative constraints on choice, potentially assigning gendered parenting norms irrelevant to household decision-making or naturalising gendered division of leave from a gender essentialist perspective (Bacchi 2009; Daminger 2020).

This thesis focuses, therefore, on social interactions and relationalities, how meaning is created as mediated by gender and gendered parenting norms from a social constructivist metatheoretical perspective (Cunliffe 2011). This focus on social interactions required collection of socially produced data. I employed a two-staged multimethod qualitative approach - a web-based asynchronous chat platform for

private group discussions with expectant parents and subsequent couple interviews. I facilitated seven online discussions (including a pilot) with approximately five to six participants in each discussion. This resulted in a total of 36 participants who actively took part in the online discussions between January and November 2020. I then interviewed 12 of the online discussion participants between April 2020 and January 2021. Ten included a partner. Mixing qualitative methods created a rich source of data on the performative and relational aspects of interaction i.e., the 'how' as well as the 'what' was discussed (Fine *et al.* 2003; Riessman 2008; Elliott *et al.* 2012; Phoenix *et al.* 2021). In operationalising my conceptual framework, thematic analysis was first employed to identify what parents articulate as of value to them when planning care. Second, 'small stories' (Georgakopoulou 2015), identified as cases within parents' reflections on decision-making and what is of value to them, provided analytical units through which to employ social constructivist dialogical narrative inquiry (Riessman 2008; Frank 2010) to explore how gender norms are constituted within decision-making narratives. I also draw on Morison and Macleod (2013a; 2013b: 570) to operationalise a discursive conceptualisation of gender norms to explore "specific performances that reinforce gender norms or, alternatively, cause gender trouble".

1.7. Summary of thesis contributions

This thesis offers theoretical contribution to family leave policy analysis by combining the CA to conceptualise parents' care capabilities during their child's first year, as an "evaluative space" (Robeyns 2017: 38), with a discursive conceptualisation of gender as normative and productive of gendered relations of power. As such, interactions between parents' subjectivities, when planning care and sharing parental leave, act as sites which to bring to the fore couple relationalities and the UK's SPL policy's normative role in shaping parents' valued functionings as "liveable [parenting] lives" (Lloyd 2007: 33). Working from a social constructivist metatheoretical perspective (Cunliffe 2011), and exploring how meaning is created within social interactions, provides insight into how gendered parenting norms mediate and shape parents' gendered relations of power and decision-making dynamics. By focusing on how gendered parenting norms

interactionally influences couple decision-making, this thesis contributes several new insights.

First, this thesis identifies what parents articulate as valuable to them and highlights areas that have been less explored in relation to the UK's SPL context, such as postnatal wellbeing and gender justice. It also provides new insights into previously identified priorities: shared parenting, spending time with baby, financial security, continuation of career aspirations, that is how gender norms are constitutive of parents' care capabilities.

Second, this thesis reveals that gender norms mediated priorities and constrained parents' care capabilities differentially by parental identity, illustrating normative constraints on decision-making. The findings illustrated the persistent and gendered nature of parenting norms through contradictions between the gendered moral imperatives, such as to treasure time with one's child, and the de-valuing of care relative to paid employment; and, moreover, the ways in which (feminine) uncommodifiable affective care was interactionally backgrounded in relation to (masculine) provision of financial security, which was foregrounded.

Third, my findings provide insight into tensions between parents' multiple priorities when planning caregiving during the first year, such as between prioritising paid employment, prioritising time with the baby and postnatal wellbeing, and the relational messiness and complexity of disentangling what is of value individually within parents' multiple and competing priorities. My findings illustrate how, in navigating these tensions, parents rationalised aspirations and enacted gender justice in various ways. Parents' navigation of work-family priorities exposed the risks arising from mothers' default positioning as the primary carer. Enacting gender justice through more equal sharing of leave involved sharing the risks, as well as the joys, associated with taking leave within the current constraints of UK's SPL policy. Furthermore, in so doing, this thesis amplifies the often-silenced lived experiences of parents' who contest gendered parenting expectations.

In summary, this thesis extends our understanding of the disjuncture between parents' increased aspiration to share care and limited uptake of SPL in the UK by evidencing the role of SPL in reconstituting gendered parenting norms within parents' decision-making, as productive of parents 'feasible' and 'imaginable'

valued functionings. As noted at the outset of this chapter, the UK's SPL objectives focused on creating greater flexibility for parents and encouraging fathers to take a greater caring role (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b). Yet the policy does not explicitly set out gender justice objectives and, therefore, reflects a vague and nebulous gender justice positionality. Nonetheless, the UK's SPL policy perpetuates the normative assumption that mothers are or should be prioritised as primary carers (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Koslowski 2022). My findings illustrate earlier theoretical research, which argues that the UK's SPL policy prioritises normative expectations of mothers as the primary carer. This prioritisation is reflected and further entrenched within parents' decision-making, which reinforces the conflation of gendered take up of leave and gender essentialist interpretations of maternal gatekeeping (see for example Mitchell 2015; Miller 2018; Mitchell 2022). My findings also provide evidence that simply providing men parental leave rights is not enough and that gender justice cannot be effectively achieved without challenging the normative values currently underpinning family leave policy in the UK.

1.8. Thesis structure

The thesis is structured as follows. In chapter two, I set out and position my approach to exploring what parents value in relation to planning care during their child's first year and what influences parents' decision-making within the academic literature. I provide more detail on how key concepts (such as gender, norms, social justice) are employed within this thesis and justify combining the CA to capture parents' decision-making with employing a discursive conceptualisation of gender as normative and productive of gendered relations.

In chapter three, I outline the research methodology, by outlining the social constructivist metatheoretical assumptions underpinning my research design, the utilisation of both thematic and dialogical narrative inquiry within my analytical framework and associated facets of coherence, robustness, trustworthiness and ethical and researcher positionality implications. I then outline how my research methodology is operationalised through my research design including my analytical framework, which combines social constructivist thematic analysis and social constructivist narrative analysis to identify what is valuable to parents planning of

care and to explore how gendered parenting norms are contested, resisted, or reinforced.

In chapters four to six I present my data analysis results, both thematic and narrative. I first present what parents articulate as valuable to them, in relation to caring for a child in their first year, as identified via thematic analysis. I then present and discuss the narrative analysis which explores how gendered parenting norms shape parents' decision-making. Chapter four focuses on the themes of shared parenting, spending time with baby and postnatal wellbeing, chapter five focuses on financial security and having a career or vocation and chapter six focuses on parents' aspirations to enact or promote gender justice.

In chapter seven, I discuss the insights drawn from the data analysis and situate my findings within the academic literature, using my conceptual framework as a guide to respond to my research questions and to organise my discussion. I finish, in chapter eight, by reflecting on the contribution of this thesis, its limitations and potential areas for future research considering what has changed in the UK in the period of this study (in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit). I also provide some recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Chapter Two – Understanding gendered decision-making within families

2.1. Introduction

This study examines how gendered parenting norms shape parents' decision-making when planning care for their child's first year, as re-constituted by work family policy. This chapter reviews how couples' gendered leave taking behaviours is explained in the literature and justifies the assumptions and concepts used in this study, drawing on gender theory, social policy scholarship and social justice debates. As such, I position my approach and contribution to exploring parents' leave taking behaviours within this literature.

Section 2.2 draws on literature which variously explain how gender and gender norms influence couple decision-making, focusing on conceptualisations of gender as dynamic and socially embedded - frequently termed 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990; Deutsch 2007). I justify employing a conceptualisation of gender as normative and discursively constituted (Butler 1990; 1993) in this study to examine how gender norms are productive of parents' subjectivities, relationalities and gendered relations of power within a couple dyad.

Section 2.3 turns to overview how normative standpoints implicit within parental leave policy have been evaluated to date within social policy scholarship. I outline underpinning gender justice debates that prioritise various normative principles and make a case for utilization a critical social justice lens (Tronto 1993; Nussbaum 2003; Fraser 2013e) as a central line of inquiry through this thesis. I then identify gaps in the literature in terms of evaluating the (normative) role of parental leave policies as productive of parents' subjectivities and exploring the lived reality of the UK's SPL policy's implicit normative assumptions on couples' decision-making dynamics.

In section 2.4, the Capability Approach (CA) is introduced (Nussbaum 2003; Sen 2009a; Robeyns 2017) as employed to capture the relationship between policy and parents' gendered leave taking practices and providing a conceptual framework that recognises parental leave policies as normative and value-laden (Javornik and Yerkes 2020). I make a case for combining the CA, adaptable at micro family level,

with a discursive conceptualisation of gender as a theoretical contribution to examining how gender norms are productive of parents' valued functionings and how gendered relations of power, as (re-)constituted by work family policy, interactionally shapes parents' decision-making. I conclude the chapter, in section 2.5, by setting out my theoretical framework.

2.2. Theorising gender and gendered parenting norms as shaping couple decision-making

As noted in chapter one, gendered division of childcare and household labour, including parents' uptake of leave during a child's first year, persists in the UK. However, gender as an organising category within social relations, and the normative nature of this social organisation, is often taken for granted in public discourse and frequently not explicitly defined within academic literature (Harewood 2014; Nentwich and Kelan 2014). Over the last 40 years or so, gender theories have become more critical of naturalised, biologically driven or taken-for-granted descriptive and gender essentialist assumptions, which have proven inadequate in fully explaining the persistence of gendered behaviours. Sex and gender have been distinguished, the former referring to individuals' physical characteristics and the latter to individuals' psychological characteristics (Holmes 2007; Muehlenhard and Peterson 2011); enabling focus on 'nurture' or learning and internalised behaviours within gender role theories, in contrast to 'nature' within sex role theories (see for example: Eagly 1987; Eagly and Wood 2012). Gender has also been explored as a socially constructed category, investigating the processes through which gender is (re)produced. Gender theories have variously focused on social interaction, discursive processes and gendered structures (see respectively: West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990; Risman 2018)

Therefore, gender has been ascribed and understood as a biologically driven category or as psychologically internalised, and descriptive of social organisation, or as socially constructed and formative of social organisation (Holmes 2007). For example, gendered leave taking practices may be understood as biologically driven and mothers higher leave uptake attributed to maternal instinct – a gender essentialist perspective. Alternatively, gender may be understood as socially

constructed and formative of gendered leave taking, and mothers higher leave uptake may, at least partially, be attributed to social expectations to do so.

Similarly, the concept of social norms has been variously conceptualised. There is consistency across disciplines in how norms are understood (Hechter and Opp 2001; Chung and Rimal 2016), as "*socially* negotiated" "*unwritten* codes of conduct" (Chung and Rimal 2016: 2 - my emphasis). However, key distinctions are made between explanations of how norms act and between what has been termed descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms are understood as providing information on what people actually do and perceptions about the prevalence of behaviours (Cialdini and Trost 1998; Chung and Rimal 2016). In contrast, injunctive norms are peoples understanding of what *should* or ought to be done, which convey underlying values (Chung and Rimal 2016). The normative force or the "normativity of the norm" (Anderson 2000: 171), that is associated with social repercussions and moral judgement (Anderson 2000; Chung and Rimal 2016), is given varying weight. Furthermore, change in social norms is variously understood through individual constructs, social constructs or a combination of both individual and social constructs (Anderson 2000; Chung and Rimal 2016). These distinctions are interwoven with diverging psychological and social conceptualisations of the nature and dynamics of social norms in relation to agency and structure (Bicchieri 2005). The former focusing on individual psychological processes and the latter focusing on social interactions and / or structures (Anderson and Dunning 2014; Chung and Rimal 2016).

Approaches to understanding parents' decision-making, therefore, variously understand gender and gender norms and making different theoretical contributions to understanding parents gendered leave taking. Theories which understand gender as an essentialist biologically driven category or psychologically internalised, and descriptive of social organisation and norms, focus on the individual within the decision-making and afford less weight to social settings and interactions in which decision-making is embedded. Rational choice theories (for example Becker's 'Treatise on the Family' (1985; 1993)) explain choice and gendered decision-making outcomes through utility maximization and the resulting distribution of human capital within households as based on 'intrinsic differences

between the sexes' (Becker 1985: 37). Studies on family decision-making underpinned by RCT, or adaptations of RCT, are also similarly positioned, placing greater emphasis on individual agency, unconstrained by social norms. For example, Hakim's preference theory (1998; 2003) suggests that women have increasingly been able to decide between career and ambition on the one hand and being a homemaker on the other hand. As such, Hakim categorises women's decision outcomes as 'home-centred', 'work-centred' or 'adaptive' within what she describes as "post-patriarchal" society (Hakim 2003: 16) – that is society in which patriarchal forces are no longer present or constraining women's choices. Similarly, models of individualisation (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) assume greater *individual* reflexivity (Giddens 1990; 1991), choice, control and ownership for one's individual biography (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

However, theories that focus on the individual pay less attention to the role of context dependence within decision-making (Sen 1990; Bergmann 1995), separating decision-making from social, cultural or economic contexts (Lewis and Giullari 2005). Numerous studies evidence, for example, how "gender trumps money" (Bittman *et al.* 2003: 186). As a recent study has found, even when parents consider their financial decision-making to be gender neutral and not shaped by gender norms, gender norms are more influential than financial earnings (Zimmermann 2023). Specifically in relation to the UK's SPL, rational choice assumptions underpinned testing of various hypothesis about intention to share parental leave in relation to demographic characteristics (Twamley and Schober 2019). The findings usefully identified trends and variations in eligibility, knowledge, and intentions and highlight the structural barriers to parents' choice. However, while normative beliefs are understood to influence cognitive processes, the focus remains modelling individual decision outcomes.

Meanwhile, gender role theories (e.g., Wood and Eagly 2010; Eagly and Wood 2016), which focus on individual psychological or cognitive processes have also been drawn on to explain parents' decision-making by examining the role of gender stereotypes (for example: Bem 1993; Eagly and Wood 2016) and the impact of external factors, such as policy features, on internalised attitudes towards parenthood (Gaunt 2006; Gaunt and Scott 2014; Olsson *et al.* 2023; Scheifele 2023).

As such, a key concept often drawn on to explain gendered leave taking behaviours is maternal gatekeeping (see: Allen and Hawkins 1999; Hauser 2012), for example, mothers' reluctance to share their leave in the case of the UK's SPL (Birkett and Forbes 2019).

Maternal gatekeeping has been understood as resulting from mothers identifying with and internalising, from an individualised perspective, culturally dominant norms of motherhood, that being "loving, nurturant, patient, available, caring, and self-sacrificing" are core to mothers' identities (Deutsch 1999: 205). Maternal gatekeeping behaviours have been described as mothers' establishing parenting standards, developing skills yet limiting the space in which fathers can develop those skills (Allen and Hawkins 1999; Hauser 2012); as influencing a fathers' involvement through "controlling, facilitative, and restrictive behaviours" (Radcliffe and Cassell 2015: 838). Through maternal gatekeeping behaviours, mothers are understood to defend what they perceive as a threat to their maternal role and self-identity (Allen and Hawkins 1999; Radcliffe and Cassell 2015) or preserve "their power in the domain of the private caregiver realm" (Featherstone 2009: 136). Consequently, the "de-gendering" of parenthood is understood as dependent on mothers' "relinquishing identities" (Deutsch 1999: 202) and, as has been suggested in relation to transferability of leave in the context of the UK's SPL, decision-making power is assumed to be with the mother (see for example: Birkett and Forbes 2019).

However, neither explanations drawing on RCT or internalised psychological processes explore how gendered parenting norms act through social interactions and within couple relationalities; examination of how gendered parenting norms shape decision-making power dynamics, falls short. Rather, the questions asked in this thesis focus on the social interactions and embeddedness of parents' decision-making, which renders theorisations of gender as socially constructed and formative of social organisation more applicable.

2.2.1. Gender and gendered parenting norms as socially constructed

In contrast to theories that examine how individuals internalise gender ideologies, disciplines such as sociology, social policy and gender studies have

sought ways of thinking about the *social* structures and processes involved in the 'doing' and 'undoing' of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009). There are, however, key points of debate between varying conceptualisations of how gender is *socially* constructed – between focus on social interaction, discursive processes and gendered structures. There is considerable variation in how (un)doing gender is theorised (Nentwich and Kelan 2014). Nentwich and Kelan (2014) differentiate conceptualisations of how gender is done and undone between, first, those which focus on the interactions, situations or structural conditions where gender manifests and where change needs to be targeted, and second, approaches which focus on the performative and discursive subversion of gender.

Falling within the first group as differentiated by Nentwich and Kelan (2014), West and Zimmerman's (1987) work on 'doing' gender was key in shifting comprehension of gender as individually learned, internalised and enacted to interactional and socially organised. For West and Zimmerman (1987) gender identity does not exist a priori but is constructed through, and is relevant in, individuals' daily interactions in which gender is a constantly present organising force (Nentwich and Kelan 2014). Drawing on and developing West and Zimmerman's (1987) concepts further, interactional theorisations of doing gender ask questions about social processes, such as when and under what conditions gendered selves matter. These questions ask what institutional, structural or policy change is needed for gender relations and expectations to change at the interactional level (e.g., Thompson 1993; Risman 2004; Deutsch 2007; Ferree 2010; Nentwich and Kelan 2014); i.e., connecting families' decision-making behaviours to their wider social contexts (e.g., Ferree 1990; Thompson 1993; Howell 2007; Risman 2009; Pfau-Effinger 2013; Daly 2020). "Holistic" frameworks, such as Risman's "gender structure theory" (2018: 20), have been developed which synthesize processes at the different levels of macro welfare-state or policy, social interaction and individual (Adams 2018).

Within such holistic frameworks, gender ideology theories are often drawn upon to provide an individualised perspective that help account for shifts in gender ideologies – as interacting with social structures (see Chatillon *et al.* 2018; Risman

2018). Giddens' Theory of Structuration (1984) has also often been drawn on within interactional and structural gender theories to conceptualise this relationship between (gendered) structures and agency (e.g., Deutsch 2007; Risman 2018; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b). Giddens (1984: 25) conceptualised the relationship between structure and agency, or individual behaviour, not as a dualism in which both are independent phenomena but as a "duality" in which social systems are produced and reproduced through social interaction; structure is not external to or constraining individuals, but dynamically and cyclically interacting. As such, structuration theory aims to explain how continuity in social relations is evidenced across space and time and social systems reproduced through individual agency (Giddens 1984). In response to critiques that structuration theory had insufficiently accounted for human agency, Giddens' later work focused on the role of dis-embedding agency from structures and settings within 'post-traditional' society (1990), steering more towards an individualised perspective (as noted above) in which agency is understood to have become more reflexive and less (or un-) constrained by traditions or expectations (Giddens 1991).

In contrast, post-structural approaches to understanding gender, which have also been fundamental in shifting comprehension of gender, fall within the second group as differentiated by Nentwich and Kelan (2014). Often drawing on Butler's theories of gender trouble and undoing gender (1990; 1993; 2004), gender is theorised as "discursively constituted" (Lloyd 2007: 30). The focus is on language, meaning, power and representation - the so-called "linguistic turn" (Holmes 2007: 80). Approaches informed by a post-structuralist lens focus on the more gradual subversion of gender, more fluidly conceptualised as context dependent (Nentwich and Kelan 2014) and in which the binary sex dichotomy is challenged (Brickell 2005; Morison and Macleod 2013a). Conceptualisation of gender as a fluid concept is based on deconstruction of the distinction between gender, as socially constructed, and sex as biological and static. For Butler (1990) both sex and gender are discursive, in other words sex is "from the start, normative" or regulatory (Lloyd 2007: 30).

A key concept for Butler (1990) is that of the "heterosexual matrix" through which the normative force of social norms is constituted through gender

categorisation. Masculinity as relational to femininity is understood by examining how “normative violence” is done to non-viable subjects, subjects who do not conform to gendered norms, deeming them “culturally unintelligible” (Lloyd 2007: 135). Also described by Butler (1990: 30) as a ”grid of cultural intelligibility”, the matrix refers to the normative framework through which legitimate subjects are recognised, redolent of Foucault’s understanding of power as constitutive of the social order or “grid of intelligibility” (Lloyd 2007: 34). This matrix can be understood as a framework through which we make sense of gender, through which subjects become “culturally intelligible”, not as autonomous stable subjects, but as discursive and productive of relationalities, what Butler (1990: 23) terms “relations of coherence”.

Discursive theories of gender have been drawn on, therefore, to examine how “culturally intelligible” ideal subjects or “liveable lives” are generated and legitimised in everyday interactions (Lloyd 2007: 33), in which to be an ideal subject, or to have “liveable lives”, involves conforming with the gendered (parenting) norms with as defined by their assumed gender (Butler 1990). The “grid of culturally intelligibility” provides a conceptual tool through which to understand “relations of coherence” (Butler 1990: 23) or how social forces are relationally constitutive of “liveable lives”. Siltanen and Doucet (2017), for example, draw on Butler’s concept of “heterosexual matrix” to examine care and the interactional relationships between different versions of masculine and feminine parenting behaviours. Furthermore, they argue that “while at any one time and within any specific place multiple ideas of what it means to be masculine and feminine may exist, not all of these ideas have the same power or legitimacy. Relations of power and dominance are built into particular versions of masculinity and femininity” (Siltanen and Doucet 2017: 71).

Butler’s work has a political aim, which is to make presently ‘unintelligible’ lives liveable. They also, therefore, intend to “avoid the essentialist pitfalls” through their conception of agency and change (Lloyd 2007: 36). Butler’s (1990) early conceptualisation of gender, which aimed to theorise both how gender identity is acquired and how it can be challenged as discursively constituted, was critiqued over concerns on lack of clarity on the possibility of social change (Brickell 2005;

Morison and Macleod 2013a). On the one hand, their notion of "performativity" was critiqued for being too deterministic; on the other hand, their use of the term "performance", with reference to a "more theatrical sense of performance" (Lloyd 2007: 58), for being too voluntaristic.

Butler responded in their later work by offering greater clarity regarding action, interaction and change. They proposed a "'third way' between issues of voluntarism and determinism" (Cadwallader 2009: 291), by theorising agency through the concept of "iterability" (Butler 1993). The concept of "iterability" conveys the idea that the processes through which gender is constructed are also sites of contestation, "in which subjection by power produces possibilities for agency" (Lloyd 2007: 60). It is through iteration that gender is performed and the "forced recitation of norms" occurs *or* is subverted (Butler 1993: 94). Where Butler's (1990) earlier accounts of agency were more permissive, their latter accounts invoked greater recognition of scope for change as well as of normative constraints (Butler 1993). As such, change is explored through "reiterative and citational practice" (Lloyd 2007: 61) and change accomplished through a process referred to as the "slow bending of citations" (Morison and Macleod 2013a: 569). Gender norms act as sites of constraint and of resistance, of persistence and challenge (Lloyd 2007; Morison and Macleod 2013a; Nentwich and Kelan 2014). It is these sites of constraint and resistance that provide "a means for investigating specific performances that reinforce gender norms or, alternatively, cause gender trouble" (Morison and Macleod 2013a: 570).

There are, therefore, several fundamental debates that thread through these alternative broadly categorised theorisations of gender as socially constructed. Key elements of the debates involve the alternative categorisation of gender itself (as a stable or fluid concept), how the relationship between agency and (gendered) structures are conceptualised and how social norms are considered within this relationship, as underpinned by diverging metatheoretical standpoints. These debates, therefore, invoke specific decisions on *how* gendered parenting norms (within parents leave taking practices) can be examined and accounted for, which inform their applicability to the research questions of this thesis.

First, the distinction between gender conceptualised as a stable subject or, alternatively, as a fluid concept, is underpinned by metatheoretical positions on how gender may be understood or known and disjuncture between ontological perspectives. In the former, gender as structure, while involving context-dependent processes and interrelated actions, is understood as objectively possible to know. While gender is understood as *socially* constructed, the gendered categorisation of activities remains often based on biological difference and gender is a stable objectively identifiable concept in which change is facilitated through structures and processes.

In the latter, gender as discursive and productive of subjectivities focuses on how gender is constructed through language and knowing gender, through a social constructivist lens, is to understand how social reality is created (Cunliffe 2011: 650). Conceptualisations of gender as more fluid and discursively constituted have been critiqued from objectivist and critical realist perspectives for potentially undermining gender as a fixed subject that is possible to know or to study. For example, Risman (2018) questions whether, if gender is conceptualised fluidly, this implies that we cannot define gender as an analytical category, ontologically understood as objective and possible to know, making substantive analysis difficult (see also: Walby 2009; Miller 2010). However, gender theorised in relation to a stable subject, as "autonomous, atomistic, individual, independent and self-reliant" (Doucet 2023: 17), affords insufficient attention to relational interactions, for example, as applicable to this thesis, relationalities within a couple dyad and between caregiver and child.

The second distinction is how the relationship between individual agency and structures is understood and, therefore, how social norms (such as gendered parenting norms) can be accounted for in shaping what is of value to parents and couples' decision-making interactions. Within gender as structure frameworks (such as Risman 2018), which synthesise processes at different (macro, interactional, individual) levels, structural barriers that constrain or facilitate individual agency are uncovered. However, normative focus remains individualised in terms of internalisation of gender ideologies through, for example, men's parental leave taking intentions and orientations (Scheifele 2023) and / or focus on maternal

gatekeeping (Birkett and Forbes 2019). This is problematic in terms of examining the role of gendered parenting norms on parents' decision-making dynamics because gender is disentangled from couple relationalities. In other words, how gender discursively acts within interactions is not examined and less focus is paid to associated power dynamics. As outlined above, Gidden's (1990) argues that individuals' have agentic possibility of doing (gender) other than is expected of their defined gender. In contrast, Butler's (1990: 23) concept of "liveable lives" brings to the fore power dynamics as embedded within social interactions and contexts, greater attention is given to the "normative violence" or cost of (not) being an ideal subject, be it ideal (gendered) parent or ideal worker.

This thesis is concerned with understanding how gender as a normative force is enacted through gendered parental leave taking practices within a couple dyad in which gender as a normative force differentially acts and shapes parents' subjectivities. Conceptualising gender as normative and discursive provides several possible theoretical contributions to examining how gender norms shape parents' decision-making as contextualised, interactional and productive of gender "relations of power" within a couple dyad (Siltanen and Doucet 2017: 71). A discursive theory of gender enables examination of how parents interactionally subvert (and / or reinforce) gender norms within the "grid of culturally intelligibility" (Butler 1990: 30), e.g., subverting what is ascribed as mothering or fathering, and contributing insight to agency and change as well as constraint. The discursive interactions and narration of decision-making become sites through which to examine how "liveable *[parenting]* lives" are performed, reinforced, and subverted. Change is facilitated through gender being discursively (un)constituted, possible through alternative performances of gender (Poggio 2006; Nentwich and Kelan 2014). As such, examining how gender acts through discourse means that "certain sites of research do not lend themselves to knowing subjects but rather to *knowing only their narratives*" (Doucet 2018: 63, author's emphasis).

Indeed, more critical engagement with the concept of gatekeeping, as embedded within gendered relations of power, has to date illustrated differential expectations of fatherhood in comparison to motherhood (Miller 2011; Miller 2018; Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2020). For example, fatherhood is shown to be articulated

in partial and episodic ways around work contexts, in comparison to mothering expectations found to be more universal and constrained (Miller 2011; Miller 2018). Riggs and Bartholomaeus' (2020) study on couples' distribution of household care work prior to and after the birth of their child, which also drew on gender as discursively generating subject positions, explored how discursive resources are productive of cultural intelligibility. The reconstituting and / or subversion of dominant narratives evidenced that the unequal distribution of responsibility within a couple was not due to maternal gatekeeping but a result of "how responsibility is differentially distributed according to gender" (Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2020: 120). Therefore, more critical engagement with the concept of gatekeeping as a "singularly maternal practice" has found that "parenting is undertaken and choreographed in highly gendered and politicised contexts and only gradually are socially constructed care arrangements being challenged and reconfigured" (Miller 2018: 32).

These studies illustrate the need for greater focus on discursive processes through which gendered relations play out through varying power and legitimacy afforded masculinity and femininity with couple relations (Siltanen and Doucet 2017). Greater attention has been paid recently to couple relationalities in relation to parents gendered leave taking behaviours (Twamley 2021; Twamley *et al.* 2021; Doucet 2023). For example, as with my study, rather than examine structural barriers or internalised gender ideologies, Twamley (2021) examines how gendered norms shape couple negotiations in the context of the UK's SPL. Twamley (2021: 68) explores parent's "relational resources" as "skills and tools" employed in couple decision-making interactions, witnessed during couple interviews, as mechanisms through which gender is (un)done (with reference to West and Zimmerman 1987; Deutsch 2007). As such, previous studies (such as Twamley 2021) have provided insight into relational resources drawn on by parents in couple negotiations. However, there has been limited utilisation of discursive gender theory, which affords greater focus on couple power dynamics, and limited explicit examination, at micro-family level, of the role of work-family policy in (re-)constituting parents' relational resources. Questions remain, therefore, as to the (normative) role of

parental leave policies, such as the UK's SPL policy, in the context of couple decision-making as productive of parents' subjectivities and couple relationalities.

My study builds on recent focus on couple relationalities. Agreeing with the suggested need for "stronger" definition of (couple) relationality (Twamley *et al.* 2021: 4), I utilise a discursive conceptualisation of gender as normative, which offers conceptual tools to theorise how gender norms are productive of parents' subjectivities, relationalities and gendered relations of power within a couple dyad. In order to focus on parents' decision-making *as shaped by* parental leave policy, I also draw on social policy scholarship that explores the normative role of social policies – to which I now turn.

2.3. Explaining the role of family leave policy (and practice) in shaping parents' gendered leave taking

Policies are themselves sites in which cultural norms are constituted, resisted and subverted and they espouse a normative and value-laden positionality (Javornik and Yerkes 2020). Policies reflect state, policy maker and employer priorities and assumptions as to what gender roles within families and gender justice look like. Yet these underpinning gender justice positionalities are often not explicitly outlined in policies[6], considered within social policy evaluation or analysis (Bacchi 2009; Doucet and Duvander 2022) or considered in terms of providing varying (normative) resources or means for parents to share care as they aspire to. A question that needs to be explored, therefore, is not only what the relationship between work family policy and gendered division of labour *is* but what the underpinning cultural or normative assumptions are as to what this relationship *should be*.

[6] As is the case for the UK's SPL policy in which there is no explicit reference to gender equality within the policy objectives. The original policy objectives of SPL scheme were to: • Give parents more choice and flexibility in how they care for their child in the first year by increasing the share of leave fathers can take, thus enabling both parents to retain a strong link with the labour market; • Encourage more fathers to play a greater caring role (pre-birth and in the first year) via longer, more flexible shared leave; • Increase flexibility for employers and employees to reach agreement on how best to balance work and domestic needs without state interference. See: Department_for_Business&Trade (2023b) *Shared Parental Leave Evaluation report*, available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1166383/shared-parental-leave-evaluation-report-2023.pdf [accessed 01.07.2023].

Varying social justice normative principles, as underpin and implicit within work family policy, are prioritised as important (Newman and Yeates 2008; Lister 2010; Fraser 2013d) and provide alternative lenses through which to identify what gender inequalities exist, or what the policy problem is (Bacchi 2009; Fraser 2013d). Social justice positionalities range from what is perceived as objective, such as rational choice and distribution of resources (Becker 1993; Rawls 2001), to what is perceived as subjective and relational (with respect to norms, hierarchy, power, recognition, human interaction) (Fineman 2009; Lister 2010; Fraser 2013c; Yerkes *et al.* 2017; Doucet and McKay 2020). Subjective and relational perspectives provide a critical lens through which to understand individual agency in the context of social norms and highlight the unequal distribution of power within society (Okin 1989; Ferree 1990; Fraser 2007; Fineman 2009).

Political philosophers, such as Fraser (1994; 2007; 2013d), have helped to disentangle the complexities and contradictions underpinning normative values and assumptions that shape work family policy as a tool to progress gender justice. Gender equality or neutral approaches versus gender differentiating approaches – as set out in Fraser's 'After the Family Wage' typology (1994) – have been central to debates on what gender justice should look like. The former, which Fraser (1994) terms 'universal breadwinner', prioritises promotion of *women's* access to employment and right to work policies with an emphasis on the commodification of care. The latter, which Fraser (1994) terms 'caregiver parity', aims to address historic structural barriers experienced by women by accommodating 'feminine' life-patterns, through (mainly women's) rights to care.

However, intrinsic contradictions have also been shown to problematise both gender equality and gender differentiating models (Fraser 2007). Gender differentiating approaches recognise social inequalities and structural barriers arising from of gendered parenting norms and aim to mitigate the material impact of those social inequalities through individual right to care policies (Fraser 2007; Fraser 2013a). As such, a key element of gender difference feminism has been the call for recognition of unpaid reproductive labour (Doucet 2018). Yet, greater recognition of unpaid reproductive labour has been partial.

In reality gender differentiating approaches potentially exacerbate gender inequality where there are less generous social policy protections for caring responsibilities in the private sphere (Fraser 1994; 2007). Furthermore, greater state intervention and more generous policy regimes in support of women's care roles within some European policies, it is suggested, has resulted in exacerbating gender segregation and public interpretation of equality as gender difference (Ferree 2009). Neither standpoint challenges the underlying gendered normative framework of care linked to women's gender identities or shifts primary responsibility of caregiving from women (Lewis and Giullari 2005; Gornick and Meyers 2009; Orloff 2009; Fraser 2013a). In other words, neither standpoint *critically* dismantles the privileging of male breadwinner norms, values caregiving enough to ask that men do it (Fraser 1994) or provides focus on supporting men to break male breadwinner norms (Murgia and Poggio 2013). Therefore, while gender differentiating approaches to some extent uncover the gendered parenting expectations that constrain parents' choice, neither an equality of opportunity nor a gender differentiating approach effectively challenges normative gender essentialist assumptions or address the undervaluing of care as the basis of a more equitable division of labour (Fraser 1994; 2007).

Alternative conceptualisations of gender justice have been proposed, which have potential to move beyond the equality versus difference gender debate, offering a more critical gender justice lens through which to evaluate parental leave policies and which this thesis draws upon. A critical social justice lens applies greater emphasis to interactions, relationalities and power dynamics associated with (historical) norms and on addressing associated arising outcome inequities (Doucet and McKay 2020; Doucet and Duvander 2022). Fraser's 'universal caregiver' model (1994; 2013a) and feminist ethics of care (for example: Fineman 2009; Tronto 2017; Lynch *et al.* 2021) provide principles through which to potentially reflect on, uncover and challenge gendered parenting norms, and associated gender relations of power, that constrain parents' choice – aligned with discursive gender theory.

Fraser's 'universal caregiver' model (1994; 2013a), focuses on both structural and discursive barriers to social justice, challenges the normative values

which underpin a gendered division of labour and argues for a shift in men's time to the home and caregiving. The universal caregiver model does not propose to simply bring men in to care work through provision of equality of opportunity to parental leave. Rather it proposes to dismantle the discursively constructed gender coding between breadwinning and caregiving and to recognise paid work *and* caring as equal. It does this through encompassing normative principles of *both* distributive and critical social justice, by recognising continued imbalance in material resources resulting from the gendered division of labour *and* by challenging power dynamics and arguing for parity in social esteem in valuing care responsibilities (Fraser 1994; 2013a). More recently Fraser has extended this by arguing against continued "free riding [of production] on unwaged carework" (Fraser 2023).

Feminist ethics of care (see: Held 2006; Tronto 2013; 2017; Lynch *et al.* 2021) also provides an alternative framing of gender justice. Feminist ethics of care challenges a liberal and objectivist separation of rational and unencumbered individuals in the public sphere and care in the private sphere (Fineman 2008). As with Fraser (1994; 2013a), feminist ethics of care brings to the fore the differential value attributed by society between what is seen as feminine, reproductive work, and masculine, protection and production work in which (affective) care is "backgrounded" and "production as the proper pursuit and concern of individuals, the state and the market are so thoroughly foregrounded" (Tronto 2013: 139). Thereby, feminist ethics of care aligns gender justice with problematizing gendered relations of power (Doucet and McKay 2020). Through focus on relationality and interdependence, feminist ethics of care makes a case for *affective* justice, which makes explicit the value and consideration of reproductive labour in relation to productive labour, and recognises vulnerability (to potential dependence) as a universal human condition (Tronto 1993; Fineman 2008; 2009; Lynch *et al.* 2021). These (universal carer and feminist ethics of care) models provide a critical lens which brings to the fore power dynamics within couple decision-making.

In the context of considering parents' decision-making when planning childcare, therefore, I draw on a critical social justice standpoint, which recognises that prevalent patriarchal gender norms differentially shape parents' choice (Sen 1990; Tronto 1993; Fineman 2008; 2009; Tronto 2017; Lynch *et al.* 2021) - in which

the "vulnerable subject" of affective justice standpoints contrasts the independent subject of equality of opportunity standpoints (Fineman 2008: 10). Fraser (2013e) makes the distinction between a critical and an uncritical theory a *political* distinction:

> "A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the *aims* and *activities* of those *oppositional social movements* with which it has a partisan – though not uncritical – identification" [*my emphasis*] (Fraser 2013e: 19).

As such if the aim of a social movement is to contest the subordination of women, a critical social theory should highlight the *foundations* of such subordination and would need to be sensitive to the ways in which "norms persist in structuring social reality" (2013e: 51), or in the context of this thesis how the UK's SPL policy (re-) constitutes gender norms. The effectiveness of such a critical theory would be tested in the extent to which "it clarify[ies] and / or mystif[ies] the bases of male dominance and female subordination…… in what respects does it challenge and / or replicate prevalent ideological rationalizations of such dominance and subordination?" (Fraser 2013e: 20). How gender norms and (gendered) relations of power (as discussed in the previous section) are conceptualised is key, therefore, in enabling focus from a critical social justice perspective. By embedding normative positionality as a central line of inquiry, this thesis aims to expose, and examine, the implications of social justice positionality within family leave policy as interacting, at micro level, with what is of value to parents' and parents' decision-making.

How then have these underpinning normative standpoints be examined within social policy scholarship to date? Political ideological positionalities, known to be implicit within welfare state policies at macro-level (Lister 2010; Javornik 2014; Laperrière and Orloff 2018; Daly 2020), have been variously examined within social policy scholarship. The foundational work of Esping-Andersen (1990: 86) usefully classified welfare state regime political positionalities. Employing the concept of "decommodification" to describe the role and responsibilities taken by the state to ensure individuals' and families' have socially acceptable standards of living enabled a typology of welfare states based on degrees of decommodification.

Emphasis on liberty, free market and freedom *from* state interference, low to medium degrees of decommodifications, are reflected in neo-liberal and conservative welfare states such as the UK and Germany respectively. In contrast, higher degrees of decommodification are evident within social democratic welfare states, such as the Nordic countries, underpinned by legitimacy afforded state intervention to reduce inequalities (Lister 2010). Feminist critiques of Esping-Andersen's (1990) classification have since called into focus how boundaries between the role of state and family differentially impact people along gender lines due to implicit gender roles and assumptions underpinning social citizenship rights and moral schema relating to caregiving (Lister 2010). Hence, alternative gender-sensitive typologies were developed (see for example: Lewis 1992; Orloff 1993; Sainsbury 1994; Javornik 2014), which incorporate the gendered relationship between paid and unpaid work in the public and private spheres.

Varieties of familialism is one such gender-sensitive typology and analytical tool, which focuses on the role and function of the family as a source of welfare, enabling reflection on normative values implicit within differing balance of responsibility between state, family and individual caring responsibilities (Lister 1997; Leitner 2003; Javornik 2014). Described as "analogous to the concept of decommodification" (Javornik 2011: 74), the framework distinguishes how welfare state policies, either explicitly or implicitly, attempt to increase family care, 'familialising', to relieve family care, defamilialising, or to have a mixed approach. While familialistic welfare states commonly attempt to increase family care, a distinction is made between explicit familialism, which supports family care and does not provide public care, and implicit familialism, which neither supports family care nor provides public care.

The UK's work family policy, of which SPL is part, has been identified as embedded within an implicit familialistic welfare state regime, i.e., work family policies in the UK neither support nor recognise the value of caregiving within the family, neither do they effectively relieve family care. In other words, care falls to the family implicitly by default (Leitner 2003; Javornik 2011). In contrast, defamilialistic approaches have been advocated in Nordic countries (Brandth and Kvande 2001; Duvander and Johansson 2012); exemplifying substantial state

intervention and the potential for policy to instigate culture change in recognition of the role of cultural constraints on the slow erosion of the gendered division of labour (see for example: Brighouse and Wright 2008; Gornick and Meyers 2009).

Analytical tools, such as varieties of familialism (Lister 1997; Leitner 2003; Javornik 2014), therefore, have drawn attention to the interaction between underpinning political ideological standpoints, work family policy (implicit or explicit) gender justice intentions and gender (in)equality (see: Morgan 2008; Ferree 2009; Orloff 2009; Collins *et al.* 2023). Extensive modelling of such typologies that theorise the interaction between macro-normative and ideological context and parents' decision-making has illustrated the interaction between national policies variables (such as childcare services and the generosity of family leave policies) and parental leave uptake (see for example: Pettit and Hook 2005; Pettit *et al.* 2010; Hook and Li 2020) as well as variation in behaviours according to gender and socio-demographic characteristics across different national and policy contexts (see for example Davis and Greenstein 2009). As such, features of work family policy, such as non-transferable individual rights to well-paid job-protected 'use it or lose it' leave allocated to fathers have been shown to contribute to parents gendered leave taking behaviours (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Koslowski 2022).

However, applying a Nordic style intervention in a liberal context such as the UK remains problematic. 'State feminist' gender strategies or interventionist approaches have been problematised as not "every feminist's utopia" (Orloff 2009: 129), highlighting that we cannot assume that everyone aspires to gender symmetrical versions of egalitarianism or gender justice (Orloff 2009; Collins *et al.* 2023). In other words, while defining defamilialism as an end goal in itself may be effective in some settings, it may not be congruent with all (Kurowska 2018). Furthermore, while drawing attention to the interaction between policy and gendered leave taking, macro-level modelling of policy features is less able to examine couples' micro level "relationships and relationalities" (Doucet 2023) or to examine how normative contexts differentially shape parents' subjectivities and gendered relations of power within parents' decision-making. Indeed, as Doucet (2023) has identified, there are gaps within social policy scholarship due to a predominant focus on 'who' does 'what' in the gendered division of labour as the

subject of the study. In other words, there is more focus on, for example, how family leave is divided between parents, who takes which (amount of) leave as shaped by structural and normative constraints than on how such constraints manifest within couple relationalities. As such, Doucet (2023) makes a call for research focusing on the interaction between parents' subjectivities, which offers greater possibilities for exploring gendered and normative interactions and relationalities.

As noted, the UK's SPL policy is embedded within an implicit familialistic welfare state regime. Drawing on political philosophical analysis of what gender justice looks like, outlined above, also exposes the contradicting normative standpoint underpinning the UK's SPL policy. The UK's SPL policy continues a legacy of long mother-centred leave policy in the UK (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Koslowski 2022) and prioritises mother's as primary carers (Mitchell 2022) – a gender differentiating standpoint. However, the UK's SPL policy espouses increased choice and giving parents families greater flexibility (Gov.uk 2015; Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b; Working_Families 2023) – a liberal equality of opportunities standpoint. However, *how* implicit familialistic and conflicting gender justice positionalities, as evident in the UK's SPL policy, manifests in the lived reality of couple decision-making at micro-family level remains underexplored. Questions remain, therefore, on whether the normative standpoint underpinning UK's SPL policy is congruent with parents' own aspirations for gender justice and how it's (contradictory) normative principles (i.e., that espouses a liberal emphasis on choice yet is underpinned by a gender differentiating positionality) shape micro-level couple relationalities and so contribute to the disjuncture between parents' aspiration to share parenting and low uptake of SPL.

2.4. The possibilities of the Capability Approach (CA)

The Capability Approach (CA) as a flexible "evaluative framework" (Robeyns 2017: 38), has potential to be adapted at micro-family level to examine the congruence between parents care aspirations, the UK's SPL policy's normative positionality and parental leave taking behaviours. The CA also has potential to take us beyond the equality versus gender differentiating debate, as a "universal equality

model" (Lewis and Giullari 2005: 90) that focuses on what individuals value and which prioritises freedom and agency as the normative principle (Lewis and Giullari 2005).

The CA (Sen 1985; 1993; 2002; 2009a) was developed in response to concerns that evaluation of individuals' economic wellbeing should more effectively considered their social context. The CA evolved from the aspiration to understand the 'state' or wellbeing of a person as did utility and rational choice theory scholars (referenced in section 2.2). However, the CA reflected a key departure from a single definable and rational conception of good, as employed through classical utilitarian measures of satisfaction, preference and happiness (see for example Harsanyi 1982; Becker 1985; Elster 1986). Sen (1995; 2002; 2009b) also moved away from a Rawlsian (1982) 'resource-based' understanding of individual agency and access to resources as means to equality. Through recognition of value pluralism and multiple conceptions of good, Sen (1985; 1993) rather focused on individuals' quality of life or wellbeing from the perspective of freedom and individual agency; prioritising greater focus on context by responding to what he termed 'physical condition neglect' and 'valuation neglect' (Sen 1985) evident in utility models.

The CA, as developed by Sen (1995; 1999; 2002; 2009a), has several essential components:

- individuals' capabilities, that is the beings and doings of value to individuals (also termed valuable functionings (Sen 1999) and valued functionings (Yerkes *et al.* 2019b));
- functionings, that is the beings and doings actually achieved; and
- conversion factors, factors impacting conversion of capabilities into functionings.

Conceptualisation of functionings involves evaluation of potential opportunities as well as actual achievements or individual's success in 'doing' and 'being' (achieved functionings), as impacted by contextual conversion factors. Distinction between opportunities and achievement is key to the CA, reflecting conversion to an individual's capability set, which encompasses alternatives open to individuals as possible realised functionings (Sen 1995). The CA conceptually distinguishes between an individual's well-being achievements (or functionings) and freedom to

achieve their opportunities (capabilities) where 'opportunity' freedoms and 'process' freedoms are also distinguished conceptually as are 'culmination' (or actual) outcomes and 'comprehensive' (opportunity and process) outcomes (Sen 2002). The CA, therefore, centres "the evaluation of a person's achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do the things a person has reason to value doing or being" (Sen 2009a: 16). Focus on evaluating beings and doings does not imply any beings and doings but those a person has reason to value.

The focus on individuals' capabilities to pursue *valued* goals, therefore, differentiates CA from other sociological theories by focusing on agency within the "normative scope of choices" and "capability and freedom to make valued choices" (Gangas 2016: 32). By conceptualising 'conversion factors', CA enables evaluation of the differential impact of personal, social (including policies and social norms) and environmental (e.g. physical / climate) factors on the conversion of capabilities, what is of value, into functionings (Robeyns 2005). Critically, Sen's conceptualisation of capabilities recognizes contextual factors, such as social norms, interpersonal relations, cooperative conflict within families and normative obligations to others as constraining individuals' opportunities (Sen 1990).

The CA provides a flexible "evaluative framework" or "evaluative space" (Robeyns 2017: 38), rather than a complete theory, which has been developed within the human development field, expanded within moral-legal philosophical context (Nussbaum 2003; 2020) and other disciplines, such as social policy (Hobson 2014; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b) and Human Resource Management (HRM) (see: Cornelius and Skinner 2005; Cornelius and Skinner 2008; Downs and Swailes 2013). I draw on previous adaptations within sociology and social policy fields, where the CA has been employed to evaluate individuals' capabilities to use policy tools and to recognise the differential impact of structural barriers on individuals or groups (see for example: Hobson 2014; Javornik and Kurowska 2017; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b; Norman 2020; Philipp *et al.* 2023). Moreover, the CA has been adapted from divergent metatheoretical standpoints (Robeyns 2017; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b) and adaptations of the CA within social policy scholarship have variously considered gender, norms, conversion factors and interaction between individual

agency, and institutional and societal structures (Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018; Kurowska and Javornik 2019; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b).

