



# Couples' Transitions to Parenthood

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Gender, Intimacy  
and Equality

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Charlotte Faircloth

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*For Amol (with love, and remarkably little fury)*

## PREFACE

This book presents findings from a research project with couples (in London, UK) as they become parents. The argument is that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable crossfire between two competing discourses: those around ideal relationships and those around ideal parenting. On the one hand, they should be committed to being ‘equal partners’. On the other, they should be parenting their children ‘intensively’, in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers. Reconciling these ideals can be difficult, and, as the book explores, has the potential to create resentment and disappointment.

Drawing largely on the narratives of couples who have faced relationship difficulties, the book points to the social pressures at play in raising the next generation at material, physiological and cultural levels. These are explored through concrete practices, linked to physiology by varying degrees: birth, feeding and sleeping, three of the most highly moralised areas of contemporary parenting culture.

London, UK

Charlotte Faircloth

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First thanks, of course, to the couples who shared their accounts of becoming parents with me. This project really would be nothing without them. It would also have been nothing without the Leverhulme Trust, which funded the research whilst I was an early career fellow at the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies at the University of Kent. That project was under the mentorship of Ellie Lee, someone who has remained a constant source of support and guidance throughout my career.

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To my children, this book would no doubt have been published much faster without your arrival, but thank you for putting some practice into the theory, confirming that no amount of research can really prepare anyone for parenthood. And, for confirming that no amount of work can get done without childcare (especially in 2020–1), a heartfelt thank you to Claire Carson.

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## Introduction

Changes to what has been termed ‘Parenting Culture’ have now become a well-established field of social science scholarship (Faircloth, 2013; Hays, 1996; Hendrick, 2016; Lee et al., 2014; Nelson, 2010). This scholarship, largely based on research in Euro-American settings, has called attention to an ‘intensification’ of parenting in the last 40 years, suggesting that raising children has become, culturally at least, a more demanding and complex task.

So far, the majority of research in this area has looked at the effect of these changes on individuals, and particularly on women. Mothers (more than fathers) are recognised as increasingly ‘torn’ by the competing expectations to parent intensively on the one hand, whilst participating in the labour market on the other (Hays, 1996; Miller, 2005). More recent work has documented the experiences of men grappling with shifting ideals of a more intensive ‘involved’ fatherhood (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011; Shirani et al., 2012). No research to date, however, has explicitly looked at the impact of these changes on *couples*.

Focusing for the first time on couple relationships in the context of an intensified parenting culture, this book reports on a longitudinal study with 20 couples becoming parents (in London, UK) over a five-year period. This is a particularly interesting historical moment at which to observe couples’ experiences of the transition to parenthood as, at the policy level, there has been a growing commitment to gender equality, especially insofar as childcare responsibilities relate to men and women’s

career prospects and ‘work-life-balance’ (see Miller, 2017). Parental leave and ‘flexible working’ are two of the key policy responses, under the auspices that sharing the responsibility for childcare traditionally assumed by women will reduce gender differentials in terms of career progression and pay (O’Brien & Wall, 2016). The couples were all professionally employed, and the vast majority were heterosexual first-time parents, one of whom were still at the stage of ‘trying’ for a baby. However, 5 of the 20 couples had a deliberately different profile: some were second-time parents, one couple had twins, another were in a co-parenting relationship as a gay couple with a ‘single’ mother and the last were a lesbian mother family (Fig. 3.1 in Chap. 3 explains this further).

The research shows that new parents are caught in an uncomfortable confluence between two competing discourses: those around ideal relationships and those around ideal parenting. On the one hand, they must be committed to egalitarian ideals about being ‘equal partners’. On the other, they must be parenting ‘intensively’, in ways which are markedly more demanding for mothers, and which makes paternal involvement in particular more complicated.

### RELATIONSHIPS END, BUT CHILDREN ARE ‘FOREVER’

Drawing largely on the narratives of couples who have faced relationship *difficulties*, this book points to the social pressures at play in raising the next generation at material, physiological and cultural levels. As Collins has noted, there is a contradiction at the heart of many couple relationships, and therefore many contemporary families: a tension between the aspiration for self-realisation through individualism (the freedom to ‘be myself’) on the one hand and commitment through coupledness and parenthood (a desire to ‘make a life’ with someone) on the other (Collins, 2003).

Before children, couples are arguably temporary; individuals are more important than relationships, which exist—in theory at least—only as long as they work (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). But children are ‘forever’. The extraordinary cognitive dissonance provoked by having a child, and the sense of being tied into something permanent, understandably takes some acclimatisation. Furthermore, as one mother in this study said, it was birth and early motherhood that made her ‘see’ her gender for the first time, in that her bodily difference to her husband suddenly seemed to ‘matter’ more than it had in the past. Indeed, whereas physiological

difference or roles associated with specific genders might potentially be downplayed in the time before children arrive, during the perinatal period each parent is likely undergoing a deep (re-)gendering. All of these factors considered, it is not surprising that the transition to parenthood creates a complex of feelings on both sides, bound to cause at least some disruption.