Hobson et al. (2009; 2011; 2014) provide a multidimensional model, which draws on Sen's categorisation of conversion factors and classifies gender as an 'individual' conversion factor, while cultural norms are classified as a 'societal' factor and social rights (policy) as 'institutional' (Hobson 2014: 13, see also figure 1.1: 14). Individual agency is conceptualised as 'situated', emphasising the relational dimensions and interdependence within families and households in which power imbalances and the *impact* of cultural constraints is recognised (Iversen 2003; Peter 2003; Hobson 2014). However, conceptual separation between individual, social and institutional conversion factors is employed and agency or change accounted for through individual autonomy or agency-capability (Peter 2003). Gender is understood as individually constituted and separate to norms, which are categorised as societal conversion factors, albeit duality between individual agency and structure is recognised.

Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018: 878), similarly, operationalise the concept of 'active agency' through the exploration of conversion *processes* and mechanisms of "virtuous" (or "vicious") circles, which enable, or hamper, translation of opportunities into outcomes. As with 'situated' agency, 'active' agency also recognises individual agency as well as the impact of diversity and structure on achievement of valued functionings but aims to do so in a way which explores capacity to modify structures (Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018). Through the collective generation of new capabilities or renegotiation of social norms, it is argued that individuals capabilities are enabled and so agency 'active' (Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018; Ibrahim 2020) – for example, arguing that women's networks enable "capabilities that each woman alone would not have been able to achieve" (Ibrahim 2020: 214).

Application of the CA in social policy scholarship has also involved some nuanced developments, accounting for "domain-specific" considerations (Yerkes *et al.* 2019a: 5), in order to evaluate the extent to which a social policy provides real opportunities to achieve a range of potential valued functionings (Yerkes *et al.* 2019a). Kurowska and Javornik's (2019) theoretical framework centres

conceptualisation of policy as a *means*, as distinct from conversion factors, such as socio-economic position and work cultures (in contrast to, for example, Hobson 2014; Robeyns 2017). Evaluating social policy as a means enables more nuanced focus on a policy's facilitation of plural or diverse capabilities (Yerkes *et al.* 2019a). Where a conversion factor conceptualises an individual's relationship with the social structures within which they are embedded, the focus on policy as a means enables analysis of how rights afforded via a social policy is differentially *accessible* to individuals as means to provide alternative outcomes (Yerkes *et al.* 2019a). Employing the CA to analyse policy as a means enables policy analysis across both structural legal barriers and normative parental orthodoxies, both of which differentially shape parents decision-making (Kurowska and Javornik 2019: 89, see figure 5.1). Analysis of policy as a means also prioritises choice and freedom as the social justice "normative reference point" (Yerkes *et al.* 2019a: 9). For example, analysis of a social policy as a means to defamiliarise childcare responsibilities (see section 2.3.1) is distinguished from to defining defamiliarising as a policy's end goal or determining a way of life (Kurowska 2018).

Drawing on Kurowska's (2018: 44, see figure 3) conceptual framework, Kurowska and Javornik (2019) also make a distinction between a welfare state regime orientated approach and a policy-orientated approach. In the latter, social policy, is embedded within the former, welfare regime – thereby situating and accounting for policy as a means within its broader *normative* welfare state regime context. As such, Kurowska and Javornik (2019) highlight both structural barriers (via legal entitlements) and relational or normative barriers (via work cultures and parental orthodoxies differential impact of moral obligations to care), identifying multiple sources of injustice as embedded within a normative welfare state regime context and making analytical distinction between structural and normative injustices. In terms of metatheoretical standpoint on agency and structure, individuals' reflexive interaction with their contextual setting is understood as a "mutual constitutive process of structuration" (Yerkes *et al.* 2019b: 7), redolent of Giddens' (1984) Theory of Structuration. Gender is conceptualised as differentially shaping both parental leave opportunity structures (conversion factors) and policy

driven means (across legal and normative features) (Kurowska and Javornik 2019: 89, see figure 5.1).

The above outlined adaptations of the CA, within social policy scholarship, enable evaluation of the disjuncture between policy goals, parents' care capabilities and achieved leave taking functionings. However, despite the articulated aims of the CA to respond to lack of consideration of social embeddedness within utility and resource-based approaches, it has been argued that the social embeddedness of individuals remains insufficiently recognised (Dean 2009). Sen's emphasis on individual reflexive activity and ability for 'self-scrutiny and reasoning' (Sen 2002: 33), have led to critiques of methodological individualism (Dean 2009; Robeyns 2017). Such critiques suggest that the CA fails to acknowledge sufficiently the realities of social interdependency, power dynamics and resulting oppressions (Lewis and Giullari 2005; Dean 2009), which could undermine the use of the CA to examine couple decision-making from a critical social justice perspective. As Lewis and Giullari argue, for the CA to be effective in progressing gender justice, it must recognize "individual's autonomy *and* interdependence" (2005: 94 (authors' emphasis)).

Adaptations of the CA within social policy scholarship have not yet fully responded to this gap by providing a theoretical solution to conceptualising what an individual sees as feasible and imaginable from a socially embedded or interdependent perspective. For example, while problematising "what an individual would choose if she is unable to imagine the alternatives and opportunities open to her" (Hobson 2014: 22), Hobson (2014: 21) rather focuses on the "cognitive experiential dimensions" and drawing "analytical purchase" on the cognitive sense of entitlement. How gender norms shape parents' valued functionings, what is of value, imaginable and feasible to parents within a couple dyad context, therefore, remains largely underexplored.

2.5. In conclusion: A conceptual framework

For the CA to meaningfully account for interactional care relationships, in which choice is shaped by responsibility for self and others, individuals need to be accounted for as both autonomous and interdependent (Lewis and Giullari 2005).

Examining normative, in contrast to structural, injustices require alternative theoretical approaches, especially concerning socially embedded subjectivities, gender relations of power and couple relationalities (Siltanen and Doucet 2017; Doucet 2023). I build on previous employment of the CA within social policy scholarship and respond to these gaps in the literature through my adaptation of the CA for this study. First, by drawing on a conceptualisation of gender as discursively constituted to examine how gender norms, as re-constituted by the UK's SPL policy, are productive of parents' valued functionings and how gendered relations of power interactionally shape parents' decision-making. Second, by employing a critical social justice lens (specifically Fraser's 'After the family wage' typology (1994; 2013a), and feminist ethics of care as outlined above), through which to examine the impact of normative values underpinning the UK's SPL policy on parents' decision-making.

As detailed in section 2.2, I employ the concepts of "cultural intelligibility" and "normative violence" as tools through which to conceptualise how gender norms are constitutive of "liveable [parenting] lives" (Butler 1990; Lloyd 2007). Furthermore, I draw on conceptualisation of relationalities as set within a "grid of culturally intelligibility" (Butler 1990: 30), extended in relation to care, to examine the relationship between masculine parenting norms and feminine parenting norms as constitutive of gendered "relations of power" (Siltanen and Doucet 2017: 71). Furthermore, I draw on Butler's concept of "iterability" (Lloyd 2007: 60), that is the discursive processes through which gender norms and relationalities are both re-constructed *and* subverted. I do not employ an understanding of gender norms and relationalities as deterministic (as discussed by Benhabib *et al.* 1994; Gannon and Davies 2012) but sites of continuity and change (Butler 1993; Fraser 1995; Lloyd 2007). There is a case for a theoretical space between voluntarism, which assumes individuals' choice is unconstrained, and determinism in which structure determines everything, a theoretical space that enables "feminist … emancipatory practice" (Fraser 2013b: 155). As does Fraser, I anticipate "a pragmatic conception of discourse" as sites through which to explore "complex, shifting, discursively constructed social identities" (Fraser 2013b: 154).

As outlined above in applying a capability perspective, conversion factors have been conceptualised to examine of how factors, such as social norms, differentially impact conversion of available resources or means into functionings (Robeyns 2005; 2017). Within adaptations of the CA for examination of social (family leave) policy as a means for parents to care as they aspire to, analysis focuses on differential access, and conversion, by individuals of structural legal rights afforded via a policy into achieved functioning (Kurowska 2018; Kurowska and Javornik 2019). Normative parental orthodoxies are accounted for as also differentially shaping parents' *conversion* of family leave policy to an achieved functioning (Kurowska and Javornik 2019). In contrast, within this study, by examining parents' valued functionings as discursively and normatively constituted, as distinct from knowing "what is *intrinsically* valuable to individuals" (Kurowska and Javornik 2019: 87 - my emphasis), conceptual separation between gender norms understood as a conversion factor and / or as constitutive of valued functionings is blurred. By blurring the conceptual distinction between gender norms understood as a conversion factor and as constitutive of valued functionings, this thesis extends analysis of the UK's SPL policy as a means to parents' care capabilities, differentially *accessed* by parents, to its examination as a means as differentially *(co-)productive* of parents feasible and imaginable valued functionings. As such, the "evaluative space" within this thesis (Robeyns 2017: 38) includes the production of parents' valued functionings themselves, as constituted by gender norms, within the context of couple relationalities when planning care for a child during their first year.

I situate consideration of the normative focus on individuals' capabilities to pursue what is of value to parents from a critical social justice lens (Fraser 2013e). I am mindful that parents' decision-making is embedded within a patriarchal normative context, i.e., not a normative neutral vacuum. As such, I draw on Fraser (2013a) and feminist ethics of care respectively to critically expose prevalent patriarchal gender norms and how societal value attributed to feminine, reproductive work, and masculine productive work differentially shapes subjectivities and, in turn, couple relationalities care and gender relations of power.

However, as noted in section 2.3, there remains a key underpinning dilemma between setting out normative principles as to what gender justice should look like and prioritising autonomy, choice and flexibility – as potentially more aligned with liberal political contexts such as the UK (as outlined above, see: Morgan 2008; Ferree 2009; Orloff 2009). Therefore, on the one hand, moral passivity resulting from recognition of value pluralism through the CA (Phillips 2002; Nussbaum 2003), potentially undermines a critical approach which aims to challenge androcentric cultural values and, hence, gendered power dynamics. On the other hand, drawing on the universal caregiver model or feminist ethics of care potentially espouse a normative standpoint in opposition to prevalent gendered parenting norms and androcentric cultural values yet may be seen to undermine choice.

Nussbaum's development of the CA, working within the moral-legal political philosophical context, navigates a way through this dilemma by suggesting the protection of *basic* defined 'capabilities' deemed of crucial importance even where this may be seen to support 'interference with choice' (Nussbaum 2000: 59). She argues that gender justice cannot be successfully achieved without setting out some essential normative values; some of which may limit freedoms men have historically had, citing examples such as the curtailment of men's liberty that followed from laws against marital rape (Nussbaum 2000; 2003). Nussbaum's setting out of normative values has been described as a 'curiously illiberal liberalism.' (Phillips 2002: 250). However, I would argue, as a critical social justice perspective aspires to do, that we are not in a neutral normative value vacuum currently; this means that, as Fraser's (1994; 2013a) universal caregiver model sets out to do, the prevalent normative and discursively constructed gender coding, between breadwinning and caregiving, needs to be exposed. Furthermore, the relationality and interdependence inherent in care relationships requires recognition of vulnerability (to potential dependence) as a universal human condition (Tronto 1993; Fineman 2008; 2009; Lynch *et al.* 2021).

Therefore, I draw on the CA to conceptualise parents' decision-making and valued functionings from a normative standpoint that recognises value pluralism (Robeyns 2017; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b). However, I also draw on a critical feminist lens to expose power dynamics arising from the prevalent normative context, as imbued

and reinforced through the UK's SPL policy - as a means for parents to share leave as they aspire to, rather than to champion a specific normative standpoint for parental leave taking behaviours (e.g., gender difference standpoint or for all parents to share care equally). Doucet and Mckay (2020) has similarly drawn together insights from Fraser (2013a) and feminist ethics of care (e.g. Fineman 2009; Tronto 2013) to explore the social justice intersection between equality and care, which Doucet (2023) extends with an explicit focus on relationalities. I extend Doucet's (2023) focus on the social justice intersection between equality and care relationalities by also drawing on the CA, as outlined above, to conceptualise the interaction between parents' subjectivities, what is of value when planning care for a child during their first year, parents' (multiple and competing) valued functionings within a couple dyad.

In summary, I contribute a conceptual framework, which examines how gender relations of power (Butler 1993; Siltanen and Doucet 2017) shapes parents' valued functionings and what parents see as feasible and imaginable. I offer a theoretical contribution to family leave policy analysis by combining the CA, to conceptualise parents' valued functionings to be and to do care during their child's first year as an "evaluative space" (Robeyns 2017: 38), with a discursive conceptualisation of gender as normative and productive of gendered relations of power. As such, within this discursive evaluative space, interactions between parents' valued functionings in relation to planning care and sharing parental leave, act as subjectivities and sites through which to explore and bring to the fore normative couple relationalities, and the UK's SPL policy's normative role, in shaping parents' valued functionings as "liveable [parenting] lives" (Lloyd 2007: 33).

As visualised in Figure 1, I first employ the CA to scaffold conceptually each parent's valued functionings and the social interactions and relationalities between parent's valued functionings, when planning care and sharing parental leave, as a discursive evaluative space. Individual preference and choice as well as personal history and psychological processes are included in the visualisation of my conceptual model (A), however, they fall outside the scope of this thesis (as discussed in section 2.2). Valued functionings are assumed to be influenced by individual preference and psychological processes as well as shaped by parents'

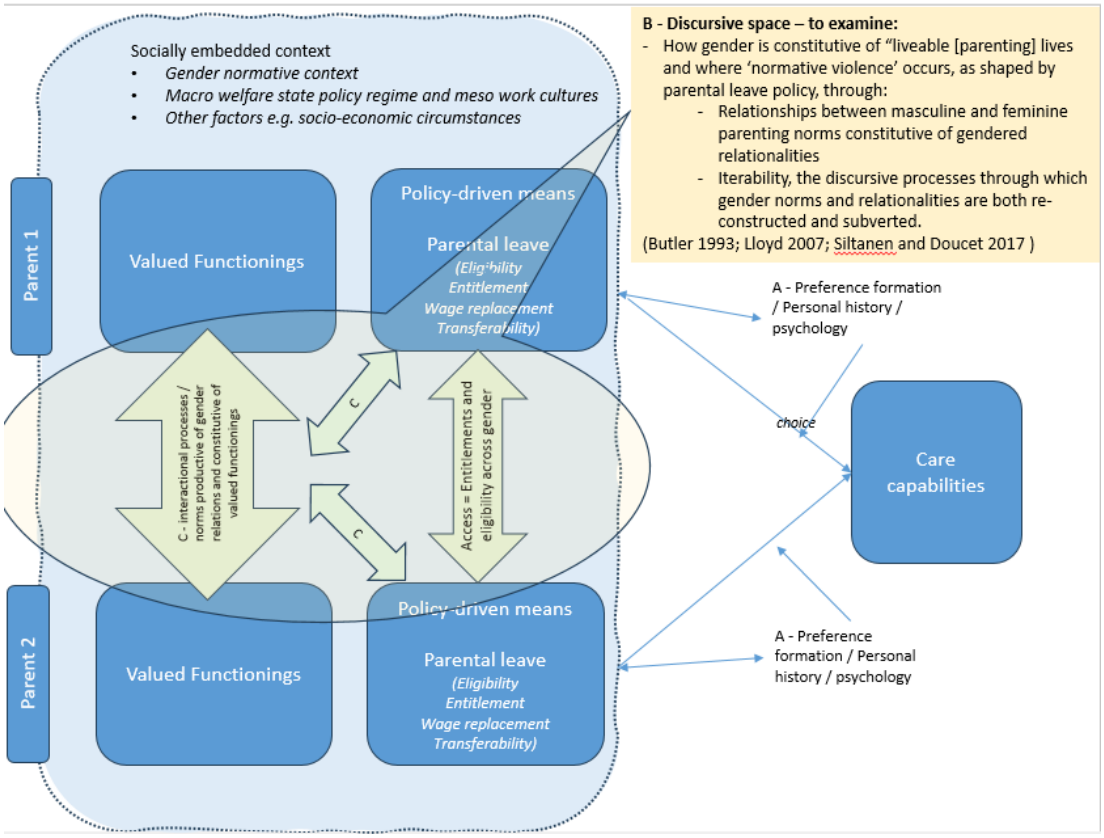
subjectivities as constituted by the normative context – it is the latter that is my focus within this thesis. I focus on the discursive evaluative space (B), which conceptualises the social interaction between parents' valued functionings or subjectivities as constituted through prevalent gendered parenting norms (masculine productive parenting norms and feminine reproductive parenting norms) (Fineman 2008; Fraser 2013a; Tronto 2013) and the UK's SPL policy as a means to parents' care capabilities. In this conceptual space, I examine:

- what parents express as valuable to them when planning care during a child's first year (research question 1)
- how gendered parenting norms shape what parents express as valuable to them (research question 2)

I reflect on gendered relations of power (C) at play between parents as members of couple dyad, and their interactions with the UK's SPL policy role as differentially (co-)productive of parents' feasible and imaginable valued functionings, to examine:

- how gendered parenting norms shape couple relationalities and decision-making dynamics (research question 3)
- whether (if at all) SPL, and employers' implementation of SPL, provides a means for parents to share parenting as they aspire to (research question 4).

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework - Adapted from Kurowska (2018) and Javornik and Kurowska (2019)



3. Chapter Three – Methodology

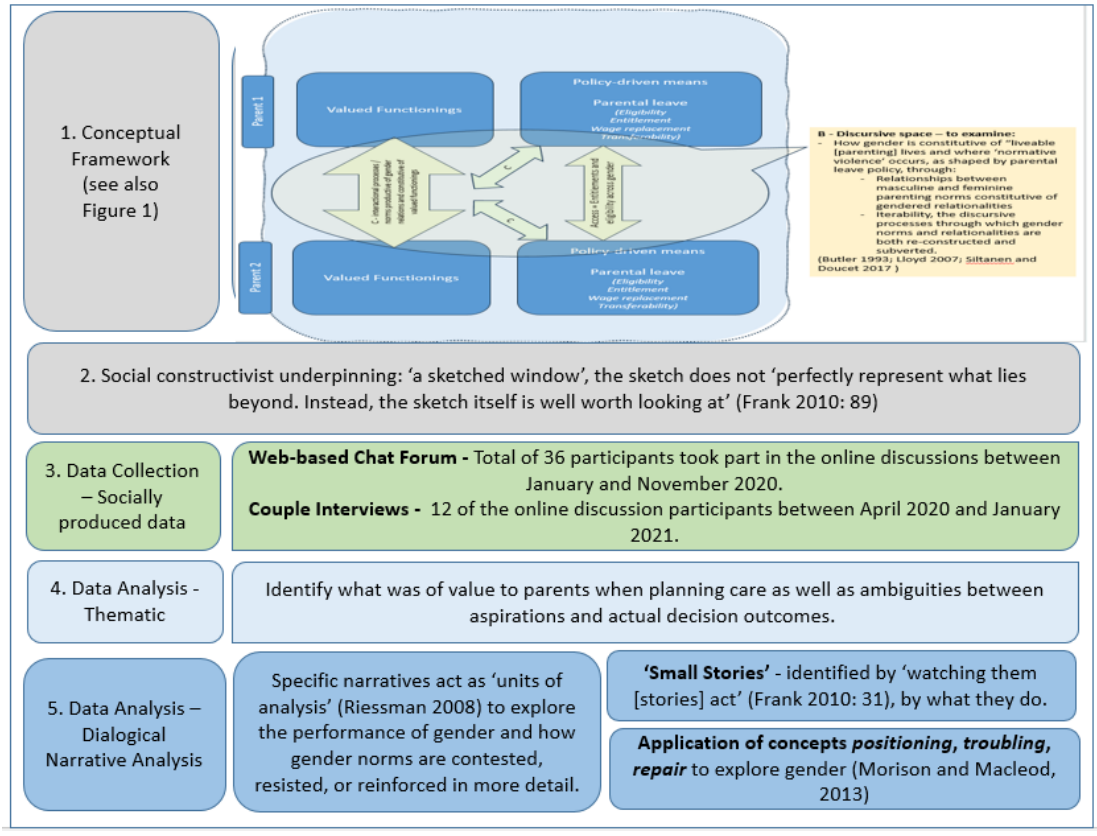
3.1. Introduction

My research focuses on social interactions, how meaning is created intersubjectively mediated by social norms and, therefore, required collection of socially produced data. My research design employed a two-staged multimethod qualitative research design (Mason 2006) - a web-based asynchronous chat platform for private group discussions with expectant parents and subsequent couple interviews. I facilitated seven online discussions (including a pilot) with approximately five to six participants in each discussion, a total of 36 participants actively took part in the online discussions between January and November 2020. I then interviewed 12 of the online discussion participants between April 2020 and January 2021. Ten included a partner. Mixing qualitative data collection methods (online discussion groups and subsequent couple interviews), enabled "meshing" of data collected in different relational and performative contexts (Mason 2006: 9), creating a rich source of data on the performative and relational aspects of interaction i.e., the 'how' as well as the 'what' was discussed (Riessman 2008; Frank 2010; Phoenix *et al.* 2021). 'Small stories' (Georgakopoulou 2015), identified within parents' reflections, provided analytical units through which to explore how gender is constituted within parents decision-making.

This chapter sets out my research methodology and is structured as follows. I start in section 3.2 by explaining the metatheoretical assumptions that underpin my methodology and research design. In section 3.3, I outline my employment of social constructivist dialogical narrative inquiry as an approach which recognises and responds to the problem of understanding what parents value within socially embedded contexts, providing analytical tools to explore how gendered parenting norms are constituted within what parents' value when planning care. In section 3.4, I set out what a social constructivist approach implies in terms of methodological coherence, rigour and trustworthiness. I distinguish between analytical focus mobilised at two levels, emic and etic, and subsequently, in section 3.5, I outline considerations of researcher positionality and reflexivity. In section 3.6, I outline the ethical implications including associated facets of trustworthiness.

In section 3.7, I then outline my research design, including justification for chosen methods, and detail my sampling strategy and research participants. In section 3.8, I set out my analytical framework, through which I employ social constructivist informed thematic analysis to identify parents, valued functionings and social constructivist informed narrative inquiry to explore how gendered parenting norms shape parents' valued functionings, as subjectivities. I finish the chapter by providing a summary of the research project challenges and reflections in section 3.9 and outline the structure of the subsequent data analysis chapters in section 3.10. Figure 2 below provides a visual summary of my conceptual framework and research design. Box 1 represents my conceptual framework, as shown in figure 1 above, and the remaining boxes summarise the operationalisation of my conceptual framework as labelled: positionality, data collection methods and data analysis methods (thematic and dialogical narrative data analysis).

Figure 2 – Summary of operationalisation of my conceptual framework



3.2. Metatheoretical assumptions

Metatheoretical assumptions, and researcher positionality, need to be consistently reflected upon throughout a research project, from the theoretical

conceptualisation of the research problem through to development and operationalisation of research methods for data collection and analysis (Cunliffe 2011; Wigginton and Lafrance 2019). I have positioned within the academic literature, my social justice positionality, my understanding of gender and of valued choice in chapter two. All are underpinned by an ontological understanding of reality as socially and discursively constructed through language in which knowing is to understand how social reality is created (Cunliffe 2011: 650). Furthermore, that gender, gendered parenting norms and valued functionings can be understood as sites of contestation as well as continuity (Brickell 2005; Morison and Macleod 2013b; 2013a).

As discussed in chapter two, family decision-making is theorised within different academic disciplines underpinned by various metatheoretical standpoints. An objectivist approach to decision-making focuses on the external observations of decision-making behaviour based on an objectivist epistemology and realist ontology. In contrast, a subjective positionality interprets the reality and experience of decision-making as inherently individual and focuses on the subjective experience itself; epistemologically subjectivist and ontologically relativist (Levers 2013). By using a social constructivist approach, this thesis *epistemologically* falls within a subjectivist frame, while *ontologically* assumes a social reality as consistent of objectified fact constructed through social interactions, language, routines and discourses (Cunliffe 2011). A social constructivist lens enables understanding of how social meaning is created, as we go about our everyday lives, by exploring how social norms are simultaneously challenged and adapted within social interactions (Cunliffe 2011; Levers 2013; Mascolo and Kallio 2020).

The underpinning ontological assumption is that there is a shared, albeit dynamic, understanding of social reality and that narratives, even personal narratives, are "expressed through culturally shared resources" (Carver and Atkinson 2021: 60). Frank (2010: 54) uses the term "inner library", a library which is evolving and dynamic, to envision the way in which discursive resources and stories may invoke shared understandings and interpretation of social reality. That is an "inner library" that is not purely subjective yet acknowledges limits to shared understanding relative to cultural contexts and different spheres of shared

experience, indeed some of which may only be held within one family. Using the metaphor of "a sketched window", a social constructivist approach recognises that the sketch does not "perfectly represent what lies beyond. Instead, the sketch itself is well worth looking at" (Frank 2010: 89). The subject of this thesis is the *social interactions* and *discussions* about what is of value between the couple rather than either what is of value as an absolute truth, externally observed behaviours or what is "encased in the minds of individuals" (Mascolo and Kallio 2020: 2). The subject of this thesis is, as reflected through social interactions, how what is of value to new and expectant parents is articulated, how gendered parenting norms shape what is articulated as of value and how this is productive of couple relationalities and decision-making dynamics.

Consistency between metatheoretical assumptions, methodology and research methods is also important for evidencing robustness and trustworthiness of research findings. Furthermore, there are important methodological implications and ethical risks arising from a social constructivist metatheoretical standing, which require researcher positionality and reflexivity to be explicitly considered (Hunter 2010; Gabriel 2018). Trustworthiness and validity for social constructivist (narrative) inquiry requires evidencing methodological consistency, guided by ethical considerations, rather than employing fixed verifying criteria as employed in realist informed research (Riessman 2008). In setting out my research methods in the following sections, I will be explicit about and reiterate alignment with my metatheoretical assumptions, as has been outlined in this section.

3.3. Employing dialogical narrative inquiry from a social constructivist positionality

There are various approaches to operationalizing a discursive approach. For example, Fraser proposes a discourse model through which she anticipates reflection on historically and culturally specific "internally dialogized" (with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin[7]) discursive resources (Fraser 2013d: 58). Fraser theorises the analysis of discursive resources in the broader political context,

[7] Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher and thinker whose literary and cultural theory, linguistics, and sociological theories have been drawn on within narrative inquiry (See for example Riessman, C.K. (2008) *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.)

comparing institutionalised discursive resources such as used by government with discursive resources used by political activists to reflect on the distribution of discursive power. She does not offer how to implement or operationalise this within empirical micro level research such as parents' everyday conversations. Similarly, while Butler (1990; 1993) provides the language through which to theorise gender, she does not provide guidance on how to operationalise such analysis in the context of empirical research (Morison and Macleod 2013a; 2013b).

Narrative inquiry has developed and become more popular within social sciences in recent years and it offers a "creative solution" (Squire *et al.* 2014: 1) to understanding persistent social problems. Narrative inquiry presents a format and the analytical tools through which to explore consensus and contradiction in what it is acceptable to say and do (Phoenix 2008; Phoenix *et al.* 2021), to explore how dominant and marginal normative expectations are articulated, often bringing to the fore "silenced, neglected and marginalized voices" (Georgakopoulou 2015: 25).

Theory underpinning narrative inquiry is drawn from a range of fields - psychology, sociology, social linguistics, literary analysis. Alongside its increased popularity as an academic field, narrative approaches focus on different issues of interest underpinned by diverse metatheoretical premise. The different points of interest within narrative inquiry requires varying, though not mutually exclusive, analytical approaches between focus on content, themes or dialogue (Riessman 2008). It is, therefore, important to define and be explicit in how I understand narrative in the context of this thesis (Mildorf 2007; Riessman 2008; Georgakopoulou 2015). Two narrative paradigms are broadly defined within the narrative academic field. First, often viewed as classical narrative analysis, is biographical storytelling through which the self and self-construction are of interest, often context independent. Second, and a more recent departure in terms of purpose and metatheoretical basis, is interactional narrative analysis. It is the latter, interactional or dialogical narrative inquiry, that I employ in this thesis - in line with my social constructivist metatheoretical assumptions and conceptualisations of gender, norms and what is of value to parents when planning care.

Underpinned by a social constructivist metatheoretical premise, interactive or dialogical narrative analysis (DNA) enables focus on stories told in everyday

conversations, sometimes described as ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou 2006; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). DNA recognises the social role and effects that storytelling or ‘small stories’ have in our everyday (family) lives (Riessman 2008; Phoenix *et al.* 2021); the ongoing everyday processes and interactions through which identities are made and remade (Squire *et al.* 2014; De Fina 2015). Small stories are not by default assumed to be a reflection on pre-existing experience or pre-complete action and neither do they reflect internal, individual psychological processes (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015; Georgakopoulou 2015). Rather small stories often express normative expectations: they are temporal and adaptable to audiences and specific social contexts, serving specific purposes, and involving co-construction between narrator, co-narrator and audience (Phoenix 2008; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015; Georgakopoulou 2015; Shuman 2015). In line with an ontological understanding of reality as socially constructed, I use DNA because it enables focus on such everyday narratives, co-constructed through social and interactional processes. As such, small stories arising within or as dialogical narratives enable analytical focus on “strategies used by narrators, co-narrators and their audience to achieve, contest and reaffirm specific identities” (De Fina 2015: 35), i.e., to resist or confirm normative expectations. Narratives may reconfirm what is culturally intelligible, while counter-narratives articulate positions which lie outside boundaries of what is expected, reflecting marginalized experiences which resist (implicitly or explicitly) dominant normative expectations (Bamberg and Andrews 2004; Squire *et al.* 2014).

Narrative analysis includes analytical focus on content, themes or dialogue (Riessman 2008) and draws on several dialogical analytical conceptual tools, such as, of positioning and reported speech. The concept of **positioning**, which draws on theories such as Goffman’s (1983) theorising of talk and performance of identity, enables focus on a narrator’s positioning of themselves or others, in relation to dominant or counter-narratives within a sequence or story. Through talk sequences a narrator establishes, shifts, and re-shifts their stance or position (Goffman 1983). Through everyday talk, we perform our “desirable selves”, projecting ourselves in relation to others and in negotiation with others in ways which are designed to persuade (Riessman 2008: 106). Similarly, analysing the use of **reported speech**

within dialogue illuminates how narrators draw on perceived authority of others through reporting the speech of others. Reported speech encompasses both the original protagonists talk and the narrator's construction of the story, and appropriation of the original talk, in a specific way within a specific interactional context (Riessman 2008; Goodwin 2015). Quoting another, as well as or instead of drawing on their own authority, may enable the reinforcing or resistance of norms, the testing and pushing of boundaries of what is acceptable to say (Riessman 2008; Shuman 2015). As noted above, dominant and counternarratives are not necessarily dichotomous or clear cut but constantly shifting (Bamberg and Andrews 2004; Frank 2010; Squire *et al.* 2014), as such gendered parenting norms are temporal and shift within varying social and narrative contexts. It is through these shifts or re-iterations (in Butler's (1993) terminology "iterability") that subversion and contestation, as well as continuity, occurs. Furthermore, dominant and counter narratives may be used explicitly together to orient to the other (e.g., dominant and then counter to resist it), or sometimes implicitly (Jones 2004; Squire *et al.* 2014). It is through social interaction, and talk sequences, then that we are able to explore gender norms in action.

Morison and Macleod (2013a) extend the concept of *positioning* to the analysis of gender specifically by focusing on a narrator's positioning, whether and how a narrator positions themselves or other characters, in relation to gender or gender norms. As noted above, it is through everyday narratives, or talk sequences, co-constructed and re-iterated through social interaction that normative expectations are confirmed or contested and subverted. Gendered parenting norms are resisted or confirmed in fluid ways, capturing "in-the-moment response to the discursive setting as [narrators] reiterate scripts … according to the demands of that discursive context" (Morison and Macleod 2013a: 571). Morison and Macleod's (2013a) extend the concept of positioning to specifically explore gender through use of the Butler's (1990) concept of (gender) trouble and of repair. *Trouble* focuses on expressing inconsistent or "negatively valued" gender *positions* (Morison and Macleod 2013a: 571). *Repair* brings attentions to strategies which enable correction of previous positions or draws on new discursive resources to preserve "positive positioning" (Morison and Macleod 2013a: 571). As an example, to demonstrate the

use of these concepts, Morison and Macleod (2013a) analysed data from interviews focusing on men's involvement in parenthood decision-making and the use of "children's needs" as a discursive resource. Morison and Macleod (2013a) explored examples of "needs" talk used to position a subject in relation to intensive mothering both in flexible and restrictive ways, where gender is troubled through challenge or recitation of gendered parenting norms. The exploration of "needs" talk suggests its use as a powerful and value loaded universal force to justify gendered parenting norms and as repair to "audience-induced interactional trouble" (Morison and Macleod 2013a: 573).

3.4. Demonstrating methodological coherence and trustworthiness in data collection, analysis and presentation

As noted previously, methodological coherence is required, from the metatheoretical assumptions underpinning the theoretical conceptualisation of the research problem through to development and operationalisation of research methods for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, while the criteria of validity, reliability and generalisability required of positivist or quantitative research is not applicable, trustworthiness needs to be evidenced to verify the value of the study. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) have commonly been used in qualitative research, however, there is a plethora of frameworks and debates over criteria evidencing good qualitative research (Loh 2013). In the case of narrative research, Riessman warns against use of standardised criteria that oversimplify "complex validation and ethical issues" (2008: 185) and argues instead for researchers to demonstrate "a methodical path, guided by ethical considerations and theory, to story their findings" (Riessman 2008: 186). In this thesis, I draw on the guidance of Silverman and Marvasti (2008) and Riessman (2008) to evidence the trustworthiness of my data collection, analysis and presentation, as follows:

1. Reflecting on the appropriateness of methods used (Riessman 2008; Silverman and Marvasti 2008) and providing a clear audit trail and documenting of sources is provided (Riessman 2008), to develop

empirically sound, reliable, and valid findings (Silverman and Marvasti 2008).

2. Providing coherence and persuasiveness within analytical interpretations, demonstrating they are "plausible, reasonable and convincing", evidenced by participants' accounts with "negative cases included, and alternative interpretations considered" (Riessman 2008: 191). As Silverman and Marvasti (2008) describe, I evidence mobilisation of conceptual tools to demonstrate theoretical thinking through and with data.
3. Evidence of researcher reflexivity and consideration of ethical issues specific to narrative analysis given the rhetorical purpose of narratives (Riessman 2008).
4. Where possible, research findings should contribute to practice and policy (Silverman and Marvasti 2008); or the "ultimate test" is whether the research adds to knowledge and can be a basis for further scholarly work (Riessman 2008: 193).

I embed consideration of 1-3 in the following sections and return to 4 in the final chapter reflections on the contributions of this thesis.

Through my research design outlined in section 3.7, I consider and demonstrate appropriateness of the methods used – for example, given my focus on social interactions mediated by social norms, how the data collection methods facilitated socially produced data. I provide detailed descriptions of my methodological processes through stage one and two of the data collection (the online discussions and then the couple interviews) as well as within my analytical processes. I evidence participants accounts as well as being explicit in my interpretations and the analytical tools that I used consistently throughout.

Coherence within my research design and analytical framework is demonstrated by setting out and detailing the stages of data analysis, the purpose of each stage and how these stages fit together. My analytical framework combines social constructivist thematic analysis to identify parents' valued functionings and social constructivist dialogical narrative inquiry to explore in more detail, drawing on narrative analytical tools, the performance of gender and how gender or gender

norms are contested, resisted, or reinforced. Identifying counterevidence, or deviant cases, serve to test the robustness or validity of identified themes, as aligns with social constructivist informed qualitative research (Silverman 2006; Riessman 2008). As such, through my data analysis I indicate the themes at play within parents' decision-making narratives and, additionally, I reflect on and identify evidence, which contests or counters the apparent importance of these themes. Identification of counter narratives is expected in the context of gendered parenting norms, which are daily being both reinforced and contested, and aides' identification of marginalised experiences reflected in parents' narratives.

It was important to recognise tension in analysing themes from a social constructivist positionality within which both myself and participants are embedded. Applying critical thought, and theorising through and with the data, enables the researcher to make connections between multiple stories (Silverman and Marvasti 2008; Frank 2010). However, maintaining respect for participants own common sense understandings at the same time is of ethical importance. As Frank (2010) suggests "critical thought can appreciate how expert people are about their lives while examining ways in which any person's or group's self-awareness is limited" (Frank 2010: 73). Application of critical thought needs to be balanced with potentially misappropriating an individual's story by prioritising the participant voice and letting the participants' stories "breathe" (Frank 2010). Explicit reflexivity was important in this respect, and I found it useful to the distinguish between recognising participants frame of reference from an emic perspective and drawing on a theoretical framework from an etic perspective (Jones 2004; Silverman 2006). As such, analytical focus was mobilsed at two levels. Both through emic analysis, working within participants own orientations, and their narrative positioning, and through etic analysis and use of an external analytical knowledge or an imposed theoretical framework, as an interpretive resource (Jones 2004). I return to detail how I applied these concepts within my data analysis in section 3.8.

In the presentation and discussion of the research findings' I continue to consider coherence and consistency of theoretical language.

3.5. Researcher positionality and reflexivity

In terms of researcher positionality, a social constructivist approach assumes the researcher is also not separate from the socially constructed phenomena being studied and cannot, therefore, approach the research focus "as a blank state with the goal of observing something in its true form" (Levers 2013: 4). As the researcher, I am also influenced by "taken-for-granted" assumptions as are participants (Gillespie and Cornish 2010: 19) and, therefore, needed to be aware of my own interpretations and how these are influenced and constructed (Levers 2013). Social constructivist positionality, which underpins dialogical narrative inquiry also implies that the co-creation of narrative data is fundamental to the nature of these narratives implying "the inseparability of observer, observation and interpretation" (Riessman 2015: 221). As data cannot be treated as separate from my experience and positionality as the researcher, my positionality requires explicit reflection.

My positionality is influenced by my own related experiences of growing up in a traditional breadwinner / caregiver family, marriage, divorce, single parenthood, cohabitation, miscarriage, shared and unshared periods of family leave, and subsequent primary carer responsibilities in both obvious and more subtle ways; all of which have impacted on my work-life decision-making, balancing caring responsibilities, and career aspirations. Further, as previously stated, this research project is positioned from a critical gender justice positionality (Fraser 2013e) and, therefore, as feminist and 'political' with an emphasis on the importance of highlighting lived experience to contest dominant narratives, problematise gendered normative assumptions and highlight less dominant narratives and associated power relations (Oakley 1999; Lloyd 2007).

Furthermore, through my employment as an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) practitioner within the Higher Education sector, I am regularly exposed to and involved in gender equality debates in my work, for example via the Advance HE Athena Swan charter mark (Advance_HE 2023) and including issues relating to pregnancy and family leave. EDI practitioner experience both heightens my awareness of gender justice issues and has provided me with the opportunity to

progress gender equality through strategy development, policy advice, policy review and conference presentations coinciding with my undertaking this research project.

My personal / political position, therefore, invokes the importance of disciplined reflexivity throughout. Through being reflexive, I aspired not to simply provide post-hoc additional reflection. Rather recognising my positionality within my data analysis was an essential part of the project, enabled conscious reflexivity and provided "greater rigour" and trustworthiness throughout the analysis (Riessman 2015: 234).

Riessman (2015) outlines various modes through which reflexivity which can be alternatively presented, such as an appendix written separately from the analysis or embedded within the narrative analysis itself. I have embedded reflexivity throughout my analysis. First, so as to acknowledge and embed the value of reflexivity in providing greater rigour to my analysis (Riessman 2015). Second, to explore my role in the co-construction of the narrative data, how I am implicated in narrative accounts and my influence within the online discussions and couple interview settings (Hunter 2010; Elliott *et al.* 2012; Riessman 2015). For example, embedding reflexivity throughout my analysis enabled exploration of my role in a talk sequence through my questions, comments or simple utterances of understanding (or not) and researcher-participant power dynamics (Fine *et al.* 2003; Elliott *et al.* 2012). I used a research journal and NVivo notes throughout my data analysis to aid reflexivity (Riessman 2008; Elliott *et al.* 2012). I am explicit and reflexive within my data analysis about my own biases and subjectivities, when I was aware of these, and consciously reflect on my emotional responses.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was received from the University of East London University Research Ethics Committee in July 2018. Upon transferring to the University of Leeds, this was approved via chairs action by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee in January 2019.

I considered several ethical issues related to avoiding harm to participants of my research. I was conscious of the discomfort that parents may feel speaking

about parenting topics which are heavily moralised (Faircloth 2021a), and of potential detrimental impact on participants of talking about sensitive parenting and parental leave issues, which may in turn trigger emotions on related topics such as pregnancy loss or postnatal depression. Furthermore, the physical distance in the online context between participant and researcher made monitoring for adverse effects, in the moment, difficult. Couple interviews specifically raised ethical issues around creating discomfort between the couple such as questions relating to decision-making dynamics, which had potential to intrude into relationship issues that they may not want to speak about (Valentine 1999; Bjørnholt and Farstad 2012; Zarhin 2018). As noted by Zarhin (2018), there were risks of contravening researchers' commitment to non-maleficence as well as of eliciting responses which are “socially correct” (Zarhin 2018: 848). There were also risks that one partner may dominate the discussion which I as interviewer may unknowingly facilitate or the risk of creating conflict, resurfacing previous disagreements or creating new ones, within the interview context (Valentine 1999; Bjørnholt and Farstad 2012). However, how the participants interacted and narrated their experience within the couple context was central to the thesis, to prompt discussion of how decisions had been or were being made, what the influencing factors were and to elicit narratives through which to explore how gender is constituted, whether resisted or reinforced, within couple relationalities.

There are also potential ethical advantages of interviewing couples together, such as avoiding the ethical challenge of presenting data drawn from individual interviews in a way which avoids exposing a participant's identity to their partner (Bjørnholt and Farstad 2012). Interviewing partners together diminishes ‘the role of the researcher as a keeper and mediator of secrets’ (Bjørnholt and Farstad 2012: 15) - also a consideration for data collected via the online discussions and subsequent interviews. Follow up interviews with a participant’s partner (and the subsequent write up) led to the potential risk of disclosing identifiable information contributed during the online discussion groups where their partner had not been present. There were some occasions where a participant shared or repeated the same message in both interview and online discussion which was less problematic.

Creating safe spaces, therefore, through which to facilitate the discussions was considered throughout development of my research methods. I was mindful of not creating harm and being sensitive in my approach in order to create a safe, friendly, and informal environment. Participant information and consent forms (see appendix 9.1), both for the online discussion and for the interviews, outlined their purpose, clearly stating the potential risks as well as benefits and how the data would be used, and confidentiality maintained. I also included how I anticipated mitigating any risks and I provided clear contact and signposting to support agencies. All participants were asked to complete a consent form (see appendix 9.1) prior to participating in the online chats and interviews. In developing the online discussion as a safe space, I used a netiquette guide (see appendix 9.2) which all participants were asked to read and confirm their understanding of on joining the online discussion platform and prior to participation. Participants were encouraging of the use of pseudonyms which enabled anonymous participation. Anonymity, discussion ground rules, and discussion moderation is further discussed in section 3.7.

The interview information forms explicitly noted the potential risk of causing discomfort between the couple. At the start of the interviews, I reviewed the information sheets with the participants so that they could raise any questions or concerns. I explained how I would conduct the interviews, that I was sensitive to the risk of causing discomfort and emphasised that they could stop the interview at any point if any questions felt uncomfortable. All the interviews were conducted via Zoom and, while not in the same physical space, I tried to make the online space friendly and informal; for example, I had my children's artwork behind me[8]. To mitigate the risk of disclosing information that a participant had shared during an online discussion to their partner in a subsequent interview, I was careful to exclude any personal reflections on a participant's contribution in the follow up interviews. When transcribing the interviews, I was careful about redacting potentially identifying information such as workplace, children's names, others named as well

[8] As it transpired a statement on my positionality and a blurring of boundaries between professional and personal which was indirectly noted by one couple and becomes an interesting example of intersubjectivity which I return to in section 6.2.2.

as the participants names themselves - i.e., by using pseudonyms. While there were no incidents of conflict either in the online discussions or the interviews, there were disagreements between participants and between couples, both explicit and subtle which I explore in the analysis. The risk of unwittingly disclosing a participant's reflections to their partner in any publicly available write up or subsequent presentations was slim as most of the online discussion group text was thematically analysed whereby individuals are less identifiable, however, I remained mindful of this risk.

Finally, all data collected via online focus groups and interviews were anonymised using pseudonyms and kept in password protected folders. Personal data collected via the biographical pre-sign-up online survey as well as names and matching pseudonym were saved in a password protected Excel spreadsheet adding an additional layer of protection. No un-anonymised data was printed or shared via email. Transcription of the interview recordings were checked at least twice for accuracy and deleted once the transcription process was complete as outlined in the participant information sheet.

There are also ethical considerations relating to data analysis and dissemination. Through ethics processes, such as gaining consent to collect and use a participant's data, with the ownership of the data transitions to the researcher (Fine *et al.* 2003). Consent processes essentially ask participants to reveal and potentially make themselves vulnerable, for example through the stories they share, while researchers reveal little about themselves or their own vulnerabilities (Fine *et al.* 2003). However, dialogue does not end on completion of data collection but continues through the researcher's analysis, which informs how the data or 'stories' are used, retold and for what purpose. There is, therefore, potential for misappropriation or 'romanticising' of narratives in the retelling (Fine *et al.* 2003; Hunter 2010) and I suggest two main considerations.

First, consideration of how to ethically navigate between using commonsense or face value understandings of a participant's narrative and applying critical thought to interpret a participant's narrative by employing an emic and / or etic lens – as discussed in section 3.4. Second, the research design aims to explore decision-making in the context of entrenched social norms and is positioned

within social justice debates and gender justice more specifically. It is important to reflect on how my research contributes to social justice and social change and who benefits from it. This is particularly important given the context of my employment within equality, diversity and inclusion, my positionality and my aspiration to contribute to culture change within my sector and beyond. When presenting at conferences, I have been conscious, given the moralising nature of parenting discussions (Faircloth 2021a), of how my research findings will be received by differently situated audiences for example by academic, policy and practitioner audiences and parent networks (Riessman 2008). I am, therefore, sensitive in how I prepare and present my research. At the start of presentations, I am explicit about my positionality and that analysis I present is informed by my positionality which may differ inadvertently from the original participants / narrator's intention.

3.7. Research design and methods

I employed a two-staged multimethod qualitative approach – a web-based asynchronous chat platform for private group discussions with expectant and new parents followed by couple interviews. In line with the metatheoretical assumptions underpinning this study (set out in section 3.2), these methods were selected in response to my research focus on social interactions that required collection of socially produced data. More structured approaches, such as in-depth interviews, were considered but not chosen due to this study's focus on social interaction and prioritizing how meaning is created intersubjectively. Rather than myself as researcher directing the interviews, probing individual cognitive processes and in-depth personal reflections, a semi-structured approach was chosen to encourage storytelling and couple interaction. In the subsequent sections, I provide detailed rationale for utilisation of online discussion forum and for couple over individual interviews.

3.7.1. Stage one: The online discussions

Using the web-based chat platform, I facilitated discussions with, and between, participants on what is of value to parents in relation to shared parenting

during a child's first year, and the perceived enablers and barriers in achieving these.

The innovative use of online discussion groups was inspired by open online chat forums, such as Mumsnet, which often provoke rich dialogue between parents, i.e., socially produced data (Mackenzie 2018). Such forums generally are open to the public do not allow a specific sampling strategy or tailored questions. I, therefore, investigated various types of private text, verbal and video and real time or synchronous and asynchronous online platform options. I explored functionality, accessibility, and issues such as data protection and considered their benefits and risks including comparability to face to face discussions. After exploring functionality, benefits, and drawbacks of various online discussion platforms, I selected an asynchronous text chat platform to facilitate private online discussions. Access to the platform was provided by Vision Live, a multi-media agency that provides online qualitative research tools. It should be noted that my decision to use, and the process I went through to develop and design, the online discussions predated the Covid-19 pandemic. At the point I was exploring options, I had anticipated logistical benefits of online discussions over in-person focus groups such as overcoming geographical and time bound difficulties in gathering geographically dispersed and busy professionals / parents (Plantin and Daneback 2009; Dermott and Gatrell 2018). With onset of the pandemic in 2020, this meant the approach was risk proof in relation to lockdowns and public distancing and already feasible in transition to working online. Hence, there were no delays due to needing to adapt my research design.

Potential technological benefits of online chat forums included the opportunity to capitalise on the increased use of the internet, said to be 90 per cent of adults in the UK (ONS 2018). There were also potential benefits, as well as risks, associated with group dynamics when comparing in person synchronous focus groups with online and asynchronous options. A potential risk included limited group dynamics and ineffective data generation of a socially constructed nature (Moore *et al.* 2015). Concern about group dynamic and interaction was balanced, however, with evidence that online discussions can provide safety or comfort in anonymity, enabling sharing of personal experiences, freedom from expectations

related to personal attributes and freedom to express what one might not in person (Williams *et al.* 2012; Moore *et al.* 2015). Given the sensitivity of the topic, the distance of online anonymity provided potential for greater disclosure and balance of views (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk 2015; Moore *et al.* 2015). The importance of anonymity has been reflected on in family studies, for example, Burnett and Gatrell (2018) who used teleconferencing in place of interviews specifically in response to low take up, concerns about logistics, anonymity as well as geographical and time constraints. An additional consideration was participants' ability to give more considered and detailed responses, giving time to reflect and decide what to disclose versus less spontaneity and potentially "carefully constructed accounts" (Williams *et al.* 2012: 374).

The Vision Live asynchronous platform provided flexible functionality for advance and staggered question posting, interactive tools such as virtual whiteboards which can be used to help with brainstorming, uploading of images, video clips, easy participant access and pseudonym options. Its functionality enabled me as the administrator to add and manage participants details (name, initials or pseudonym and email address) via an administrator login. Messages were sent directly from the platform via email with each communication providing an individualised link for participants to use negating the need for participant login and making access straightforward. I also used a test login for each online discussion to test and view communications from a participant's perspective. The platform enabled live monitoring of engagement overall and by question and to see where someone had joined the discussion but not responded. As discussion moderator, I could send follow up and prompt questions either directly to one participant or all. There was also flexibility in setting up the questions on whether to enable participants to see other people's responses either before they have made their own response or only upon submitting their own response.

After receiving training from Vision Live, I uploaded and tested the online chat questions for clarity and flow as well as the functionality and accessibility with six acquaintances (men and women). I used feedback from this test discussion to check whether the platform was indeed technically straightforward and easy to use. To create a safe environment and to mitigate the risk of misunderstandings,

expressing negative views or less tact than may be used in discussions in person, I developed a 'net etiquette guide'. All participants were asked to read and confirm their understanding of the guide at the start of each discussion to set ground rules of how to respond to each other.

I used questions within the online chat which drew on a range of potentially interdependent valued or influencing factors discussed in previous research on SPL in the UK - such as shared parenting aspirations, financial / employment security, potential impact on career and breastfeeding. See appendix 9.3 for the online discussion schedule of questions. Use of vignettes for questions focusing on gendered parenting expectations enabled parents to contribute in an impersonal way if they preferred (Barter and Renold 1999). Vignettes have also been found, within narrative research, to act as fictional narrative which can encourage participant narrative production (Goodwin 2015). Following initial broad and depersonalised questions, the discussion questions focused on participants actual leave planning and outcomes, where these were already decided. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on discussions within their 'web of relations' (Thompson 1993), both immediate family and within the employment context, again in anticipation of production of narratives. In addition to the initial testing, I piloted the discussion to make relevant adaptions prior to the facilitating subsequent discussions such as the introduction of using vignettes, which had not been used in the pilot.

3.7.2. Stage two: The couple interviews

The second stage used couple interviews for online discussion participants. The aim of the interviews was to elicit discussion about the issues and dynamics that impacted the decision-making as narrated from the couple perspectives. I had considered and weighed up the benefits and risks associated with couple interviews in comparison to individual interviews.

It has in the past been assumed that women are the mouthpiece of the household, a result of assumptions that women are responsible for the private sphere of household and family matters, leading often to the exclusion of men in family research (Valentine 1999). However, interviewing household members jointly

can bring men's (or other household members') voices into the research and provide insight into household relationships, discussions and negotiations (Valentine 1999). A key strength of joint interviews is that the family discussion and negotiation may naturally occur during the interview; issues can be debated in the moment and through that process, rich socially constructed data is produced (Valentine 1999; Bjørnholt and Farstad 2012). The couple bringing together their experience and understanding during an interview, creates rich data through which the researcher is able to explore couple relationalities and gain insights into the household dynamics that would not be elicited from individual interviews. As outlined in section 3.3, it is through interactive co-constructed everyday narratives that normative expectations are expressed serving specific purposes within specific temporal settings. Through such narratives we can focus on consensus and contradiction, or the strategies used by narrators to reinforce, resist or contest normative expectations. Indeed, couple interviews can create reflective spaces which encourage discussion (sometimes of previously undiscussed topics or views) as well as the co-creation of responses (Valentine 1999; Bjørnholt and Farstad 2012). Couple interviews, therefore, elicit additional data from the interaction and discussion dynamics including nonverbal interactions and body language or interactions between the couple and researcher (Bjørnholt and Farstad 2012). Even, as Bjørnholt and Farstad (2012) noted, at times where the researcher becomes the observer and one partner transitions to interview their partner – a phenomenon I experienced in several of the couple interviews.

However, couple interviews also generate methodological and ethical risks in terms of power dynamics between couples, which can shape responses and potentially do harm (Valentine 1999; Zarhin 2018). I was conscious of the ethical considerations in potentially intruding into the couple's private interpersonal space or exposing disagreements which may cause discomfort – as outlined in section 3.6. On balance, I decided couple interviews would better produce socially constructed data that would enable me to respond to my research questions. However, the ethical risks and considerations relating to couple interviews were taken seriously within my research design so as to put in place risk mitigations and centre care in my interview approach (see section 3.6).

The interview format was semi-structured using open-ended questions rather than a structured question and answer approach. It was informed by a free association narrative interview approach in which open-ended questions are asked to invite retelling of experiences (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). When designing the interview guide, I aimed to encourage discussion of the following topics:

- What shared parenting meant to them as individuals and as a couple.
- Personal experiences that have influenced their aspiration and understandings of shared parenting.
- Discussions they have had in relation to planning and to sharing leave (or not).
- Factors influencing their decision-making including SPL.
- Agreements and disagreements about shared parenting and planning.

The aim was to invite reflections on lived experience, to talk broadly about shared parenting and leave plans, to encourage participants to share 'small stories' or narratives which reflected their experience, feelings and emotions. As outlined in section 3.3, the presence of narratives, and use of discursive resources, within talk sequences enable exploration of the role of gendered parenting norms within what participants described as of value and how this interacted with decision-making (Frank 2010; 2012; Smith 2016). I only drew on the factors that participants had already discussed in the online discussions broadly so as not to reference specific points that one partner may have shared during the online discussions inadvertently. Finally, I asked about whether there was anything that they had not agreed on in terms of their decision making. I was conscious that this may trigger difficult reflections and so made sure I gauged when and how to ask this question sensitively and anticipated not pushing the question if there seemed to be an awkward response. The interview schedule can be found in appendix 9.4.

3.7.3. The participants

The sampling criteria for participation were as follows:

- Participant must have a partner.
- Participant and their partner must both be in work.

- Participants had to be either expectant or parents who had had a child in the previous 12 months.
- Participants could be heterosexual or same sex couples and could be biological or adoptive parents.
- Participants did not have to be eligible for SPL.

The rationale for the expectation that both parents would be in work was to enable exploration of the different influences on decision-making in relation to taking leave from work, and how this was impacted by gender. Additionally, as outlined in chapter one, eligibility to SPL is based on minimum employment thresholds and so I did not want to exclude non-eligible employed parents.

My initial plan was to gather a wide spectrum of voices from across socio-economic groups via purposive sampling (Campbell *et al.* 2020). This was in recognition that the dominant voice in the family research is often that of white heterosexual middle-class professionals (Dermott and Gatrell 2018). Specifically, SPL related research has predominantly involved professionals and well-educated groups (O'Brien and Twamley 2017; Parliament.UK 2018). I aimed to recruit a diverse sample of participants to recognise the benefit of using an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 2017) and in response to Robeyns' (2003) criteria that identification of valued functionings should be sensitive to diverse contexts. I initially targeted recruitment via local antenatal services and parenting support groups. However, despite regular contact with antenatal services, such as National Childbirth Trust (NCT) and local councils, prior to starting recruitment of participants in late 2019, I had limited response. Therefore, I adapted my initial purposive sampling strategy and used the snowballing technique instead (Lewis-Beck *et al.* 2004). I used my own personal and work networks and approached professional organisations such as Working Families, Fatherhood Institute, Bright Horizons Family Solutions, Advance HE Athena SWAN network. Furthermore, I shared the call using Twitter and Facebook. Additionally, I had initially aimed to focus only on expectant parents but expanded this criterion due to difficulties with recruiting participants and following expressions of interest from new parents.

All participants were asked to complete a pre-participation socio-demographic questionnaire. Table 2 provides a summary of personal characteristics of the participants and table 3 lists all the participants and their socio-demographic characteristics. The final sample was more limited than initially planned in terms of socio-economic status as most of the participants had a higher education qualification and just over 50% had a household income of above £80,000. However, the sample reflected different career stages and contract statuses, as well as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Table 2: Summary of online discussion participants disclosed personal characteristics

Online discussion participants	**Number**
Female	28
Male	5
Bisexual	3
Gay	3
Heterosexual	27
White	28
Ethnic Minority	5
Total	**33**
Participants who signed up but did not participate (not included in table 6 - below)	10

Table 3: The participants including socio-demographic characteristics and type of leave taken if decided

Pseudonym:	Partner Name if Interview	Gender	Age	Describe self as from an ethnic minority?	Sexual orientation	Relationship status	Do you have children?	Rent or Own home	Employment status / working pattern	Total household income - past 12 months	Leave type if decided
Pilot OFG (January 2020)											
Sukhi		Female	29	Yes	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Other	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	Maternity
Ruth		Female	38	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Self-employed	Over £100,000	SPL
Olivia	Ben	Female	32	No	Heterosexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£80,001 - £100,000	SPL
Sally		Female	34	Yes	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Part time permanent	Over £100,000	Maternity
OFG1 (February 2020)											
Emma		Female	34	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£40,001 - £50,000	Maternity
Anne		Female	34	No	Heterosexual	Cohabiting with your partner	No	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	Over £100,000	Maternity
Louise		Female	40	No	Bisexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Part time permanent	£30,001 - £40,000	SPL
Eve	Thomas	Female	35	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	SPL
Stella		Female	31	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Rent	Part time permanent	£40,001 - £50,000	Maternity

Denise		Female	34	No	Heterosexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	Maternity
OFG2 (March 2020)											
Lorraine		Female	32	No	Heterosexual	Cohabiting with your partner	No	Own / mortgage	Full time fixed term	£50,001 - £80,000	Maternity
Pam		Female	38	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Part time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	SPL
Natasha		Female	30	No	Heterosexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£80,001 - £100,000	Maternity
Gemma		Female	32	Yes	Heterosexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	Over £100,000	Maternity
OFG3 (May 2020)											
Susan	Guy	Female	36	No	Heterosexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Part time fixed term	Over £100,000	Not yet decided
Florence		Female	39	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	Not yet decided
Alex		Female	38	No	Bisexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time fixed term	£80,001 - £100,000	Maternity
Catherine		Female	36	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time fixed term	Over £100,000	Maternity
Rachel		Female	36	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£80,001 - £100,000	Maternity
Jennifer		Female	35	No	Heterosexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	Maternity
OFG4 (August 2020)											

GM wonderwoman – Wendy		Female	42	Yes	Gay	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	Over £100,000	Not yet decided
Wonderwoman – Ciara					Gay						Not yet decided
Ivy	Isobel	Female	35	No	Bisexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	SPL
Annie	Craig	Female	36	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time fixed term	£50,001 - £80,000	SPL
OFG5 (August 2020)											
Michael	Rhonda	Male	40	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	Over £100,000	SPL
Gregory	Kiren	Male	38	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£40,001 - £50,000	SPL
Ned		Male	38	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£80,001 - £100,000	Paternity
OFG6 (November 2020)											
Philip		Male	28	No	Heterosexual	Married	No	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	Paternity
Melissa		Female	34	Yes	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time permanent	£50,001 - £80,000	Maternity
Steve		Male	41	No	Gay	Civil Partnership	Yes	Own / mortgage	Full time fixed term	Over £100,000	SPL
Frances	Henry	Female	32	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Part time fixed term	Over £100,000	Maternity
Sandra		Female	35	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Rent	Full time fixed term	Over £100,000	Maternity

Elizabeth		Female	36	No	Bisexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Part time fixed term	Not completed	Not completed
Diana		Female	39	No	Heterosexual	Cohabiting with your partner	Yes	Rent	Full time permanent	£80,001 - £100,000	Maternity
Katie	David	Female	38	No	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Own / mortgage	Part time permanent	£40,001 - £50,000	SPL

3.7.4. Transcription

The online discussions transcripts, as written by the participants, were downloaded directly from the online discussion platform. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, including features such as laughing, stops and pauses, tone and emphasis because these may have been important in understanding how messages are being relayed - an essential as part of narrative analysis (Esin *et al.* 2014; Smith 2016). I used the coding drawn from Roulston (2013) as outlined in the table 4 below. I also kept a reflective diary and for each interview this included reflections on couples physical positioning in relation to each other, body language, and my emotional responses to the participants, which I drew on throughout the data analysis.

Table 4: Transcription Coding

Symbol / notation	Action indicted
(.)	A micro-pause between utterances
<u>Sure</u>	Underlined words indicate emphasis
=	Indicates “latched” utterances, or no pause between turns
[	Square brackets indicate overlapping utterances
u::m	Colon indicates elongated utterance

3.8. Data Analysis

I undertook both thematic analysis and dialogical narrative analysis. As outlined in chapter two, I employed the CA to conceptualise parents' decision-making as part of a couple dyad and as a discursive space in which to explore what is of value (valued functionings), interactions with family leave policy, their capabilities, as differentially shaped by gender norms. I undertook **thematic analysis** to identify what was of value to parents when planning care as well as ambiguities between aspirations and actual decision outcomes. I interpreted themes in what parents articulated as of value to reflect and be suggestive of parents' valued functionings as socially constructed within specific contexts (i.e., co-constructed, temporal, purposeful and adaptable to audiences). Thematic analysis also enabled identification of recurrent discursive resources employed in relation to valued functionings, of dominant discourses as well as those more marginalised or less dominant. As noted in section 3.4, identification of divergent narratives helped to test the robustness of the identified themes whilst also indicating more marginalised narratives (Silverman 2006; Riessman 2008; Silverman and Marvasti 2008). I then identified specific narratives as 'units of analysis' (Riessman 2008) employing **dialogical narrative analysis** to explore how gender norms are contested, resisted, or reinforced within parents' discussions in more detail.

In summary, I used the following steps for the thematic and dialogical narrative analysis:

1. Thematic analysis for identification of themes suggestive of valued functioning
    a. Preparation of data
    b. First round coding – using deductive coding
    c. Second and subsequent rounds of inductive coding
2. Dialogical narrative analysis
    a. Identification of small stories or narratives
    b. Analysis of content and structure of the narratives

c. Implementing dialogical narrative analysis and invoking Morison and Macleod's (2013a) application of concepts of positioning, trouble and repair (as detailed below – 3.4)

3.8.1. Thematic analysis

Preparation of Data

I uploaded both interview and online discussion data to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to undertake the thematic data analysis. Within the NVivo file, I set up each participant as an individual 'case' file and linked both their online discussion and interview data to their individual 'case'. I added detail on whether the data was from an online chat or an interview as well as demographic data such as gender from the pre-participation socio-demographic questionnaire.

First round of coding

Drawing on earlier SPL research (discussed in chapter one), I used common themes such as financial barriers, career concerns, breastfeeding etc to set up preliminary pre-existing codes. I added these as 'nodes' titles in NVivo into which online chat and interview data on the specific themes could be collated. I then reviewed all the data using deductive coding to organise the data within the preliminary pre-existing codes as broadly indexed topics (Miles *et al.* 1994; Saldaña 2013). NVivo automatically saves data aligned to codes as 'references'.

Second and subsequent rounds of coding

In second and subsequent rounds of coding I refined the pre-existing codes by linking thematic coding analysis to my conceptual framework in a more structured way (Ryan and Bernard 2003). To do this, and drawing on the CA, I used inductive coding to identify what participants articulated as their values, attitudes, beliefs (Miles *et al.* 1994). I focused on emotions (as recalled and experienced by participant or inferred by me as the researcher) and on expression of values (reflecting on participants values, attitudes, beliefs). I used this inductive coding alongside my conceptual framework to differentiate and code discussion content expressed as of value (valued functionings) from discussion content which focused on perceived barriers or enablers by the participants (conversion factors). During

the inductive coding, I also identified themes and sub-themes, which had not been identified within the preliminary pre-existing codes, such as postnatal wellbeing and shared parenting. As the pre-existing codes had been identified from previous research, the newly identified codes indicated previously less explored themes.

As noted in my conceptual framework, the phenomena under study, parents' valued functionings, as subjectivities shaped by gender norms shape, makes identifying the role of gender norms conceptualised as a conversion factor (barriers and enablers) and / or constitutive of parents' valued functionings (i.e., what parents valued) blurry. Therefore, as outlined in section 3.4, I mobilised thematic analysis predominantly working within participants own orientations and frame of reference from an emic perspective (Jones 2004; Silverman 2006). Inductive coding was an iterative process which involved numerous rounds of repeated working through and interpreting the data and analysis and identification of themes was more straightforward for some 'valued functionings' than others. For example, what participants valued in relation 'to being able to share parenting' was more distinguishable than finances, which was often articulated as outside of someone's control. It was the messiness of the data, which highlighted anticipated ambiguities, contradictions, and discursive data with potential for employing DNA. It was through mobilising DNA that I analysed how gender shaped parents' valued functionings from an etic perspective.

For the thematic analysis, I developed code descriptions to complete NVivo 'code books' for both valued functioning and conversion factor themes. I was able to export from NVivo the complete 'code books' (see appendix 9.5 for example) as a list of themes and their descriptions to review and employ for the write up alongside participants actual quotes or NVivo 'references' (see appendix 9.6 for example). Having completed this initial thematic analysis, I then used thematic analysis (identified valued functionings as well as ambiguities and contradictions), to locate analytical units for **dialogical narrative analysis**.

3.8.2. Dialogical narrative analysis

While there are no prescriptive stages to narrative analysis (Squire *et al.* 2014), I drew predominantly on Riessman (2008), Frank (2010; 2012) and Smith

(2016). I outline and make explicit my methods of narrative inquiry below so as to evidence how I constructed an interpretive and trustworthy account of my findings (Riessman 2008).

Identifying small stories or narratives

Dialogical narrative analysis recognises that the stories people tell have a rhetorical purpose beyond description alone and, within specific social and cultural contexts, stories often either legitimise or contest social norms (Frank 2010; Squire *et al.* 2014). Within this study, the stories, and the social context that they are situated within, involved parents' discussions of what is of value to them in relation to shared parenting – this enabled analysis of how gender norms act and are constitutive of parents' decision-making and couple relationalities. While narratives, or small stories, may not always be neatly delineated (Shuman 2015), it is not, however, a case of anything goes and it is important to be clear that not all data or text is narrative (Georgakopoulou 2015). Frank (2010: 31) argues that stories can be identified by 'watching them [stories] act' (Frank 2010: 31), by *what they do,* on the effects the story has and their apparent purpose within an interaction, rather than by a specific structure. As such, we can explore the capacity of stories to make a point of view compelling, to make (gender) trouble, or to explore speakers use of parrhesia to truth tell (Frank 2010). I spent a considerable amount of time reading and re-reading the data to identify small stories. I drew on Smith's (2016) guidance about indwelling, that is reading, immersing, listening and jotting down initial impressions and I initially identified potential small stories while completing the thematic analysis within NVivo – described above.

Content and structure of the narratives

In contrast to analysis of many qualitative approaches in which text is broken down in detail, dialogical narrative analysis requires "preserving" (Smith 2016: 210) longer lengths of text so the 'story' can be explored as a whole and so as to analyse how participants construct stories or narratives. While I used NVivo to identify narratives, I did not use it for the actual narrative analysis because I needed to engage with the whole texts in order to identify structural characteristics as well

as themes. Instead, I used Word to set up tables within which to analyse the data, using colour coding and columns for notes, which helped me to navigate the content and untangle how something was communicated (see appendix 9.7 for an example). I also printed out the selected narratives to enable better engagement with the text. By repeatedly reading the text I was able to focus on different aspects and then reflect on the overall purpose of individual small stories.

The analytical focus on context and how something was communicated enabled an in-depth focus, beyond what was said thematically, at how respondents constructed and expressed their understandings of social reality - the when, why and for what purpose (Riessman 2008; Frank 2010; 2012; Smith 2016). This included focus on the direction(s) of the story, participants reflections, tone, emotions, subtexts and the resources they drew upon to reflect on or construct their experience (Frank 2010; 2012). Furthermore, drawing on Frank (2012), I used the following questions to aid reflection on the texts:

- What resources does the storyteller draw upon to shape their experience? Who has access to these and under what constraints? What alternative resources might be used?
- Who are the stories told to and intended for? Are there some people to whom the storyteller would not tell that story?
- To whom does a story connect? Who is placed outside this connection? How might groups be formed through sharing common understandings of a certain story? Who does the story render external or 'other' to the group?

To employ the analytical tools provided through dialogical narrative inquiry, I paid particular attention to the use of pronouns and reference to people within a story and how narrators *positioned* themselves and others, using words such as: "I know I shouldn't but…", "most people wouldn't agree" or talk of "taboo" (Jones 2004: 175). Analysis of 'positioning' required analysis of dialogue or talk as sequences recognising that it was through temporally unfolding talk sequences that narrators positioned themselves. It was not only the replies but what came first that was important and "the place where understanding in a conversation is

demonstrated is in a subsequent turn" (Goodwin 2015: 203). I also focused on the role that reported speech had in claiming or borrowing the authority of another to support or reinforce their confidence to tell a story (Shuman 2015).

These narrative analytical tools provided me both an emic lens, working within participants own orientations, and their narrative positioning, and an etic lens, where I was able to draw on external analytical knowledge as an interpretive resource (Jones 2004). As such, I additionally drew on Morison and Macleod's (2013a) operationalisation of the concepts of *positioning*, *trouble* and *repair* to explore of the narrator's (i.e., participants) positioning of themselves or others in relation to gender norms or expectations (see section 3.3 for more detail) and on Fraser's (1994; 2013a) After the Family Wage typology as a lens through which to reflect on parents' various articulation of gender justice.

3.9. Reflections and challenges

In this section, I reflect on the challenges with producing socially constructed data and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

3.9.1. (Recognising the blurriness in) constructing a comprehensive account of my findings

It was important to draw together theoretical concepts to construct a coherent and critical account of my findings. I present my analysis, drawing on the CA as a framework to conceptualise what was of value to parents as valued functionings. As noted in section 3.4, I found it useful to distinguish between participants reflexivity, that is the participants own frame of reference, from an emic perspective, and drawing on my own knowledge or theoretical framework from an etic perspective (Jones 2004; Silverman 2006). While not a clearcut divide, my thematic analysis and identification of valued functioning tended to rely on applying an emic perspective. My narrative analysis additionally mobilized, from an etic perspective, concepts which enable narrative inquiry, such as that of positioning, reported speech, gender trouble and repair, to explore how gender norms shape parents' decision-making. There was of course blurriness between analysis using parents' own frame of reference and drawing on external analytical tools as interpretive resources.

Participants' reflexivity varied. Some participants explicitly articulated their aspiration to challenge gender inequality and how they purposefully trouble gender. They had clear aspirations to change social structures as 'trailblazers'. Other participants trouble gender in much more subtle ways which require sensitive analysis through narrative inquiry. Similarly, given (as noted in section 3.4) I am not separate from the co-construction of the data and straddle between being a parent and a researcher, I recognised that I am no less immune to operating within cultural norms (Bamberg and Andrews 2004). My own positionality, experience as a parent and awareness of commonly shared narratives became an interpretative resource as well as potentially biased my attention to particular narratives. I reflected on why parents choose to tell a particular story. Similarly, I needed to reflect on why I chose the stories of focus. Rationales for story choice because of the effect they have as part of a sequence, their impact in that sequence, could reveal both dominant and marginalized narratives. I reflect on these issues through the data analysis.

3.9.2. Successes and failures in producing social constructed data

Overall, while the online platform enabled interaction between participants, there was varying success with greater interaction for some of the online discussions than others. As noted in section 3.7, participant interaction within the online discussions was an integral requirement for anticipated socially constructed data generation, both between the participants and with me as the moderator. Risks included limited interaction between participants, difficult exchanges due the physical distance and lack of body language and tone of voice to pick up on emotions (Moore *et al.* 2015). These challenges were reflected in one exchange between two participants and subsequently commented on within a follow up interview with one of the participants:

> *"the impact of it going badly is very much less than if you were in a face-to-face focus group and if I'd said something and they were visibly pissed off, you are kind of insulated aren't you in an online environment."*

Feedback from participants (either volunteered in email communication or via the follow up interviews) reflected that the platform was accessible and very easy to use alongside positivity about the ability for participant interaction. As was

anticipated, feedback from participants emphasised the importance of anonymity in enabling them to speak openly without fear of moralising and judgement, such as, the prevalent expectation on women to take their full maternity leave and make sacrifices in terms of their career development. While a few participants chose to share their names rather than use a pseudonym, most did not and were explicit about the importance of anonymity. Varying engagement in the online discussion may have also been impacted by the COVID19 pandemic - I consider this in section 3.9.4.

In terms of the interviews, the couple dialogue produced rich data in which short stories, or narratives, were embedded. I reflect on engagement within specific interviews within the presentation of my narrative analysis. As with the online discussions, COVID-19 pandemic impact is considered in section 3.9.4.

3.9.3. Discussion moderation - Moving between data collection and data interpretation

The online asynchronous discussions allowed me time as the moderator to move between facilitating the discussion, reflection and further reading in a way that in-person discussions would not have. It enabled "moving iteratively between data collection and data interpretation" (Williams *et al.* 2012: 375) and greater reflection before responding or asking following questions. I was able to revert to and reflect on the research questions and my methodological approach as well as engage with both coincidental and deliberate reading which was important for personal reflexivity (Morgan 2011). For example, recognising the problematic nature of potentially silencing further discussion through lack of empathy in contrast to possibilities of leading a participant to reveal more than they would otherwise (Bancroft 2011). Indeed, in many cases it felt important to reflect on how to respond to participants. For example, showing empathy felt important yet potentially difficult to express in an online context, not only in terms of showing sensitivity to difficult and emotive experiences but also how this might impact subsequent discussion. As anticipated, there were various points where participants shared emotive issues such as experiences of infertility, miscarriage and loss where showing empathy felt quite permissible, while in other examples, such as lack of

employer or family support, it felt less clear cut with responses potentially steering the discussion in particular directions or potentially sounding patronising or ingenuine, especially in the online context.

As well as my own reflexivity, participant reflexivity varied between those who appeared more reflective in their responses and those less so. Difference in responses may have reflected variation in response styles within the group discussion context (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk 2015). Response variation, and the extent of reflexivity, may also have represented varying degrees of explicit discussion (prior to engagement with the research), on such topics between participants and their partners, friends, family. Decisions within households often being a "matter of everyday and unspoken understandings that emerge in the course of everyday family living" rather than explicit consideration (Morgan 2011: 21). Those who provided more carefully constructed responses perhaps suggested greater reflexivity, echoing some participants' motivations for participating in the study, i.e., political aspirations to challenge gendered assumptions or parenting norms (Williams *et al.* 2012). In contrast, some participants reflected that participation in the research had generated greater reflection. I reflect further on participant reflexivity in chapter eight in relation to the limitations of this research project.

3.9.4. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

The primary and secondary school closures in the UK between March and July 2020 and January and April 2021 meant that my partner and I were working at home together and sharing the home-schooling and childcare for our then four- and eight-year-olds. My EDI practitioner workload was also significantly impacted by the pandemic and, following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement. Time available for the research project was as a result impacted.

Data collection took place through 2020 and early 2021 and so coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic which also had several impacts. In terms of logistics, my research design had already embedded use of an online discussion platform which transpired to be sustainable in the context of the pandemic – as noted in section 3.7. However, there were ethical implications and necessity to consider first

and foremost the wellbeing of the participants (Jowett 2020). The pandemic also impacted participant engagement which varied quite considerably both between the discussions and between individual participants. Of the six online discussions, three took place before the UK's first COVID-19 lockdown (between January and March 2020) and three during (between April and July 2020). The discussion which started in March 2020 just as we were moving into the UK's first lockdown, had noticeably lower levels of engagement which I interpret to have been because of the understandable distraction of the pandemic emergency. Whereas I would normally have sent prompts and follow up questions, it did not feel right to do so in the context of the early days of the pandemic lockdown and the levels of uncertainty everyone was experiencing. Therefore, I ended the discussion early explaining to participants why I was doing so. Later in the lockdown it felt more appropriate to facilitate a discussion and the discussion facilitated mid-lockdown in May-June 2020 had considerable engagement; perhaps given the isolation and opportunity to engage with other expectant and new parents at that point. Impact on participation in the interviews was mixed. One parent turned down an invitation to participate as they were feeling anxious because of concern about their mother and herself potentially having COVID-19. In contrast, a few couples noted how they had welcomed the conversation because of lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic to some extent also impacted the issues of focus within the research project, i.e., parents' decision-making itself. I did not notice a significant shift in parents' commentary about what was of value to them in making parental leave decisions – i.e., there were similar themes arising from the online discussions before and during the pandemic. However, some considerations were exacerbated, such as financial and employment security concerns due to increased employment precarity and fears that organisations may have had to make staffing cuts. COVID-19 related vulnerability and health risks during pregnancy were also referenced as having impacted decision-making. Unpredictability was reported as arising from uncertainty regarding availability and accessibility of childcare, e.g., nurseries struggling to stay open was also reported. As well as causing additional stress, lockdowns, furlough or having one's partner working from home coinciding with parental leave created more time as a family which was noted as beneficial. It

was also notable that the pandemic and resulting changes to caregiving was reported to have shifted opinions of and actual practice in the gendered balance of caring. I have embedded findings arising from analysis specifically impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic within the results chapters.

3.10. In summary – Presenting the findings

This chapter has outlined the qualitative methodology utilised within this thesis, combining two stages of data collection (web-based asynchronous group discussions with expectant parents and subsequent couple interviews) and two analytical approaches (thematic analysis and narrative analysis). This methodological approach, which captured parents' discussions in relation to planning care during their child's first year, enabled collection of socially produced data and, subsequently, analysis of how meaning is dialogically shaped by social norms. My analytical framework involved thematic analysis to identify themes within what parents articulated as valuable to them in relation to planning care for their child during their first year. Drawing on the CA to conceptualise parents' decision-making as part of a couple dyad, I understood identified themes as suggestive of parents' valued functionings (what is of value when planning care), scaffolding a discursive evaluative space in which to explore how gender norms act. As well as dominant and recurrent themes, I also noted counter evidence, which both questioned the apparent importance of a theme and aided identification of parents' more exceptional experiences. I drew these more exceptional experiences, on ambiguities between parents' aspirations and achieved capabilities and on discussions suggestive of being shaped by gendered parenting norms as evidence of complexities within parents' decision-making. I used this evidence to select narrative cases as units of analysis through which to explore the thematic findings in more detail using dialogical narrative analysis. Narratives were also selected based on the purpose they served within a talk sequence, for example, as an act of resistance or parrhesia or because of the vividness in how a story was narrated (Frank 2010).

As discussed in chapter two, there are challenges in exploring how gender norms shape decision-making, what is imaginable, what an individual sees as

feasible, because what is valued (or not) is embedded within settings and situations impacted by social norms, making individual reflexivity difficult. Participants' discussions provided narratives through which to explore ways in which gender is constituted within parents' decision-making and how parents contest and subvert gendered parenting expectations. Within narratives, discursive resources serve different (rhetorical) purposes, some may legitimize, and some may contest gender norms. Through the identified narrative cases, using dialogical narrative analysis, I explored the use of identified recurrent discursive resources and how gender norms are contested, resisted, or reinforced, in more detail, focusing on specific themes.

While not clearcut, thematic analysis and identification of themes tended to rely on parents' frame of reference from an emic perspective and narrative analysis additionally mobilised narrative inquiry tools from an etic perspective. As such, I utilized from an etic perspective, narrative inquiry tools, which included consideration of resources drawn upon by the storyteller, of story connections and common understandings, and use of positioning and reported speech. I also specifically drew on Morison and Macleod's (2013a) operationalisation the concepts of *positioning*, *trouble* and *repair* to facilitate analysis of gender within the narrative analysis. I also utilised in my analysis, Fraser's (1994; 2013a) 'After the Family Wage' typology as a lens through which to reflect on parents' various articulations of gender justice.

In chapters four to six, I present the results of my analysis, both thematic and narrative. Through thematic analysis I identified six main themes within parents' discussions of what was valuable to them. Within each theme, sub-themes were identified. Table 5 details each theme, sub-themes, the number of participants that spoke to each theme, within both online discussions and interviews, and split by parent identity (mother / father). I use these themes to organise presentation of my findings as set out below. Each findings chapter (4-6) also provides a table summarising the theme, sub-theme, and number of participants that spoke to each theme alongside a sample quote. The aim is not to quantify the qualitative analysis but to provide the reader with a snapshot of the chapter findings. On the whole, the ratio of mothers to fathers speaking to each theme reflects the overall participant sample ratio. Where it is not the case that the ratio of mothers and fathers speaking

to a theme reflects the sample ratio and rather reflects a gendered distinction in the analysis, I note and discuss this within the findings.

Within each chapter, the findings from the dialogical narrative analysis are also presented in relation to the selected cases, again as set out below.

In chapter four, I present themes one to three as reflecting what parents articulated as valuable to them in relation to shared parenting, spending time with the baby and postnatal wellbeing. I then present narrative analysis in relation to identified cases in relation to theme two: 'spending time with baby' and specifically on the identified moral imperative to treasure time with baby, which thread through parents' aspirations, providing cases that reinforced this imperative and cases that contested it. I explain my rationale for case selection further in chapter four.

In chapter five, I present thematic analysis findings in relation to theme four, financial security, and theme five, having a career or vocation, and then narrative analysis, which focuses on the use of financial rationalisations and narratives about the 'economics of things' and of 'no flexibility' (within parents' financial rationales) as discursive themes and, again, counter-narratives, which questioned apparent inflexibility. In chapter six, I focus on thematic and narrative analysis findings for theme six, that is what parents articulated as valuable to them in relation to gender justice and illustrate the various ways parents articulated navigating and enacting gender justice.

Where applicable, in relation to each theme (within chapters four to six), I summarise the barriers and enablers (i.e., the conversion factors) to achieving what was of value - as articulated by participants. I conclude chapter six, in section 6.3, by summarizing (conversion) factors within the workplace as articulated by parents and parents' views on what they felt employers should be doing from raising awareness of parental leave to more proactive promotion of parental leave possibilities.

Table 5: Identified themes and sub-themes within parents' valued functionings.

	Theme	Number of participants that spoke to theme	Subthemes
Chapter four	1. Shared parenting	Mother = 18 Father = 8	Sharing the responsibility and the labour of childrearing
			Sharing experience / knowledge leads to shared confidence
			Aspiration to be equally called on by the child
	2. Spending time with baby	Mother = 16 Father = 5	Time spent with baby that you can never get back
			Impact of emotional or physical absence on child development
	3. Postnatal wellbeing	Mother = 23 Father = 5	The emotional and physical impact of becoming a parent and of returning to work
			Loneliness, social connections and maintaining self-identity
			Navigating wellbeing in context of unpredictability and the unknown
Chapter five	4. Financial security	Mother = 20 Father = 8	No flexibility on financial security limits choice and agency
			A supportive or secure employment context links longer term to financial security
			The (understated) role of gender within financial risks
	5. Having a career or vocation	Mother = 19 Father = 6	Managing potential detrimental career impact
			Accepting, or being prepared to take, a step back from one's career
			Acceptance or lack of sense of entitlement to parental leave
			The (understated) role of gender in limiting career choice decisions
Chapter six	6. Enacting or promoting gender justice	Mother = 28 Father = 10	Rejecting (or mirroring) own experiences growing up
			Maintaining or developing an egalitarian relationship
			Valuing care work
			Rejecting gender essentialist and patriarchal expectations
			Challenging heteronormativity

4. Chapter Four – Exploring what is of value to parents in relation to shared parenting, spending time with baby and postnatal wellbeing

This chapters presents thematic findings for theme one, two and three, that is what parents articulated as of value to them in relation to shared parenting, spending time with the baby and postnatal wellbeing, respectively and then narrative analysis of selected narrative cases.

4.1. Theme one: Shared parenting

Many participants (26, 18 mothers and 8 fathers) aspired to share parenting, a similar proportion of mothers and fathers to the participant sample. How shared parenting was articulated, and the remit of shared parenting, however, varied to some extent.

Table 6 (and the subsequent tables in this chapter) includes an example quote or quotes for each sub-theme. Where evidence was found which contested the theme, I also include a quote, or quotes, to exemplify this – shown in the table in italics**.** The number of participants that spoke to the (sub-)theme is shown, split by parental identity.

Table 6: Shared Parenting – sub-themes, number of times participants spoke to theme and example quote

Theme one		Number of participants that spoke to theme
Shared parenting		Mother = 18 Father = 8
Sub-themes	Example quote	
Sharing the responsibility and the labour of childrearing	"It's a about both feeling equally responsible for everything to do with the child" (mother, shared parental leave) "About not just sharing the work but also sharing the thinking" (mother, shared parental leave)	Mother = 9 Father = 5
	Example quotes, which contests theme *"He can provide a spare pair of hands when needed" (mother, maternity leave)* *"He still expected me to keep the nappy change box in our living room topped up with supplies, despite being at work!!" (mother, shared parental leave)*	Mother = 4 Father = 1
Sharing experience / knowledge leads	"Shared parenting means the one who's coming … to take over childcare and I need a quick stats update. And right we've had a clean nappy on at this time,	Mother = 9 Father = 4

Theme one		Number of participants that spoke to theme
to shared confidence	he's had this much sleep… blah, blah, blah. I don't need to ask any more follow up questions …, we know what all that information means, and you've got the information and you fly" (mother, shared parental leave)	
Aspiration to be equally called on by the child	"I really strongly never wanted to be in that situation as a father where if my child was upset, they would always go running to mummy … I put the effort in … so that he would come running to me just as much as he comes running to [his mother] and I think he does, and even as a young baby he doesn't tend to favour one of us over the other one" (father, shared parental leave)	Mother = 3 Father = 1

Some participants described shared parenting as being able to care for and nurture their child to the same extent as their partner; to be able to **share the responsibility** and **the labour of childrearing.** This aspiration was articulated as "*feeling equally responsible for everything to do with the child"* (Olivia – mother / shared parental leave) or *"equally sharing responsibility (and quality time!) with the baby"* (Sandra – mother, maternity leave), "*sharing everything down the middle"* (Michael – father, shared parental leave). Equal responsibility for all parenting roles was explicitly distinguished from fathers taking a support role to mothers in undertaking household duties. Further, it felt was important that both parents be *seen* as the primary carer by others, including their own child/ren and extended networks such as nurseries and childminders. For example, David expressed this as wanting his children to see both himself and his partner doing the range of household tasks – both parents doing the cleaning, working in the garage, or playing with the children:

> *"… to show him [their son] that there is a shared responsibility between the pair of us, so it's not going to be like oh mum does all the cooking, mum does all the ironing, in fact I do all the ironing" (David – father, paternity leave).*

The labour involved in childrearing was also expressed as "*pulling your weight*" (Thomas – father, shared parental leave), *"not dropping the burden on your partner"* (Kiren – mother, shared parental leave*)* and ensuring both partners have time off for their own leisure activities.

Being equally called on by the child was an important manifestation of successfully sharing parenting. Rather than a child automatically calling out for 'mummy', participants expressed wanting their children to see them "*both as "go to" parents",* as described by Ruth (mother, shared parental leave*).* Eve conveyed this in a way that acknowledged physiological differences yet being equally able to comfort to their child:

> *"Our baby is happy being comforted by the two of us. Sometimes I have the Magic Boob, sometimes he has the Magic Arms. It's not constantly down to one or other of us to deal with a crying baby because only one of us can do it."* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave)

While Michael (father, shared parental leave) described *"put[ting] the effort in … so that he [the baby] would come running to me just as much [as his mother]."*

Sharing the experience and learning of parenting was described as instrumental to confidently knowing what a child needs or wants and, consequently, to sharing parenting on an ongoing basis. Sharing 'on-the-job' experience, having "*figured out what to do together"* (Michael – father, shared parental leave) or intentional learning through reading parenting books (Steve – father, shared parental leave) enabled easier transition of caring responsibilities between parents. Eve, for example, depicted this shared knowledge as meaning:

> ***"…** the one who's coming downstairs to take over childcare … needs a quick stats update. And right we've had a clean nappy on at this time, he's had this much sleep, this much water, he did alright at lunchtime, blah, blah, blah. I don't need to ask any more follow up questions or [baby's father] doesn't need to ask any more follow up questions, we know what all that information means, and you've got the information, and you fly***"*** (Eve – mother, shared parental leave)

Shared parenting knowledge acquired through having independent time with baby as the primary carer, to learn and bond with the child and to develop confidence in caring for them, was articulated as an enabler to shared parenting aspirations. Independent time was seen as key to fathers becoming a *"confident hands-on dad"* (Annie – mother, shared parental leave) or being able *"to just relax and maybe do somethings (.) my way, just the two of us"* (Craig – father, shared parental leave).

However, while aspiration to share responsibility was consistently articulated, it was not a universal aspiration and boundaries were apparent to what shared parenting encompassed. While an outlier amongst the participants, Sally referenced her partner providing a supporting role:

> *"My husband working from home allows him to work flexibly throughout the day and evening which means he can provide a spare pair of hands when needed."* (Sally – mother, maternity leave)

Furthermore, shared parenting did not appear to extend to the mental labour, or **coordinating of the household,** as consistently. "S*haring the thinking" (*Eve), the mental load of parenting and organising the household, was mentioned by only a few. When conveyed, co-ordination tended to be led by the mother, with no examples of a father coordinating the household:

> *"I do a lot of the organising, but that is in my nature."* (Ruth – mother, shared parental leave)
>
> *"So, for me even if it is just going on a trip, I like to be the one who has packed us up and stuff."* (Kiren – mother, shared parental leave)

Parents also reflected on how leave arrangements impacted sharing of care. Several parents expressed frustration, feelings of **annoyance**, **resentment, sadness**, that primary parental responsibility might fall to the person taking most leave, predominately the mother and that limitations on time for the other parent, predominantly fathers, would impact on their ability to bond with their child and the ease with which a child would settle with them.

> *"The partner who takes more leave - often the woman in a heterosexual partnership ... thus becomes more highly skilled. I think this is largely the result of the systems we've put in place as a society rather than anything inherent in men/women's abilities to do childcare"* (Alex – mother, aspired to but not able to share leave)
>
> *"From my experience there certainly was a stronger bond between my wife and son when he was very small and he would only settle/want his mom over me but that has changed as he has grown"* (Ned – father, paternity leave)

Limitations to the enactment of aspirations to share responsibility were also related by some participants to physiological limitations such as the physical constraint of breastfeeding in contrast to bottle-feeding:

> *"I was able to do pretty much everything that was needed,* ***apart from breast feeding****! We introduced one or two expressed bottles per day after about 3 weeks so from then on, we have been able to share all caring activities."* (Michael – father, shared parental leave)

While the COVID-19 pandemic was not the focus of this study, it is important to highlight how the pandemic and resulting changes to caregiving were reported by participants to have shifted opinions of and actual practice in the gendered balance of caregiving. Some participants reflected on the impact of COVID-19 where caring shifted to a partner who had previously not been very involved in caregiving of their children. For example, Melissa explained that while her husband was furloughed, he assumed *"the full-time parent role, whilst [she] work[ed] from home. He's able to care for her in every way"* (Melissa – expectant mother of one, maternity leave). Florence noted the increased confidence she witnessed in her husband who was looking after their 3-year-old while she was a frontline worker and, importantly, how this impacted on her opinion of his ability to be the main carer:

> *"My opinions have definitely changed dramatically. I always thought he would struggle and would not cope but as time has gone on, he has really grown and coped so well considering my 3-year-old is used to going to nursery full time normally and is very busy!!"* (Florence – expectant mother of one, undecided)

Shifts in caring responsibility, for several participants, also meant greater appreciation of work involved by partners:

> *"I think it has definitely opened his eyes more to how hard the first few months are, not just baby wise, but just the strain it can have on me. I have struggled with mental health and having a baby is so tough. … I think lockdown has given some people a crash course ;-)"* (Catherine – mother, maternity leave)

Finally, some considerations intersected with participants, or their child's, identity other than gender, as follows:

- Shared biological parentage was specific to one LGBTQ+ couple who had a child via surrogacy; this impacted on the non-biological parent wanting to ensure they bonded well with their child.
- One couple, whose daughter had profound hearing loss, reflected that they both needed additional (shared) learning to support her.

- A couple, both of whom were from outside the UK, expressed the importance of sharing cultural experiences from their home countries: "*it was important that [their child] is exposed to everything … just so he's aware of where he comes from*" (Kiren – mother, shared parental leave).

4.2. Theme two: Spending time with baby

As with the aspiration to share parenting, many (21) participants (16 mothers and 5 fathers), expressed desire to spend a prolonged period with the baby to bond. Two main sub-themes were identified. First, that the time spent with their child was precious and prompted the aspiration to protect that time from other commitments. Second, the emotional or physical absence of time with parents was articulated, by both mothers and fathers, as potentially impacting negatively on child development. However, the theme, including both sub-themes, were also contested by a similar proportion of participants (15). It was predominantly mothers who contested the theme, at odds with the participant sample and suggesting gendered experiences in relation to spending time with baby. However, mothers' reflections related to their own sentiments about spending time with baby and recited perceived sentiments of their partners. These gendered experiences are discussed further below.

Table 7: Spending time with baby – sub-themes, number of times participants spoke to theme and example quote

Theme		Number of participants that spoke to theme
Spending time with baby		Mother = 16 Father = 5
Sub-themes	Example quote	
Time spent with baby that you can never get back	"I couldn't give up the time with my baby. You can never get it back." (mother, maternity leave)	Mother = 11 Father = 6
	Example quote which contests theme: *"To be honest this is not something my partner was interested in doing" (mother, maternity leave) (7)* *"I think people say it passes really quickly and I completely disagree, I think there are some periods of time that pass incredibly slowly" (mother, shared parental leave) (5)*	Mother = 12

Impact of emotional or physical absence on child development	"I mean I think when they are very young umm if you have the possibility to arrange childcare at home, I would prefer that …. I mostly grew up with my grandmother, so my mum was always working a lot, that was one of my experiences that shaped my attitude" (father, shared parental leave)	Mother = 10 Father = 4
	Example quote which contests theme: *"that's not something I would ask him to be home for all the time, either through the kid, for the kids' sake, you know "oh junior is never going to see you at dinner"" (expectant mother, not yet decided)*	Mother = 2 Father = 1

The first sub-theme reflects the recurrent articulation of time, and specifically the preciousness of time, with their child. Time was not simply identified as valuable. *How* time was expressed was also recurrent, almost verbatim, through discursive resources such as **'time to be treasured', 'time you can never get back'.** The 'preciousness' with which time was 'to be treasured' conveyed irrefutability and invulnerability, as exemplified:

> *"In terms of the first year I will do the main caring role and I am happy to do this as I feel this is **precious time that you can never get back**. For myself and my partner this works best for us both."* (Sukhi – mother, maternity leave)

> *"For me, **I couldn't give up the time with my baby. You can never get it back**. I was prepared to take a step back in my career to do it"* (Sally – mother, maternity leave)

> *"Spending time with a baby in the first year is such valuable time that **you can never get back**. They are impressionable, vulnerable, and so much fun (most of the time!)"* (Melissa – expectant mother of one, maternity leave)

> *"I think you've always said to me you need to make sure that whatever happens [child's name] doesn't miss you because you are away so often so luckily in my next job I'm going to be working from home a lot more" "so yeah its **time you'll never get back right** so."* (Kiren, then Gregory – mother and father who shared parental leave)

Great value was placed on "time," articulated as passing quickly yet particularly important to value and embrace in the moment. However, there were tensions between the value of time spent individually and the sharing of this time. Some mothers reported conflicted feelings, such as Diana who said:

> *"I really don't know how I would have felt had my partner wanted to share leave. I love my job, I'm very happy in my role and even on a bad day I still love what I do but being able to stay home with my baby has just been*

> *something else. Selfishly I just don't think I would have wanted to miss a second of it!"* (Diana – mother, maternity leave)

Partners also reported this on behalf of the (birth) mother:

> *"I think the mother's voice is really important to capture here and reckon there is likely some truth to this [mums don't want to share leave]. My wife is v much looking forward to her 9 months off! My feeling is that sharing the parental leave is a good option to have but it would be far better to increase paternity leave than just to leech it off the mother's!"* (Philip – father, paternity leave)

> *"It is such a precious time that I can imagine the birth mothers would like to maximise their time with baby at home during the first year."* (Ciara – expectant non-birth mother, shared parental leave)

Despite conflicted feelings and not wanting to miss any precious time, some mothers consciously reflected on the importance of "*letting go … of being the main parent*" (Olivia – mother, shared parental leave) or of having (mistakenly) thought that their partner "*would struggle and would not cope"* (Florence – expectant mother of one, undecided). Louise, for example, illustrated this well:

> *"... really, I would just love to be home with my baby forever while my husband does all the work outside of the home! I have to keep reminding myself that he would ideally want that too, and that we have to share!"* (Louise – expectant mother, shared parental leave)

Some mothers consciously shared "their" leave not to deny their partner time to bond and build a relationship*:*

> *"Obviously, I wanted to bond with my child, but my personal thoughts were that my desire to bond with him did not preclude my husband's own desire to bond with his child. So that was the starting point for our decision-making, I think."* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave)

However, some parents also contested the irrefutability of treasured time. Some mothers (7) reflected that their male (heterosexual) partner did not want to or appeared not that interested in taking leave:

> *"To be honest this is not something my partner was interested in doing."* (Diana – mother, maternity leave)

> *"I don't even think [my husband] spoke to his boss about it so I struggle a little to 'blame' this on outdated policies as it was also his personal choice not to pursue it further."* (Frances – mother, maternity leave).

While other mothers (5) expressed identity loss associated with maternity leave, desire to return to work earlier or frustration at not being able to share time off as

well as guilt associated with 'not loving' maternity leave. Through expressions of frustration, identity loss, 'not loving' maternity leave, these mothers contested the irrefutability of treasured time. Eve, Rhonda, and Ruth expressed this as follows:

> *"... having lived it Oh my god it can be boring!!! (laughing) …*" (Eve – mother, shared parental leave)
>
> *"I think people say it passes really quickly and I completely disagree; I think there are some periods of time that pass incredibly slowly"* (Rhonda – mother, shared parental leave)
>
> *"I felt guilty a lot about not loving maternity leave and wanting to go back to work"* (Ruth – expectant mother of one, shared parental leave)

Participants in same sex relationships also highlighted the binary imbalance common in heterosexual relationships with one partner having only two weeks leave and the other a year. As such, highlighting the gendered nature of time spent:

> "I just can't imagine how (..) either of us would have felt to have just had those two weeks with him" (Steve – father, shared parental leave).

The second sub-theme (of being able to spend time with baby) included reflections on the potential **detrimental impact of emotional or physical parental absence on child development.** Child development was linked to "*secure attachment"* (Louise – expectant mother, shared parental leave) and developing "*an emotional bond"* (Katie – mother of two, maternity leave), a strong bond between child, parents, and extended family. Bonding was described as important to building security overall and influencing positive child development. Emphasis on the importance of child development was linked to participants own experiences of emotional insecurity when growing up as well as with reference to parenting books and guidance covering, for example, attachment theory and child-led parenting. Some participants, who worked in academia, drew on their own academic background (for example in early childhood and in psychology).

4.3. Theme three: Postnatal wellbeing

Postnatal wellbeing within the family was a prevalent aspiration for most (26) participants (21 mothers and 5 fathers). Postnatal wellbeing was associated with parenthood transitions, with self-identity and social connections and with planning during a child's first year in the context of uncertainty and unpredictability, the latter of which exacerbated wellbeing concerns. In the following section I outline these themes in more detail to identify and explore parents' aspirations for postnatal wellbeing. The sub-themes are summarized in table 8. As with spending time with baby, several postnatal wellbeing sub-themes reflect greater proportion of mothers and, therefore, gendered experiences which I explore further below.

Table 8: Postnatal wellbeing – sub-themes, number of times participants spoke to theme and example quote

Theme		Number of participants that spoke to theme
Postnatal wellbeing		Mothers = 21 Fathers = 5
Sub-theme	Example quote	
The emotional and physical impact of becoming a parent and of returning to work	"I thought … as soon as its [your baby] in your arms you're like oh this is amazing and of course it was amazing but it was so much harder than I imagined it would be, …, I guess that was the one thing I was completely unprepared for, how hard this whole thing is" (father, shared parental leave)	The emotional and physical impact of becoming a parent. (Mothers = 16 / Fathers = 5) Returning to work (Mothers = 5)
Loneliness, social connections and maintaining self-identity	"... for me working and having a career helps with self-esteem and self-worth. I think I would struggle emotionally if I wasn't contributing somewhat financially to the household and if I didn't have a career" (mother, maternity leave)	Mothers = 12
	Example quote which contests theme: *"It was me, not him, that said on my last day at work: 'but my identity! I shall miss this!' My husband couldn't give a c**p" (mother, shared parental leave)*	Mother = 1 (about her male partner)
Navigating wellbeing in context of unpredictability and the unknown	"It is very difficult to take an un-emotional and professional approach to something which is so completely embedded into your personal life, and welfare of those nearest to you." (mother, maternity leave)	Mothers = 8 Fathers = 1

Physical and emotional impact on wellbeing related to physical recovery from pregnancy and childbirth as well as adapting to becoming a parent and later to returning to work. The **transition to parenthood** was described as a psychologically stressful time by mothers and fathers and for some parents was much harder than they had expected. For example, Steve described feeling:

> "…*completely unprepared for how hard this whole thing [being a parent] is"* (Steve – father, shared parental leave).

Eve expressed the transition to parenthood as follows:

> *"... from being an individual that pleases yourself to being solely responsible for a little creature, who is terrifying but also lovely*", which was a *"mind fuck"* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave).

Physical recovery from pregnancy, labour and adapting to breastfeeding was felt directly by (birth) mothers (e.g., incontinence, mastitis) and the extent of recovery time needed fell as a shock.

> *"... we just assumed I would be able to recover quickly like society seems to want to project. Nobody wants to talk about incontinence, leaky breasts or infected wounds. The 6-weeks check-up seems to be the milestone by which most new mothers assume they will be back to themselves"* (Annie – mother, shared parental leave).

As a result, mothers valued the presence of partners during the recovery period and similarly, partners reflected that they felt it was important that they were present; this informed some participants' planning:

> *"… it was good having him [the father] off because he kind of kept the house going, made sure the laundry was done and we were fed"* (Kiren – mother, shared parental leave)

> *"... physical recovery was in the back of our minds" "… that's another reason I took off eight weeks in case Isobel wasn't able to move round much."* (Isobel and then Ivy – birth mother / non-birth mother, shared parental leave)

As with transition to parenthood, **returning to work** raised wellbeing considerations, predominantly amongst mothers in the context of continuing breastfeeding, leaving baby in childcare and postpartum body image, leading to reflections such as:

> *"I think it is a difficult transition to leave your baby and return to work, especially with added pressures of logistics around breastfeeding etc in addition for me, body and personal image postpartum can be an issue for*

> *me, I fear the thought of fitting back into work clothes, not acting like I have baby brain ..., and fearing having conversation that involves more than sleepless nights, nappies and baby leaps! It can make me feel like I would like to hide away with my baby in the house for eternity sometimes, but the end of maternity leave gives me that push back."* (Emma– mother, maternity leave)

Partners support, through taking time off during transition back to work, was also noted as important; for example, Ruth reflected that her husband taking SPL enabled her to go back to work without their "*son having to go into childcare immediately*" (Ruth – mother / shared parental leave).

Loneliness or concerns related to loneliness were only expressed by mothers. That only mothers reported loneliness may be attributed to them, on the whole, spending a longer period at home alone with their baby. There were fathers who took an extensive period of leave, though only one took longer than three months while their partner was working from home. Loneliness was associated with missing social interaction, both in anticipation and as actual experience, with losing sense of identity and feeling alienated from the expectations associated with the joy of being a parent.

> *"... found being alone difficult … I've cut my leave short because of current circumstances because of the effect on me of being home alone with the baby so consistently"* (Rachel – mother, maternity leave)

> *"I found it very lonely, and that I "lost" who I was, as was always Mum. Knowing I* ***wasn't loving it*** *and wanted something different to other mums didn't help"* (Ruth – mother, shared parental leave)

Participants connected work and contributing financially to the household with **maintaining personal identity** with "*self-esteem and self-worth"* and "*fulfilling my potential" (*Denise – mother, maternity leave). Absence from "*workplace activities"* (Alex – mother, maternity leave) manifested in frustration and negatively impacting mental health. Others expressed being relieved to have returned to work and to be "*my old self again" (*Annie – mother, shared parental leave).

Strategies **for navigating wellbeing influenced aspirations and informed planning**. In response to concerns or anticipation of social isolation, some participants **aspired to create support networks via baby groups.** Although notably there were divergent feelings with other participants dreading baby groups and

joining them only as an alternative to being alone, preferring extended family such as in-laws or their partner as their support network:

> *"... the thought of mum & baby groups horrifies me... but so does 10 months on my own! Hoping for the confidence to do things 'my way'"* (Anne – mother, maternity leave)

> *"I found it quite difficult to get involved with baby groups (..) I was quite nervous about attending them"* (Katie – mother, maternity leave)

For some participants **previous experience of family leave and / or wellbeing concerns** (e.g., of traumatic birth, difficult recoveries, postnatal depression, or longstanding mental health conditions) informed their plans with greater focus on their wellbeing and mental health for their subsequent child. Katie, for example, reflected on her mental health after her first child which she describes as having been "*terrible"* due to a traumatic birth and what transpired to be undiagnosed post-natal depression. Katie reflected that she felt better able to cope during her second maternity leave because her partner was around much more due to working at home during COVID-19 lockdown and that this had a positive impact on her mental health and wellbeing.

> *"... having David at home and not having visitors every weekend and not having people coming in and out of the house all of the time I can just be comfortable in myself … comfortable with feeding her, comfortable with asking him for help, yeah it's a blessing … don't feel so (.) watched"* (Katie – mother, maternity leave)

David, her partner, also explained how being more present due to working from home had a positive impact on his mental health:

> *"Yeah, I mean I enjoyed it, definitely enjoyed it because I got, got more time to see the kids err … like Katie said, I didn't see much of him, I was at work most of the time, you know and … it's kind of therapeutic sometimes (.) works very stressful and err (.) … I'll go and grab her and she's like … she's looking at me fluttering her eyelids and going, and it's like oh and I forget everything that's going on the computer"* (David – father, paternity leave)

Unpredictability of parenting experience during a child's first year was reported as resulting in changing priorities during the family leave period. The complexity of not having "*a crystal ball"* (Annie – mother, shared parental leave), not knowing how you will feel or react or the amount of recovery time you might need impacted decision-making. As such navigating family leave and associated decision-making was described as guess work, as "*walking into the unknown and chang[ing] within*

seconds" (Emma – mother, maternity leave) and as "*hedging my bets*" (Rhonda – mother, shared parental leave). Frances attributed this unpredictability and variability of situations to making achievement of aspirations difficult:

> *"... no two situations are the same, there are so many nuances of working contracts (permanent, fixed-term, self-employed (limited company vs not), zero hours etc.), the list seems endless, and every single situation leads to slightly different reasons why some variation of leave might work for one situation but not for another, and then that's without even beginning to consider personal preference."* (Frances – mother, maternity leave)

The above analysis provides some insight into wellbeing factors such as the emotional and physical impact of parenting, the importance for some participants of their partner understanding the demanding work involved in, and so valuing, caregiving through direct experience themselves of staying at home independently with the baby.

It is important to note some of the reported impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on wellbeing. The increased unpredictability impacted in a range of ways such as uncertainty regarding the availability and accessibility of childcare for planning a return to work. Difficulty in building social networks outside of work and stress and uncertainty due to increasingly precarious employment statuses were described as negatively impacting on mental health. Some participants changed their plans due to loneliness experienced while on leave which was attributed to lack of baby groups and adult interaction. As well as causing additional stress, lockdowns, furlough or having one's partner working from home coinciding with parental leave created more time as a family which was reported as beneficial. Participants (both men and women, 10 in total) commented positively about either themselves or their partner working from home or being furloughed as it gave them more time to be around their child and partner who was on leave; this meant the partner on parental leave had extra support and company which they would not have had if their partner had been working in the office. Saved commuting time was also reported as beneficial and allowing extra time at home. Positive impact, as illustrated by Katie and David above, was the subject of one online discussion. "*Relish[ing] lockdown"* in the COVID-19 context was described as reducing pressure to "*rush around and see people and go out and 'do' something every day";* being

able to *"to pull up the drawbridge and just be with your little one."* (Katie, Steve and Frances respectively in an online discussion).

4.4. Narrative inquiry into "time you can't get back"

As as outlined in section 3.10, parents' more exceptional experiences (such as mothers who contested the treasuring of time), use and variability in deployment of discursive resources provided my rationale for selecting cases or units of analysis through which to explore the thematic findings in more detail using dialogical narrative analysis.

Overall, drawing on the thematic analysis, there was consistency in the use of discursive resources, such as "time you can't get back" and reference to the importance of bonding and child attachment - within theme two: spending time with baby (section 4.2). Use of "time you can't get back" and child development as discursive resources evokes a moral imperative, which echoes what has been described within academic studies on parenting culture as "intensive parenting" and child "needs talk" (Lawler 1999; Faircloth 2014b). Intensive parenting studies highlight the role of normative parenting standards, such as the association between quality parent time spent with children and children's emotional and physical development. These studies examine parenting norms, which are often depicted as biological truths, and highlight how these norms are socially constructed and deployed (Lawler 1999; Andenæs 2005).

The discursive resources that evoked moral imperatives to spend time with baby were deployed in various ways by participants in this study. Many participants drew on these discursive resources to reinforce the importance of spending time with baby. Some participants, either explicitly or implicitly, associated time with biological sex, for example, associating desire to treasure time with being a *birth* mother. However, some participants contested the treasuring of time as irrefutable. First, by mothers who reflected on their own experiences of the slowness of time spent with baby. Second, by mothers who reflected that their partners appeared disinterested in taking leave. In the latter, disinterest may have reflected a reduced sense of entitlement to leave or lack of confidence in requesting leave from employers, which in turn may be associated with organisational culture and

conversion factors in the employment setting (which I return to in section 6.3). However, reported disinterest in taking leave, regardless of the underlying causes, manifested in gendering the "treasuring of time" because caring fell predominantly to the mother as a result. This decision-making dynamic contested maternal gatekeeping arguments, which imply mothers' unconstrained choice. Annie argued this point as follows:

> *"... the statement "mothers don't want to share their leave"* ***feels like a misogynistic, gaslighting dig at childbearing women*** *who did not decide that they should be the only one to have the time off given the family leave policy structure"* (Annie – mother, shared parental leave).

From an individualistic conceptual standpoint, some mothers' conflicted feelings about possibly sharing maternity leave may be suggestive of maternal gatekeeping, prioritising their time with baby, and some fathers' apparent disinterest in or reluctance to take leave may be suggestive of paternal gatekeeping. As discussed in chapter two, gender role ideologies and biological essentialist perceptions have been evidenced as influencing parents' division of childcare (see for example: Gaunt 2006). However, rather than mobilising an individualised standpoint, this thesis draws out couple relationalities and the interactional dynamics; exploring how discursive resources are deployed dialogically and how gender norms are constituted within parents' valued functionings – such as, of spending time with baby. In the remainder of this chapter, through selected narrative cases, I further explore how gender was enacted, how gendered parenting norms were reinforced and contested by parents in relation to time with baby.

4.4.1. "It's just a complete non-compromise second time round" despite "painful" episodes with employer contrasted with "I didn't even talk to my boss" Frances and Henry

I start with Frances and Henry, both qualified professionals, working within higher education and a small private company respectively. Frances explained she is more qualified though Henry earns more. During the interview, Frances seemed more engaged; she was happy to talk, and it was clearly an important topic for her. Henry was not so willing to share, he was keen to finish and indicated this by looking at his watch. There were points in the interview where I would have liked to follow up with further questions, but it felt uncomfortable doing so, perhaps

because of Henry's apparent relative disinterest and partly because of being conscious of potential intrusion into their private discursive space. Frances took a full year off for their first child, and at the time of the interview, when they were expecting their second child, planned to repeat the same leave pattern. Henry took two weeks off for the first child and hoped to take three weeks for the second child. The couple articulated shared parenting as both being involved "*relatively equally*" as they "*share everything*" (Henry) in their relationship. In Frances' words during the interview "*I certainly felt like I wasn't going into parenting as a, (.) you know as being the sole person that was gonna look after (.) our child and that you were always (.) like throwing yourself in it as well (.)".*

While the analytical focus in this section was time with baby and how (treasuring) time with baby is variously discussed and discursive resources deployed, the discussions also intertwines with factors relating to finances and career. To set the scene I start by focusing on how Henry and then Frances discussed the option of sharing leave.

Henry described the possibility of him sharing leave as *"[n]ever going to be particularly realistic"*:

> *"I'm not,* ***well I didn't even talk to my boss*** *about it but (..) err (.) I think it would, we talked about it, we have talked about it more internally as a* ***team*** *(.) but I think it would be difficult because we're such a small team (..) umm (..) it would be expensive as well."*

Difficulty asking for time off was exacerbated given he worked for a small organisation and organising cover for his role would have been expensive relative to the organisation size. Henry's description also reiterated Frances' reference in the online discussion that "*he [Henry] didn't even speak to [his] boss*" and in which she framed finances as the driving factor for her husband not taking extended leave as he is the higher earner.

In contrast to Henry, Frances described being "*very fortunate"* to be able to take extended leave, to get to know the baby and privileged to have "*a choice*" because they are financially secure. Valuing and prioritising time with her baby was repeated at various points by Frances, in both the online discussion and the interview. She connected her wellbeing to motherhood and contrasted this with

wellbeing and identity aspirations of other parents who *"want to (.) to reconnect with their pre-baby identity*." She reflected on having "*threw*" herself into being a mum and that she "*loved being a mum like nothing else*." Further, she explained that "*having done it [taken maternity leave] once it's just a complete non-compromise second time round."* The following extract provides further insight:

> *"… career development and preferences, I think that was relevant, well **for both of us** (..) umm (...) except that maybe because, I don't know maybe **because I'm a woman** and (.) I just always knew that I'd have some periods of (.) career breaks because of having children (..) ... you know it just kind of felt like **I'm accepting that as part of wanting to have a family** (..) umm if you'd **asked me that ten years ago** I probably wouldn't [laughs] have given you the same answer but I think as you get broodier and **you get, kind of make that choice as a family** (.) … I'm more acutely aware of it now (.) that I'm about to go off again and it's that, it's a **quite unpleasant couple of months** where (..) you just get stuff pilled on to you and you feel quite a lot of pressure and guilt."*

Frances, in the above extract, initially led with "*both of us*" and then changed focus on her own expectations to take career breaks to have children because she is "*a woman*" and "*accepting that as part of wanting to have a family*." The choice was gendered to her being a woman, while she also referred to making the "*choice as a family*" suggesting a joint decision. Reference to being "*accepting*" of that "*choice*" suggests awareness of her own choice constraint and subtle *troubling* of these gendered parenting expectations or constraints with reference to a potentially different answer if she had been asked "*ten years ago*". She also referred to the pressure and guilt associated with this choice in the work context and the "*unpleasantness*" in the couple of months building up to taking leave. She experienced this with her first child and expected to experience this again with her second.

The following narrative reflects Frances' workplace culture which contextualised her experience of work family conflict and provides a narrative unit of analysis through which to explore insights on value attributed to time spent with baby:

> *"I think [name of workplace] is **not a particularly nurturing, (.) umm workplace, umm (.) and it's quite male dominated**, it's quite kind of power dominated, … you know my boss was saying things like 'oh you'll be back at work in three months cos you'll be bored, **they're really boring at this age'***

> *and it's like okay well [laughs] you know they're not and I probably (.) won't be but okay, umm and … because of the position I was already in (.) and knowing that (.) I wasn't a student and (.) …, if it all went awry and I lost my job I could get another one**, I didn't need him to love my choices**, I wasn't bothered … it would be much nicer if it felt like (..) he wasn't creating guilt (.) umm (.) but at the same time I think I'm kind of [laughs] strong enough individually and (.) very fortunate to have that (.) that **qualification and experience behind me and kind of know in my mind** that (.) … **his opinion doesn't actually (.) matter and to, to my life,** … I had to go through (.) some like really long hoop jumping process to get everything signed off for **them [Human Resources]** to even accept that I'd even get maternity pay because there was something about [my] fixed term contract, … in the end it was fine it was just, **it was really painful,** ... and I'd actually kind of planned (.) you know planned the [first] pregnancy so it wouldn't impact on the research trial I was working on … which I didn't do the second time I was like [laughs] no**, I'm not thinking about them this time cos I did that last time** and it (.) it you know almost umm (.) well … you know actually realising that **our family** choices, and we didn't need to involve work in those and umm (.) you know umm (.) **nothing was really more important than family"***

Tension between the value Frances and the value her employer places on time spent caregiving is reflected through the above recital of discussions she had with her boss. In the above extract, Frances' boss was *positioned* as placing greater importance on continuing the research, on work, and placing less value on time with baby. His suggestion that "*they're really boring at that age"* was associated with "*male dominated*" environment, positioning career and work as masculine and at odds with time with family. The precarity of her employment was also a crucial factor, the "*hoop jumping*" she had to perform for Human Resources to confirm that "*I'd even get maternity pay*". She referenced *"not thinking about them [her employers] this time [second maternity leave] cos I did that last time [first maternity leave] and it (.) It you know almost umm (.) well it just didn't yeah"* – which alluded to uncertainty about maternity pay and that she almost did not get paid for her first maternity leave even though she had been considerate of the impact on her project at the time. Overall, she described the experience as "*really painful*."

However, Frances contested her boss's and employer's view. First, finding comfort in the security she felt having got to a certain career point, that she had "*qualification and experience*" behind her, no longer being a student and having confidence in her own ability to get another job if it "*all goes awry*." Second, by rejecting the need for her boss to like her choices, "*his opinion doesn't actually (.)*

matter and to, to my life." Third, through her own positioning of family and caring for family as paramount, "*nothing really was more important*." As such, tensions between work identity and maternal identity, between the value of work and the value of time off, time with baby, were apparent.

The value of time with baby was shown to be temporal in nature. In the employment context, prioritising time with a baby was positioned in direct conflict with work and careers – a tension demonstrated when parental leave is associated with being on holiday as time off work without recognition of the labour involved in childcare. Drawing on parenting culture research, Faircloth (2014b) notes the irony with which childrearing is devalued in the workplace where greater value is placed on the world of work and masculine breadwinner work norms in order to progress one's career. And yet motherhood is idealised almost as a "*sacred endeavour*" in which "*no cost is considered too high*" (Faircloth 2014b: 28-29) – as Frances expressed in the above extract, "*nothing really was more important*". Irony, it is suggested, which results in mothers undertaking "*'ideological work' to make their own positions livable*" (Faircloth 2014b: 28). Frances' reflection on being "*strong enough individually"* and on the resilience of her work experience to cope with an unsupportive line manager and work environment is an example of this 'ideological work.' Furthermore, there is irony in Frances' narration of her life outcomes articulated as the product of choice; reflecting a postfeminist narrative, about hard work and one's own responsibility (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Hakim 2003; Wilkinson and Rouse 2023).

Frances' experience also contrasts quite starkly with her own conclusion in the online discussion that parental leave is not "*the right thing*" for everyone:

> *"It didn't feel right for him and his career, or his workplace. I don't even think he spoke to his boss as it was also his personal choice not to pursue it further, and his voice is important in all of this too and not making assumptions that for everyone parental leave is ever the right thing given* ***their*** *life circumstances."*

The "*their life circumstances*" being associated in this sentence is Henry's. Alongside constraints narrated in terms of Henry's workplace, Frances reflected that Henry did not seem "*that keen".* She repeated this during the interview:

> *"I sort of got the sense that financially it wouldn't work and then **also you weren't that keen**, (.) kind of you know (...) to talk to your boss and **to, career wise** and (..) and I wasn't so strongly (..) you know I didn't feel strongly about that either, you know to push it further".*

How should we interpret "*you weren't that keen… to talk to your boss*" and "*I didn't even talk to my boss*"? Being "not that keen" could reflect that taking leave was unimaginable, a lack of sense of entitlement to leave on Henry's part (Hobson 2014; Cook *et al.* 2021). Similarly, Frances' above reflections, on throwing herself into motherhood, may be suggestive of internalised gender ideologies. However, the costs, risks, and expected choice constraints associated and expected with motherhood, as experienced by Frances, are not equivalent to the costs and risks associated with or expected of fatherhood, as experienced by Henry; the moral imperative enacted by Frances differs from that enacted by Henry. The intersection between these reflections illustrate how gender norms are constituted in parents' valued functionings and productive of couple relationalities.

Finally, in the following exchange, Frances turned the question about career preference to Henry, positioning herself as the interviewer to check her assumption that his "*preference would have been to carry on* [working]."

> ***Frances**: Yeah, I had a really unpleasant run up to it last time and I can kind of see [laughs] the same thing starting to happen this side of Christmas (.) umm but yeah I guess for you the preference? **your preference would have been to carry on?***
> ***Henry**: what working?*
> ***Frances**: yeah*
> ***Henry**: err*
> ***Clare**: would you have been worried about your career, that's kind of what that question, if would it have impacted on your decision making.*
> ***Henry**: err not really I don't think so*
> ***Frances**: are you sure?*
> ***Henry**: don't think so*
> ***Frances**: do you think? okay that's interesting, I wouldn't have expected you to say that.*
> ***Henry**: I mean I kind of run (.) I'm a director, company director*
> ***Frances**: umm*
> ***Henry**: kind of (..) run the finance (.) department, I don't think it would have been massive (.) impact on my career*
> ***Frances**: yeah*
> ***Henry**: the main thing, the main concerns were money and (..) you know on my side I would have felt like I was leaving [company name] in the lurch*

***Frances**: yeah okay*

My intervention during this exchange responded to his slight hesitance and to help focus the question but was perhaps (mis)leading and directional towards impact on his career specifically. Frances questioned Henry's denial that the impact of his career, or his workplace, which contrasts what Frances "*wouldn't have expected [him] to say that*." When he circulated back to his work, in terms of "*leaving [his work] in the lurch*," it confirms what she had originally thought – "*yeah okay*." She also implicitly contrasted this with her own preference for family time despite the "*unpleasantness*" or leaving their employer "*in the lurch*".

4.4.2. "Babies this age need their mums, he's too small" Annie and Craig (Part 1)

The following extract involves Annie, an early career academic researcher on a precarious fixed term contract, and her husband Craig, who worked for a public sector organisation which he described as having family friendly policies and culture. Annie talked significantly more than Craig during the interview. She also laughed throughout the interview, including in the extracts below, but it was apparent that she felt emotional and passionate about the issues discussed. Craig was more reserved, except at a couple of points when he talked animatedly about his experiences independently caring for their child.

Both Annie and Craig reflected that they were on same wavelength about what shared parenting meant to them and had assumed they would share parenting 50/50 having "*always been equal".* At the time of the interview, they had recently shared parental leave, Annie having taken 16 weeks and Craig 10 weeks of leave. Annie breast fed the baby until one year old and had expressed at work to facilitate this. She described being apprehensive about returning to work but also the positive impact on her wellbeing once she had returned. She also explained that they had considered the option of her husband transferring leave back to her when he returned to work, but: "*by the time we got to my husband going back to work, I was in the swing of things at work and I didn't want to affect my project, which had started to ramp up again*".

As with Frances' narrative above, dominant narratives of intensive motherhood and motherhood gender ideologies resonate through Annie's narrative. In contrast to Frances, Annie had taken a relatively "*short*" period of maternity leave and Annie returned to work after four months. In the following narrative, Annie reflected on the "*pushback*" she had experienced when their son went to nursery at six months old.

> ***Annie**: yeah, the only person and this always bugs me is, **the cook at nursery**, where our baby goes, (.) she loves him and he, he was going in at, he was six months old, (.) he was a baby, … it was a bit of a nightmare about bottles wasn't he cos he was a breastfed baby … and **she said** to me, **I think you wouldn't, Craig wouldn't even care about this**, but it bothered me, **she said 'babies this age need their mums, he's too small'** and I was like (.) he's coming to nursery and **I'm** paying your wage and I have to work and **he needs a house to live in please don't make me feel bad** that I'm putting my baby in nursery, and I just felt like that really **annoyed me, upset me** a little bit, obviously first time mum putting a baby in nursery and just to be told he's too small by someone. ... Obviously, I have no choice over this but **that little bit of guilt**, cos some people would say, they speak before they think, I think, of the consequences, of the guilt. (.) I mean …, he was the only **little sitting baby** cos **everyone else puts their kids in at the end of the year don't they** … So, it felt like, you know, **he's the smallest in nursery** are we doing something wrong here cos he's tiny. Nursery were lovely, and **they've been very good with him,** haven't they? [to Craig]*
>
> ***Craig**: yeah … It's helped his development I think, (.) **he doesn't seem to be showing any adverse effects** shall we say*

In the above extract, she reflected on an interaction with the cook at nursery and, using reported speech, conveyed the nursery cook views as critical of her return to work: "*Babies this age need their mums, he's too small*" [to be at nursery]. Annie noted the differential emotional impact of the cook's views on herself in comparison to her husband: "*you wouldn't [to Craig], Craig wouldn't even care [to me].*" This is important because it denotes the personal impact of the comment, which she considered Craig would not have felt. Given the story circulation with myself as the audience, this element of the storytelling was perhaps creating a connection between us as women and mothers that Craig and fathers were to some extent made external to. While Annie did not explicitly connect the differential emotional impact to her role as mother, this was implied by the cook's reported comment, which differentiated and targeted her as a mother (babies "*need their*

mum's"). The cook was positioned as reinforcing gendered parenting norms and interpreted by Annie as implying that she is a bad mother. Placing their baby in nursery at six months was positioned at odds with "*everyone else"* who *"puts their kids in [to nursery] at the end of the year."* There was a sense of guilt and emotion in the tone and feeling that was conveyed by Annie throughout the interview, which perhaps reflected the impact of internalised gendered parenting ideologies. It also provides insight to how gender norms are constitutive of what was articulated as of value to parents.

Annie was highly reflexive throughout the online discussion and the interview, explicitly and vocally challenging gendered parenting norms. Through the "*babies this age need their mums*" narrative, Annie was making explicit the dominant normative gendered expectation that she *should* be with her baby despite financial detriment. She thereby *troubles* this expectation by openly challenging it within the interview dialogue. By noting that her child is an exception by being at nursery in comparison to "*everyone else*", however, she then switched gender *trouble* onto herself and reflects internalisation of intensive motherhood narratives that the absence of the mother is detrimental to the child's needs (Lawler 1999; Faircloth 2014b). This is then followed by *repair* through reference to finances and the child's physical needs dictating choice: "*I have no choice over this*," "*I have to work, and he needs a house to live in.*" She draws, therefore, on the powerful rhetorical child "needs talk" (Lawler 1999; Faircloth 2014b) but from the perspective of masculine financial protection parenting norms rather than feminine reproductive labour parenting norms, which is outsourced. Reference to the quality of care provided by the nursery, who *"were lovely*" and set up for little ones, also offers repair within the interview extract. Craig was called on to reinforce "*they've been very good with him, haven't they?*," he confirmed the positive impact being in nursery has had on their child's development and that the child was not "*showing any adverse"* effects.

Annie also noted in the online discussion, though she did not draw on this in the interview, that on reflection she had realised that "*subconsciously*" she had been worried about the impact of her leave on her career:

> "*I felt like my line manager would be encouraged about my commitment to my job if I told him I was taking a short mat leave of only 16 weeks (as per the enhanced maternity package on offer with my employer). I … was worried that I would be dismissed as someone that doesn't care about my career anymore if I took a longer period of leave."*

In contrast to Frances (4.4.1) and Susan (whose narrative I discuss in 5.3.1), there was a less of a sense that choice had been constrained in practice, however, guilt was a recuring theme within Annie's narrative; the "*little bit of guilt*" that their child was the youngest at the nursery, was the "*little sitting baby."* The emotion conveyed in relation to guilt felt was palpable during the interview. The narrative discussed above, and fluctuation between gender *trouble* and *repair*, illustrates well the interactional context-specific fluidity of master and counter-narratives, which "are not clear-cut, dichotomous categories, but rather thoroughly interwoven with one another" (Squire *et al.* 2014: 32).

I turn lastly to the following short exchange in relation to breastfeeding in which Annie's expression of guilt recurred and provides further insight into couple relationalities. Craig, having been fairly quiet throughout the interview, became particularly animated talking about his "*opportunity to spend time with him [the baby]."* He explained his appreciation of time caring for their baby independently, learning his own way of caring: "*I did kind of feel like I was (….) [pause / looking at Annie] kind of trying to follow Annie's lead to an extent"* and appreciated time *"to just relax and maybe do somethings (.) my way, just the two of us."* He also explained that he would have liked to get more involved in feeding, which sparked the following interaction:

> ***Craig**: it just felt like a little part of me was almost missing out on something there but (.) …*
> ***Annie**: and it was easy and ready to go.*
> ***Craig**: I wasn't suggesting formula.*
> ***Annie**: no, no but he wouldn't take a bottle would he as well so*
> ***Craig**: not always no*
> ***Annie**: so, we did try to share that and then it was like it's just too hard … I left a bottle of milk out for Craig's mum … and then she went oh I just gave him this formula and I didn't use the breast milk and I was like do you realise there's like two hours of my time in that bottle … you do get a little bit angry about it don't you? the gold, the liquid gold that you're producing going to waste"*

The reference to "*the liquid gold*" again evoked an image of (intensive) motherhood – as encapsulated within a bottle. The exchange suggested some conflict between Craig's aspiration to get involved and do caring his way as relational to the guilt felt by Annie. The "*liquid gold*" *repairing* any *trouble* caused by her physical absence while at work contrasted and was relational to the limitations that Craig felt in terms of opportunities to get involved.

4.4.3. "Being on maternity leave was just never a great fit for me" Rhonda and Michael

This last narrative focusing on spending time with baby involved Rhonda and Michael, who both work in health care. Michael was a researcher and a medical practitioner. At the time of the interview, they had recently shared parental leave - Rhonda took ten months and Michael took two months, one month at the beginning and one at the end of Rhonda's maternity leave. They both spoke openly and with frankness and positivity. When reflecting on their aspirations to share parenting they explained that they had not explicitly discussed but "*just sort of made it up as we've gone a long*" (Rhonda) though they expected "*that we would both play a (.) significant role"* (Michael). There was a section in the interview, coinciding with the extract below, where Michael seems uncomfortable which, I reflect on in the analysis.

The extract below is an extended narrative in which Rhonda was the main narrator, reflected on her experiences of maternity leave. I have divided the narrative into parts to enable better analysis and presentation of the sections I felt to be most poignant. In 'part 1', Rhonda explained that she would have, in an ideal world, taken less time if her choice had not been restricted by her employer's understanding of leave and by her husband, Michael's, work restrictions.

Part 1:

Rhonda**: to be perfectly honest, what I would have ideally liked in the perfect world (.) which was not just restricted by (.) the fact [employer] doesn't understand (.) leave generally but also I think by the fact that there were only certain weeks and certain times that Michael could take off, **I would have happily returned to work** about two months earlier than I did. (.) **I'd really had enough,** and I can't honestly say how delightful it is to just go to work in the morning. I'm all for delegated childcare [Michael smiling] **I know

that sounds awful it's just like I was pulling my hair out, it's just unbelievably boring.

Rhonda talked at length in this section of the interview about her experience of maternity leave, experiences of loneliness and boredom as the above, part 1, illustrates. Her narrative was a vivid example of a mother contesting biological essentialist assumptions, which underpin narratives that suggest that as a mother she should enjoy and "*treasure every moment*". The narrative is emotive using expressions such as having "*had enough,"* maternity leave being "*unbelievably boring*," that she was "*pulling [her] hair out*." She also, at another point in the interview, said that she "*would have sold a kidney*" to return to work. She laughed throughout this narrative and explained that she is being dramatic. However, she alternated between negative experiences, which *trouble* gendered parenting expectations, and *repair* by reflexively saying that she is aware that the negativity "*sounds awful*."

In the 'part 2' Rhonda went on to talk about the impact that her maternity leave had on her mental health and on experiencing "*huge identity loss*".

Part 2
Rhonda: ... most **people say treasure every moment**, (.) … **and you do** treasure every moment but you are still a whole person and **there is a huge identity loss** associated with being on maternity leave (.) and I think **people say it passes really quickly and I completely disagree**, I think there are some **periods of time that pass incredibly slowly** (.) err you know and I think (.) that if you say 'god I hate being off' it does sound a bit like well **you're lucky** to be off (.) so I always feel like I need to prefix that with **I'm lucky** to be able to afford to be off for this time you know, (.) I'm lucky to have a child in the first place, I know a lot of people who struggled incredibly hard for that, and I also think that people, (.) some **people you speak to tend to say** but **don't you love spending time with your kid** and **you think well yes I do** (.) err but being on **maternity leave was just never a great fit** for **me**, (.) I'm glad that I was able to get the time to do it but I genuinely dread doing it again and I would never take as long again and [laughs]

Michael: I think it was the length of it.

Rhonda exemplified the "*other parents*" that Frances references (in the above narrative): "*wanting to (.) to reconnect with their pre-baby identity*" (Frances). Through the reflection on "*huge identity loss associated with being on maternity leave*," Rhonda provided an alternative perspective on work / family conflict.

Recurrent reference to time and enjoying time with baby resonates with intensive motherhood narratives, as in France's narrative, but the intention of the narrative, what was at stake, differs in that it contested intensive motherhood and gender essentialist associations between parenthood and motherhood. Rhonda used reported speech extensively in this narrative thereby adding weight and authority to the voice of dominant narratives recited: "*most people say treasure every moment,*" which she positioned herself in stark opposition to by saying "*I completely disagree there are periods of time that pass incredibly slowly*." Although, she did again reflexively add that she was "*glad … to get the time*," that she consciously needed to prefix any negativity with recognising that she is lucky: *"lucky to be off," "lucky to be able to afford to be off*," "*lucky to have a child in the first place."* Michael suggested it "*was the length of it*", with reference to the COVID-19 pandemic context, which we will come back to in part 4 below but to note here his role in co-creation of the narrative.

In 'part 3' she reflected further on the problematic nature of contradicting or challenging treasuring of time with the baby which she referred to as being "*very taboo*", that you are "*not allowed to".*

> *Part 3*
>
> ***Clare**: **I love your** honesty .... do other people, would **other people** have shared that with you, do you think?*
>
> ***Rhonda**: no I think that is very taboo (.), **you are not allowed to say that** (.), especially to anyone of our grandparents generation, but then there is also **a lot of rose tinted glasses** and **I don't think, I** genuinely think that's quite a taboo thing to say because quite a lot of **people say** "oh I loved it, I didn't want to go back to work", and since I've gone back to work a lot of people have said oh you are back in this place, **I bet it feels like you've been back for a <u>hundred</u> years** and umm I said "**no its wonderful**, **I <u>skip</u> into work** in the morning, it's the <u>easiest</u> part of my week" because it is (.) and they're probably like huh this person must dislike their own child, but **you know you do get that vibe I think more than its openly said** but **I'd say very few people say that being off with a baby is like pulling teeth**, (.) perhaps because they think they're going to be judged themselves*

She suggests that recollections of time as "*treasured time*" was misplaced because people remember with "*rose tinted glasses*." She also questioned "*people*" saying "*I bet it feels like you've been back for a hundred years,"* i.e., the norm or expectation, that she would feel sad to be back at work. She visualised the socially expected

burden of being back at work heavily in terms of time - "*a hundred years*" which she contrasted with "*I skip into work*," light and unencumbered. She oscillated from negative experiences which trouble gender essentialist assumptions with reflections that may be interpreted as maternal ambivalence, contesting narratives that mothers do not want to share their time, their leave.

She explained that her feelings about what you are "*allowed to say*" arose from *"vibe" "more than its openly said",* suggesting a shared understanding, or "inner library" (Frank 2010: 54 - discussed in section 3.3), but one that people are hesitant to express for fear of being *"judged."* These reflections on what you are allowed to say responded directly to my question about whether people would share their experiences with such honesty. Both my question and her responses, including the previous reflection on consciously needing to prefix any negativity, provided insight into what is felt acceptable to say and to whom the storyteller would tell the story. Expressing that *"I love [her] honesty*" perhaps provided greater normative safety.

In 'part 4' Michael countered or provided mitigation for Rhonda's perspective, explaining her experiences as resulting from COVID-19 circumstances. Rhonda herself had not referenced COVID-19 in her narrative to this point.

> *Part 4*
> ***Michael****: I think the experience has been a little bit warped by the whole lockdown though as well.*
> ***Rhonda****: = I think so*
> ***Michael****: = and* ***I think*** *certainly earlier on* ***you were*** *a* ***lot happier when you could get out and about and you were seeing family on a regular basis*** *and then* ***when that all stopped*** *that is, and not just seeing the family, it's all the support groups that you went to that suddenly stopped, I think losing all of that support is really difficult*
> ***Rhonda****: I think losing that interaction with a range of people is difficult (.)* ***… I think that was my coping strategy*** *and I remember when lockdown started I thought I don't know what I'm going to do, because* ***you don't sleep****, (.)* ***what am I going*** *to do, and I used to walk for miles and miles with him ...*

Michael had been quiet for most of this section of the interview, he had been nodding throughout but there was a growing sense of discomfort and silencing as Rhonda progressed through the above. He contributed that it "*was the length of it* [the maternity leave]" and reiterated that Rhonda's maternity experience was "*a*

little bit warped by the whole lockdown". By referencing the COVID-19 context and that this context had skewed Rhonda's experience, Michael was invoking a more positive, and perhaps natural, experience had her leave been in normal circumstances. Rhonda agreed at first and they both talked about the "*when that* [the interactive activities] *all that stopped*". However, she also went on to refer to the interactions as her "*coping strategy*," suggesting that she had already found maternity leave difficult, and the interactions were a way of coping with the "*same-y-ness*" [sic] (Rhonda) - i.e., regardless of the pandemic context.

Exploring how the "treasuring of time" is narrated, whether reinforced or contested, provides insight to how the gendered division of labour in the private sphere continues and is understood and legitimised. At the end of part 2 (above), Rhonda said she "*genuinely dread[s] doing it again*" and that "*being on maternity leave was just never a great fit for me*". What is at stake when contesting maternity leave as a great fit? Expectations relating to maternity leave, its uninterruptedness and sole focus as part of the greater sacred endeavour of motherhood are problematised by Rhonda's reference to it not being "*a great fit*." It is not that parenthood is not a great fit, but the binary nature of maternity leave and paternity leave is not a great fit, highlighting that a binary, gendered (parental leave) world in which one is meant to "fit" as problematic, where expressing that "*being on maternity leave was just never a great fit for me*" needs to be prefixed with appreciation of being lucky.

4.5. Summary of findings

This chapter detailed analysis of what parents articulated as valuable to them in relation to aspirations to share parenting, to spend time with baby and for postnatal wellbeing, all of which had identified sub-themes. For example, for theme one – shared parenting – there was consistency in how parents articulated the meaning of shared parenting as sharing of the responsibility and labour involved in caregiving, sharing experience and learning and desire to be seen as carers and called upon equally by one's child. Parents also associated sharing leave and parenting during a child's first year with facilitating shared and involved parenting in the *longer* term, echoing large scale quantitative research that correlates the

importance of fathers' involvement in care in the first months or years with the increased likelihood of involvement in future years (Fagan and Norman 2016; Norman *et al.* 2023). Household co-ordination (or cognitive labour) stood out as an exception as it tended to be attributed to women, as has been found in previous research (e.g. see Daminger 2019; Wishart *et al.* 2019; Faircloth 2021b).

For theme three – post-natal wellbeing – there was consistency in how parents articulated wellbeing considerations in relation to transitions, transition to parenthood, transition on returning to work. The findings also brought to the fore how parents anticipated and consciously thought about wellbeing within their planning, which has received little attention in previous literature in relation to parents' take up of shared parental leave in the UK. Findings highlighted the importance of postnatal wellbeing to parents and offered valuable insights on how wellbeing was intentionally considered when planning care, interacting with parents' motivations to share leave. For example, sharing leave and independent sole experience of staying home with baby, which facilitated greater shared understanding and valuing of the labour involved in caring for a child, was associated with couple wellbeing.

As set out in my analytical framework (summarised in section 3.10), I also noted evidence counter to the main (sub-)themes, whether this was relating to more exceptional experiences, ambiguities between aspirations and outcomes or suggestive of gendered parenting norms at play. Theme two – spending time with baby – in particular showed less consistency. In fact, a similar proportion of parents who positively described spending time with baby also contested it in some way, whether reflecting apparent tension between discursive aspiration and practice, a partner's apparent lack of interest in spending time with baby or due to the impact that extended leave had on their own identity. For example, Rhonda oscillated between reciting negative maternity leave experiences and reiterating positive appreciation of the "*lucky*" position afforded to her by being able to take leave. The former (negative maternity experience) *troubled* gender essentialist assumptions about maternal instinct and the latter (appreciation) acted as *repair,* reverting to the expected social norm – illustrating both contestation and continuity within the reiteration of gender norms. Furthermore, Michael's apparent discomfort at

Rhonda's *troubling* of gendered parenting assumptions, and *repair* by attributing her negative experience to COVID-19 during this narrative, brought to the fore an interactional and relational couple dynamic.

In summary, by mobilising an interactional standpoint to understand parents' decision-making, I was able to explore how discursive resources, such as 'time you can never get back', were variously deployed dialogically, which signalled how gendered parenting norms were productive of parents' valued functionings. For example, the treasuring time with baby evoked a moral imperative associated with normative parenting expectations and yet value attributed to time with baby was temporal in nature. In the employment context caregiving was positioned in direct conflict with work, careers and masculine breadwinner work norms which starkly contrasted the idealization of motherhood within intensive parenting narratives. Furthermore, both dominant and marginalised normative gendered expectations were shown to be fluid in nature, shifting within dialogue rather than rigid and binary, in which, acts of resistance (marginalized) interacted with the recurring theme of guilt (dominant).

5. Chapter Five – Exploring what is of value to parents in relation to financial security and career aspirations

This chapter presents thematic and then narrative analysis findings for theme four and five, what was valuable to parents in relation to financial security and having a career or vocation, respectively.

5.1. Theme four: Financial security

Most (28) participants (20 mothers and 8 fathers) referenced finances within their decision-making considerations, broadly reflective of the sample ratio between mothers and fathers. The sub-theme of employment insecurity was an exception that was predominantly reflected by mothers' experience. In this section, I consider how financial security was articulated by participants, and the related sub-themes, which include the intersection between financial security and employment security. Financial security sub-themes are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9: Financial security – sub-themes, number of times participants spoke to theme and example quote

Theme		Number of participants that spoke to theme
Financial security		Mother = 20 Father = 8
Sub-themes	Example quote	
No flexibility on financial security limits choice and agency	"There isn't really any flexibility on the finance part" (mother, maternity leave)	Mother = 14 Father = 6
A supportive or secure employment context links longer term to financial security	"... is there job security? There is a reason why the 'Pregnant then screwed' campaign exists. … Despite legal protection I am not convinced my role will be there for me when I return. If has definitely affected how I've planned my upcoming leave" (mother, shared parental leave)	Mother = 10 Father = 1
The (understated) role of gender within financial risks	"... because the guys do to quite a large extent make a lot more money than their female partners … that probably adds to attitudes and decisions that are made with regards to SPL yeah. (..) because I mean if the man goes on SPL … you lose … at least 75% of the family take home income" (father, shared parental leave)	Mother = 5 Father = 3
	Example quote which contests theme:	Mother = 2 Father = 1

	"... even if the chap was earning more money, they could afford for the chap to take some time off on leave. You know if we had been in that position where you were earning more than me, I'd still demand that we look at it" (mother, shared parental leave) *"We, slash, I have been prepared even to make quite significant financial loss (.) to be able to do it cos … my workplace is not giving me any (.) wage at all in the three months I'll be off" (father, shared parental leave*)	

Financial security of the family, including the absence of financial worries, was often articulated as **a consideration over which there is no flexibility**, as "*hard facts that need to be accounted for"* (Catherine – mother, maternity leave) especially when you have dependents, i.e., hard facts that are articulated as socially accepted and objectively established. Such hard facts, as referenced included paying the bills, paying the mortgage, feeding the family, and additional costs resulting from bringing up children, such as childcare. Rigidity or lack of flexibility around financial security was also often articulated in ways which suggested limited individual agency. For example, Michael (father, shared parental leave) attributed decision making to "*financial necessity"* and rather than "*'choice' as such"*. Gregory (father, shared parental leave) articulated "*a purely economic decision"* and rejected the notion of "*conservative or sexist"* decision-making. He explained that *"the loss of income and the economical factor even overruled [him] maximising time spent with my child"*. Furthermore, financial considerations were articulated as instrumental to enabling other aspirations, such as to spend time with baby and resulting in outcomes for some which "*contradict your ideals"* (Gemma – expectant mother, maternity leave) – or, in capability terms, their valued functionings.

For some, articulation of financial security was less rigid and encompassed "*maximising finances*" or being in a better financial position in the longer-term with consideration given to pensions, travel and home renovations, for example. Louise (mother, shared parental leave) described wanting to give their child "*the best kind of cultural and critical experience (.) of the world*" while another couple aspired to have a choice about sending their children to private school.

The subtle distinction between a "*purely economic decision*" and a less rigid articulation is important because it provides insight in to how financial constraints align (or not) with rational choice theories, which frame household decision-making as a rational process aimed at optimal utility maximisation (Becker 1985; Bergstrom 1997), as discussed in chapter two. However, the subtle distinction between *"hard facts"* and less rigid articulations suggested a more nuanced and normative picture.

Fathers' ability to take periods of unpaid leave was associated by participants with low paid statutory shared parental leave and to women on average having lower salaries. Loss of mother's salary during unpaid maternity leave or a mother having a higher salary than their partner were also grounds cited for mothers' "*early"* return to work.

However, mothers' financial loss was also described as an expectation, where this was not similarly articulated in relation to fathers' salaries:

> *"... you know the weeks 39 to 52 where you don't earn anything."* (Frances – mother and expecting, maternity leave)
>
> *"... at first everyone assumed that it would be me taking a very long leave and living on £500 a month as if that was okay."* (Annie – mother, shared parental leave)

Exceptionally, less subtle reflections explicitly challenged the intrinsic-ness of financial security, the gender neutrality, objectivity and "*no flexibility*" of narratives around financial barriers. For example:

> *"I often feel there is a narrative around 'this is how it is' rather than space to really think about different options e.g., …, and if downsizing our lifestyle can mean more time."* (Elizabeth – expectant mother of one, maternity leave)
>
> *"... even if the chap was earning more money, they could afford for the chap to take some time off on leave**.** You know if we had been in that position where you were earning more than me, I'd still demand that we look at it."* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave)

Steve also questioned how couples navigate women's ineligibility to paid maternity leave, implicitly contesting the distinction between men and women taking unpaid leave:

> *"I've heard a number of cases where men weren't eligible for SPL but I wonder how it would work if only the male partner was eligible for parental leave and the mum went back to work after the mandatory 2 weeks. I've never heard of such a case."* (Steve – father, shared parental leave)

Notwithstanding the reality of participants' financial circumstances, the aim within this thesis is to explore how finances are narrated and how gender is constituted within these narratives. As has been found in recent research, couples articulate that they are making financially rational decisions even when it is apparent that financial decision-making is more closely entwined with gender norms and estimated costs than actual financial calculations (Zimmermann 2023). The subtle nuance in how finances are articulated suggest that drawing on discursive resources, such as "*purely economic*", serve important context-specific interactional purposes. As with spending time with baby and the "treasuring of time", the use of financial rationalisation and narratives of "no flexibility" act as discursive resources reflecting both dominant and counter narratives, which fits within my rationale for selecting cases or units of analysis for narrative analysis, presented in section 5.3.

Participants also reflected on factors relating to conversion of shared parental leave policy and employer policy enhancement and / or implementation into practice, which had specific financial implications. Some participants, predominantly mothers, associated **job (in)security to financial (in)security**. Stella (mother and expecting, shared parental leave), for example, felt that "*despite legal protection"* her role may not be there on her return from leave, while other mothers expressed concern that the length of time taken would exacerbate feelings of job insecurity. Frustration was expressed at the presence of minimum eligibility criteria to parental leave which had prohibited some expectant fathers to SPL entitlement having recently changed jobs:

> *"In our case this was completely not because of lack of wanting SPL, but* ***because my husband was not eligible as he had recently changed his job.*** *I've lived in other countries where SPL is eligible for both parents regardless of employment status."* (Sandra – mother, maternity leave)

Consequently, there was a call by some participants for eligibility criteria to be "*scrapped*" (for example, Steve – father, shared parental leave). Rhonda and Michael (mother and father who used shared parental leave) highlighted lack of parity to enhanced paid leave (within the same organisation) between maternity and shared parental leave so if a mother switched from one to the other, they would have been financially worse off. Other participants referenced employers

tying enhanced shared parental leave to the statutory model in which a partner's entitlement is dependent on the mother's curtailment of her leave and restricting enhanced leave to the first four months – as was the case for Gregory and Kiren. In contrast, other employers were reported as enabling parents to use the leave entitlement without restriction at any point during the child's first year. I will return to discuss articulated conversion factors within the employment context in more detail in chapter six.

5.2. Theme five: Having a career or vocation

Career related aspirations were also expressed consistently as of value by 25 participants, both mothers (19) and fathers (6). Sub-themes indicated how participants anticipated managing and balancing different aspirations – such as career progression and time with baby. While overall the theme reflects the sample ratio of mothers to fathers, the sub-theme of accepting career detriment was reflected predominantly by mothers and lack of sense of entitlement to parental leave was reflected predominantly by fathers. The sub-themes, as summarised in table 10, are discussed in this section.

Table 10: Having a career or vocation – sub-themes, number of times participants spoke to theme and example quotes.

Theme		Number of participants that spoke to theme
Having a career or vocation		Mother = 19 Father = 6
Sub-themes	Example quote	
Managing potential detrimental career impact	"I've still been able to be primary deliverer on my project (.) umm so it hasn't negatively impacted me in that way. … I'd feel differently if I had had to take six months and then someone had come in and shared my work with me and then suddenly it's not quite the same is it" (mother, shared parental leave)	Mother = 8 Father = 3
	Example quote which contests theme: *"... so, I still have ambition, but I think the amount of leave is unrelated, as much as to what can I do on leave to keep my brain (.) active and to keep my networks (.) going and to keep my projects ticking over so I don't lose that year of life, career life and productivity" (expectant mother, undecided)* *"I don't think it would have been massive (.) impact on my career" (father, paternity leave)*	Mother = 1 Father = 2
Accepting, or being prepared to take, a step back from their career	"... because I'm a woman and (.) I just always knew that I'd have some periods of (.) career breaks because of having children" (mother, maternity leave) "... to tell you honestly I don't care anymore [laughs] you know spending more time with my son means that I will not reach 100% peak performance with regards to pursuing my career" (father, shared parental leave)	Mother = 7 Father = 1

Acceptance or lack of sense of entitlement to parental leave	"I have absolutely felt as though if I do take the full year, it would have an impact on how I am seen within part of a team" (mother, maternity leave)	Mother = 2 Father = 3
	Example quote which contests theme: *"... it's irrelevant (.) they're [employer] still going to (..) have (.) let me go" (mother, shared parental leave)*	Mother = 1
The (understated) role of gender in limiting career choice decisions	"... you just know that there is not going to be much necessarily of a choice (.) because like it or not you are going to be their primary carer for how long you take off and even beyond that" (mother, shared parental leave)	Mother = 4
	Example quote which contests theme: *"In our family, career progression decisions were not linked to gender (at least directly)" (father, shared parental leave)*	Mother = 1 Father = 1

Articulation of career aspirations, by both (expectant) fathers and mothers, entwined considerations over the impact on self and / or career, feelings of guilt towards employer and colleagues and concerns about how time off would be perceived by managers or teams. Both mothers and fathers shared how they anticipated mitigating the impact of taking leave to ongoing delivery of their work and on career aspirations. Some parents anticipated managing the potential detrimental impact of taking leave on their career, while other parents articulated acceptance of detrimental impact on their career because of having a family and were consequently prepared to take a step back from their career progression.

Managing the impact of taking leave on career intersected with specific contextual employment factors, such as planning around specific projects, fixed term contracts, funding and career stage or seniority. Other considerations included the ability to arrange cover during a period of leave, disruption to colleagues and team members or supervisees. For example, Michael - a father who used shared parental leave and worked in higher education as a senior academic researcher – reported restrictions on his ability to take "*a prolonged period of leave"* of more than a month at a time due to having ongoing responsibility for his research project. He also reflected that he would have felt "*quite guilty*" to have taken longer and that he "*would have also started to miss [his] work."* Others who also worked in higher education although at different career stages, similarly, explained work

considerations. For example, Annie, an early career researcher within academia, returned after four months and was able to remain the primary lead for her project:

> *"I've still been able to be primary deliverer on my project (.) umm so it hasn't negatively impacted me in that way. … I'd feel differently if I had had to take six months and then someone had come in and shared my work with me and then suddenly it's not quite the same is it."* (Annie – mother, shared parental leave)

Comparable considerations, such as work going on pause or not being covered while on leave, were reflected by participants in various other sectors (e.g., sales / private sector) and those self-employed. Guy, who worked in the private sector, was "*considerate of the amount of time (.) that I would spend at the office or dedicated at the work in order (.) to continue my achievements and progression*" (Guy – expectant father, undecided)**.** While Gemma felt that "*working in a private sales sector, the more time off I would take the more my role could be affected so this does play a huge part/create a worry when considering the amount of leave*" (Gemma – expectant mother, maternity leave).

In some cases, it was evident that gender norms constituted parents' approach to managing (potential and actual) detrimental impact on career and how participants anticipated responding, or how they had responded, to the guilt felt towards employer and / or colleagues. On the one hand, (expectant) fathers were more prone to reflect a limited sense of entitlement to leave, as indicated in section 4.2 in relation to spending time with baby. On the other hand, (expectant) mothers were more prone to reflect a limited sense of entitlement to non-career detriment.

Ben, for example, felt that taking six months "*would have made it difficult [and] would have made having the conversations [*with his employer*] difficult to have"* (Ben); in contrast to his partner, Olivia, who reflected the "*[length of leave] is irrelevant (.) they're [her employers] still going to (..) have (.) let me go".* Ben's reflection in relation to potentially having difficult conversations with his employer perhaps reflected a lack of sense of entitlement, exacerbated in Ben's case because he did not meet SPL eligibility criteria.

Similarly, Henry was concerned about "*leaving [company name] in the lurch"* (Henry), while his partner Frances also reflected on feelings of guilt for taking time off but declared she would be taking leave regardless (as was discussed in narrative

4.4.1). Guy reflected on reluctance to access leave while his partner Susan focused on overcoming the potential detrimental impact to her career through strategies to stay mentally active and engaged with work networks whilst on leave:

> *"so I still have ambition but I think the amount of leave is unrelated, as much as to what can I do on leave to keep my brain (.) active and to keep my networks (.) going and to keep my projects ticking over so I don't lose that year of life, career life and productivity." (Susan – expectant mother, undecided).*

Furthermore, there was evidence of (expectant) mothers (8) acceptance of negative career impact and being prepared to take a step back from their career as "*part of wanting to have a family"* (Frances), suggesting perhaps a lack of sense of entitlement to protection from career detriment. For example:

> *"... because I'm a woman and (.) I just always knew that I'd have some periods of (.) career breaks because of having children."* (Frances – mother, maternity leave)

> *"... you sort of assume that you're going to go off and you're probably in most cases not going to be doing a lot of career related stuff in that time (.) and you just accept it, and it is a hit to your career on some level."* (Rhonda – mother, shared parental leave)

Perceptions about societal expectation and previous experience of prejudice influenced mothers' acceptance of negative career impact; articulated, for example, as "*societal expectations to either give up your career, go part-time, or become a full-time parent and leave paid employment*" (Annie – mother, shared parental leave), having previously lost out on a role "*because of being a woman of child-bearing age"* (Rachel – mother, maternity leave) and having experienced "*negativity"* from a manager towards a previous pregnancy (Katie – mother, maternity leave).

Fathers also situated concern about taking leave in the context of witnessing the impact of time out on women's career trajectory:

> *"Yes, I mean I'm aware that (.) women kind of progress and then (.) sometimes have a pause [mimics with hand hill and then plateau] to have a baby and they're kind of stuck in a bit of a plateau and can't necessarily, they are not continuing the trajectory that they were on before."* (Guy – expectant father, undecided)

Gregory (father, shared parental leave), in the context of acknowledging the impact on his work and that he will not reach "*100% peak performance with regards to*

pursuing my career", expressed his prioritisation of time with his son because he does not "*care anymore"* – again in context of awareness of the detrimental impact of taking leave on women:

> *"I have to expect or factor in the detrimental impact right, if I take three months off, … but to tell you honestly, I don't care anymore [laughs] you know spending more time with my son means that I will not reach 100% peak performance with regards to pursuing my career"*

He went on to reflect that while potentially detrimental to his career, the impact may not be as significant as women or parents who take a longer period of leave:

> *"I don't even want to know what it's like for women in academia to be honest yeah if it's difficult for me yeah umm so if somebody takes a longer time off for childcare."*

As with spending time with baby and financial security, thematic analysis revealed the subtle nuances in how gender parenting norms are productive of career aspirations and in turn relational decision-making dynamics that constrained choice:

> *"Women **don't really have a choice** about taking some maternity leave, and the question is how to do it, and still have a career... Whereas, despite the ability to take SPL, men have a choice whether to take it."* (Ruth, mother, shared parental leave)

> *"... you just accept that hit (.)umm and I think it's not so much that its easier its more just that you just know that there is not going to be much necessarily of a choice (.) because like it or not you are going to be their primary carer for how long you take off and even beyond that."* (Rhonda, mother, shared parental leave)

Furthermore, as with financial security, **conversion factors within the employment context** were also referenced. For example, employer provision of family leave cover, budget for family leave cover, or lack thereof, created practical concerns such as how taking leave will impact on colleagues. Openly unsupportive line managers, as indicated through negative comments towards parents taking leave or pressure to return early, was interpreted as causing inconvenience to line managers. This contrasted with examples shared of supportive line management. Again, I will return to discuss conversion factors within the employment context in more detail in chapter six.

5.3. Narrative inquiry into 'the economics of things'

The thematic analysis, therefore, suggested that gender plays a subtle role within *how* financial security, financial rationalisations and career aspirations were articulated. It was possible to identify discursive resources (such as "*the economics of things*"), which were deployed for various (rhetorical) purposes within context-specific dialogues. Furthermore, the thematic analysis highlighted that (expectant) fathers appeared more prone to reflect a limited sense of entitlement to leave and (expectant) mothers were more prone to reflect a limited sense of entitlement to non-career detriment. In response to methodological challenge of exploring how social norms shape what is imaginable or what an individual sees as feasible, and as set out in my analytical framework, I drew on parents' narratives to explore ways in which gender is constituted within parents' decision-making. Similarly, by focusing on the interactional dynamics within narrative case studies, I explored how gender was enacted and how gendered parenting norms were reinforced and contested by parents in relation to financial security. I now present the narrative analysis, which while predominantly focused on financial security, includes links and reference to career aspirations.

5.3.1. "Time that is merely kind of load bearing … there is a case for me to simply pay for additional help rather than me do it because of the economics of things" Susan and Guy (part 1)

This first example focuses on Susan, a mid-career academic researcher on a fixed term contract which was due to end soon after the baby's arrival, and her partner Guy, who was employed in a permanent role in the private sector. At the time of the interview, Susan was approximately 20 weeks pregnant and had a future academic fellowship application pending, her pregnancy remained hidden from both current and potential new employers due to working at home during COVID-19 pandemic. Susan and Guy had not finalised their leave arrangements at the time of interview, referencing limited discussion about it to date, though they were considering Susan taking maternity leave and Guy taking paternity leave topped up with annual leave.

The following excerpt starts with Susan who, having shared her ideal leave scenario in response to my question about their leave plans, then repositioned herself as the interviewer and initiated a discussion of Guy's preference, his "*ideal*". Two narratives or stories are apparent within the extract, one in which Guy recited his discovery of the disparity between his employer's UK office and global office family leave policies and another with reference to his colleague taking shared parental leave. I reflect on each in turn.

> *Part 1*
> ***Susan**: That would be my ideal …. In terms of Guy's time, I don't know what your ideal is? What you'd like to take with him? [directly to Guy]*
> ***Guy**: Well, it feels substantially **constrained by the company paternity policy** (..) … what they (.) have is if you work for HQ (.) then they have one policy and if you work for the UK, it's a separate policy and what I've uncovered is there is a disparity that if I worked in the HQ London office it is more generous than for the UK (.) office.*
> ***Clare:** So, the American policy is better than the UK one?*
> ***Guy**: yeah umm so and it's the same for maternity leave as well which is not okay and I've done a little bit to say, to highlight that disparity but then of course with coronavirus and all the things with the economy it doesn't seem a smart thing to rant about you know dads getting less time off umm when we're making redundancies and other things so I may fight that fight later or closer to the time …*
> ***Clare**: And do they have any shared parental leave, I mean obviously legislatively shared parental leave is statutory, but do they have any?*
> ***Guy**: = As far as I know there's no umm let's say **appropriately compensated [emphasis] shared parental leave** they will do the bare minimum of what the legal requirement is and (.) umm our main issue or certainly my main issue is that you know it's great to have the legal protection of statutory you know that they can't sack you for it umm (.) and you can return to your job but the economics of it, it is really not far off just unpaid leave (.) so (.) umm the fact that we could legally transfer some of Susan's allowance to me doesn't really help as even if she was to go back to full time work during that time …*

In response to Susan's question, rather than talk about his preference, Guy focused on his employer, the "*company's paternity policy*." Guy noted that the company's global office has more favourable maternity and paternity leave entitlement compared to the UK office, with an emphasis on the maternity leave disparity, which "*is not okay"* – thereby he negatively *positioned* the company's family leave policy as problematic through failing to progress maternity rights. He reflected that he might challenge the disparity at a later point as it would not have been "a *smart*

thing to rant about" in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy and potential for redundancies. Thereby, Guy expressed his opinion on gender justice, although he appeared more inclined to act in relation to maternity "*disparity*" that paternity.

By focusing on "*they"* [the company] and the constraints of the organisation's policy, he positioned the organisation as controlling the decision. During the interview, they both reference his salary being "*three times"* her salary, meaning that the household earnings loss would be significantly greater if he takes unpaid time off. The financial restraints resulting from the lack of *"appropriately compensated shared parental leave,"* the statutory minimum, resonate previously discussed rigidity of financial considerations as well as public dialogue and research on SPL relating to financial barriers (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019; Forbes *et al.* 2021). However, his actual preference remained unknown as reference to his employer also had the effect of deflecting from what was of value to him.

Regardless of his preference, as a result, he would remain largely invisible to his employer as an expectant parent. It is unclear whether he was actually disinterested in taking leave, felt a lack sense of entitlement to access leave policies (Hobson 2014; Cook *et al.* 2021) or if he had concerns about potential negative impact in the employment context – potential "fatherhood forfeits" (Kelland *et al.* 2022: 1). I intervened at two points in the above interaction, first asking about the US policy and then about his employers SPL policy. My questions reflected my curiosity, and while I was conscious to refrain from expressing my scepticism at the time, my intervention implicitly questioned his financial rationale.

In the following second part of the extract, Guy recited an anecdote about his colleague who had taken time off.

> *Part 2*
> ***Guy**: (continues from above excerpt)… and I have a colleague who did do that, I guess think in their instance they were quite closely matched in terms of earnings so as a household they accepted that (.) there would be a 50% loss but it didn't matter which bucket it would come out of and they could interchange between the mum and the dad whereas for us, you know, if it is a day that I work, it is kind of 2 or 2.something pounds and if it is a day that Susan works it is 1 pound.*

> ***Susan**: = it is worse than that now*
> ***Guy**: is it, so oh well yeah okay*
> ***Susan**: = he makes close to three times what I make*
> ***Guy**: umm so I mean (.) I am aware of, and **I** do take seriously the kind of (.) the benefit to the child of having bonding time with the dad and things like that at a biological, physiological level umm (.) but if it is merely, so beyond that the next step we're considering time that is **merely kind of load bearing** umm (.)*
> ***Susan**: = chores*
> ***Guy**: chores and stuff yeah then sadly there is a case for me to simply pay for additional help rather than me do it because of the economics of things.*

Guy explained that his colleague's salary matched that of their partner, thereby, reinforcing that it was not the principle of sharing leave he had concerns about, but it was the financial element which was problematic. Later in the exchange, in contrast to the financial constraints, Guy reflected that he takes "*seriously the kind of benefit to the child of having **bonding time** with the* dad;" he invoked the value of parenting and child attachment. However, this bonding was separated from what he referred to as the "***merely load bearing**"* aspects of childcare, "*beyond that,"* which *"sadly there is a case for me to simply pay for additional help rather than me do it because of **the economics of things**".* There remained no reference to any benefit to him as the father. His preference on whether he would have liked to take time off work during the child's first year remained largely silent. Susan echoed the separation between bonding and load bearing through reference to "*chores"* as well as re-stating the salary differential between herself and Guy. Although gender is not referenced directly, financial constraints to Guy taking leave were espoused as gender neutral, with (rhetorical) effect of *repairing* any potential *gender trouble*.

In the subsequent section of the interview, Susan reflected on her preference which included taking a period of SPL together and Guy taking some time during her transition back to work so "*junior has one of us home so it's not a **huge** [emphasis] transition*." She referred tentatively, "*could"*, to the possibility to "*use the shared split"* to help her transition back to work – which echoed the option

she had outlined in the online discussion[9], in which she explained that finances were constraining their options:

> *"The finances also aren't helping us envision a blended option: all options are me at home. I don't mind this as much because one benefit of the UK and Europe are the great maternity protections and long leave…. But if I see it [the decision between a blended option i.e., sharing leave and her solely at home] as a choice, then it becomes harder to accept..." (Susan – online discussion)*

In other words, if they wanted to share leave, they would have had to pay for it. It was unclear if it was a jointly agreed plan, as Susan referenced "*I was thinking"* as well as "*we have"* a plan in "*our head*". Susan also referenced options such as he "*could"* work from home, work flexibly, or "*doing some sort of compressed time"* enabling him to leave work early to be home for the evening as "*lots of mums*" do. In the following interaction, we have the first direct indication of Guy's preference follows:

> **Susan**: *… it would be worth it to have him home and*
> ***Guy****: = yeah that's not my preference but*
> ***Susan****: = no I know it's not [speaking together]*
> ***Guy****: = work wise it could accommodate*

In terms of the decision-making dynamic, Susan is very much constrained. While Guy would remain largely invisible as a parent and at a distance from the risks, the risks were apparent for Susan in navigating a precarious contract situation. Susan put a positive spin on navigating the risks in the following passage:

> ***Susan****: So, in terms of ambition that [securing the fellowship] would be fantastic. And **I** think a great role model actually, to show what **I** can do, **I** have the brain, and **I** have ambition and I have plans, (.) and I need to pause it for a tiny bit (.) to have this baby and then I'll be able to **pick it up full steam,** (.) umm I think that would be great for research, for **women** in research, for **me**, for my project, for **my son to see what a woman can achieve** (.) umm (.) . **so, I still have ambition, but I think the amount of leave is unrelated,** as much as to **what can I do** on leave to keep my brain (.) active and to **keep my networks (.) going** and to **keep my projects ticking** over so I don't lose that year of life, career life and productivity you know.*

[9] Susan's options expressed in OFG3: "So we know my time at home would be unpaid, and I plan to take as long as I am breastfeeding and/or returning after 6 months. For my husband, we want him to take at least two weeks at the beginning; we would like him to take more, but a) we would have to pay for it and b) we can't decide whether he should take this in the newborn stage, sometime with an infant, sometime just before I return to work/as I return, or some other time in Year 1."

She envisaged her maternity experience, set in the future and unfolding in which she as the central character would achieve her career ambitions; being "*able to pick it up full steam*" after needing to "*pause for a tiny bit*" when the baby was born. Rather than accepting detrimental career impact, she talked about managing the break by keeping her brain and her networks active and her projects ticking over.

Her role in this narrative is positioned as in control, with choices and having ownership over her career pathway. These reflections resonated with Frances', discussed in section 4.4.1, who in a similar context of uncertainty also expressed having choice and control in relation to her career. Frances' expressed this as being "*strong enough individually"* and being able to rely on the resilience of her work experience to cope with an unsupportive line manager and work environment. Both Susan and Frances, therefore, to some extent narrate their life outcomes as the product of choice, which reflects a postfeminist narrative, about hard work and one's own responsibility (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Hakim 2003; Wilkinson and Rouse 2023) or as biographies that reflected theories of individualization (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). However, their narratives also exemplify how ideal subjects or "liveable lives" are generated and legitimised in everyday interactions (Lloyd 2007: 33), in which to be an ideal subject, or to have "liveable lives", involves conforming with gendered (parenting) norms with which people are associated as defined by their gender (Butler 1990). I return to discuss these positionalities in relation to articulation and enactment of gender justice in the following chapter.

I began the section on the "economics of things" with Guy and Susan's narratives because they both reflect dominant financial rationales, which are articulated as constraining their capabilities for sharing of parental leave. As such, these narratives set the scene for discussion of counter-narratives. I return to Guy and Susan in section 6.2 to explore discussions of articulations and enactment of fairness and gender justice.

5.3.2. "Everyone assumed that it would be me taking a very long leave and living on £500 a month" Annie and Craig (Part 2)

The following extract returns us to Annie and Craig and comes immediately before their narrative discussed in section 4.4.2, in which they had recalled the interaction with the cook at the nursery. Annie repeatedly talked at the length about the role of finances in their decision-making, as reflected by many participants in the thematic analysis, and repeatedly explained that they took a pragmatic approach, with finances "*dictating*" their planning. The following narrative, which is set at an antenatal booking appointment, focused on financial influencing factors.

> ***Annie**: [laughs] at my booking in appointment the midwife said "are you taking nine months or a year?" and I was like "I'm taking four months", (.) like it was obviously [emphasis] just assumed in society that a woman takes up to nine months or a year … and **I** was like who can afford that (.) really? but that was **the assumption at my booking in appointment with my midwife and obviously everyone said**, my mum was like "that's very short Annie" "yeah but how else am I going to fund it" so I think at first everyone assumed that it would be me taking a very long leave and living on £500 a month as if that was okay (.) and I was like no, … cos I just got out of university student debt so let's not get back into debt with a baby so yeah (.) at first everyone was like made the assumption … and not have any income basically (.) and then when we said no this is what we are doing, everyone went oh okay that makes sense.*
> ***Clare**: right*
> ***Annie**: And **there wasn't any pushback was there**? [to Craig]*
> ***Craig**: No*
> ***Annie**: and it was like we had to say like no we're not doing what you're all doing cos what you're all doing just doesn't make financial sense to us … I think she [her mum] had a year off with all of us (.) umm, I don't know your mum had short leaves though so she wasn't like*
> ***Craig**: yeah, I think she only had three / four months (.) and then back full time. (.)*
> ***Annie**: yeah*
> ***Craig**: So, I was in childcare from about three or four months old.*

The antenatal booking appointment anecdote was recited as a recurring scenario experienced by the couple in which in this example the midwife, as well as Annie's mum, acted as a representation of "*everyone*" and societal *positioning* on gendered parenting expectations. As with Annie and Craig's previous narrative (section 4.4.2), by using reported speech to represent society, Annie conveyed authority in her

representation of the expectation that "*it would be me [Annie] taking a very long leave*." Annie also used reported speech for her own contribution to the conversation. In so doing Annie problematises societal expectations, as invoked by the midwife, by questioning: "*as if that was okay*." She *troubled* the gendered parenting expectation that she *should* be "*living on £500 a month*" (i.e., statutory maternity pay), with "*no income basically*". In so doing Annie explicitly challenged the "*assumption*" that she as the mother would take low paid leave and the financial hit, as has been highlighted in previous research (Kaufman 2018; Andrew *et al.* 2021). She also implicitly challenged low paid leave as the commonly referenced underlying cause for fathers' low take up of leave (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019; Forbes *et al.* 2021).

Annie stands out not because she did not take unpaid leave but because, through the interview dialogue, she positioned herself as working against the assumption or perceived expectation that she should have taken a period of unpaid leave. As with Guy, finance is referenced and provides a discursive resource. Annie's "*so let's not get back into debt*" is deployed as a counter-narrative, an act of resistance, by articulating a position which *troubles* gendered parenting expectations in which she as the mother should take the majority of the leave despite financial detriment. Annie's vehement rejection of the gendered assumption that she would take unpaid leave - "*I was like no" / "no we're not doing what you're all doing"* - acted as resistance to the dominant norm or expectation.

In contrast, Guy's narrative and reference to the "*economics of things*" legitimises the master, or dominant, narrative that fathers' do not take up SPL due to financial barriers. Decision-making is articulated as driven by household economics in which fathers' financial provision to the household is paramount. However, Guy and Susan's narrative also troubles a perhaps more marginal expectation, exceptionally highlighted by participants and noted in the thematic analysis, that *"even if the chap was earning more money, they could afford for the chap to take some time off on leave."* Thereby making time with baby the paramount driver even if it was only for a few weeks – as Susan aspired for during her transition back to work. There is normativity or normative force both behind the dominant expectation for Guy as father to provide financially and behind a more

marginalised expectation that fathers take time even at financial detriment. Guy's deference to his employers' policies attempts to repair any potential gender trouble created by these more marginal expectations. The interactions illustrate how gendered parenting norms, and the normativity of such norms as set within gendered relations of power, are not constant but are shifting and context specific. Gender trouble in one context may not be troubling in another – if we compare for example expectation felt by Guy as compared with expectation felt by Annie to take extended leave. As such the dynamics and boundaries between master- and counter-narratives, as reflecting gender norms, are blurry, not polarized opposites and rigid, but, instead, fluid, interwoven and shaping couple relationalities (Squire *et al.* 2014)

5.4. Summary of findings

This chapter presented analysis of what parents articulated as important in relation to financial security and continuation of career aspirations, both of which were articulated as important to most participants. Financial security was narrated as without flexibility and often positioned as outside the sphere of individual agency. Few participants expressed that decision-making was gendered, especially in relation to financial considerations. However, the thematic analysis highlighted that (expectant) fathers appeared more prone to reflect a limited sense of entitlement to leave and (expectant) mothers were more prone to reflect a limited sense of entitlement to non-career detriment. Furthermore, there was subtle nuance in how finances were articulated, which suggested that gender norms were constitutive of parents' valued functionings. For example, time described as "*merely load bearing*" had the effect of delineating between attending to the child's emotional and relational needs and attending the child's physical needs (see section 5.3.1).

Notwithstanding the reality of parents' financial circumstances, I drew narrative cases to explore how finances were narrated and how gender was constitutive within these narratives, which illustrated variable mobilizing of financial discursive resources, used within both dominant and counter narratives. Financial rationalisations for fathers' not taking leave or for outsourcing care were

juxtaposed with mothers' subversion of the societal expectation that they would take a longer period of maternity leave despite a period of low pay. It was through interactional analysis that it was possible to identify the variable normative force behind expectations linked to fatherhood and to motherhood, how gender norms are constitutive of couple relationalities. I also noted the mechanisms that some mothers drew on, such as their own resilience (previous work experience, qualifications, keeping networks active and projects ticking over while on leave), and articulated navigating the constraints arising from work family reconciliation as the product of choice, hard work and one's own responsibility – I return to this finding in the following chapter.

6. Chapter Six – Exploring what is of value to parents in relation to gender justice

This chapter presents thematic analysis (section 6.1) and then narrative analysis (section 6.2) findings for theme six - parents' articulation and enactment of gender justice. Section 6.3 provides a summary of parents' experiences on employer implementation of parental leave policies. I summarise the barriers and enablers created by organisational culture (i.e., workplace conversion factors) as identified and articulated by the participants and what they felt employers should be doing to facilitate parents' aspirations.

6.1. Theme six - Enacting or promoting gender justice

Most participants (38) explicitly discussed gender justice in some way. Amongst all the themes, this was the most referenced, by both mothers (28) and fathers (10). The ratio of mothers and fathers, who expressed this theme, was reflective of the overall participant sample. The exception to this was sub-theme of the underpinning motivation of valuing caregiving which was only expressed by mothers. Discussions related to experiences of prejudice (either directly or as a witness), challenging gender essentialist, patriarchal and heteronormative expectations and motivations for enacting or promoting gender justice.

Table 11: Enacting or promoting gender justice – sub-themes, number of times participants spoke to theme and example quotes

Theme		Number of participants that spoke to theme
Enacting or promoting gender justice		Mother = 28 Father = 10
Sub-themes	Example quote	
Challenging gender essentialist and patriarchal expectations	"Ultimately, I believe parenting is a verb. You are a parent if you do the job. All it takes is to do the job, and then the love and the skill and the very real physical effects follow from that" (mother, shared parental leave)	Mother = 13 Father = 4
	Example quote which contests theme: *"This time round we are very much approaching it as though our roles as Mumma and Puppa will be different to each other, … in a much more traditional way than either of us would have originally imagined" (mother, maternity leave)*	Mother = 2 Father = 1

Challenging heteronormative expectations	"... so, we can kind of write the rules ourselves in terms of how we're doing it I suppose … cos we're already (.) challenging kind of social norms, so we may as well challenge them a bit more" (non-birth mother, shared parental leave)	Mother = 4 Father = 1
Motivations and values shaped by participants' rejecting (or mirroring) their own family experiences growing up	"Yeah he [my dad] was never really a hands-on type (.) person (.) umm and that's very much made me go the other way, it's made me want to be a lot more (.) involved" (father, shared parental leave)	Mother = 10 Father = 6
Motivations and values shaped by aspiration for an egalitarian relationship	Financial independence: "That was why it was so important for me …, you know she ... is not financially dependent on my income so yeah that these dynamics don't arise yeah" (father, shared parental leave) Valuing caregiving: "... it is about the perceived value of care work, but also a lot of ignorance about HOW MUCH work it actually is to care for a baby." (mother, maternity leave)	Mother = 4 Father = 4 Mother = 9
Experiences of or witnessing prejudice	"... they [senior manager] do not approve of a full year off work with partially full pay for maternity leave, it was in an informal chat rather than a work-based conversation, but the thought that that is their true feelings still hovers over me" (Mother, maternity leave) "... he [his line manager] was very supportive, curious as well [laughs], it was like okay, I was a bit like an exotic animal" (father, shared parental leave)	Mother: 20 Father: 6

Participants explicitly discussed their **aspirations to challenge or reject gender essentialist** (13 mothers and 4 fathers) or **heteronormative assumptions** (4 mothers and one father) about who would be predominantly responsible for caregiving as determined by their gender. Many participants explicitly deemed an individual's ability to care for a child as unrelated to gender or sex, rejecting notions about mothers' maternal instinct or fathers' lack of such an instinct. For example, Wendy expressed this as it not being about the "*genetics of either sex parent that drives the inclination and ability to nurture"* (Wendy – planning to share leave / mother). Perceived gender differences were often viewed as ingrained in culture and socially constructed. Confident parenting was viewed as resulting from

investing time and developing a bond with one's child, rather than from gender. As Eve described:

> *"... you are a parent if you do the job. All it takes is to do the job, and then the love and the skill and the very real physical effects follow from that."* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave)

Participants also aspired to proactively challenge gendered expectations about how care is divided during a child's first year by proactively undertaking caring duties, "*consciously make sure that I put the effort in*," by being a shared parental leave "*trailblazer,"* by being "*proud to wave the flag for SPL!"* (Michael, Olivia, Eve respectively – all shared parental leave). Resistance to gendered parenting norms was also enacted through everyday actions such as favouring public spaces or amenities supportive of "*both genders being parents"* (Annie – mother, shared parental leave) (e.g., gender-neutral baby changing facilities), or were referenced in scenarios with work colleagues, public health care professionals and public settings. Catherine, for example, reflected on openly challenging gendered assumptions about who cares with her work colleagues:

> *"I said that yes, I was pregnant again and that somebody had to have babies if pensions were to be paid when we are all old and grey... I tried to convince my husband to get a uterus transplant but that he said no and so here we were... the look on the men's faces just imagining doing it themselves... priceless!* 😊*"* (Catherine – mother, maternity leave)

However, some participants reflected that consciously challenging gendered parenting norms often felt to be a battle in everyday settings:

> *"My partner also felt quite like a spare part during some of the midwife appointments ... I'd still find it difficult to say to a doctor 'excuse me, there are two of us here, please do address both of us', because that's actual conflict, and that's hard!"* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave).

While Emma shared being *"shocked by how medical practitioners always referred to me first as though my husband wasn't there"* (Emma – mother, maternity leave), having the impact of disempowering him.

Participants in same sex relationships reflected being freed from heteronormativity to *some* extent which meant that their *"roles as parents are more determined by our skills and assets than gendered roles*" (Steve – father, shared parental leave) and feeling able to "*write the rules ourselves … cos we're*

already (.) challenging kind of social norms, so we may as well challenge them a bit more" (Ivy – mother, shared parental leave). Again, however, their experience was not completely free of heteronormative expectations with Ivy reflecting on pressure to choose roles:

> *"I had a conversation with someone in a same sex relationship, …, who said oh, but you do have to choose which of you is going to (..) be the person who focuses more on their career, and I was like well why…"* (Ivy – mother, shared parental leave)

Furthermore, in the employment setting, same sex couples found themselves working within heteronormative and gendered policy contexts, for example, evidenced through HR's unfamiliarity with interpreting policy and supporting same-sex parents going through surrogacy.

However, challenging gender norms was not averred by all participants. For a minority of participants (mothers 2, fathers 1) parenting was explicitly gendered. For example, in an online discussion between Elizabeth and Katie, two mothers who took maternity leave, in the context of their heterosexual relationships, reflected on practicing "*different gendered roles*" than they had anticipated before the arrival of their children. Katie described breastfeeding as resulting in her being "*naturally … more soothing"* to her children who *"haven't settled so well in Daddy's arms, so he is resourcing himself into other tasks for now*" (Katie – mother of two, maternity leave). Katie thereby articulated different "*gendered roles*" as biologically determined in which her partner David's other tasks are not articulated[10]. Elizabeth concurs a similarly more gendered split in parenting and reflected the following:

> *"Yes, I actually found the narratives around 'equality' with caring … unhelpful when I found us feeling we needed to do something very different to fit our particular family.* ***I have needed to dive further into feminism*** *… to help me* ***re-anchor****. This time round we are very much approaching it … as* ***Mumma and Puppa …*** *we have overlapping, but also very* ***specific*** *and valuable,* ***roles in our family*** *unit … to work out* ***optimising*** *how long I can have the new baby … in a much more traditional way than either of us would have originally imagined (especially as* ***I previously earnt a bit more****) …. Letting go of* ***current*** *social pressure for equality has really freed us up." (Elizabeth - expectant mother of one, maternity leave)*

[10] During the interview with Katie and David, Katie was breastfeeding on and off throughout. I observed that when she was not breastfeeding, she would pass the baby to David who cuddled and changed the baby's nappy. The split of time that they physical held the baby was fairly equal.

The "*roles in [their] family unit*" stemmed from an optimisation of the division of labour and extending her time with baby through "*Mumma and Puppa*" role specialization. Rather than reflecting on gendered expectations for her to take most of the maternity leave, Elizabeth, in this quote, reflected on and rejected an expectation that they would share leave more equally. In contrast to Katie, who referred to biological drivers, Elizabeth was not explicit about the drivers but refers rather to "*overlapping, but also very specific and valuable roles*". Thematic analysis of participants aspirations for and enactments for gender justice, as based on their own explicit articulations, more predominantly reflected challenging or rejecting gender essentialist and heteronormativity. Elizabeth's articulation of gender justice as gender differentiating was more exceptional as represented by the participants in this study but importantly highlighted the normative force felt through "*the narratives 'around' equality with caring.*" Her need to "*re-anchor*", "*letting go*" and being "*freed up*"; all illustrate this normativity and that, as reflected by Faircloth (2021a), speaking about parenting topics can be heavily moralised.

Motivations for challenging gendered parenting norms varied. Sixteen participants' (10 mothers and 6 fathers) reflected on own family experiences growing up as an influencing factor. Participants aspired to mirror or replicate how they had been parented in various family models, which included both dual-earner models and 'traditional' breadwinner / homemaker models. Rhonda, for example, aspired to be "*the everyday kind of caregiver"* as her mother had been as well as working: *"she was always around but she was always working you know … and so I never really envisioned anytime when I would want to spend … a few days a week at home"* (Rhonda – mother, shared parental leave). While Jennifer, whose family *"was quite traditional"* also aspired to be like her mother: *"my mum was a stay-at-home mum until I was a teenager and I do feel that has had a positive impact on our relationship"* (Jennifer – mother, maternity leave).

In contrast, other mothers and fathers desired to do the opposite of what their parents had done, for reasons such as experiencing parental (physical and emotional) absence. Gregory described coming from a "*a huge patchwork family"* where *"everybody worked all the time, and I didn't see my parents a lot when I* was a kid." This influenced his aspiration that his child "*gets to spend time with me as*

well and I spend time with him" (Gregory interview – father, shared parental leave). Similarly, Craig described his father as "*never really a hands-on type*" which "*very much made me go the other way, it's made me want to be a lot more (.) involved*" (Craig – father, shared leave).

Maintaining an **egalitarian relationship was also a motivating factor for participants (17). Financial independence** (8, 4 mothers and 4 fathers) was viewed as enabling continuing equality in couple decision-making power dynamics:

> *"That was why it was so important for me as well that she also gets back to work, (.) not immediately but like, you know she ... is not financially dependent on my income so yeah that these dynamics don't arise yeah." (Gregory – father, shared parental leave)*

Nine mothers (no fathers) referenced the importance of **valuing caregiving** within the family, as well as more broadly within society, as a contributing factor to maintaining an egalitarian relationship, it was important that the labour involved is recognised:

> *"It is about the perceived value of care work, but also a lot of ignorance about HOW MUCH work it actually is to care for a baby. It may also be related to the fact that it is overwhelmingly provided by women …and that women's work is not valued as much." (Catherine – mother of two, maternity leave)*

> *"It is not a year holiday! It's a job that is 24hrs a day with little rest or breaks." (Sally – mother, maternity leave)*

Sharing parental leave was seen as an opportunity for both parents to understand the challenges involved in caregiving – overlapping with the sub-theme of theme one, shared parenting (see section 4.1).

Many participants (26) referenced **experiences of prejudice**, either their own experiences or those they had witnessed (20 mothers and 6 fathers). Prejudice was described as manifesting through both overt comments and more subtle behaviours in work settings, from line managers and work colleagues, as well as in other settings, such as health care. Mothers reported experiencing disapproval at having paid time off or judgement in relation to anticipated career expectations on becoming a parent. Fathers tended to experience surprised responses within the employment context when taking leave and at their presence within support settings such as baby groups.

Emma, who had taken maternity leave more than once, reflected on "*the running commentary from colleagues "oh enjoying more paid time off"".* She shared a specific incident with a senior colleague:

> *"... they [senior manager] do not approve of a full year off work with partially full pay for maternity leave, it was in an informal chat rather than a work-based conversation, but the thought that that is their true feelings still hovers over me"* (Emma, expectant mother of three, maternity leave).

Rachel similarly shared having *"previously heard her [line manager's] negative views of other staff on maternity so it [support] feels disingenuous.*" (Rachel, mother, maternity leave). While Stella within the work context was asked why she was sharing leave with her partner and only taking seven months leave herself: *"oh, why so soon? Don't you want to take a year with them*" (Stella, expectant mother of two, shared parental leave).

In contrast, Michael, as an expectant father, experienced his work colleagues surprise that he would be taking two months leave:

> *"I think most of the people in the group were very unclear as to what that was (.) and were quite surprised that I wanted to do it, (.) not that they weren't supportive, but I don't think they'd come across it necessarily before as an option"* (Michael – father, shared parental leave).

Other fathers described similar scenarios of colleagues doing "*a 'double take'"* when he talked about taking leave (Ned – father, paternity leave) or feeling "*a bit like an exotic animal"* (Gregory – father, shared parental leave). Lower expectations, acceptance or support for fathers taking paternity leave than mothers taking maternity leave was also anticipated by mothers in relation to their partners.

Steve and Katie (father, shared parental leave and mother, maternity leave respectively) discussed (in an online discussion) experiences of receiving comments, often from strangers, which exposed gender bias. Katie experienced criticism as a mother while Steve received comments on how well he was coping as a father and he reflected that "e*xpectations are pretty low, it seems. I never get unsolicited advice. My mum friends on the other hand often have people tell them what they are doing wrong. With few positive comments"* (Steve).

Examples of bias and gendered parenting expectations re-confirm research on the experience of discrimination and prejudice in the employment setting (Ndzi

2021; Kelland *et al.* 2022). At the micro family level, these experiences illustrate the role of gender norms in employment and health-care settings, shaping parents' capabilities to achieve valued functionings. The impact of unconscious bias, prejudice or gendered expectations that mothers are better placed to be primary carers and that *"it's the mother's 'job' to bring up the kids, whilst the father goes to work"* (Anne – mother, maternity leave) was reported as consciously impacting choice. The "*hidden cultures*" (Emma – expectant mother of three, maternity leave) resulting from prejudice were sometimes subtle, described as a feeling and difficult to evidence, but manifested in influencing decisions as a result. For example, Annie (mother, shared parental leave) described changing employers due to "*abysmal things*" being said about childbearing women and subsequent nervousness speaking to her line manager. Rachel experienced uncertainty and concern about not wanting to "*upset senior leaders*" by her leave decision-making (Rachel – mother, maternity leave). Wendy put off revealing her pregnancy which she explained as follows:

> *"… because I simply can't deal with the stress that this may bring and thankfully working from home has allowed me to put this off until I am truly ready*" (Wendy – expectant mother, shared parental leave).

Stella was particularly evocative of the impact on her mental health of expectations to breastfeed and reflected on disapproval of bottle feeding from a healthcare worker:

> *"I think the socially accepted assumption that Mums are the more natural parent and are instinctively programmed to ""get it"" led to my own diagnoses of PND [post-natal depression]. I felt ashamed that I didn't automatically ""get it"" and struggled whereas my husband took to it so naturally."* (Stella – expectant mother of two, shared parental leave)

As Ivy (mother, shared parental leave) explained, patriarchal beliefs and structures, which assume mothers are primary carers, can be "*very destructive.*"

6.2. Narrative inquiry into parents' enactment of gender justice

Thematic analysis of participants aspirations for and enactments for gender justice showed a consistent picture with most parents' explicit discussion of gender justice articulated as challenging gender essentialism and heteronormativity. There was consistency in parents' experiences of prejudice and motivations for gender

justice also. Gender differentiating articulations of gender justice, as more "naturally" driven, were less common. These more exceptional articulations of gender justice also illustrated the normative risks associated with such discussions, highlighting that examining how social norms shape what is of value presents methodological challenges. As with the previous chapters, I mobilised narrative inquiry tools from an etic perspective to further explore how parents articulated, enacted or promoted gender justice. I also drew on Fraser's (1994; 2013a) typology (i.e., universal breadwinner, caregiver parity – or gender differentiating – and universal caregiver models) to explore parents various articulations and enactment of gender justice.

6.2.1. "Dinners with an infant and toddler are no fun" Susan and Guy (part 2)

In this section, we return to Susan and Guy whose narrative on the topic of financial security ("the economics of things") we explored in section 5.3.1, which concluded with Guy revealing of his preference not to work flexibly to enable him to be home in the evenings. In this and the subsequent section, I analyse a series of narrative interactions from their interview in which they, first, discussed what shared parenting meant to them and, second, reflected on work-based exchanges about family. The narratives have been selected because, while not explicitly discussing gender justice, they provide insight to more subtle positioning on fairness and gender justice. I should note that that I found sections of Susan's and Guy's dialogue puzzling (including those discussed in this section); both at the time of the interview and when listening back to the recording of the interview. At the time of the interview, I was struck by Susan's confidence and self-assurance, but I also sensed her frustration at the constraints on her capabilities to share parenting as she aspired to. Her frustration was mixed with hopefulness at points when her partner appeared to open to the idea of sharing leave or taking a longer period off work.

I start by considering Guy and Susan's perspective on shared parenting as this sets the scene for the subsequent narrative focusing on conversations at work. Guy described shared parenting as:

> *"... taking all of the duties that need doing, both parenting and not parenting, so all the things to run a household and divide them up … based on time availability and energy and sort of skill set".*

Susan similarly differentiated between tasks through a focus on time and energy; she additionally invoked values of fairness and quality time with the baby. First, on fairness, Susan attributed importance to "*both people feel[ing] they're going through it fairly"* and so, as Guy noted, "*both people don't feel so shattered*." She added that Guy has a health condition detrimentally impacted by tiredness. She noted that she would be "*home on leave*" while he would be at work making it unfair to expect him to wake up to feed the baby at night as he would be tired from work. She explained that: "*it doesn't seem fair to him, to me, (.) to pull rank and say oh I've done three nights you need to do nights."* An implicit distinction was made between paid and unpaid labour (caregiving) which resonates the distinction made between the load bearing versus quality time articulated by Guy in section 5.3.1. Second, on quality time with the baby, Susan distinguished between spending time and spending *quality* time with baby. She argued that young children "*don't remember <u>who</u> put them to bed or when they went to bed, they just remember routine and safety and someone taking care of them,"* the who is not important. Susan illustrated her point in the following hypothetical scenario:

> *"While it would be nice for Guy to be home for the bath time, bedtime routine actually dinners with a baby are the same as all the other meals all day and* ***dinners with an infant and toddler are no fun, [laughs] they are no fun..*** *And we have a* ***big disparity in income*** *as well so (.)* ***I wouldn't demand him to come home for a child that*** *eats at five thirty, he'd have to leave at four, four thirty, start wrapping up at four, cos his commute is about an hour* ***just to watch the kid fling cereal across the room and scream the house down*** *and you know carry them into the bath covered [mimics carrying] in cereal, umm you know that's not something* ***I*** *would ask* ***him*** *to be home for all the time, either through the* ***kid****, for the kid's sake, you know 'oh junior is never going to see you at dinner' or (.) saying well I did the last three nights and I'm sick of it, maybe like Guy says, maybe that'll change but we don't see each* ***other pulling rank like*** *that."*

Susan's case for differential split of responsibilities was based on who is on leave, not explicitly gendered or associated with being a mother or father but due to the "*big disparity in income****."*** The dinnertime and bedtime routine are not something she *"would demand him to be home for*" "*just to watch the kid fling cereal across*

the room and scream the house down." It is not stated whether this potential to "*demand*" was driven by Guy's stated or unstated unwillingness to be home for the dinner and bedtime routine. From the child's perspective, the case was made that it does not matter *who* is doing bath time and bedtime; rather it is important to focus on "*routine and safety*." She mimicked herself, saying she would not "*ask him [Guy] to be home*" either for herself or for "*for the kid's sake, you know [using a complaining tone] 'oh junior is never going to see you at dinner'"* – thus undermining (her own) authority often enacted through use of reported speech.

The narrative has two key impacts. First, as in Susan and Guy's previously discussed narrative (see section 5.3.1), caregiving is considered in relation to "*load bearing"* and disparity in financial compensation *positions* "*who"* cares as less important to the child over the importance of safety and routine. Depersonalising time spent caring for the child *troubled* importance associated with engaged or intensive fatherhood, which emphasis *quality* time with fathers specifically, and the emotional bonding involved in childcare, i.e., it silenced value attributed to the relationalities of care.

Second, despite being constrained by their wage disparity, curiously she positions herself as decision-maker. By suggesting that they "*don't see each other pulling rank*" to demand he comes home earlier, Susan implied a hierarchy between them in which she is *positioned* as a decision-making gatekeeper. I mention above my confusion through this interview, and this would be one instance where I was curious about the tension between their apparent hierarchal positioning and how this was articulated. The constraint on Susan's choice, articulated as being due to salary differential exposed Guy's paternal gatekeeper role, the potential detrimental impact on her being on a precarious contract and yet positioning herself as the gatekeeper was conflictual. Susan subsequently shifted direction to an alternative way of describing shared parenting, as follows:

> *"I think a better way of describing how we see shared parenting is like Guy is a feminist, it is very easy to say, he's a feminist, he's a very modern guy and a very egalitarian dad, I mean 10 of the 12 people who work for him are women, he's got two sisters you know he's got a lot of very strong modern women around him so he's not going to be the dad who doesn't change a nappy or doesn't know what the kids favourite book is or doesn't know what*

> *to do when the kids screaming ummm (.) you know so its fully involved parenting umm and that's a pretty good share so far. ... It's not the same as this perfect 50/50 and passing them back and forth like a football you know."*

Susan's description of Guy as a feminist is clearly important to her, but what is at stake? Use of present tense is interesting, the baby has not yet arrived, but she referred to Guy's contribution as "*its fully involved parenting," "that's a pretty good share so far."* Susan's description of Guy as a feminist is extensive and effortful: "*he's a feminist, he's a very modern guy"* and his engagement in parenting as *"fully involved",* being *"a very egalitarian dad"*. Susan's description of Guy as a feminist, as enacting gender justice through sharing childcare, appears to attempt to *repair* any potential gender *trouble* evoked by Guy's preference not to work flexibly and deference to workplace constraints on his capability to share parental leave.

6.2.2. "I'm Clarissa, full professor of management, I work in the areas of strategy … vice-dean of Education" Susan and Guy (part 3)

I turn now to explore a further exchange between Susan and Guy later in the interview, which focused on conversations at work. I have chosen to focus on this exchange, following on from the above discussion, because it evokes further reflection on enactment of gender justice. It also provides an interesting example of narrative in action. Susan had shared some reflections on conversations at her workplace about being an expectant parent. The sequence then turned to turn Guy who "*confesses*" that he does not know whether his male colleagues have children or not (confesses perhaps in response to a perceived expectation that he "should" talk about family or know about his male work colleagues):

> *"if you said name ten men that you work with, and I'd go bop bop bop bop [shows counting with fingers] and then you'd go how many of them are dads er I wouldn't know for most of them."*

The exception is his "*boss*" about whom he knows has a daughter but little else. Guy contrasts the women he works with: "*do I know their children's names? Yes*" and reflects that "*the ladies are reaching an age where they are starting families*". The exchange established that he and his male colleagues tend not to talk about family, and that he knows more about the women colleagues and families, such as their

children's names. Guy noted that the absence of discussion, and of family photos, was not in "*a weird kind of 1950s way it's just kind of it doesn't come up, I go to work, and we talk about work*". The 1950s depiction evoked for me Mad Men, an American period drama based in 1950s America, a period which represents "the oppressive image of the happy housewife" (Orgad 2019: 4). While he acknowledged the *"gender stereotype you know the guys don't sit around and talk about family stuff particularly,"* he explicitly positioned women as homemakers. Guy's explicit gendered visualisation of a professional worker fits masculine work practices as discussed in academic literature (see for example: Gatrell 2011; Cahusac and Kanji 2014; Kelland *et al.* 2022). As such, Guy *troubles* an enactment of gender justice from either an equality or equity perspective, and Susan's description of Guy as a feminist. Susan subsequently pointed out they (Guy and his work colleagues) "*don't sit around and talk about football either*" – perhaps an attempt to repair any gender trouble by professionalising Guy and his work colleagues' conversations – which I will come back to.

My subsequent question about whether the COVID-19 pandemic had changed this with "*everyone working from home*" stems from my interest in the context of discussions at the time, as the interview was during the pandemic, and sparked the following narrative. By speculating whether the norm of not talking about family had been challenged at all, I indirectly provoked reflection on Guy's visualisation of the professional model worker.

> ***Clare**: and with everyone working from home, would you? Would that have changed at all?*
>
> ***Guy**: umm yes, it's happened on occasion but it (.) hasn't opened the flood gates, show me around your lovely home and children and stuff. It's just you might occasionally see or hear one [child] in the background … there's an **American colleague** who was working from (.) … **kid's playroom so I got a brief tour,** … and he waved his laptop around at their kids Lego collection cos they like Lego too. Ummm (..) but **it didn't then trigger a twenty-minute conversation**, so all I know is that particular guy has at least one child and they like Lego (.) but I still don't know name, gender, how many, age, nothing. Those normal questions don't flood out of my mouth when I know someone has a child, I'll be just like oh cool …. (.) Umm what was I thinking? … there was … recently, some work thing and you had to introduce yourself and (...) it struck me (..) that the men when they introduced themselves, it would be like so 'Hi, **I'm Joe and here's something about Joe that's actually***

> ***something about Joe and his work'****; whereas when the* ***women*** *introduced themselves, they'd be like 'Hi,* ***I'm Mary, I'm a mum of three'*** *and I was like oh okay I didn't ask how many children you had but that's kind of how* ***they identified their place in the universe by 'I'm a mum, let me tell you about my*** *family' whereas* ***the boys don't often do that****.*

In this narrative, Guy again referred to his work colleagues, citing a "*brief tour*" of his American colleague's kid's playroom being used as a workspace but which had not "*triggered a twenty-minute conversation*" about family. Guy then recited a story with reference to a "*work thing*" in which several fictional characters are employed who each represent different (gendered) worker models. Employing "*Joe"* to represent men, Joe only shares something "*that's actually about Joe and his work*", his fatherhood status remains unknown. In contrast "*Mary*" represents women and mothers, "*a mum of three*". As in the previous narrative, women are positioned as visible carers in the workplace because "*that [motherhood] is kind of how they identified their position in the universe … "I'm a mum, let me tell you about my family" whereas the boys don't often do that*". By quoting fictitious Joe and Mary, Guy conveyed additional authority to his narrative, which also provided a means to articulate his discomfort with discussion of family in a work context. This discomfort was also indicated by his comment "*I was like oh okay I didn't ask how many children you had but that's…".*

The sequence then returned to Susan as I enquired about and linked to her previous reference in the interview to her workplace being celebratory of families.

> ***Clare****: Susan, you talked about your work, and it is quite open about who's got children?*
>
> ***Susan****: again that* ***doesn't happen, in an academic setting its very formal****, even though we know each other,* ***at coffee time we would talk about stuff like that****, if are we doing in a meeting round the table introductions,* ***no one would say 'I'm Clarissa, I have two kids'*** *no* ***they'd be like 'I'm Clarissa, I'm full professor of management, I work in the areas of strategy*** *and* ***I'm the vice-dean of Education'*** *or something like that,* ***absolutely not, no****. Umm but they have like* ***you****,* ***your child's painting in the wall in the office and pictures on their desk*** *…; so one of* ***the women*** *who came back from baby leave,* ***…*** *she made a big deal about going home every day at 4.30, declining meetings that went on after 4 and (.) umm packing up, locking her office, (.) … Umm* ***she*** *made a big thing of it for a whole year, I leave at 4.30 … so that was very visible and I guess she was doing that for* ***boundary setting*** *and that she was doing that as much for herself as for letting people know,* ***I wasn't away on holiday, I was making a human and this is my new work****.*

Susan also invoked a small (fictitious) story and characters through which she professionalised work colleagues' conversations. She juxtaposed "*very formal*" professional work contexts where "*that [talking family] doesn't happen*" with the less formal spaces "*coffee time*" where colleagues "*would talk about stuff like that"*. In Susan's narrative "*Clarissa*" performed the role of the professional academic, positioned as senior "*full professor"*, "*vice-dean*", working in "*areas of strategy*" who would "*absolutely not*" talk about family in a formal work context. Susan then told the story of a mother who had recently returned from leave who visibly performed a going home boundary setting process - a contrast to the scenario above which explained why she would not pull rank and demand Guy come home for the *"bath time, bedtime routine"*, something she would like Guy to do. What is at stake here? Whether consciously or not, Susan re-positioned the narrative *repairing* the gender *trouble* sparked by Guy's narrative which positioned women as carers. For Susan, discussion of family is not about gender but professionalism, both through the mother establishing new boundaries on return from leave and through "*Clarissa*", whose role in the universe is positioned as multiple: woman, mother, highly accomplished professional. As in previous cases, it is the gendered relationalities within the couple that bring to the fore the normativity and associated gendered relations of power – in this case, gendered expectations that position women's role in the universe as carers is contrasted with an alternative expectation in relation to professional workers in which gender is made less relevant and caring does not have a place.

Susan's reference to my context, "*like you, your child's painting on the wall*" provided further intersubjective reflection. I had not discussed my own circumstances but through my children's artwork visible on the wall behind me, I had positioned myself as occupying this contentious space between professional and parent. While not a conscious decision for the research interview, it had been a conscious decision in the second COVID-19 pandemic lockdown not to hide my family status in my workplace by situating a giant pink unicorn visibly in my background, the timing of which approximately coincided with this interview. Perhaps Guy's American colleague went through a similar process working in his child's playroom. As with Susan, I would not often bring up my family as a topic of

conversation in meetings though would have done in more informal discussions with colleagues. I remember the personal impact of a Dean of Faculty at my workplace who similarly visibly worked from her child's bedroom.

Susan then made a subsequent turn in the conversation sequence, demonstrating Goodwin's (2015) point that a turn in a dialogue sequence, or discursive change in direction, is where common understanding is revealed. Susan differentiated between academics or "*professionals of a certain level of education and achievement*," within which she included herself and Guy who "*are continuing our ambitions*," and university administrative staff:

> ***Susan****: Like being a university administrator, …, life is so different for <u>them</u>. You know they almost all take the whole year off, their colleagues make a huge deal about them leaving, you know there's handover meetings and maternity cover … you know that just don't apply to academics at all and the same thing about all these Athena Swan initiatives for gender equality, they all work for admins fantastically, most of them don't work for academics at all … it's a completely different world, you know and I think it's the same for you [to Guy], you know HR, the chick in accounting, the pa for your department…*

Through this class-based distinction, Susan positioned herself (and Guy) as professionals having achieved a level of education and career progress and in so doing continues to respond to and *repair* the gender *trouble* caused by Guy's identification of women's place in the universe as mothers, an example of action through narrative, the transformative power of narrative in constructing self (Shuman 2015). By referring to herself, and other similar professionals, as "*continuing our ambitions to achieve more*", she was also *positioning* herself as in control of her destiny, perhaps in line with Sheryl Sandberg's call to lean in "as they combine professional careers with motherhood" (Orgad 2019: 4), or career orientated women (Hakim 2000). She also associated gender equality initiatives with more proactive support for transition to maternity leave and cover and a more family friendly approach.

So why is this important and how does this position what gender justice is to Susan and Guy? I interpret Susan's evocative portrayal of gender justice as resonating with what Fraser (1994; 2013a) terms a universal breadwinner model, though which professional women aspire to fit masculine work practices (Gatrell

2011; Cahusac and Kanji 2014), or ideal worker norms (Acker 1990). Yet she feels the workplace is more supportive for administrative staff for whom right to care policies are more applicable or adapted, resonating with what Fraser (1994; 2013a) terms caregiver parity.

6.2.3. "Even if the chap was earning more money, they could afford for the chap to take some time off on leave" Eve and Thomas

I now turn to Thomas and Eve. Thomas worked for a government department in a local council while Eve was an academic who was predominately teaching rather than research focused. They had recently shared parental leave, with Eve taking approximately nine months and Thomas three months. Both Thomas and Eve were animated in the interview especially Eve who aptly described herself as a "*chatty person*." The interview felt positive, and they both passionately expressed their support of shared parenting and shared parental leave. They reflected on shared parenting as being about sharing all the labour involved in childrearing and sharing the knowledge that enabled them to smoothly transition caregiving between them. They were one of the only couples who also reflected on sharing the mental load of childcare: *"About not just sharing the work but also sharing the thinking."* (Eve)

I focus here on the section of the interview in which the couple reflected on the value placed on being able to share parenting and the distinct positions that they took on factors that enable and constrain shared parenting with reference to the work context. I have selected this narrative because, while again not explicitly discussing gender justice, it provided insight to parental articulation and enactment of gender justice, one which contrasts Susan and Guy's position.

Both Thomas and Eve reflected on discussions with work colleagues about parenting. Thomas reflected on other fathers' experience of taking leave who had recommended leave as "*really worthwhile*" while Eve referred to conversations with colleagues about the "*business of having children"* and positive relationships between parent and child. They both reflected on the value and benefits of spending time with the family which reflects or perhaps mirrors the messaging of the government campaign to promote the benefits of SPL through which parents can 'Share the Joy' (GEO 2019).

However, despite the couple's apparent consensus, their narratives appeared at times in conflict with each other. For example, Eve, who saw herself as a champion of shared parental leave as a policy through which to enable parents to share leave, reflected that despite the positivity of work colleagues about parenting, men were not choosing to take leave: "*they are not doing it are they?*". In contrast, Thomas provided explanatory factors such as financial situations and social support systems being set up for mothers and children rather than fathers – again a clear reference to the common narratives on low take up of SPL in the UK, such as financial barriers (Twamley and Schober 2019).

> ***Eve**: **So,** I remember feeling frustrated that **people** like **my colleague** weren't considering doing the same thing... Yeah like I'm on a crusade here, you know like, I want this to be the norm, you know. I want it to be such that me going off on maternity leave for an extended time off does not single me out. … So, you know **I** was like marching about 'oh yeah this is what we're doing and it's great isn't it!'. And by and large **most people** agreed with me. ... I remember having really nice **conversations with everybody at work about the business of having children**, and what it was like, and you know the relations people have with their kids. ... Yeah, like it's weird, isn't it? That as much as all these **people, men and women** were saying this to me, it was obvious to me, that when for example I was looking at my colleague …*
>
> ***Thomas**: But he's kind of in a different situation though, financially. ...*
>
> ***Eve**: But you know nevertheless, no matter what **they** say, **they are not doing it are they.** ... And I find it really **frustrating**, I don't want to be in this position that like **oh we** are only doing as I happen to earn more than [Thomas]. **We** made the decision, so this is the thing [bangs on table]. We made the decision to do shared parental leave before I got a promotion, so we were earning [the same]". I don't have a lot of sympathy with those arguments that you know like well you want your child to have everything don't you so **you want to bring in a certain level of income** so they can have those things. So, I don't think the **kid** gives a toss about violin lessons in the future, you know. I don't think they really care if go to like Florence for a holiday when they are eight as opposed to Butlins, I don't think they care. I think it is **really important to spend time with your parent**s ...*
>
> ***Thomas**: And just to go back to your point about [your] colleagues, umm the fact **they** are not doing it. This relates to potentially what **I** experienced while I was on doing it, even though the mechanism is there to do it, the reality of doing it is u:m and the stuff that is provided sort of, you know the support networks that are available are really not geared up for a sort of u:m shared parental leave experience.*

> ***Eve**: So, there's two separate points there. So, as I say, I don't have a lot of sympathy for people that think that having, beyond making your baby I do think that possibly, that **even if the chap was earning more money, they could afford for the chap to take some time off on leave.** You know if **we** had been in that position where you were earning more than me, **I'd still demand that we look** at it.*

Considering the audience and story circulation, i.e., who the participants are telling their story to, who the stories are directed at or intended for, it is important to note that throughout their conversation with each other, both Eve and Thomas were addressing me. They both promoted SPL and saw themselves as role models throughout the interview. In contrast, while supportive of SPL, Thomas defended the choice of men not to share. Underlying or implicit tensions emerged, as a struggle, or duel almost, between the alternate and divergent messages that they were trying to convey or emphasise. Sudden changes of direction and focus can be seen, driven by separate personal narratives that were in tension with one another. For example, Thomas referred to work colleagues who have taken time off and Eve responded by referring to colleagues in her workplace who have not.

This duel within the dialogical narrative also had implications in terms of connections to dominant and marginalized public narratives. Thomas' message as to why dads do not take up SPL connects to the dominant narrative on SPL that parents do not share it because of finances while Eve championed SPL regardless. In this sense, they drew on public narratives as discursive resources. Thomas drew on more common narratives such as childcare systems not being set up for dads and financial constraints behind low take up. Eve contradicted and questioned this, perhaps as it contradicted the narrative she was trying to share on the positive benefits of SPL and her "crusade" to encourage people to take it.

In this example, Eve's narrative positioning suggested a heightened awareness and investment in progressing gender justice through making a case for valuing parenting and leave (despite potential financial detriment) and compelling men to do what women do – caring. As such, Eve challenged gendered norms or expectations. For example, in the exchange regarding Eve's work colleague who Thomas suggested had financial justification, Eve in effect refuted this, emphasising that finance was not the driving factor in their decision-making, banging on the

table to strengthen her point. Eve went on to say that *"even if the chap was earning more money, they could afford for the chap to take some time off on leave"* which resonated the benefits and the context of the 'Share the Joy' campaign but even if at the detriment to finances. Her voiced "*lack of sympathy*" echoed a marginalized narrative about sharing the risks as well as the joys associated with taking leave. As with Susan, this was an example of narrative in action. However, Eve evoked gender justice, not as 'leaning in' but by demanding that men do caregiving redolent of Fraser's (1994; 2013a) universal caregiver model.

6.2.4. "I really had to put my money where my mouth is for this unfortunately, yeah" Ben and Olivia

I finish with a dialogical narrative between Ben and Olivia. At the time of the interview, Ben was working in the private sector, having recently changed employers, and Olivia in a higher education administrative role. Their baby was a few months old. Olivia was on maternity leave and Ben would be taking leave in due course. Their plan was to split parental leave where Olivia would take 9 months and Ben would take 3 months. I chose to finish on this dialogue because it combines a focus on financial security, in which gender is demonstrably entangled, with how both Olivia and Ben enact gender justice. Social justice was clearly important to them both and was referenced throughout the interview, through mention, for example, of Jeremy Corbyn, who had a the time of the interview recently stepped down as the Leader of the Labour party (Roe-Crines 2021)[11]. Olivia also cited growing up in outside of the UK in a country where shared parenting is more common. During the interview, they were both enthusiastic about sharing leave and the importance of sharing leave in relation to gender justice. Olivia came across as calm, while Ben was quite serious, looking into the camera rather intensely, sometimes slightly defensively. For example, at one point he asked if he had something wrong or contradicted himself. His rationale for sharing leave included strong emphasis on gender justice and at various points in the interview was keen

[11] The interview took place shortly after, Jeremy Corbyn, a British politician, stepped down as Leader of the Opposition as Leader of the Labour party, he held this position between 2015 – 2020. Corbyn has been described as both a popular and divisive leader of the labour party, reflecting for some an ideological shift and challenge to neoliberalism in the UK.

to ensure I understood this. As with Thomas and Eve, my role, as the audience to whom the stories were intended for, was evident in Ben and Olivia's responses. It was Olivia who had participated in the online discussion, and it was apparent that Ben was keen to share his perspective also. Hence, as with previous narratives, the circulation of narratives, who the story is told to and intended for was important.

The analysis focuses on two key discussion points – first, their motivations for sharing leave and their rationale for their split of leave and second, tensions arising from translation of their aspiration into practice. I start by summarising how they articulated and envisaged shared parenting. Olivia explained that they "*both (.) thought the same [about parenting] from the beginning*", aspiring to be *"in charge (.) just as much"*. While expressing agreement, Ben explained that his not "*particularly good relationship"* with his father was a motivating factor and he provided "*additional*" rationale, as follows:

> *"Umm yeah so my point of view (.)* ***in addition*** *to what Olivia just said, it was something that have* ***never been in any doubt*** *and umm (.)* ***we, slash, I*** *have been prepared even to make* ***quite significant financial loss*** *(.) to be able to do it cos* ***I don't know if you covered this in the first interview*** *but my workplace is* ***not giving me any (.) wage at all*** *in the three months I'll be off and additional motivations for me … equality is quite important to me, (.) I don't (.) in the face of it, I don't think it is fair for somebody to be expected to do the majority of the hard work of bringing up a child because of their (.) because of their sex." (Ben)*

Ben's leading point was to confirm that "*it [sharing leave] has never been in any doubt,"* driven by fairness: "*I don't think it is fair …."* He declared that "***we, slash, I*** *have been prepared even to make quite a significant financial loss".* Later in the interview, he additionally detailed taking two weeks leave following the baby's birth: "*one week holiday and one week unpaid*, ***I really had to put my money where my mouth is for this****, unfortunately"*. It was clearly important to evidence living his values despite the financial loss.

When discussing how long they will each take off, Olivia explained, with reference to the unequal split in leave, that she would take nine months and Ben three months because she had thought that during "*the first three months you*

aren't going to be able to even leave the house, … and if we had 50/50 that I'd only have three months to kind of enjoy it"[12]*.* The extract below follows in the sequence:

> ***Olivia****: … and I wanted more (..) so then I think it was the kind of 9 and 3 and Ben was just (.) happy with that.*
> ***Ben*** *= not quite*
> ***Olivia*** *= And also (.) oh, cos financially* ***I wouldn't get paid for the final three months either*** *and then financially and we earn the same, umm (.) when we are at work, so financially it makes no difference who would stay at home cos (.) yeah*
> *[When Ben started talking Olivia covers her mouth with her hair as if to silence herself and let Ben speak]*
> ***Ben*** *= So in addition to that umm (..) I think in, I work in quite a (.) traditional industry, umm (.) … I think there is a big difference between a three-month paternity leave and a six-month paternity leave. I would have, I would have been happy to take a six-month paternity leave.* ***I don't think I would have got it signed off****. (..)*
> *…*
> *I was quite lucky in that* ***my manager*** *is umm (.) she is very supportive, so she has two children and* ***her (.) husband*** *is doing the same thing as me, so he is the one home with the kids. Eh so that kind of, as a factor like as a supportive,* ***not necessarily an official policy based like working environment, but kind of leading by example*** *and as specific role models within the company has been* ***important for me*** *to feel like I can take those three months off without it impacting on* ***my career (.) or my kind*** *of you know status (.) within the* ***company*** *so to speak.*

In the above extract Ben disputed Olivia's claim that he was happy with an unequal split by saying "*not quite*," that he would have wanted to take six months, i.e., an equal split, returning to the running theme about what equal parenting means in practice. He referred to his employment context, three months being the maximum time he "*would have got away with*," that he did not think he "*would have got [six months] signed off*." Reference to "*getting away with*" taking leave was suggestive that this was counter-typical to the norm. Ben also differentiated the official policy position to that of his line manager who is "*leading by example*," acting as a role model with reference to her own husband taking leave, enabling him to take the three months.

[12] In the online discussion, she had also referenced that a "75%/25% seemed like a good compromise" because it still felt like they are "trailblazers" of SPL, she was "comfortable with the "unequal" split as most people don't split it at all" adding that "It would have been interesting to see how I would have felt if my partner had "requested" that we split it equally - I would have agreed though (and maybe not even felt that I would have had the right not to agree) as it's only fair."

Although they both agreed to share leave, it was apparent that tensions arose when translating their aspirations into practice. Ben's ineligibility to paid parental leave was cited as creating barriers to him taking the leave. Olivia referenced tensions at home, both in the online discussion[13] and during the interview, which provided an example of her enacting or wrestling for gender justice within their specific context. Olivia reflected on the difficult conversations they had had towards the end of the interview:

> ***Olivia**: Didn't **we have,** when it turned out that Ben didn't qualify for the, did we have any conversations there, was it a bit difficult? [Asking and looking at Ben]*
> ***Ben**: No*
> ***Olivia**: I remember I was asking you **have you** done **have you** asked them, **have you** asked them, **have you** asked them, and you said you were gonna ask them after (..) your probation.*
> ***Ben**: yeah I wanted to delay doing it until I'd passed my probation*
> ***Olivia**: And then I was kind (.) of nervous I wanted to get it confirmed as soon as possible so I could tell my work so (.) ummm, cos it was, I remember when we realised that Ben didn't qualify being really (..), **I was quite (.) upset (.) for a bit**, (.) that kind of like this was what we had planned to do and we were going to share all experiences ... umm so I wanted it all to be confirmed (.) quickly cos it was so important to me but then you obviously had (.) that you know that it was a new role and new people*
> ***Ben**: yeah ... just a difference in timing approach more than anything else*

The above interaction highlights a different interpretation of the discussion, with Olivia reflecting on it having been "*a bit difficult*." In contrast, Ben was not keen to reflect on the difficulties perhaps because this implied discord contesting their enactment of gender justice. It was a joint retelling of the incident in which their individual purpose was at odds. My role in the space was important here and provided insight to the divergence between who Olivia and Ben would wish to circulate the story to. Olivia referred to me directly to explain the context "*when it turned out that Ben didn't qualify*." Olivia retold the impact of the uncertainty on her and having been "*quite (.) upset (.) for a bit*," she reflected on their joint aspirations "*we had planned*," "*we were going to share*…" and attributed the

[13] "It turned out my husband wasn't actually entitled to the "official" SPL as he had changed jobs too recently, so he had to ask for 3 months' unpaid leave instead … I think that made him nervous as he had only just passed his probation so **discussing it at home was also a bit tense** until he got the green light from work" (Olivia – in online discussion)

uncertainty to Ben's "*new role*…." She also reflected on the persistence with which she requested resolution: "*have you done have you asked them, have you asked them, have you asked them".* Ben referred to his probation period, explaining that it was "*just a difference in timing approach more than anything else*." The case also provided an example of the impact of gendered couple relationalities and how constraints within one parent's employment context interacts with their partner's capabilities. The case also exemplified how parents navigate their way through these contextual constraints and subvert gender norms.

As with Annie and Craig's narrative in section 5.3, the dialogical narratives provide an example of how parents *trouble* gendered assumptions about who will take leave. Olivia and Ben both challenged expectations regarding financial loss, although in divergent ways, presenting a complex interaction between dominant and counter narratives. As cited above, Ben explained that he was driven by aspirations for fairness and gender justice to the extent that he is prepared to make significant financial loss, which he associates as his personal loss "*we slash I*." Olivia challenges (in the second extract above) the personal nature that Ben attributes to the financial loss by interjecting that "*financially it makes no difference who*" had taken the final three unpaid months. She would also have been on unpaid leave (following six months paid, three months on statutory pay). This had the effect of troubling the gendered assumption that she should take unpaid leave, that women are expected to take a financial hit (Kaufman 2018) - thereby making explicit the implicit master narrative which was being resisted (Squire *et al.* 2014). Ben also challenged expectations regarding financial loss. His reflections had the effect of highlighting the problematic characteristics of SPL in terms of eligibility and entitlement to paid leave in line with dominant narratives, that fathers low take up of shared parental leave is not because they are not egalitarian but because of the financial barriers. However, he also countered such narratives through the financial loss he would personally shoulder. Olivia and Ben's narrative stands out, because Ben does plan to take a period of unpaid leave, despite the financial loss caused and doing what it is assumed mothers will do, as described by Annie (see section 5.3). The narrative provides insights into how gender norms are constituted within financial security as a valued functioning as well as insights into how parents enact

gender justice within the current constraints of UK's SPL policy. Ben in effect responded to Eve's "*demand*" or marginalised narrative through his enactment of gender justice, which required him to share the risks as well as the joy[14].

6.3. A parents' view on promoting or enabling gender justice in the employment context

In this chapter, I have so far presented what parents expressed as of value to them in relation to gender justice in the context of sharing parental leave. Participants also provided insights into their experiences of employer parental leave policy implementation and employer organisational culture. I conclude this chapter, by presenting thematic analysis of parents' views on what they felt employers should be doing from raising awareness of parental leave to more proactive promotion.

Participants considered the UK's SPL policy as providing parents a *"formal system which plants the seed of an idea"* that enables parents to tell their employers: ***"****I want to make use of this formal system of SPL… you can't say no, it's not weird, it's not random. I do think it makes it more possible"* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave). Importantly, Eve described herself as an SPL trailblazer, sharing leave was already something imagined and feasible. This reflection suggests that the UK's SPL policy goes some way to provide the *means* to parents' care capabilities, for parents to access the means to share care during their child's first year.

However, shared parental leave policy was frequently described as having "*fiendishly complex rules*" with "*sometimes strange rules / regulations*" (Louise – expectant mother, shared parental leave). Associated processes were described as overly cumbersome. As expressed by Olivia:

> *"Even though my employer seems very supportive of SPL**, there were five different forms that I/we would have had to fill** in to apply for it as opposed to the one form for maternity leave. That seemed excessive, although I'm not*

[14] Gregory is another example of a father sharing the risks, in his case in relation to career, as referenced in section 5.5: "... to tell you honestly I don't care anymore [laughs] you know spending more time with my son means that I will not reach 100% peak performance with regards to pursuing my career" (Gregory - father, shared parental leave)

> *sure whether it's a government requirement or just my employer's internal process*" (Olivia – mother, shared parental leave)

Participants wanted employers to **better promote policies**, to make parental leave information **openly available** online and accessible to both prospective and current employees:

> *"I would expect an employer to have a clear easy to understand policy on leave and it should be easily accessible rather than hidden in the small print."* (Denise – mother, maternity leave)

Employers having parental leave policies openly accessible was deemed to message support for parents and that (current and prospective) employees would not have to ask questions about entitlements - "*not really something you want to bring up in a job interview, is it?"* (Catherine – mother, maternity leave). As Rachel described, having to ask about policies meant potentially being exposed to prejudice, as a "*declaration of some kind*" which makes one feel "*very nervous because of previous discrimination*" (Rachel – mother, maternity leave).

Promotion of (shared) parental leave policies was also articulated as "***bringing them [policies] to life*** *with lots of case studies, FAQs, buddying with someone who has been through it*" (Louise – mother, shared parental leave). Sharing "how they [colleagues] have been supported by the organisation" (Steve – father, shared parental leave) helps make sharing leave a real option by illustrating the actual scenarios couples have used. Case studies not only "*demonstrate how it [SPL] works*" but demonstrate that "*it's not really a big deal because [people] have done it before*" (Isobel – mother, shared parental leave). In contrast, employers lack of promotion or anticipation that their employee parents would like to share leave becomes a cultural barrier to leave take up having a negative impact, described by Anne as follows:

> *"Promotion of leave policies is one thing - promotion of uptake of those policies is totally different! Just because you have a policy doesn't mean it's culturally 'acceptable' to take it up, which can be a real barrier. Promoting the fact that you (as an organisation) actively encourage SPL would be a big change from the current system." (Anne – mother, maternity leave)*

Participants shared experiences of having to seek out policy because although "*the policy is there … it's not promoted really"* (Eve – mother, shared parental leave),

consequently if you are not aware or specifically "*looking for the SPL policies … I'm not sure whether they [policies] would be mentioned or promoted to someone who didn't know about it"* (Olivia – mother, shared parental leave). Similarly, expectant fathers described having to proactively seek the policy out as there was "*nothing forthcoming*" (Thomas – father, shared parental leave). Stella noted that making SPL guidance accessible had not been prioritised or progressed by her employer over the 4-year period between her two pregnancies:

> *"Now I'm just going through the process of applying for leave again, 4 years later, there still isn't any updated guidance regarding SPL. In fact, none of the paperwork I've completed even mentions SPL. I work for a huge Russell group university, not a small local business" (Stella – expectant mother of one, shared parental leave)*

Even when information was available it was "*hard to digest and relate to your individual situation*" (Ned – father, paternity leave), especially given the complexity of SPL. Organizational understanding of parental leave, as comparable to understanding of maternity leave, was also cited as important:

> *"I think parental leave should be as well understood as maternity leave entitlement - this may come with time, but currently I don't think it is clear. It is likely that companies don't understand the position of parental leave that well." (Ned).*

Participants referenced HR teams being unfamiliar and unable to advise on the policy entitlements, simply printing policies out or providing incorrect advice due to misunderstanding of SPL rules; described by one mother as not having "*a clue about SPL at all*" (Rhonda – mother, shared parental leave). Olivia also noted her HR team's reluctance to provide advice:

> *"... so, I asked for advice from HR … but they kind of said they can't really advise you. So, they weren't the most helpful with this to be honest. (.) … So then at the back of that form I noticed that if you want to come back early (.) that's fine but you have to give eight weeks' notice and that's pretty much what I'd been asking but they'd said they can't advise me, so they didn't even know their own policy" (Olivia – mother, shared parental leave)*

Ineffective HR support was attributed to lack of knowledge, high turnover or, as reflected by this exchange between Catherine (mother, maternity leave) and Rachel (mother, maternity leave), lack of interest:

> ***"Catherine:*** *I felt there was little support from HR with regards to details or whether something may be useful for me, which I found a bit disappointing. I wasn't sure HR really understood the policy themselves.*
>
> ***Rachel****: That's interesting-I would imagine it's HR bread and butter! Were they new?*
>
> ***Catherine****: No. Just not interested..."*

Negative employer interactions were contrasted with effective support. Examples of proactive HR support included having a nominated contact who is knowledgeable of the policies they are advising on, able to help navigate the regulations and understand the different options available. This was described well by Gregory:

> *"I was lucky to have a very dedicated team member from HR who was in charge of sorting out my SPL with me. He was extremely helpful and I got a lot of advice from him. This person … was able to explain all the regulations and rules and employer policies (that are very complex, confusing, and sometimes strange) to us." (Gregory – father, shared parental leave)*

Similarly, a line manager's role was crucial in enabling trust and open discussion, for example encouraging an extended leave period without "*reveal[ing] if they [the line manager] had any preference"* (Denise – mother, maternity leave) and proactively making cover arrangements. Catherine's supervisor was reported as saying "*we are going to make this work*" and then planning around her leave to the benefit of all in the team (Catherine – mother, maternity leave). Effective support extended to the transition back to work, as Ivy described, her manager checked in with her: "*she's been saying oh you know it's a transition going from not having children to working with children (..) and I wanna help you with that and make sure you finish work on time (..)"* (Ivy – mother, shared parental leave).

More broadly, an open, inclusive and flexible team or organisational work culture was felt to be enabling of healthy work life balance especially when role modelled by more senior colleagues which sets the tone or standards expected. Employers' recognition of potential bias was called for because of the *"scope for managers to circumvent policy through microaggressions" (Wendy – mother, shared parental leave)* which, it was suggested, could be addressed via unconscious bias training.

Some participants argued for going beyond simply raising awareness and promotion of the policy and advocated for prompting discussions between parents by asking expectant employees (of any gender) *how* they wish to organise their leave or through gendered promotion targeting men specifically. For example, Olivia advocated for prompting couples to discuss leave plans by asking all expectant parents about their plans so as to "*change the default*" from "*mum stays at home unless otherwise stated*" (Olivia – mother, shared parental leave). Others talked about promotion specifically for expectant fathers. Ivy had organised an event for a staff network to which an HR colleague came to "***talk about shared parental leave*** *… trying to talk to people about what you could do so trying to encourage it [taking leave]"* (Ivy – mother, shared parental leave) and Michael reported feeling able to actively pursue SPL due to the *"**active promotion** in our [staff] newsletter with a named contact to get further information"* (Michael – father, shared parental leave). Steve went as far as suggesting that "*SPL should be opt out rather than in and seen as the default"* (Steve – father, shared parental leave).

However, employer 'promotion' or 'advice' was also problematised wherein advice may be interpreted as promoting a specific choice outcome. The following interaction from an online discussion between Eve and Louise, two expectant mothers both of whom shared leave with their partner, spotlighted this through discussing 'requirement' to take time off.

> *Eve: "What we want to get to is BOTH parents being required to take off set, decent periods with their children. … So, SPL as it is at the moment is a good forward step, but it's only intermediate. And it provides 'choice' which isn't always a true choice. … I think parents should all have the right to decent time with their babies, and that this should be a given."*
>
> *Louise: "I would love for there to be more of an expectation for all parents (of any gender) to take significant (paid!!) leave to be with their children, but I'm not sure about 'requiring' …"*

Other participants referenced the different purposes that maternity leave serves in comparison to parental leave in terms of birth mothers' physical recovery and time to establish breastfeeding as well as caregiving:

> *"There is a big difference between work leave required for physical recovery (mother) and providing physical needs for a newborn (baby) and taking time off work to mark a major life transition including bonding with baby and building a routine. The way most policies conflate these as just "some time away for caring needs" doesn't do anyone a service." (Susan – expectant mother, undecided)*

While not explored in detailed, this resonated with debates about policy driven culture change and whether this should be at the expense of individual choice, signalling lack of consensus about what gender justice looks like in practice.

These findings extend insight to the UK's SPL policy as a *means* to parents' care capabilities, for parents to access the means to share care during their child's first year and the conversion factors in relation to the employment context as well as the policy itself. The importance of policy promotion and organisational culture also provide insights on the UK's SPL policy, and its implementation, as a means differentially *(co-)productive* of parents 'feasible' and 'imaginable' valued functionings.

Finally, as noted previously, while the COVID-19 pandemic was not in the focus of this study, participants' reflections on their employment context included specific impacts of the pandemic. Several participants commented on the impact either the lack of (proactive) support for them during their pregnancy or leave period by their employer. One participant who worked within health care gave quite a detailed account through which she expressed how unsupported and vulnerable she had felt due to lack of clarity regarding shielding recommendations and specific circumstances of lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). On a more positive note, participants also reflected on the learning curve the pandemic had instigated for employers, with employees afforded greater trust to complete work responsibilities. As a result, some participants anticipated the possibility of positive change and greater flexibility for parents going forward:

> *"it's interesting that working from home is now becoming more acceptable. ... I am a senior manager in the [employer] and it was out of the question before." (Florence – expectant mother of one, undecided)*

Some reflected on already witnessing such changes.

"…at work we're deciding to err change our policies so that (.) umm people can work from home, err (.) two days a week once the pandemic is over" (Henry – expectant father of one, paternity leave)

6.4. Summary of findings

In this chapter I have presented analysis of what parents articulated as important in relation to gender justice, which has been rarely considered in research specifically on uptake of the UK's SPL to date. While most participants explicitly discussed gender justice in some way, articulation of their motivating and influencing factors varied. Participants discussed their aspirations to challenge or reject gender essentialist or heteronormative assumptions about who would be predominantly responsible for caregiving and their aspirations to proactively challenge gendered expectations about how care is divided during a child's first year. However, challenging gender norms was not averred by all participants and a minority of participants rejected an expectation that they would like to share leave more equally. Many participants spoke of experiences of prejudice, either their own experiences or those they had witnessed, and some described how this influenced their decision-making.

Through narrative analysis, and employing Fraser's (1994; 2013a) typology (i.e., universal breadwinner, caregiver parity – or gender differentiating – and universal caregiver models) from an etic perspective, I illustrated variation in how parents enacted gender justice. Some participants' enactment of gender justice resonated with Fraser's (1994; 2013a) 'universal breadwinner', in which professional women navigate work family reconciliation through masculine work practices, articulated as having control over their destiny. For example, mothers drew on previous work experience, qualifications, keeping networks active and projects ticking over while on maternity leave - Susan's evoking of "*Clarissa*", senior "full professor", "vice-dean", working in "areas of strategy" (section 6.2.2.) and Frances' navigation of the differential value attributed to care (between home and work) (see section 4.4.1). A class-based distinction was invoked for women, who are not of the same professional standing, benefiting from right to care policies, which resonated with what Fraser terms 'caregiver parity'. Other participants' narrative positioning made a case for valuing parental leave (despite potential financial

detriment) and compelling men to do what women do – caregiving. As such, gendered parenting expectations were challenged and contrasted a postfeminist 'leaning in' by demanding that men do caregiving, reflecting a 'universal caregiver' positionality. Insights were drawn, which illustrated the interaction between financial security and how parents enacted gender justice, within the current constraints of the UK's SPL policy, which for some parents involve sharing the risks as well as the joy.

In contrast to the previous two chapters, I concluded chapter six with a summary of parents' views on what employers need to improve in relation to implementation of family leave policies. It felt important to conclude, through parents' voices, what the thematic analysis elicited in terms of the significant role of human resources teams and line managers in implementation of policies. This included a call for proactive, rather than neutral actions, such as proactive promotion of policies.

7. Chapter Seven – Discussion

7.1. Introduction

Chapters four to six presented findings arising from analysis of what is valuable to parents' when planning care during their child's first year. The overarching themes were presented as follows:

- Aspirations to share parenting, to spend time with baby and for postnatal wellbeing (chapter four).
- Aspirations for financial security and continuation of career aspirations (chapter five).
- Enacting or promoting gender justice (chapter six).

In this chapter, I discuss the insights drawn from the data analysis and set out this study's contribution to academic literature on work-family policy as a mechanism to progress gender justice. Each section aligns to my research questions, as follows:

- What is of value to parents (which I conceptualise as valued functionings) when planning care during a child's first year.
- How do gendered parenting norms shape what parents express as valuable to them and couple decision-making dynamics in the planning of care for their child's first year.
- Whether SPL, and employer implementation of SPL, provides a (normative) means for parents to share parenting as they aspire to.

In each section, I set out a key finding (**in bold**) and then provide a more detailed discussion of the key empirical findings and their implications in the context of work-family literature. Discussion of my findings also illustrates my adaptation of the CA, which embeds discursive conceptualisation of gender as normative and productive of gendered relations of power, as a theoretical contribution to work-family literature. In the discussion, I also draw on critical social justice principles (Fraser 1994; 2013a; Tronto 2017; Nussbaum 2020) through which to illustrate how parents articulate and enact gender justice in the context of the UK's SPL policy.

7.2. What was valuable to parents when planning care during a child's first year?

Key finding: Shared parenting, spending time with baby, financial security, continuation of career aspirations, postnatal wellbeing and aspirations for gender justice were valued by parents (in capability terms were identified as 'valued functionings') when planning care during their child's first year. Gender was also shown to be a driving factor within parents' decision-making.

It is known that parents in the UK increasingly aspire to share care (Working_Families 2017; Chung 2021), that fathers want to spend more time with their children (Jones *et al.* 2019; Milkie *et al.* 2019; Churchill and Craig 2022) and that parents intend to share parenting (e.g., Scheifele 2023). However, take up of the UK's SPL is low. This study examines the role of culture, specifically gender norms, in contributing to the disjuncture between this aspiration to share care and low take up of the UK's SPL. The CA provides a conceptual framework, as has been employed within work-family scholarship, to evaluate the disjuncture between policy entitlements and real opportunities (Hobson 2014; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b; Philipp *et al.* 2023), including, for example, in the case of UK's SPL policy (Javornik and Oliver 2019). As set out in chapter two, in order to examine how gender norms are constitutive of what is of feasible and imaginable to parents when planning care in relation to take up of the UK's SPL, relationalities and interdependency inherent in care relationships need to be considered. In this study, I adapted the CA from a social constructivist perspective to identify what parents expressed as valuable to them (in capability terms 'valued functionings'), as constituted by gendered parenting norms, and the role of the UK's SPL policy as a normative means differentially (co-) productive of parents feasible and imaginable valued functionings.

Through the thematic analysis, I identified what was of value to parents when planning care and, as such, identified several 'valued functionings': shared parenting, spending time with baby, financial security, continuation of career aspirations, postnatal wellbeing and aspirations for gender justice. Identifying what was of value to parents provided insights into valued functionings that have

received less attention to date in relation to the UK's SPL – first, how postnatal wellbeing was intentionally considered by parents when planning care and, second, parents' aspirations for gender justice. Some participants overtly aspired to challenge gender essentialism, patriarchal and heteronormative expectations. This contrasted participants whose aspirations reflected a gender differentiating standpoint. I return to discuss parents' aspirations for gender justice in more detail in section 7.4. The other valued functioning have previously been shown as important to parents when planning care during their child's first year in the UK context: spending time with baby, sharing parenting (Working_Families 2017; Chung 2021), financial security and career aspirations in (e.g., see Birkett and Forbes 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019). However, this study brings to the fore how gendered parenting norms are constitutive of these valued functionings.

As outlined in chapter two, mothers' and fathers' gendered decision-making behaviours have previously been discussed in the literature through the concepts of rational economic choice and / or maternal and paternal gatekeeping (see for example: Birkett and Forbes 2019; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019). However, where gendered leave taking behaviours has been explained through rational economic choice (e.g., Twamley and Schober 2019) or individualized or psychological lens of gender ideologies (e.g., Scheifele 2023), less focus has been paid to normativity of gender norms or gendered relations of power. For example, fathers' passive assumptions about their partner's leave preferences in my study echoed earlier empirical evidence of parental gatekeeping in which fathers expressed "it is not their place to raise the issue of SPL..., so the mother holds considerable power" (Birkett and Forbes 2019: 212). However, in such a scenario, gender essentialist assumptions underpin both the father's assumptions that he cannot raise the issue and the subsequent attribution of power to the mother, rendering the mother's voice is silent.[15] However, by examining how gendered parenting norms constituted parents' valued functionings, the "evaluative

[15] As one participant, Annie, said in an online discussion: "saying that "women won't share their leave" feels like a misogynistic, gaslighting dig at childbearing women who did not decide that they should be the only one to have the time off."

space" (Robeyns 2017: 38) within this thesis was both parents' identified valued functionings and the discursive production of these valued functionings.

My findings provided insight as to how parents purposefully responded to and navigated constraints and enablers (conversion factors), such as (in)eligibility to leave, whether leave was well paid and potential impacts on careers. Gender was shown to be a (often subtle) driving factor within parents' decision-making. On the one hand, (some) mothers expressed reluctance about sharing their leave entitlement with their partner, redolent of previous literature on take up of the UK's SPL (for example: My_Family_Care 2016; Birkett and Forbes 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019), in which good mothering and breastfeeding ideals have been associated with maternal gatekeeping (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Twamley 2019). It was also predominantly mothers who expected to, or had, stepped back from their career aspirations and associated stepping back from career aspirations with becoming or being a mother. On the other hand, my findings suggested that fathers experienced a lack of sense of entitlement to leave. It was predominantly fathers who expressed, or about whom their partners expressed, disinterest in taking leave or for whom their preference (on whether they would have liked to take leave) remained silent. Fathers' reluctance to discuss leave options with their employer was in part dependent on organizational context, in line with previous research (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019; Twamley 2019). As such, parents' dissonance about sharing leave (in my study) may have reflected adoption of "cautious" workplace strategies, which conform with ideal worker norms and workplace cultural expectations, over "bold" strategies which may not (Atkinson 2023: 1).

In the case of uptake of parental leave, fathers' experiences of navigating workplace barriers have been previously described as involving "risky choice[s]" (Byun and Won 2020: 606) in which visibly caregiving fathers risk experiencing workplace discrimination (see also Borgkvist 2022; Harrington 2022; Kelland *et al.* 2022; Tanquerel 2022). The paternal breadwinner role has been found to persist despite rhetoric of increased involvement and intensive fatherhood (Burnett *et al.* 2013; Faircloth 2014a; Dermott and Miller 2015; Kelland *et al.* 2022). Fathers who do make their caregiving more visible to their workplace, and have accessed leave

policies, experience being stigmatized for undertaking 'feminine' life choices (Bowles *et al.* 2022; Kelland *et al.* 2022), face being seen as "ideological renegades" (Byun and Won 2020: 592) or experience "fatherhood forfeits"(Kelland *et al.* 2022: 1). Dissonance between fathers' aspirations for shared parenting and what they are able to do in practice has previously been associated, therefore, with constraints on fathers' ability to share parenting rather than lack of aspiration (e.g. see Harrington 2022); and a lack of sense of entitlement to use work family policies (e.g. see Hobson 2014; Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019) and dependent in part on organizational context (see for example Haas *et al.* 2002; Atkinson 2022; 2023).

This study contributes an alternative explanation to economic choice and of apparent maternal and / or paternal gatekeeping behaviours by examining the *interaction* between couple's valued functionings, through the lens of gender conceptualized as discursive and normative. Discursive interaction between parents' valued functionings illustrate that the picture is a complicated one in which innate interdependency and variable normative force within care relationships are productive of gendered relations of power and shape couple relationalities and decision-making dynamics. As such, parents' dissonance, 'silence' as well as incompatibility between valued functionings provided evaluative space to examine how gender norms not only shape parents' differential *access* to the UK's SPL policy (as conversion factors) but also how the UK's SPL policy, as a means for parent care capabilities, is differentially *productive* of parents' valued functionings. It is the normative and relational production of parents' valued functionings within a couple dyad that this thesis contributes, the implications of which highlight the need for work-family research to better consider gender relations of power and couple relationalities.

7.3. How do gendered parenting norms shape what is valuable to parents and couple decision-making dynamics, interactionally, in the planning for a child's first year?

Key finding: Differential value attributed to gendered parenting roles was constitutive of couple relationalities and decision-making dynamics. Uncommodifiable (feminine) affective care, evidenced through gendered moral imperatives to 'treasure every moment' was temporal, valued in the private

sphere while devalued in the workplace, and interactionally backgrounded in relation to (masculine) provision of financial security.

To disentangle lack of sense of entitlement to parental leave options, silence, indifference and / or disinterest about taking leave from what is unfeasible or unimaginable to parents and to examine how gender norms were *productive* of parents' valued functionings, I employed a discursive conceptualisation of gender. I drew on concepts such as "cultural intelligibility" and "normative violence" (Butler 1990; Lloyd 2007), and Butler's concept of "iterability" (Lloyd 2007: 60), the discursive processes through which gender norms are both reiterated and contested. I mobilised DNA (as described in section 3.3) from an etic perspective to extend my thematic analysis of parents' valued functionings. I make reference to narrative inquiry tools and to Morison and Macleod's (2013a) concepts of *positioning*, *trouble* and *repair* which I drew on to explore the narrator's (i.e., participants) positioning of themselves or others in relation to gendered parenting expectations.

Parents various positioning of themselves and others in relation to time with baby and to financial rationales provided insight into how parents navigated gendered parenting expectations to either value this time or to fulfil financial protection. My empirical findings showed how recurrent use of discursive resources, such as to "treasure time", evoked an irrefutable moral imperative to prioritise time with baby. Moral imperatives to "treasure time" reflected normative standards of parenting that emphasise both quantity and quality of time spent with children, described in academic literature as intensive parenting (see for example Andenæs 2005; Faircloth 2011; Faircloth 2014b). While associated with both mothers and fathers, such cultural expectations and obligations to care, as reflected in this study, are more closely associated with mothers (Faircloth 2021b). Meanwhile, parents articulation of financial security (the rigidity and lack of flexibility of financial considerations in relation to taking leave), such as "*economics of things",* had the effect of legitimising the dominant narratives that fathers low uptake of leave is driven by household economics.

My empirical findings illustrated how these discursive resources, which (re-) constituted normative standards of parenting and differentially shaped parents' subjectivities, played out within couple decision-making and were dynamically productive of couple relationalities. The findings exemplified complexity and temporality in how ideal subjects or "livable lives" are generated (Lloyd 2007: 33), in which time caregiving was differentially valued between home and workplace. Participants' idealization of motherhood reflected descriptions within intensive parenting literature of motherhood as an almost "sacred endeavour" for which "no cost is considered too high" (Faircloth 2014b: 28). Yet, the prioritisation of paid employment over care work in the employment context stood in stark contrast to this positioning of time with baby as paramount in the private sphere.

Moreover, participants' fluctuation between *troubling* of gendered parenting assumptions and expressions of guilt and / or of *repair* illustrated the "normative violence" (Lloyd 2007: 135) and risks associated with contesting gendered parenting norms and with the use of parrhesia to make (gender) *trouble* (Frank 2010: 28). This fluctuation, as set within a couple dyad, brought to the fore interactional and relational couple dynamics. Counter-narratives, which *troubled* the imperative to "treasure time" with baby or the "economics of things", demonstrated the iterative role of gendered parenting norms in action within dialogue; in which boundaries between dominant- and counter-norms were blurry and fluid, dynamic within the couple's interactions.

In relation to paid employment and financial rationales, identifying boundaries around what is included as valuable revealed what was excluded or silent. Narratives which reflected outsourcing time with baby, described for example as "merely load bearing", demonstrated how relational aspects of care were not (explicitly) factored into the commodification of care or financial security cost calculations. In the process of rationalising and facilitating financial security, as exemplified within these narratives, relational aspects of care were depersonalised. This juxtaposed the above moral imperatives to care (to treasure time), predominantly associated with motherhood.

Drawing on the comparison between ethics of work and the ethics of care (Tronto 1993; 2017), this juxtaposition illustrated that while production and

protective aspects of care were valued and remunerated financially, affective care, or activities associated with social reproduction, were to be remunerated "in the coin of 'love' and 'virtue'" (Fraser 2016: 102). The division of labour and rationale for delegating "*load bearing*" aspects of care due to the "*economic of things"* was not described or explicitly recognized as gendered. However, echoing feminist ethics of care scholarship, protection and production, which are attributed greater value by society, were more closely associated with fatherhood. Meanwhile, the value of contributions associated as feminine or with motherhood are downplayed - aspects such as affinity, commitment, responsibility, and love[16], so described in as "love labour" (Lynch 2007: 550). As such, (affective) care is "backgrounded" and "production as the proper pursuit and concern of individuals, the state and the market are so thoroughly foregrounded" (Tronto 2013: 139). This illustrated an enactment of what Tronto (2013: 92) terms as the "protection" and "production" passes, providing fathers greater access to discursive resources to "'pass' out of what we normally regard as caring responsibilities" (Tronto 2013: 70) because of other societal contributions. In contrast, moral imperatives to care and images of (intensive) motherhood – such as reference to "*the liquid gold*" (see section 4.4.2) – illustrated constraints on some fathers' care capabilities. Moreover, by drawing on Butler's concepts of "cultural intelligibility" and the "heterosexual matrix", as applied in relation to care, the juxtaposition between depersonalization of care in relation to financial rationales and moral imperatives to care exemplified the gendered relations of power that are "built into particular versions of masculinity and femininity" (Siltanen and Doucet 2017: 71).

Meanwhile, just as relational aspects of care are uncommodifiable neither can "love labour" be done vicariously through a partner, the relationship between child and parent is innately personal. This is because "love labour" comprises specifically the affective and relational element of caring, the development of a

[16] As Eve articulated: *"Ultimately, I believe parenting is a verb. You are a parent if you do the job. All it takes is to do the job, and then the love and the skill and the very real physical effects follow from that" (mother, shared parental leave)*

unique relationship between parent and child – indicating simultaneously the detrimental impact on father / child relationship.

The ways in which these normative standards of parenting, which differentially shaped parents' subjectivities, played out within couple decision-making dynamics has several implications for the work-family policy literature. As noted, mothers' and fathers' decision-making behaviours in previous evaluation of the UK's SPL have been attributed to maternal and / or paternal gatekeeping and rational economic choice (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019). More broadly, financial restraints are commonly given as a rationalisation for men not taking leave, mothers taking a financial hit has been an expectation even when fathers earn less (Kaufman 2018). Likewise, justification for a gendered division of care has been attributed to maternal instinct drivers overriding financial considerations (Grunow and Evertsson 2016) and childcare costs are often associated with mothers, while being absent from fathers' accounts has been attributed to the impact of residual parental stereotypes (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Faircloth 2017).

Recent studies have begun to show how such societal association between children's wellbeing with motherhood, manifest within couple relationalities – see for example Grunow and Evertsson (2021), who explore the relational and interdependent construction of motherhood and fatherhood from a life course perspective. Twamley's (2021) explorative study on couple relationalities in the context of the UK's SPL identified that gendered parenting expectations shape couple decision-making relationalities. However, few studies have previously examined *how* gender norms shape couple relationalities and dynamics in action. This study contributes an alternative explanation for gendered leave taking and low uptake of the UK's SPL by focusing on the gendered relations of power in constituting "liveable (parenting) lives". The multiple, nuanced and complex dynamics of couple relationalities, challenge a gender essentialist conflation of the impact of gendered parenting norms with maternal instinct; it shows that a singular focus on maternal gatekeeping is problematic (Miller 2011; Miller 2018).

Furthermore, by utilizing a capability perspective to examine the role of the UK's SPL in providing a (normative) means for parents to share leave, this study

contributes detailed analysis of the role of work family policy as productive of gendered relations of power and of parents' valued functionings within the context of couple relationalities. Previous critiques of the CA suggested insufficient acknowledgement of interdependency, power dynamics and resulting oppressions (Lewis and Giullari 2005; Dean 2009). Employment of a capability perspective from a social constructivist lens in this study enabled greater recognition of such interdependence and illustrated how unequal power, as associated with productive and reproductive labour, differentially shapes parents' real opportunities.

From a capability perspective, differentiation between the "*merely load bearing*" commodifiable caring activities from the non-commodifiable affective (bonding) aspects of care between parent and child animates the possibility of a gendered boundary between commodifiable and non-commodifiable care. This illustrates that for the CA to meaningfully account for real opportunities in relation to interactional care relationships, choice needs to be understood as shaped by responsibility for self and others and the innate (and currently gendered) interdependence of care relationships (Lewis and Giullari 2005). Moreover, the gendered boundary between commodifiable and non-commodifiable care as well as the normativity of interactional care relationships blurs the possibility of a conceptual distinction between gender norms understood as a conversion factor and as constitutive of (imaginable) valued functionings because gender norms currently constrain what is imaginable. As such, interaction between masculine and feminine aspects of care, as productive of couple relationalities, has implications for the evaluation of work family policy, such as the UK's SPL policy, in providing parents the (normative) means to imagine the feasibility of sharing leave or to share care as they aspire to.

7.4. Does SPL, and employer implementation of SPL, provide a means for parents to share parenting as they aspire to?

Key finding: The risks and tensions associated with sharing care in the context of the UK's SPL manifested in a lived reality sometimes incongruent with parents' aspirations for gender justice and / or in sharing the risks as well as the joys associated with taking leave. The UK's SPL policy entitlement to transferable

parental leave does not provide parents the (normative) means to imagine the feasibility of sharing leave.

As discussed in chapter two, policies themselves espouse a normative and value-laden positionality (Javornik and Yerkes 2020), and, therefore, make normative assumptions about gender roles within families and what gender justice looks like (Bacchi 2009; Doucet and Duvander 2022). There are extensive and ongoing debates as to what gender justice should look like between gender-neutral equality of opportunity, gender differentiating and critical gender justice standpoints – described by Fraser (1994; 2013a) as universal breadwinner, caregiver parity and universal caregiver models, respectively. While a gender differentiating model recognises the historical structural gender inequalities experienced by mothers, a critical gender justice model, such as proposed by Fraser (1994; 2013a), focuses on the discursive *as well as* structural barriers that underpin the gendered division of labour. To dismantle the discursively constructed gender coding and power dynamics between breadwinning and caregiving, Fraser (1994; 2013a) argues for parity in social esteem in valuing care responsibilities and paid work as equal. However, gender justice debates also query whether gender differentiating and / or critical gender justice standpoints, that set out and progress normative values through for example gender equalised leave, would meet everyone's gender justice aspirations. On the one hand, it has been argued that gender justice cannot be successfully achieved without setting out essential normative values, some of which may limit freedoms men have historically had (Nussbaum 2003). On the other hand, it is questioned whether setting out such normative values would be congruent with a liberal emphasis on choice and equality of opportunity (Orloff 2009; Collins *et al.* 2023).

In terms of the normative values underpinning the UK's SPL policy, the policy itself does not explicitly set out aspirations in relation to gender justice[17]. The policy

[17] The original policy objectives of SPL scheme were to:
• Give parents more choice and flexibility in how they care for their child in the first year by increasing the share of leave fathers can take, thus enabling both parents to retain a strong link with the labour market; • Encourage more fathers to play a greater caring role (pre-birth and in the first year) via longer, more flexible shared leave; • Increase flexibility for employers and employees to reach agreement on how best to balance work and domestic needs without state interference.

aims are articulated as providing parents greater choice and flexibility in how they care for their child during their first year, encouraging parents to share childcare, to 'share the joy' (GOV.UK 2019) – i.e. a liberal equality of opportunity standpoint. Yet, the approach to gender justice in relation to parental leave in the UK has been driven by the legacy of prioritising maternity employment protections, developed in response to the physiological demands (pregnancy and breastfeeding) and protection from detrimental employment risks (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Dobrotić *et al.* 2022) – a gender differentiating standpoint. The UK's SPL continues this legacy of long mother-centred leave policy (Baird and O'Brien 2015; Koslowski 2022) and fathers' entitlement to leave is based on maternal transfer (Javornik and Oliver 2019).

From this historically informed perspective, the debate on whether parental leave should be shared appears to be a win-lose one in which mothers potentially lose hard-fought maternity protections curtailed and leached to the father (Morgan 2008; Javornik and Oliver 2017). Likewise, ongoing tensions between asking men to care while continuing to value the caregiving that as has historically been undertaken by women (Doucet 2018) have been reflected in previous resistance amongst women's and mothers' groups to more proactive change to family leave policy in development of shared parental leave (Baird and O'Brien 2015). As noted by Doucet bringing men into caregiving should not "undermine women's own caregiving interests" (2018: 30). The UK's SPL policy, however, does not address the question of where leave for pregnancy-related physiological and post-partum recovery ends and where leave for childcare or parenting begins because it makes no distinction between maternity protections and gender-neutral parental protections (Fredman 2014; Sammon 2017; Javornik and Oliver 2019). Therefore, on the one hand, there is asymmetry between pregnancy and maternity (mother-centred) rights and parenthood rights within the UK's family leave policies, which has the effect of protecting mothers' right to care but not fathers – suggesting greater decision-making power afforded to mothers (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Javornik and Oliver 2019). On the other hand, as has been highlighted previously, fathers' and partners' entitlement being based on maternal transfer potentially exacerbates assumptions of maternal gatekeeping (Mitchell 2015; 2022) – querying

this assumed power attributed to mothers. Aspirations for progressing gender justice are unstated and nebulous within the UK's SPL policy. However, the implicit normative assumptions that roles within families are gender differentiated has important implications.

In terms of congruence between the normative values underpinning the UK's SPL policy and parents' aspirations for gender justice, few previous studies have explored in detail the role of gender justice in parents' decision-making. Some studies have suggested gender justice aspirations are less important to parents than other priorities such as time with child (e.g., Romero-Balsas *et al.* 2013) or have considered parents' aspirations for gender justice in relatively narrow terms, restricted to gender consciousness (e.g., Faircloth 2021a; Twamley 2021). Less is known about *how* the conflicting gender justice positionalities evident in work-family policy, specifically the UK's SPL policy (i.e. a gender-neutral liberal emphasis on choice flexibility while underpinned by a mother-centred positionality), manifest in the lived reality of couple decision-making and whether congruent with parents' own aspirations for gender justice.

As noted in section 7.2, most parents articulated aspirations for gender justice in some way, providing an alternative lens to Twamley's (2021) study in which parents are found to downplay or minimize the importance of feminism through the lens of gender consciousness. Drawing on a capability perspective - as set out in my conceptual framework (section 2.5) adapted to illustrate interdependence and unequal power within care relationships (Lewis and Giullari 2005) - enables recognition of value pluralism i.e., multiple conceptions of gender justice (Robeyns 2017; Yerkes et al. 2019b). As such, this study brought to the fore the normative constraints imbued within the UK's SPL policy, as a means for parents to share leave as they aspire to, rather than championing a specific normative standpoint for parental leave taking behaviours. By employing an expanded view of gender justice, gender differentiating and equality of opportunity stances, as reflected by some participants, were also explored. Parents' various enactments of gender justice, as illustrated in this study, have several implications for work-family policy literature and evaluating work-family policy as a mechanism to progress gender justice and whether setting out normative values would be at odds with

facilitating choice or invoke cost to men if gender justice is to be achieved (Nussbaum 2003).

The findings of this study highlight the implicit contradictions and risks for mothers and fathers as arising from conflicting equality of opportunity and gender differentiating standpoints within the UK's SPL policy. As discussed in section 7.3, gendered power dynamics arising from the prevalent normative context were evident within couples' decision-making relationalities, which illustrated how unequal power, as associated with productive and reproductive labour, differentially shaped parents' real opportunities. Friction between partners because of competing valued functionings and gendered relations of power were apparent; sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly. Overtly described friction included conflicting explanations for not (more equally) sharing parental leave. For example, one participant described their shared leave arrangement within the online discussion as having "*worked perfectly for both of us and I'd probably look at doing the same again next time (if there is one!)".* This directly contradicted their partner's, the mother's, account of being restricted in sharing leave more equally by, amongst other reasons, her partner's employment context. However, more often friction in couple decision-making dynamics were subtle – with notable implications for parents' enactment of gender justice. For example, some fathers' preference on sharing leave, or not, remained silent and some fathers remained largely invisible as a parent in the employment context. While distanced from the risks, fathers' invisibility resulted in constraints within their partner's decision-making.

Default positioning of the mother as the primary carer within the UK's SPL policy was shown to exacerbate gendered division of leave, which echoed Miller's (2011: 1095) argument that, despite egalitarian aspirations, parents "fall back into normative gendered behaviours". In terms of gender justice, falling back into gender was often rationalised or articulated as prioritisation of 'feminine' life choices, drawing on moral imperatives to spend time with baby and reflecting a gender differentiating or 'caregiver parity' gender justice positionality (Fraser 1994; 2013a). However, constraints on mothers' decision-making as arising from default positioning of mother as primary carer were also illustrated.

Despite constraints arising from the default falling back into gender, some mothers positioned themselves as the household decision-maker or gatekeeper, with choices and having ownership over their career pathway or biography. Navigation of work-family conflict so articulated as the product of choice and hard work reflect theories of rational economic choice, individualization (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), individual agency and career orientated preference (Hakim 1998; 2003); illustrating postfeminist narratives in which life outcomes are the product of choice, hard work and one's own responsibility (Orgad 2019; Wilkinson and Rouse 2023). Professional women's navigation of work-family reconciliation, such as described, involved adopting masculine work practices reflecting Fraser's (1994; 2013a) universal breadwinner model – a gender neutral standpoint. Gender neutral, equality of opportunities standpoints situate individuals as self-contained, unencumbered, and unconstrained by historic normative values (Fineman 2008; Doucet 2023). Commodification of care is also assumed (Fraser 1994; 2013a). Yet, "love labour" (Lynch *et al.* 2021) and interdependency innate in care relationships are uncommodifiable. The risks experienced by mothers, normalised in an equality of opportunity gender justice positionality, often coincided with a positive framing of choice, having control over their destiny (Orgad 2019). In reality, women (and men who are visibly carers) "retain more connection to reproduction and domesticity than men, thus appearing as breadwinners manqué" (Fraser 2013a: 127).

However, using a critical social justice perspective within this study exposed unfolding normative dynamics and the role of patriarchal normative constraints, which prioritised breadwinning or protection interactionally over childcare (Tronto 2017). As discussed in section 7.3, Tronto (2013) describes freedom, or privilege, experienced by men as being more able to 'pass' on care than women and so also the risks associated with care – which provide an alternative explanation to gender essentialist maternal gatekeeping. Consequently, as Fraser (2013a: 134) argues, "women today often combine breadwinning and caregiving, albeit with great difficulty and strain." As shown in this study, tensions between parents' competing valued functionings brought to the fore how *risks* of "*difficulty and strain"* were normalized in association with caregiving provided by women yet provided fathers a

'pass' out of caregiving. Arguably, participants' drawing on narratives of choice and control over ones' biography illustrated the effort afforded to make these tensions "liveable". Fathers' entitlement to leave being based on maternal transfer within the UK's SPL policy, therefore, does not enable parity of social esteem between productive and reproductive labour. Rather, the UK's SPL policy exacerbates expectations that mothers will be the primary carer.

In contrast to either a gender differentiating or a universal breadwinner gender justice positionality, there were couples whose aspirations and enactment of gender justice more closely aligned with Fraser's universal caregiver model (Fraser 1994; 2013a). Mothers, who challenged financial rationales for fathers not taking leave, enacted counter narratives which troubled, and so subverted, the gendered assumption that women should take a financial hit (Kaufman 2018) (see for example Eve's "*lack of sympathy*" and making a case that some "*[parents] could afford for the chap to take some time off on leave*", Olivia contesting her partner's take on personal loss associated with unpaid leave and Annie's challenging "*everyone['s] assumption*" that she would take long low paid leave in sections 6.2.3, 6.2.4 and 5.3.2 respectively). These counternarratives also compelled men to do what women do, as Eve said "*I'd … demand that we look at it*" despite potential financial detriment. Ben provided such an example by "*put[ting] [his] money where [his] mouth is*" (see section 6.2.4), taking a period of unpaid leave despite financial loss, doing what it is assumed mothers will do. In so doing, he highlighted that fathers' enactment of 'universal carer' gender justice principles, within the current constraints of the UK's SPL policy, involves sharing the risks as well as the joys associated with taking leave.

Parents' enactment of 'universal caregiver' (Fraser 1994; 2013a) positionality of gender justice, in which men *do not* 'pass' on care, exposed the potential costs to men or previously unexperienced risks – as set within the current constraints arising from the UK's SPL policy. In other words, parents' navigation of sharing leave currently in the UK requires fathers to share the risks, as well as the joys, associated with maternity leave and experienced by mothers. The cost currently incurred arises due to the sharing of risks rather than removing them, which a true 'universal caregiver' conceptualisation of gender justice would reflect,

and normative principles of valuing affective (non-commodifiable) care (Lynch *et al.* 2021) would aspire to do. Moreover, patriarchal normative values also create barriers to fathers' ability to care and denies children the bonding and relational aspects of care from both parents. Therefore, in summary, the UK's SPL normative assumptions undermine parents articulated gender justice aspirations regardless of whether an equality of opportunity, gender differentiating or universal caregiver standpoints.

Within social justice debates and public discourses in the UK, we are increasingly witnessing a shift towards 'gender equity' approaches (e.g. IWD_campaign 2023). We see parallel calls for *anti*-racist strategies recognising that a neutral equality of opportunities approach does not go far enough to dismantle historical and structural racism – i.e., the need for anti-oppressive action (see for example: Davis 1981; Kendi 2019). However, calls for gender equity often focus on women's development in the workplace and are not reflected in parental leave policy. Furthermore, there does not yet appear to be a clear consensus on what a gender equity positionality would look like in relation to family leave policy in the UK (employment) context.

The implications of this study are that simply bringing men into care through the UK's SPL policy entitlement to transferable parental leave exacerbates normative expectations that mothers will be primary carers and does not provide parents the (normative) means to imagine the feasibility of sharing leave and / or care in practice, as congruent with their gender justice aspirations. These findings support Mitchell's (2022) claim, based on previous legislative analysis, that transferable maternity leave has limited effectiveness in enabling parents to share care. Despite espousing greater choice for parents, the UK's SPL policy reconstitutes the historical legacy of positioning mothers as the primary carer and exacerbates the gendered moral imperative to care, restricting what was imaginable to parents. In turn, decision-making conflicts manifested in a lived reality often incongruent with parents' own aspirations for gender justice or blurring what parents' aspiration for gender justice as a valued functioning looks like.

Rather, an *anti*-patriarchal approach should dismantle normative and discursive barriers (as well as structural barriers) to parents sharing leave by shifting

the expectations that mothers are primary carers and by setting out normative values that recognise (potential) human vulnerability and the necessity of labour involved in affective and relational care as *universal* (Lynch 2007; Fineman 2009; Fraser 2016; Tronto 2017; Doucet 2023). It should deconstruct the gendered coding between work and care by affording parity in social esteem in valuing care responsibilities and paid work (Fraser 1994; 2013a); ensuring "that men do the same [caring], while redesigning institutions so as to eliminate the difficulty and strain" currently experienced (predominantly) by mothers (Fraser 2013a: 134). Fineman (2009) argued (with reference to the US context) that men or all carers need the same protection from exploitative work settings as do women. More recently, this case has been made in relation to family care more broadly, exemplified through policies that treat family care as employment thereby dissolving the distinction between work and care (Eggers and Grages 2023; 2024). In parental leave policy terms, this requires well-paid non-transferable leave for fathers, or all parents, based on 'parenthood' rights as distinct from *and in addition* to pregnancy / maternity protections. In other words, distinction needs to be made between leave rights in relation to pregnancy-related physiological and post-partum recovery and leave rights that provide parental protections.

In addition to implications for statutory policy, the findings of this study have implications for employer policy and practice. As noted in chapter one, the employers' role is crucial in the UK context due to minimal statutory parental leave provision – both in terms of policy enhancement and implementation. Over the last 20 years, in parallel to state gender justice positionalities, there have been shifts within employer or HRM strategies from equality (of opportunities) and diversity (management) to inclusion and equity (of outcomes) (Gagnon and Cornelius 2000; Gagnon et al. 2021). Liberal equality of opportunities strategies, shaped by legislative compliance (to the Equality Act 2010 in the UK context), have predominantly driven workplace equality approaches (Gagnon and Cornelius 2000). Nonetheless, while we see a dominance of equality of opportunity models underpinning the UK's employer gender justice strategies (such as positive action in recruitment, management and leadership initiatives to address gender inequalities in the workplace) (Gifford *et al.* 2019; Miller 2022), gender differentiating policies

continue to underpin employer family leave policy and practice - as with UK statutory policy discussed above.

Previous research has evidenced (fathers) low sense of entitlement to accessing family leave policy (Allen 2001; Burnett *et al.* 2013; Hobson 2014), illustrating that without proactive promotion of active fathering by employers, fathers are less likely to take up leave opportunities (Koslowski and Kadar-Satat 2019; Cook *et al.* 2021; Kurowska 2022). Recommendations for proactive employer implementation have been made (Ndzi 2017; Forbes *et al.* 2021; Kelland *et al.* 2022).

This study illustrates, through a fundamental message from parents, that for sharing of leave to be imaginable, as well as engendering a sense of entitlement (Hobson 2014), employers need to dismantle patriarchal normative expectations as well as structural barriers. Proactive policy implementation, therefore, needs to go beyond a neutral position and starkly contrasts ineffective HR and or absence of line manager support, as experienced by many participants in this study. Employers need to proactively ensure policies are openly accessible, brought to life through case studies of policy use, hold events to share lived experience and prompt couples to discuss leave plans. Human resources teams need to be as knowledgeable on parental or paternity leave as they are on maternity leave, and employers need to proactively address prejudice through unconscious bias training and engendering supportive line management.

8. Chapter Eight – Conclusion

This thesis makes an empirical and theoretical contribution to the literature and research on social justice and parental leave policy in the UK. In this chapter, I set out the contribution of this thesis from both perspectives and make recommendations for policy and practice. I then critically reflect on the limitations of this thesis, briefly consider changes in the UK's SPL policy in the period since its launch in 2015 and map out possible areas for future research.

8.1. Empirical contributions and recommendations for parental leave policy in the UK

Low take up of SPL in the UK has been partially explained by structural policy barriers, such as low wage replacement and restrictive eligibility criteria, and poor and inconsistent employer implementation (Ndzi 2017; Birkett and Forbes 2019; Javornik and Oliver 2019; Twamley and Schober 2019). This thesis sought to extend understanding of the disjuncture between parents' increased aspiration to share parenting and low uptake of SPL in the UK by focusing on how gendered parenting norms, as re-constituted by the UK's SPL policy, shaped parents' decision-making dynamics when planning care for their child's first year. To date, within work family policy literature, positioning of mothers as the primary carer has attributed decision-making power to mothers as gatekeepers, with whom the father must negotiate to access leave (Birkett and Forbes 2019; Javornik and Oliver 2019). This thesis contributes an alternative perspective on decision-making power within in the context of couple relationalities and gendered relations of power.

In this study, the moral imperatives to care, more closely associated with (intensive) motherhood, illustrated constraints on some fathers' care capabilities. However, this study also illustrated that due to greater societal value attributed to breadwinning, as opposed to caregiving, the UK's SPL policy continues to privilege fathers' greater decision-making power to prioritise productive work and (imperative) to 'pass' (Tronto 2013) on the career related risks currently associated with sharing leave.

The reconstituting of gendered parenting norms within parents' decision-making has implications for evaluating the gender justice positionality underpinning

the UK's SPL policy. Currently, the UK's SPL policy does not specify a gender justice positionality (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023a) yet there are inherent gender justice contradictions within the policy rhetoric. On the one hand, the UK's SPL policy objectives aspire to create greater flexibility and choice for parents, for parents to share the joy, as referenced through the Government's 'share the joy' campaign (GOV.UK 2019). On the other hand, a partner's entitlement to leave is based on maternal transfer of leave from mother (or primary carer) to the father (or partner). The UK's SPL policy prioritisation of mothers as primary carer defaults mothers to reproductive work and taking the majority of available leave. Prioritisation of mother as primary carer has been historically framed from the perspective of protection from impacts of maternity discrimination. However, this framing does not positively value the importance of time spent by *both* parents with their child during its first year.

As this study illustrates, gendered take up of leave should not be conflated with gender essentialist interpretations of maternal gatekeeping (see also for example Mitchell 2015; Miller 2018; Mitchell 2022). The gender differentiating normative assumptions underpinning the UK's SPL policy, rather, creates friction with the liberal equality of opportunity emphasis on flexibility and choice. It fails to provide parents the (normative) means to imagine sharing leave and so restricts parents' capabilities to share care as they aspire to. Therefore, reconceptualization of gender justice aspirations (alongside other policy aspirations) underpinning parental leave is needed. As with anti-racist strategies, this thesis supports the case for family leave policy to be *anti*-patriarchal, through valuing care not only as a private endeavour, primarily associated with motherhood, but as intrinsically important to the inherent vulnerability of all humans. Specifically, to achieve gender justice the normative values currently underpinning family leave policy in the UK need to be addressed; distinction needs to be made between leave rights in relation to pregnancy-related physiological and post-partum recovery and leave rights that provide parental protections. In other words, well-paid non-transferable leave for fathers, or all parents, based on 'parenthood' protections as distinct from *and in addition* to pregnancy / maternity protections is required.

This study also brings to the fore parents' views on how employers could better support them. As well as addressing barriers identified in previous research, such as financial barriers, organisational culture change is required in which employers proactively reduce the risks associated with taking parental leave for all parents. This should start by employers recognising that an approach to policy implementation or support, which does not recognise the gendered context within which we are situated, is not a neutral act but one which reinforces patriarchal gendered parenting expectations. Strategically, such a culture shift would involve an explicit (re)conceptualization of gender justice within EDI strategies. It would focus on supporting women, as individuals, progressing in the workplace as well as reduce the risks associated with caring for all parents and carers. Participants recommended employers making policies more accessible, making it explicit that leave is available for both fathers and mothers, engendering greater feasibility in parents' engagement with policy entitlement – for example, sharing case studies, talking to staff networks, embedding signposting to all parental leave options. Often subtle resistance to parental leave policy change or meaningful implementation is underpinned by prejudice, as experienced by participants in this study. HR Directors, managers, and teams, alongside EDI specialists, need to lead the way by ensuring there is knowledge and expertise across all family leave policies (i.e. without bias to maternity leave) so they are able to help employees navigate the different options available. Organisational leaders, especially HR Directors, should understand and embody gender justice as set out in their (EDI) strategy and should hold their managers and themselves, as leaders, to account.

8.2. Theoretical contributions and reflections on the application and adaptation of CA

As discussed in chapter two, the CA's liberal foundational concepts have previously led to critiques that the CA fails to sufficiently acknowledge the realities of social interdependency, power dynamics and resulting oppressions (Lewis and Giullari 2005; Dean 2009). Combining the CA with discursive and normative gender theory to explore parents' valued functionings recognised the normativity of gender in relation to care and extended conceptualisation of gender norms as a conversion factor to (co-)productive of valued functionings; recognising choice as shaped by responsibility for both self and others (Lewis and Giullari 2005). As such, this thesis contributed several insights on the use of a capability perspective as a conceptual tool in a qualitative and micro family level study. Specifically, it illustrated the importance of an interactional or relational lens in application of the CA within work family literature. Furthermore, operationalising employment of the CA to examine parents' decision-making, through social constructivist thematic and narrative analysis, contributed a novel approach to exploring how gender norms are productive of parents' subjectivities and couple relationalities. I discuss insights from this approach below.

First, as noted in chapter two, the CA recognizes value pluralism, i.e., that the value attributed to identified functionings is ambiguous and not of equal value to everyone (Yerkes *et al.* 2019b). For example, to some individuals providing care may be of more value than paid employment and vice versa (Hobson 2014; Robeyns 2017; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b) or the value attributed to caregiving may vary between individuals, depending on various factors such as, for example, the time duration spent caring, if they are the only one doing the care or if it is impacting their own wellbeing (Robeyns 2017). As anticipated in developing the conceptual model, identification of heterogeneity within and ambiguity between valued functionings within my findings, therefore, reflects this expected value pluralism. Recognition of ambiguity was important to consider given the dominant neoliberal context within the UK, in which the importance of individual choice and recognising value pluralism is emphasised.

However, employing a critical social justice lens and gender as normatively constituted enabled exploration of parents' subjectivities and couple relationalities in action. I associated sites of greater ambiguity as reflective of the normative context, i.e., the impact of social norms or expectations in relation to a valued functioning. Within the socially produced data, via online discussion and couple interviews, I was able to examine the rhetorical purpose of discursive resources, as employed within interactions and illustrating the normative force of gendered parenting norms. I interpreted dominant themes as reflecting dominant normative gendered expectations and atypical or counter-themes as articulating more marginalized valued functionings, which lie outside of or contest normative expectations (Frank 2010; Squire *et al.* 2014). Contrasts between dominant and counter themes provided sites through which to reflect on the fluid, temporal and constantly shifting, relational and dynamic nature of gendered expectations, sites at which boundaries are blurred, where atypical or counter narratives troubled or subverted dominant themes or expectations (Squire *et al.* 2014). Therefore, while value pluralism is expected, findings illustrated how gender norms, which differentially shaped parents' subjectivities, interacted relationally and dynamically within a couple dyad.

Second, multiple drivers are at play within parents' decision-making. Employing the CA enabled me to conceptualise the *combination* of (potentially competing) valued functionings and how these were prioritised in relation to each other and within and through couple relationalities. Reflecting on aspirations, such as to share parenting and to have a career, in isolation would have provided piecemeal analysis. Rather, employing the CA provided a comprehensive analysis of the multiple functionings (Robeyns 2017), achievable to working parents. While valued functionings such as postnatal wellbeing, appeared to be less ambiguous than career aspirations, and unanimously of value, it remained in competition with other valued functionings (Hobson 2014; Yerkes *et al.* 2019b). Having a comprehensive view of competing valued functionings highlighted and enabled conceptualisation of the messiness and complexity of understanding and disentangling what was of value individually, individual subjectivities, from couple relationalities and decision-making dynamics. This again created sites within which

it was possible to explore how norms were reinforced and contested differently by mothers and fathers. Alongside examining how gendered parenting norms were deployed within interactions, comprehensive analysis of multiple functionings enabled analysis of how and to what purpose various drivers were prioritised.

My methodological approach operationalized this conceptual contribution by employing narrative inquiry. Use of narrative inquiry extended and added depth to my thematic analysis. By applying and drawing on theoretical perspectives from an etic standpoint, through use of narrative inquiry tools such as positioning, I was able to examine how gender was constituted within parents' articulation of what was valuable to them and to find patterns and connections between multiple narratives. As such, I was able to theorise how gendered relations of power dynamically and relationally shape parents' capabilities, within a couple dyad and how gender norms were reconstituted by the UK's SPL policy. Within the context of couple relationalities and interactions, the UK's SPL was shown to be productive of and differentially shaped parents 'feasible' and 'imaginable' valued functionings (Hobson 2014).

8.3. Research limitations

There were also challenges and limitations within the research project, including in the adaptation of the CA to focus on parents' aspirations and capabilities in relation to planning childcare during their child's first year. As discussed at the outset of this thesis, there are competing priorities within work-family policy and gender justice debates and political struggle over which needs are deemed worthy and how they should be responded to (Fraser 2013d; Tronto 2013). As well as my own motivations for this study, some participants explicitly articulated their aspiration to challenge gender inequality and to change social structures as trailblazers. This thesis was both feminist and 'political' in this respect because of the ongoing struggle over competing priorities within which both my own and the participants' positionality as parents are embedded. I employed a narrative approach due to the rich affordances of storytelling in highlighting parents' lived experience, to contest dominant narratives and to problematise gendered normative assumptions by exploring less dominant narratives (Oakley 1999; Lloyd

2007). Similarly, parents will have invoked narratives to support their views. Rationales for story choice because of the effect they had as part of a sequence, their impact in that sequence and in turn within the analysis had a rhetorical purpose. There is, therefore, a complex relationship between narrative and action and the ongoing dialogue between the participants, myself as the researcher and any readers of this thesis in which 'no-one's meaning is final' (Frank 2012: 99). The rhetorical work at play within the storytelling, undertaken both by the parents as participants, and by me as the researcher, required reflection on the implications of instrumentalization of narratives.

Furthermore, there was creative tension in drawing together thematic and narrative analysis (Mason 2006), mobilised at emic and etic levels, as underpinned by social constructivist metatheoretical positionality. I needed to be conscious and reflective of this when identifying themes and labelling them, suggestive of discrete valued functionings, as not indicating *objective* reality but a shared *socially constructed* reality. While these themes created evaluative and discursive spaces to explore how valued functionings were articulated, it was important to recognise the themes representing parents' nebulous and shifting priorities. At some points in the analysis, identifying positioning of gendered expectations was problematic. I struggled to identify, at times, what was '*trouble'* and what was '*repair*', evidencing the fluidity with which gendered parenting norms and gender justice positions are constantly shifting in time, space and context.

Moreover, as reflected by participants in this research, as well as in the academic literature, while family decision-making was sometimes consciously considered, decisions were often made as part of everyday interactions and negotiations involving limited reflection (Radcliffe and Cassell 2014; 2015). What was of value was not always consciously reflected on and decided. Rather, decisions were implicitly understood, evidenced through 'silences' in which 'taken-for granted understandings' invoked acceptance by both mothers and fathers of, for example, the 'instinctiveness' of motherhood (Rose *et al.* 2015: 51). Variations in decision-making practices were evident within participants recollections. Some participants, whether they shared leave or not, expressed having always been on the same page but this was based on assumption and limited explicit discussion,

whereas other couples had held specific discussions about sharing parenting and / or leave. The challenge was exploring the impact of gendered parenting norms, often within unconscious decision-making and assumptions, and differentiating what an individual sees as feasible, valuable and imaginable as separate from cultural norms within which we are all embedded.

Other limitations related to methodology. First, as discussed in section 3.6, interviewing couples may have restricted the freedom of individuals to express their views (Valentine 1999). This limitation was outweighed for the purposes of this research given my focus on the interactions between the couple. Second, I aspired to have diverse participation and for the sample to reflect intersectional experiences so as not to privilege existing (white, middle-class, heteronormative, stably employed) voices. While there was diversity reflected by my participants, in relation to, for example, sexual orientation and ethnicity, majority groups were more prevalent, i.e., white, middle-class women. While there has been a relative dearth of fathers' voices in research on parental leave (Harrington 2022), I note that there was some father led participation within this research project. I ran one online discussion for fathers only and out of the five men who participated, three responded to the subsequent interview invitation – two with their partner.

Third, my pre-participation socio-demographic questionnaire included a question on gender, however, the response categories referred to biological sex (male / female rather than gender - man / woman). Moreover, I added parental identity data to describe and provide context to the participant references throughout presentation of my findings. This was based on assumption as participants were not asked to disclose this within the socio-demographic questionnaire. I based my assumption on how participants referred to themselves and each other as parents. In hindsight, as gender identity categorisation within research continues to evolve, greater reflection on employment of these categories within the socio-demographic questionnaire would have provided greater clarity. Similarly, given the focus on shared parenting, explicitly asking whether a participant identified as a mother, father or parent would have enabled greater reflection on parental identity in the data analysis. Furthermore, again in hindsight, involvement with stakeholders through co-designing methodological approaches

would have enabled greater reflection and embedding of inclusive research practices.

Finally, there were limitations to the data analysis because the richness and depth of the data made it impracticable to give all the data due justice. Some findings suggested possible areas of more detailed exploration. For example, the impact of participants' own experiences of parenting as children or growing up were referenced with some interesting associated narratives. While I noted this in the thematic analysis, I was not able to extend presentation of narrative analysis relating to this theme; because the extent of data collected meant I needed to be selective and focus on the narratives most pertinent to the constitution of couple relationalities and the disjuncture between parents aspirations to share care and uptake of SPL. Similarly, postnatal wellbeing was identified as an important theme. While more detailed exploration of this theme was outside the scope of this research project, it identified a potential extensive area of further exploration paving the way for future research.

8.4. Future research

I was motivated to explore Shared Parental Leave in 2015 for my master's dissertation inspired partly by the experience of my partner and I navigating parental leave, which coincided with the launch of SPL. Before suggesting areas for future research, I briefly consider two important developments that have occurred since 2015. First, parental leave policy development within the UK since 2015 and second, the impact of COVID-19, which created "massive reverse migration … as daddies came home" (Burgess and Goldman 2021: 6) providing research opportunities to explore the corresponding impact on parents and gender justice.

Since the introduction of SPL, take up has been low. The policy has been largely considered a failure (Javornik and Oliver 2019; Mitchell 2022) – detailed analysis of the UK's SPL policy was discussed in chapter one. The policy neither enables parents to share leave as they aspire to or shifts gendered parenting norms to facilitate this. Despite the policy being considered flawed, there has been minimal government action since its introduction. A consultation was undertaken in 2019 to inform an evaluation of the SPL and Pay scheme, which aimed to assess the

extent to which the scheme has met its anticipated objectives[18]. The results of the evaluation were published, in June 2023, alongside the UK Government's response (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023a; Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b). The evaluation report did not provide an overall conclusive finding in terms of whether the scheme had met its objectives. The evaluation did find that SPL has provided parents, who have taken SPL, more choice and showed evidence of shifting attitudes towards sharing leave and childcare responsibilities. Employers reported several advantages of SPL, for example, improved workplace morale amongst employees (parents and non-parents) who viewed accommodating parental leave as positive and increased employee loyalty where line managers were able to accommodate requests.

The evaluation also shows that, in 2019, only 42% of fathers and 51% of mothers knew about SPL at the time of their child's birth or adoption. Of parents who did not take SPL, just over 40% of parents reported not feeling comfortable asking their employer about taking SPL. Partner support and encouragement (46%) was reported most frequently as an enabler by parents who had taken SPL, followed by employer support (25%), and financial reasons (12%). Financial constraint was the most frequently reported barrier by 25% mothers and 30% fathers (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b). The role of partner and employer support suggest the ongoing impact of gendered parenting norms as shaping parents' capabilities to care as they aspire. Additionally, the evaluation criteria reinforce the importance of exploring how the policy problem is framed, as argued at the outset of this thesis. As noted in chapter one, the listed policy objectives do not include gender justice or addressing women's labour market outcomes. Rather, they focus on giving parents choice, invoking a liberal equality of opportunity standpoint. While strong workplace support for gender equality was noted as an

[18] The original policy objectives of SPL scheme were to:
• Give parents more choice and flexibility in how they care for their child in the first year by increasing the share of leave fathers can take, thus enabling both parents to retain a strong link with the labour market; • Encourage more fathers to play a greater caring role (pre-birth and in the first year) via longer, more flexible shared leave; • Increase flexibility for employers and employees to reach agreement on how best to balance work and domestic needs without state interference.

enabler for take up in the evaluation, what gender justice means was not considered.

There have been various calls to the UK Government for action (see for example Maternity_Action 2021; Fatherhood_Institute 2023). However, the UK Government response to the SPL evaluation report has proposed few changes (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023a). The only proposal that relates to specifically SPL is the development of an online tool, which has already been released, to make it easier for parents to access SPL and which responds to the evaluation finding that parents and employers find the UK's SPL policy confusing. There is evidence of the better labour market outcomes, such as greater female labour market attachment for SPL mothers, and parents' experience of SPL positively impacting their intentions to share childcare responsibilities going forward. However, the UK Government are not currently considering any further changes to the SPL policy (Department_for_Business&Trade 2023b).

Since launch of SPL in 2015, we have also begun to see diverging policy trajectories between European Union (EU) countries and the UK following Brexit. The EU Parental Leave Directive 2019 (2019/1158) came into effect in August 2022, requiring member states to provide individual four-month parental leave entitlement to each parent, of which two months is non-transferable. The Directive sets a new baseline in the EU context. An emerging trend in the EU has been noted; away from maternity leave, intended for women and linked to physiological needs, and towards a birth-related leave, which can be transferred, or a generic parental leave (Dobrotić *et al.* 2022). This trend has not been followed in the UK, at statutory level at least. Himmelweit (2023) compares the UK and Germany as two cases described as relatively late moving away from a male-breadwinner model (see also - Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2019). Comparing the diverging trajectories between Germany, which now has well-remunerated, non-transferable leave for fathers, and the UK, which does not, has been attributed to substantial shifts in underpinning political thought about the role of fathers in the former, a shift not observed in the UK (Himmelweit 2023). However, there is evidence of employers in the UK beginning to take up the challenge in developing enhanced parental leave provisions, both eligibility and entitlements, with numerous examples of employers

offering equalized parental leave (see for example Aviva, Diageo, and Proctor & Gamble and the University of the Arts London) (Koslowski 2021).

Second, the closure of schools and nurseries during the COVID-19 lockdowns triggered the re-insourcing of childcare to the home, which was described as causing an "exogeneous shock" (Vandecasteele *et al.* 2022: 2014). This shock sparked both extensive debate and academic research on whether the increased time caregiving would be equally distributed between mothers and fathers and the pandemic's potential impact on gender equality (see for example: Burgess and Goldman 2021; Vandecasteele *et al.* 2022; Petts *et al.* 2023). On the one hand, there was concern that progress towards gender equality in employment witnessed over the last 40 years, in which women's participation in the labour market has increased (OECD 2021), may be undone. On the other hand, questions were asked about whether re-insourcing of childcare would spark more egalitarian parenting norms at home (Vandecasteele *et al.* 2022). Research found that while mothers spent increased time caregiving so did fathers, across several countries in which this was examined (see: Burgess and Goldman 2021; Petts *et al.* 2021; Koslowski *et al.* 2022; Vandecasteele *et al.* 2022; Petts *et al.* 2023). Evidence of a shift in attitudes towards the impact of women working full time on their family was found in some countries, suggesting a shift away from traditional gender norms to more egalitarian norms (Vandecasteele *et al.* 2022). Men also reported greater confidence in caring for their child/ren in the UK because of the increased time caring through becoming the primary carer or spending more time with children due to working at home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Burgess and Goldman 2021).

As noted in earlier chapters, my research focus and questions did not relate directly to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, my data collection coincided with the social experiment that unfolded and inevitably had an impact on participants decision-making. I too found evidence of care shifting to a partner who had previously not been so involved in caregiving of their children. This shift resulted in greater appreciation of the work involved in care and some participants reported positive impact on their wellbeing due to being more present at home. Improved wellbeing in relation to mothers having more support as well as fathers

spending more time with their child was reported to have impacted parents' thinking about their future work life patterns. Additionally, participants reported the learning curve that employers experienced during the pandemic. It was an experiment of trust, of employers being able to trust employees, out of sight, to work. In this context, some participants articulated anticipating and hoping for what was described as a 'new normal', seeing changes to policies as a result of the pandemic and the promise of greater flexibility on return from leave (Vyas 2022).

As described at the outset of this thesis, parents increasingly aspire to share parenting and COVID19 pandemic has potentially extended this aspiration. However, as noted above, the UK's family leave policy has not developed or kept up with these expectations. While some employers are filling the gap, this is not a consistent picture. These noted shifts have also extended to how care is conceptualised in the context of couple relationships and relationalities when planning care (Doucet 2023).

By and large, what are the implications for future research? First, my findings provide insight into how gendered parenting norms mediate parents' decision-making both in the couple decision-making dynamics and as shaped by wider meso and macro contexts. The findings support the case previously made for greater research focus on the impact of one partner's employment context on their partner's capabilities (Haas *et al.* 2002). For example, father's (perceived) inability to speak to his employer impacts their capabilities to care for a child but also their partner's capabilities to avoid detrimental impact on their career. While this thesis has indicated the importance of an interactional exploration exemplified in my family-level study, a quantitative study may be able draw on these findings and tease out trends at couple level on how statutory policy, employer enhanced policy and employer implementation conversion factors predict both parents' (in couples) capabilities to take leave as they aspire to.

Second, this thesis has indicated the potentially positive impact of sharing time or leave on parents' wellbeing and, similarly, how this functions interactionally within couple relationalities. Potential positive impact was broadly exemplified in three ways: being better able to support each other in their child's first year, having a shared understanding of how to respond to, and care for, their child and having a

shared appreciation of the labour involved in caring for a child; all of which were reported as having had positive impact on the couple's relationship. A 2018 study with a similar focus in Germany, for example, found a correlation between positive relationship satisfaction in heterosexual couples and reduced length of maternity leave (Schieman *et al.* 2018). Similarly, research based on the European Social Survey data recently found that dual-earner couples reported fewer symptoms of depression than couples in male breadwinner / female caregiver models, additionally signalling the need for couple or relational, as well as individual, focused research on postnatal wellbeing (Baranowska-Rataj 2022). Overall, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic brought wellbeing into greater focus and, in the pandemic context, fathers' increased time spent on housework during the pandemic has also been associated with improved relationship with their partner and satisfaction in the division of labour (Petts *et al.* 2023). Postnatal wellbeing was not an intended focus of this thesis, and thus the findings are to some extent incidental. However, they offer valuable cursory insights into the importance of focusing on wellbeing as interactional for couples and in relation to sharing of leave, something that has received limited focus in the UK to date (see for example: Glass *et al.* 2016; Heshmati *et al.* 2023). My findings highlight the need for research specifically exploring the relationship between length of leave or leave take up of both parents with wellbeing indicators and specific focus on the interaction between parents sharing leave with the wellbeing of themselves *and* their partner.

Third, this thesis brought to the fore the importance of explicitly conceptualising gender justice to evaluate approaches to achieving it, as previously noted (Doucet and Duvander 2022; Doucet 2023). My findings provide empirical evidence, which supports the call for greater recognition of affective gender injustices specifically, i.e. injustices which arise outside of the public sphere and which recognise the value of care or 'love labour' as relational and innate to all human (potential) vulnerability (Lynch *et al.* 2021). Such conceptualization would need to reject social justice values which assume individuals are ontologically situated as self-contained, unencumbered, and unconstrained by historic normative values. As noted above, a consequence of Brexit is the UK moving away from the parental leave baseline emerging in the EU, i.e. moving away from 'maternity leave'

towards a birth-related leave or a generic parental leave. In this context, there is greater need to understand, and so challenge, the normative values underpinning parental leave policy within the UK.

Conceptualisation of gender justice positionality has several implications for future research, including evaluating employer implementation of parental leave as a strategy for progressing gender justice. Previous research has explored employer implementation and the role of managers in facilitating work family policy take up. For example, Kelland's study (2022) brought into focus managers' views on working parents' treatment in the workplace (see also: Burgess and Goldman 2021; Forbes *et al.* 2021). However, there has been less focus on the interaction between UK employers' Equality (or Equity), Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies, how gender justice is framed within these strategies and how such strategies are translated into in practice in terms of parental leave. Focus on the employment context is perhaps more imperative given inactivity in the UK government's parental leave policy development. I have prioritised several potential research questions accordingly, as follows:

- With a focus on how gender justice is specifically framed by UK employers within their EDI strategies (if they have one), to what extent is family leave policy development and review driven by their EDI strategy?
- How are EDI and specific gender justice strategies interpreted and enacted by managers and HR professionals? Do managers and HR teams buy-in to wider organizational culture, including the organisation's conception and strategic approach to gender justice? For example, participants reported that HR colleagues were reluctant to promote and 'advise' on parental leave policies. In order to explore why promoting or advising on parental leave policies would be problematic, this needs to be evaluated specifically from the organisation's gender justice positionality.
- Specific case study focus could be afforded to employers who have enhanced parental leave provision (e.g., equalized leave) in terms of whether, and how implementation of enhanced policy has resulted in a cultural shift and / or been driven by explicit EDI strategy shift in normative values.

9. Appendices

9.1. Ethics docs – participant information sheets and consent form templates

9.1.1. Online Chat Forum information sheet

You are invited to participate in a PhD research project looking at how expectant parents plan leave from work to care of their child during their first year. The focus is on factors influencing parents' decisions-making including whether, or not, to share leave.

Project Description

The project aims to explore parents' decision-making relating to taking time off work and how much leave to take following the birth or adoption. The aim is to explore what parents' value and what influences, enables or hinders their discussions and decision-making; factors such as leave options, finances, parenting expectations, employer support as well as personal circumstances and experiences.

Within this context, this project will also explore how the option of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) influences discussions and decision-making. SPL aims to give parents greater choice and opportunity to share parenting during a child's first year. This project will explore how shared parenting is considered and the factors influencing whether, or not, to share time off.

What does participation in the study involve?

Prior to the participating in the online chat forum, I will ask you to complete an initial online demographic registration to aid analysis of trends and to check eligibility for participation.

Participation involves joining an online chat forum with approx. 10 other (expectant) parents for approximately 1-2 hours in your own time over a one-week period. You will be able to participant anonymously to other participants e.g. by using a pseudonym, if you wish.

You are eligible to participate if:

- You are in a relationship or share caring responsibility for the child

- both you and your partner are in employment

- your baby is expected with a due date within five months of the online chat forum

What is in it for you?

The chat forum is informal and provides an opportunity to discuss issues in common with other expectant parents. I anticipate contributing to policy discussions on parental leave based on research findings.

Are there any potential risks and what support will be available?

The online chat forum will aim to promote a positive and open discussion. However, the topic can touch on issues which are personal and private. I will be sensitive to this through moderating the discussions and information and support available will be signposted.

Use and protection of your data

Your personal background information (such as employment status, age etc) will be collected as part of the online chat forum registration. This will be linked to your chat forum contributions to facilitate analysis and identify participants for possible follow up interviews.

When the online chat forum has ended, I will download the discussion transcript which will subsequently be deleted from the online platform. Data will be anonymised, and contact name and email will be stored separately. Any information that you share will be kept strictly confidential and be anonymous in analysis and reporting.

While the findings from the study will be published, all names will be changed and, for example organization names, will not be mentioned.

Data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy and will only be retained as long as needed for the purposes of completing and writing up the research. The online chat forum platform may store data outside the UK but is also fully compliant with the most recent data protection legislation, GDPR. The platforms data protection policy is available on request.

Your confidentiality will be maintained unless a disclosure is made that indicates that you or someone else is at serious risk of harm. Such disclosures may be reported to the relevant authority.

Location of research

Online

Disclaimer

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time during the research. Should you choose to withdraw from the programme you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give

a reason. Please note that your data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis – after this point it may not be possible.

Research Integrity

The University adheres to its responsibility to promote and support the highest standard of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research, observing the appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks.

The University is committed to preserving your dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing and as such it is a mandatory requirement of the University that formal ethical approval, from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee, is granted before research with human participants or human data commences.

Principal Investigator/Supervisor

Dr Liz Oliver, LUBS, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT e.a.oliver@lubs.leeds.ac.uk

Student researcher

Clare Matysova, LUBS, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT bncmat@leeds.ac.uk / 07969 687747

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this document is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

University Research Ethics Committee

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

University of Leeds, Research Ethics, Leeds, LS2 9JT, Tel: 0113 343 4873

Email: ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk

For general enquiries about the research please contact the researcher or supervisor via the contact details above.

9.1.2. Shared Parental Leave – Biographical questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate this focus group on Shared Parental Leave.

Section 1 – Participating in the focus groups

To be eligible to participate in the focus groups:

- you and your partner must currently be in employment
- your baby must be due within five months of the date of the focus groups

- Are you both currently in employment? Yes / No

What is the due date of the baby? _____

Would you prefer to participate in a:

- Women only focus group
- Men only focus group
- Don't mind

Do you have a preference for time of day for interacting on the focus group:

Morning / Afternoon / Evening

Please provide the email address you would like to use for the online focus group link:

_____

Section 2: About you

As outlined in the participant information sheet, the following questions aim to collect information on your job and demographics which will help in the analysis of data also collected in the focus group. All data will be held and destroyed as detailed in the participant information sheet and in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Your Job:

1. Which sector and industry are you working in at the moment? (E.g. private sector, construction industry, education, health,)

_____

2. What is your employment status? Permanent / Fixed Term / Hourly Paid / Other

3. Do you work full time or part time? Full time / part time

4. How long have you been at your current employer? Xxxxx years xxxx months

5. What is your level of seniority? – entry level / non-manager, line manager, middle manager, senior management, executive

6. What was your approximate total **household** income from <u>you and your partner's job(s)</u> before taxes during the past 12 months?

- ✓ Up to £30,000
- £30,001 - £40,000
- ✓ £40,001 - £50,000
- £50,001 - £75,000
- ✓ £75,000 - £100,000
- Over £100,000

7. Are you eligible for Shared Parental leave? Yes / No

(To be eligible you must share responsibility for the child and must have been employed continuously by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the due date (or by the date you're matched with your adopted child) and must stay with the same employer while you take SPL)

8. How many weeks of SPL are enhanced by your employer (i.e. above the statutory rate)? Number of weeks _____ / Don't know

Information about yourself

1. Age _____

2. Gender: Male / Female / Transgender / Do not wish to say

3. Would you describe yourself as from an ethnic minority? Yes / No

4. Do you consider yourself to be: Heterosexual / Homosexual / Other / Do not wish to say

5. What is your relationship status? Single / Married / Cohabiting with your partner / Other (please specify)

6. Do you have children already? Yes / No If yes, what are their ages? _____

7. What is your highest level of education?

GCSEs

BTEC qualifications or equivalent

A-levels

University – Bachelor's degree

University – Master's degree

University - PhD

Other:

8. Do you currently rent or own your property? Rent / Own / Other

Consent

Participation in the online focus group is anonymous through use of a pseudonym. A transcript of the discussion through the online focus group will be downloaded as a transcript on completion of the focus group. The transcript will be analyzed alongside the above biographical information anonymously. Only anonymized quotes will be used in analysis and publication / final thesis

Your involvement the online focus group and the data from the focus group will remain strictly confidential as far as possible. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. Confidentiality is would be limited only if you chose to provide your name online at any point in the discussion or if a disclosure is made that suggests that you or someone else is at serious risk of harm as this may need to be reported to the relevant authority.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time during the online focus group.

By submitting this biographical questionnaire, you confirm that you have the read the information sheet and the above and that you fully consent to participating in the online focus groups.

9.1.3. Interview information sheet and consent form

University of East London, Docklands Campus, University Way, London E16 2RD

Research Integrity

The University adheres to its responsibility to promote and support the highest standard of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research; observing the appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks.

The University is committed to preserving your dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing and as such it is a mandatory requirement of the University that formal ethical approval, from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee, is granted before research with human participants or human data commences.

Principal Investigator/Director of Studies

Dr Jana Javornik, Docklands Campus, University of East London, University Way, London E16 2RD, 020 8223 6678

Student researcher

Clare Matysova, Docklands Campus, University of East London, University Way, London E16 2RD, 020 8223 7069

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

Project Title

PhD study - Shared Parental Leave - A catalyst for progressing gender equality or a reinforcement of the status quo? Exploring the impact of SPL on parents' decision-making dynamics in the UK

Project Description

You are being invited to participate in a PhD research study on the topic of Shared Parental Leave (SPL). Introduced in April 2015, SPL aims to give greater choice, opportunity and incentive for parents to share parenting during a child's first year. SPL allows eligible parents to share a total of 50 weeks leave, 37 weeks paid leave.

The aims and objectives of the study

This research will look at the impact of this new SPL legislation in the UK on if and how parents are deciding to share the care of their child in their first year. It focuses on decision-making, exploring what parents consider in their discussions and how the final decisions are arrived at over a period of

time. This will include discussing different factors and influences such as social expectations, employer support, couple circumstances and individual past experiences.

What does participation in the study involve?

In-depth interviews follow on from the focus groups you participated in and will further explore the issues and dynamics which have impacted your decision-making from your perspective as a couple. You are asked to record or collect any 'items' / events / discussions which impacts on your consideration and decision-making between the focus group and interviews.

You are eligible to participate in the couple interviews if you are eligible for Shared Parental Leave.

Are there any potential risks and what support will be available?

The interviews will aim to promote a positive and open discussion of the options and issues around SPL. However, the topic can touch on issues which are personal and private. As couples may not always agree, the discussion may possibly provoke disagreement at times. I will be sensitive to this through my approach to the interviews and information and support available will be signposted.

Confidentiality of the Data

Information that you share in the interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed to aid understanding and analysis. While the findings from the study will be published, this will be anonymous in analysis and reporting. All names will be changed and, for example organization names, will not be mentioned.

Data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy. The recordings and notes will be stored confidentially and only retained as long as needed for the purposes of completing and writing up the research. Audio recordings will be destroyed once transcribed and anonymised.

Your confidentiality will be maintained unless a disclosure is made that indicates that you or someone else is at serious risk of harm. Such disclosures may be reported to the relevant authority.

Location

Interviews – Variable dependent on participant choice

Disclaimer

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time during the research. Should you choose to withdraw from the programme you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason. Please note that your data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis – after this point it may not be possible.

University Research Ethics Committee

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Catherine Fieulleteau, Research Integrity and Ethics Manager, Graduate School, EB 1.43

University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD (Telephone: 020 8223 6683, Email: researchethics@uel.ac.uk)

For general enquiries about the research please contact the Principal Investigator on the contact details at the top of this sheet.

Consent to Participate in a Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants - Interview

Clare Matysova

PhD study - Shared Parental Leave - A catalyst for progressing gender equality or a reinforcement of the status quo? Exploring the impact of SPL on parents' decision-making dynamics in the UK
Please tick as appropriate:

	YES	NO
I have the read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.		
I consent to the audio recording of the interview		
I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential as far as possible. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data.		
I understand that maintaining strict confidentiality is subject to the following limitations: if a disclosure is made that suggests that you or someone else is at serious risk of harm, this may need to be reported to the relevant authority.		
Only anonymized quotes will be used in analysis and publication / final thesis		
It has been explained to me what will happen once the programme has been completed.		
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time during the research without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. I understand that my data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis and that after this point it may not be possible.		
I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me and for the information obtained to be used in relevant research publications.		

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) ……..

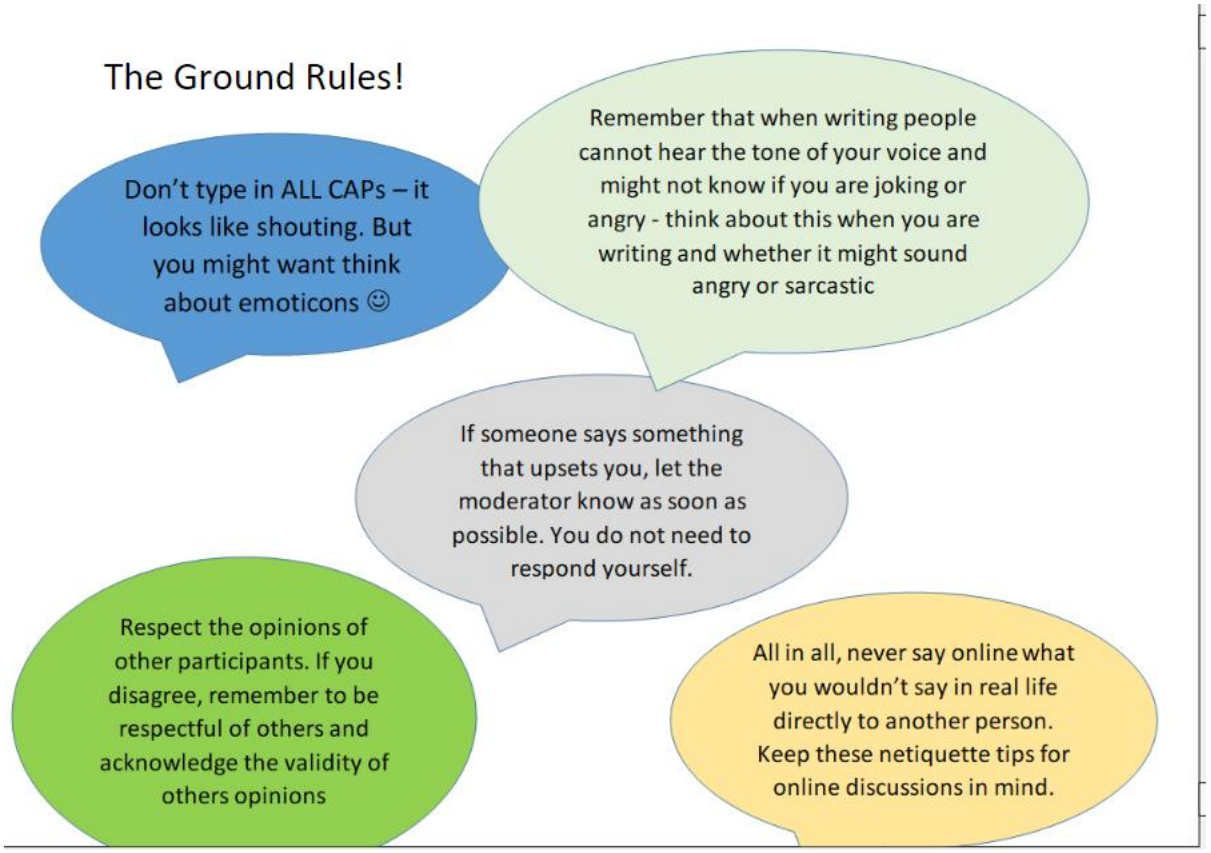
Participant's Signature ……..

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) ……..

Investigator's Signature ……

Date: ……

9.2. Netiquette guide



9.3. Online discussion question schedule

9.3.1. Focus Groups – Schedule (Questions) Version 1

1. Introductions

Content: Welcome, introductions and icebreaker, ask participants to tell the group something about themselves and how many weeks along they are in their pregnancy / when they are expecting

2. First thoughts about Shared Parental Leave

Content: Description of SPL / an outline of what SPL is to be added together with image / video case study example from the recent government campaign

2.1 What is your current thinking, how likely are you to share parental leave?

- Very likely
- Possibly
- Not sure
- Definitely not

2.2 If likely or possibly, how would you share your leave? (e.g. both take leave at the same time, alternate…)

3. Attitudes to shared parenting

3.1 What comes to mind when you think about the option of taking Shared Parental Leave?
(Use of whiteboard facility for participants to share words of association)

4. Considering your options

4.1 If you have started planning your leave (maternity, paternity or shared parental leave), what are the key factors you are thinking about? (Rank top four most important to you?)

- Recovery of self or my partner (from pregnancy and labour)
- Breastfeeding
- Spending time with baby
- Finances
- Your career development or preferences
- Your partner's career development or preferences
- Supportiveness of your employer
- Shared parental leave entitlements
- Cultural expectations – attitudes of friends / family
- Previous experiences of maternity / paternity / shared parental leave
- Experiences growing up
- Other

4.2 Why did you chose these factors as most important?

5. Discussing your options – your partner

- What have you discussed with your partner about these factors to date?
- How did you feel about these discussions?
- How have these discussions helped your thinking?

6. Discussing your options – your friends / family
- What have you discussed with your friends / family about these factors to date?
- How did you feel about these discussions?
- How have these discussions helped your thinking?

7. Benefits offered by your employer
- How would you rate your employer in terms of being supportive of or promoting a family friendly culture? (Rating to be added)
- How has your employer promoted shared parental leave and do you know what package your employer offers?

8. Discussing your options – with your employer
- What have you discussed with your employer / line manager?
- How supportive do you think your line manager would be of you taking maternity / paternity / SPL?

9. Has the possibility of shared parental leave changed how you think about sharing parenting responsibilities?

10. If there are barriers to you taking shared parental leave which could be removed, what changes would you like to see?

9.3.2. Focus Groups – Schedule (Questions) – Version 2

Introduction
Tell the group something about yourself, why you were interested in participating in this discussion and broadly any aspirations you have about the time off work with your child.
Parenting values and expectations
This section looks at parental expectations, this will be the focus of the next few questions. In the table below, add some words that are often associated ***by society*** to the role of mother / father / parent?
There are many messages about parenting in the media. Some messages suggest mothers are instinctively better at caring for children than fathers. Other messages suggest that fathers can care and nurture as well as mothers. What do you think about this?    
The first of the newspaper stories below suggests that mum's don't want to share leave / time off work. The second suggests dad's are fed up with stereotypes suggesting they are 'day care' rather than parents. What do you think about these? To what extend to you think these messages reflect society's views?  Amidst all this talk of shared parental leave – low uptake for the men, the fault lying with outdated work cultures and sexist bosses – there's an important voice missing the mothers. Maybe 98 per cent of leave is taken by women because that's what they'd prefer  Survey reveals that Britain's fathers have had enough of lazy stereotyping, David Edwards reports. Dad dancing, dad jokes, dad bod – fathers are used to being figures of fun. Apparently it is one of the few things they are good at.
Leave Planning: influences, enablers, barriers
When planning leave, which factors do you think are most valued by parents? Select the four factors that you think are most valued by parents. Can you say why you selected these factors? *Factors listed – as above*

What barriers or problems do parents experience when planning leave?
Employers urged to publicise shared parental leave policies By Ashleigh Wight on 7 Jun 2018 in Shared parental leave, Latest News, Maternity & paternity      **Organisations with 250 staff or more are being urged to publish their shared parental leave policies on their websites to improve transparency and encourage competition on pay.** What do you think about the above headline suggesting employers promote their leave policies? Do you think employers can better support expectant employees? If yes, how?
Individual plans (participants can answer the following questions either in private or so the group can see their responses or both)
Have you decided how much leave you plan to take? If yes, what are your leave plans currently?
Have you discussed your plans with work colleagues, family or friends? How have these discussions helped with the options you are considering?
Have you discussed different options for taking leave with your partner? How did you feel about these discussions? How have the discussions helped your decision-making?
Final thoughts – all things considered
Considering all the factors discussed above, to what extent do you think parents actual leave plans reflect their ideal choices?
How would you like to see parental leave policy or practice changed at work to make it easier for parents?

9.4. Interview schedule

Introductions and context of SPL
Unstructured interview but key themes / questions as follows:

- What does shared parenting mean to you (in the context of SPL)? *(Aim to encourage the respondents to talk broadly about how SPL relates to own experience / identity)*
- Tell me something about your life / background / experience which influences what SPL and shared parenting means to you? *(Thinking about stories people refer to and why those stories are the important ones)*
- Tell me about the discussions you have had so far, if any, about your plans for taking leave. What are the factors influencing your thinking and how you feel about taking leave? *(Aim to explore the decision-making and decision-making dynamics)*
- Discussion of any particular 'items' (e.g. picture, news story) which are influencing / have influenced your thinking. How did this make you feel?
- Have you agreed or disagreed on different factors? Tell me about this and how you felt about this

9.5. Thematic Analysis Codebook example

To be able to be financially security	
Balancing multiple drivers - finance, career, time with baby	The considerations about how each partner will feel whether at work or at home in terms of financial pressure and balancing this time with baby and career. Each partner is balancing these variables but also there is a balance between the considerations of both partners - Hard to disentangle these.
Financial independence	Both parents being financially independent of each other - this adds also to equality in a relationship
Financial stability or security	Financial security is important when you have dependents, mortgages etc - not wanting to have financial worries and being able to give your child security and sometimes this goes further than security to 'best kind of cultural and critical experience'. Financial stability has been exacerbated in the Covid context.
Financially better off	Maximising finances or financial options via paid family leave / or not or no dips in finances
Impact on pensions	pension contributions - like that bothers me - this was particularly in relation to returning to work part time.
No flex on finances	There isn't really any flexibility on the finance part - parents can only do so (spend time with baby) if their financial and work situation allows.
Paying the bills or financial worries	You have to make certain decisions so you can carry on paying the bills
Supportive or secure work environment	Financial security also links to longer term employment security...
Surviving on one salary	Surviving on one salary (e.g., if one parent goes on statutory / SMP or unpaid leave for a period) has implications in terms of it being the higher salary, on the other hand having one sole breadwinner might lead to financial pressure - also includes not being able to afford unpaid maternity leave and so surviving on one salary not being an option.
To be able to have a career or vocation	
Careers and progression	there are negative views around parental leave (despite legal protections) and concerns about impact on career especially the longer the time taken off, and this impacts on sense of entitlement to take leave (interesting to see gender differences here) and worries about telling employer / line manager that they are expecting
Long term planning	Thinking about longer term plans relating to home / life choices (e.g., location where living) and also about longer term impact of taking career breaks or working part time.
Partners work or career pressures	Reflections on difficult conversations with partners who were worried about the impact of taking time off and so reluctance to ask employer / or take time - in comparison to reflection on limited choice for women to take or not take maternity leave.
Sense of entitlement - To not have career impacted	Reflections which relate to sense of entitlement not to have their career impacted or lack of this. This contrasts with societal expectations for women to give up career, go part time - awareness of and just having to accept that your career will be impacted, accept that is part of wanting to have a family

Sense of entitlement - To take leave	Reflections which relate to sense of entitlement not to have their career impacted or lack of this eave and that this consequently impacts on how long they feel they can take off - examples of potential impact: how seen as part of the team, given left autonomy.
To be able to share parenting	
Discussions or not deciding to share	
Discussed	Reflections that couples had discussed, some that 'were always clear' about sharing, some that felt or partners felt the final decision was mums, not always discussed in detail and some reflect on assumption of being on the same page or some who talked about sharing leave but not really in detail, in terms of shared parenting, also the unpredictability makes the discussions difficult. Others have discussed for a long time - associated with longer time to having a child.
Dont want to share	Reflections that - happy to be the main caregiver because it 'is precious time that you can never get back', not wanting to give up time, prepared to take a step back careerwise or not 50/50 / Or that partner not particularly interested, not something he wants to do, reluctant to do (some who work from home and so spend time that way), something they had pushed for put partner didn't want e.g. to ask employer - a number of examples - 'my husband... is .. a feminist. He didn't want to share parental leave'.
Not discussed	Reflections on short or no discussion, or telling the partner their plans, or working on assumptions mainly that will take all or most of leave, as the mother.... And so unconscious decision-making or discussions which do not really consider SPL as an option.
Parenting expectation influences	
Egalitarian relationship	Shared parenting will be of benefit to an egalitarian relationship, this also influences independence and being free to make choices, both parents being involved in parenting to know how much work it is (about parity of value Fraser?), this impacts couple dynamics, being on an equal level
Establishing as a family	Time to become closer as a family, between children also, spending time together as a family - time together, time together at the beginning was important to establish as a family. Also, during pandemic / lockdown - has created benefits in terms of time together as a family. Caveats to this being absence of financial worries and so privileged in this sense.
Expected to share equally	Something about knowing from the outset that they both expected to share equally, 50 / 50 or close to equally! Some had discussed, some had that as an assumption, being on the same wavelength
Experiences growing up	Growing up - dad who did the caring / household work, or my mum did but was miserable, or working class background and both parents worked, or my parents were traditional, or of witness mum doing the double shift (work and coming home to all the work), or witnessed dad not doing (e.g. no nappy changing), or influence from culture (e.g. Indian) - so ' what my parents were like and think I'm never going to be like that, or like that'
Fairness Unfairness Resentments	Family leave is not a holiday, it's a job 24/7 - if not shared, limits shared experience and resentments both ways emerge. Desire to bond with child should not preclude partners own desire to bond. Resentments about time / own time / bonding time - and so coming to an agreement as a family about what all are comfortable with.

Impact on child development	Importance to me of early childhood, development in the first few years of a child's life, influenced by for e.g., attachment theory and being child-led- to build security and strong bonds with both parents (and extended family). Also views about importance of interaction with a range of people and need for more stimulation through both parents or interaction out with family. Some debate about this between parents.
Parenting is a verb	This is an important - Parenting is about building a relationship and anyone can build that relationship - about caring and nurturing, but that this is not about who is naturally better. Both can parent it is about bond. Both partners equally capable to love and emotionally support a child, children going to both parents, being a team - each has own strengths
pragmatism v ideals	heart says want to spend as much time as possible - theories and values and wants rub against each other
Role models for children	Aspiration for 'good' role modelling for own children - e.g., important that children see both parents doing household tasks, so they realise not one gender does one thing or there are not gendered jobs. Though have also tried to normalise breastfeeding and some different perspectives on what challenging gender roles means - 'I think I'm probably happy with the ... old rules of challenging gender rules'
Seeing your child develop	witness your child develop, being conscious of their development at different stages - not wanting to miss out on child developmental stages?
Time - Don't want to share leave	Mix of reflections - some of people known who did not want to share, some who did not want to miss any quality and recovery time an important factor, some whose partners did not want to share - reasons such as husband not wanting to take time away from partner, good to have time but not taken from mothers' time. Reflection that this will differ between couples
Time - Independently with baby	Reflections on importance of having independent time with baby as a primary caregiver, including husband or partner getting 'his' time
Time - Quality time with baby	A very common reflection - spending quality time with baby for both parents, enjoying time with your children. Some reflections on dads missing out, sad for dads / partners not able to spend that quality time or only for short periods in comparison to value felt in having extended time with baby, to bond. 'Valuable time that you can never get back'. Not wanting miss out on child's first year of life and when sharing leave possibly missing out on the experience of the other parent. A +ve impact of c19 wfh

9.6. Thematic Analysis References example

Name: No flex on finances (As output from Nvivo)

Description: There isn't really any flexibility on the finance part - parents can only do so (spend time with baby) if their financial and work situation allows.

<Files\\1st OFG Feb 2020> - § 2 references coded [0.61% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.23% Coverage

¶66: SPL will clearly work well for some families and not for others and that's why I think having that choice is so good. There isn't really any flexibility on the finance part.

Reference 2 - 0.38% Coverage

¶72: Financial security is incredibly important when you have dependents, mortgages etc. I have never been able to afford unpaid maternity leave, so I have to consider all of the options and be as careful as we can with annual leave to ensure our time at home is financially viable for all of us.

<Files\\2nd OFG March 2020> - § 1 reference coded [0.52% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.52% Coverage

¶29: However perhaps I'd we could have afforded to; we would have done shared leave.

<Files\\3rd OFG May 2020> - § 1 reference coded [0.27% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.27% Coverage

¶82: I'm sure every parent would spend as much time with the baby as they can so of course that is a factor, but parents can only do so if their financial and work situation allows.

<Files\\4th OFG July 2020> - § 3 references coded [0.81% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.36% Coverage

¶28: Babies are not exactly cheap. Some parents are able to save up for their reduced income on parental leave, whilst others run into thousands of pounds of debt.

Reference 2 - 0.20% Coverage

¶33: Planning the finances to enable the above unfortunately does have to play a key role."

Reference 3 - 0.25% Coverage

¶55: When it came to it, I just don't think either of us wanted to have money worries on top of becoming new parents

<Files\\5th OFG July 2020> - § 1 reference coded [1.11% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.11% Coverage

¶21: we do have friends where the mother went back to work quite quickly because she earned the highest salary, and her partner took parental leave. This wasn't necessarily by 'choice' as such, rather financial necessity. I think she would have wanted to stay at home for longer if finances hadn't been considered.

<Files\\Annie &C interview> - § 3 references coded [0.54% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.28% Coverage

¶10: So, we knew quite early on that was what would happen, I think it was just very pragmatic, finances dictating what we're going to do (.)

Reference 2 - 0.18% Coverage

¶14: so yeah, it was just finance [sighs], it was about money

¶15: C: certainly, the main driver yes

Reference 3 - 0.08% Coverage

¶229: finances is obviously the biggest driver

<Files\\Frances and H interview> - § 1 reference coded [0.24% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.24% Coverage

¶118: cos I sort of got the sense that financially it wouldn't work and then also you weren't that keen, (

<Files\\Gregory & S interview> - § 4 references coded [0.73% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.26% Coverage

¶29: But the thing is like it is not because we are conservative or sexist or anything it is mostly either economical pressure yeah or

Reference 2 - 0.05% Coverage

¶93: S: = but is about the money

Reference 3 - 0.24% Coverage

¶226: even in our, I think, I like to think [emphasised] that the main factor is, and I’m pretty sure it is,

¶227: S: = finances

Reference 4 - 0.17% Coverage

¶260: but at the same time people need to heat their houses and feed their families [laughs]

9.7. Narrative Analysis Example

'Story' example - Annie and C Xxx – story start Xxx – story end	**Themes / Content - Manifest meaning**	**How - 'how' the story is put together by noting the direction(s) of the story, participants reflections. Focus here also on tone, changes in tone, emotions, subtexts, what is not said.**
Context / Diary notes on the interview *L is an academic on an FTC / grant. C works in public sector which has quite family friendly policies. They have already shared parental leave, 16 weeks / 10 weeks.* *L generally looking at me / the camera, leaning towards the camera and sometimes turns back to C or talks to her side to C rather than looking back. C is sat slightly behind. Also, L fidgets quite a lot – touching her face or playing with her necklace. There was a sadness in the interview, from A, I think.* *C not very expressive body language – only real point in the interview where he talks about his experiences, smiles, but doesn't give much away.* *L does significantly more of the talking in the interview.* *Changes towards the end of the interview, feels a bit more relax, L also shifts position so is more in line with C's position rather than slightly in front.* *C watches L talking most of the interview, or looking down, or out of the window*		
Annie: [laughs] at my booking in appointment the midwife said are you taking nine months or a year? and I was like I'm taking four months, (.) like it was *obviously [*emphasis*]* just assumed in society that a woman takes up to nine months or a year, you can have nine months of basic err whatever the SPL is, mat leave pay or you can have a year and I was like who can afford that (.) really? but that was the assumption at my booking in appointment with my midwife and obviously everyone said, my mum was like that's very short Annie yeah but how else am I going to fund it so I think at first everyone assumed that it would be me taking a very long leave and living on £500 a month as if that was okay (.) and I was like no, we've just had the wedding, we've literally, I mean our finances are fine but I was like I don't want to get into debt cos I just got out of university student debt so let's not get back into debt with a baby so yeah (.) at first everyone was like made the assumption that we'd be taking what is apparently standard as I would have nine months or a year and not have any income basically (.) and then when we said no this is what we are doing, everyone went oh okay that makes sense. Int: right	- discussion with midwife - length of time taking off / assumptions about time - 9/12 months - society assumptions - affordability - who can afford that 'living on £500 a month' / not have any income basically - everyone assumed - length of time off linked to income – i.e. unpaid element of mat leave / SMP (£500 a month) or 'no income basically' - no pushback	Laughs – though clearly emotional and serious - characters in the story - different people spoke to - midwife, mum, 'everyone' - gender invoked in relation to assumptions – assumptions that 'it would be me' taking time off and challenging these - circulation – sets the scene with example of the midwife but numerous references to 'everyone', sets out 'everyone's assumption' and rejects this 'I was like no' / 'no we're not doing what you're all doing',

Annie: And there wasn't any pushback was there? [to C] C: No Annie: and it was like we had to say like no we're not doing what you're all doing cos what you're all doing just doesn't make financial sense to us (.), I'm still amazed (.) by what people do but yeah, my mum was like that's a short leave, (.) I think she had a year off with all of us (.) umm, I don't know your mum had short leaves though so she wasn't like C: yeah, I think she only had three / four months (.) and then back full time. (.) Annie: yeah C: So, I was in childcare from about three or four months old *[Note I've separated these as 'stories' but they are continuous within the interview]* Annie: yeah, the only person and this always bugs me is, the cook at nursery, where our baby goes, (.) she loves him and he, he was going in at, he was six months old, (.) he was a baby, he could sit and he would not always take a bottle during the day, it was a bit of a nightmare about bottles wasn't he cos he was a breastfed baby (.) and she would, and she said to me, I think you wouldn't, C wouldn't even care about this, but it bothered me, she said 'babies this age need their mums, he's too small' and I was like (.) he's coming to nursery and I'm paying your wage and I have to work and he needs a house to live in please don't make me feel bad that I'm putting my baby in nursery, and I just felt like that really annoyed me, upset me a little bit, obviously first time mum putting a baby in nursery and just to be told he's too small by someone. I was just like umm. Obviously, I have no choice over this but that little bit of guilt, cos some people would say, they speak before they think, I think, of the consequences, of the guilt. (.) I mean he was the smallest there and you know obviously when he went back, he was the only little sitting baby cos everyone else puts their kids in at the end of the year don't they, most babies start nursery at about a year. (.) So it felt like, you know, he's the smallest in nursery are we doing something wrong here	- retells – does not make financial sense - practice of previous generations – mum took full year for 'all of us' - context of nursery setting - difficulty adjusting to bottle as breastfed baby - 'babies this age need their mums, he's too small' – childcare / impact on child development? 'I'm paying your wage' – outsourced childcare - needs to work / need a house – financial rationale - reference to emotions felt – annoyed, upset - Reference to lack of choice / constrained choice BUT guilt	asks for confirmation from C, wasn't any pushback was there? 'no' - resources: Draws on finances / does not make financial sense / but used to respond to assumptions Also 'pushback' and previous examples – C's mum 'So, I was in childcare from about three or four months' - ????? – which triggers Annie's subsequent 'story'. *[Note I've separated these as 'stories' but they are continuous within the interview]* - characters in the story – 'the cook at nursery', baby, managers Circulation – sets the scene / which is an example of 'pushback' in relation to above, example of being told 'babies this age need their mums' – response justification in terms of outsourced care and well looked after – back to guilt. Returns at the end of the 'story' to 'most women are taking that year off' Gender invoked through the guilt – which has been associated with child needing the mum – gender invoked here. Also 'C wouldn't even care about this' 'but it

cos he's tiny. Nursery were lovely, and they've been very good with him, haven't they? [to C] C: yeah Annie: and the managers always been very good with him, but you know you do have that thing about why is our baby the smallest thing going into this like (.) nursery and they're all toddlers and he's only sat there bless him just putting spoons in his mouth but [laughs] C: Its helped his development I think, (.) he doesn't seem to be showing any adverse effects shall we say Int: but it's the guilt thing Annie: there's that guilt, there is a guilt thing about putting him in, cos he's the only little one in there, I mean they had a baby sensory room, and they were geared up to take such you know small babies but it's obviously a very minority thing to put a small baby in before a year cos most women are taking that year off. (.)	- Young a nursery – smallest - Nursery a safe setting (importance of) / trust in? nursery 'were lovely', managers were good, set up for little ones, 'had a baby sensory room', 'geared up'	bothered me' – upset and tone was upset when speaking / quite emotional, sadness. Class – 'I'm paying your wage'? Resources – quality of care, impact on child development (i.e. 'it's helped his development', no 'adverse' effects Calls on C to reinforce 'they've been very good with him, haven't they?'

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