This is not a new subject for academic research. Indeed, the idea that parenthood disrupts marriage and is incompatible with romantic relationships goes back at least to LeMasters in 1957, and there was a large body of work on the transition to parenthood beginning at around that time, much in the US but also in the UK. Perhaps most famous in the UK was the work of Ann Oakley in the ‘Becoming a Mother’ study which commenced in 1974. The resultant books, *From Here to Maternity*, published in 1979, and *Women Confined: Towards a Sociology of Childbirth* (1980), highlighted the ‘shock’ of childbirth in forcing couples, especially women, to acknowledge the divergence between expectations and reality, and to realise that equality between men and women did not exist. *Women Confined* in particular examined the theme of shock and analysed it in relation to women and the diagnosis of postnatal depression, contextualising it thus:

the crushing numbness that can follow a birth over which a mother feels she has little control; the cumulative insult of multiple, poorly explained technical procedures; the extraordinary (but yet ordinary) isolation and exhaustion of finding oneself suddenly in charge of another human life. (Oakley, 2018 [1979], p. vii)

This ‘extraordinary (but yet ordinary) isolation and exhaustion’ resonates with other work in the area since (see, for example, Asher, 2011; Maushart, 1999; Miller, 2007, 2017; and also Fox’s *When Couples Become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood* (Fox, 2009) to which this book pays homage by echoing the title). The original ‘Becoming a Mother’ study was repeated 37 years later with many of the same women, which prompted similar interesting temporal comparisons about changes in the management of childbirth as women reflected on how different things were (or are) for their own daughters, as well as around the sociology of memory (Oakley, 2016). Whilst much had changed about motherhood (mothers in general being older, a higher proportion of same-sex couples and a more routine use of technologies such as ultrasound and caesarean section), it was notable how much had

stayed the same. Feelings of alienation due to the medicalisation of childbirth and the ‘shock’ many women experienced seemed uncannily similar, a feature that was ‘just as prominent in the second study as in the first’ (2018 [1979], p. ix).

Another important theme to emerge from these later studies was around the shifting role of the partner. Whilst there was a great degree of continuity in the views expressed about partner relationships in the studies, there was greater surprise in the later ones at how the addition of a baby changed many partner relationships towards more traditional gender roles (around the division of labour, paid employment, personal interests and so on), something that was not always anticipated or welcomed by the women in an era of supposed ‘gender equality’ (see also Miller, 2017). In line with this, there was an increased emphasis on the lack of independence, which many women described as frustrating (Brunton et al., 2011, p. 24). As such, this study recognises these historical continuities around the transition to parenthood, at the same time as calling attention to changes in the conception of both parenting and personhood which might make this shift more acute today.

Tensions around lack of independence might be said to be a reflection of shifting conceptions and expectations of personhood, or indeed womanhood itself. As numerous scholars have discussed, our biographies in recent years have increasingly become ‘choice biographies’, as part of an era in which an overarching discourse of individualism within wider society, where individuals are increasingly expected to ‘fulfil’ but also regulate themselves through carefully curated life trajectories, behaviours and choices (Butler, 2020; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Faircloth & Rosen, 2020). This can create discord when it comes to couple and family relationships, in that there can be difficulty in reconciling tensions between partnering and parenting which are based on investments and commitments *beyond* individual choice. That is, whilst becoming a parent can be read as an exercise in ‘self-expression’ (particularly in the current historical moment), it is also about a moral responsibility beyond the self (Ruddick, 1995; see also Doucet, 2015). To this end the book takes a relational perspective in understanding subjectivities within a family context, to try and take a holistic view of how, why, when and with what implications people within families make decisions that they do.

Certainly, a tension between the desire to ‘be oneself’ and ‘make a life’ with someone is as difficult to resolve, if not more difficult, for contemporary ‘equal partners’, than ever. All of the couples I spoke with in the

course of the research would describe themselves as committed to gender ‘equality’ (or rather, none would say that they were against it). But what was interesting was that, in spite of this, all of them were ‘gender traditional’ in that mothers tended to take longer periods of leave than fathers, and scale back working commitments further down the line—and this is in spite of the fact that the period in which these couples became parents for the first time was during the advent of first ‘Additional’ Paternity Leave and then ‘Shared’ Parental leave (see discussion in Chap. 2). Paying close attention to how they talked about and understood equality in their relationships, I outline a typology in development with Twamley (see Twamley, 2020; Faircloth, 2020) to suggest a loose grouping into those couples who talked about equality in terms of ‘fairness’ (a general principle as to how to treat a partner) and ‘balance’ (in an overall sense, including cases where each member of the couple ‘takes turns’ to take the lead on respective roles of working and caring). These are in contrast to those who talked about it as ‘breaking gendered roles’ (e.g., men doing care work) or ‘50/50’ (with each member of the couple doing the same tasks to the same degree.) Those in the latter group were *most* likely to talk overtly about their commitment to equality, and relatedly, about their desire to split their parental leave, for example, so that each member of the couple took some sole responsibility for childcare (even if this did not actually materialise in practice).

One of the most illuminating aspects about the design of this study was being able to trace how expectations around parenthood and the division of care matched up with reality (or rather, did not). What emerged is that those couples who were most strongly committed to equality in general (and ‘50/50’ in particular) were also those who were most disappointed in terms of how things worked out in practice. Due to their resources—as households with comfortable incomes, professional, flexible jobs and with high levels of social capital—these are the couples who should be *most* able to balance these competing demands of discourses around ‘good parenting’ and ‘equal partnership’, and yet they, particularly the women, seemed to be the ones who are most exasperated by the situations they find themselves in. To put it another way, why was it that so many of the well-educated, professionally employed, middle-class mothers I spoke to in the course of this research were so frustrated?

One idea explored in the book is that underlying ideas about equality (and particularly one concerned with ‘50/50’) is a highly individualised understanding of subjectivity, as opposed to a more ‘relational’ one. The

suggestion is that this leads to a more ‘tit-for-tat’ rubric in relationships in terms of how fairness is understood, calibrated and processed. This is especially hard to reconcile in the period of early parenthood when gender difference is suddenly so ‘obvious’ and the edicts of a culture of intensive motherhood reign with such ferocity.

## OVERVIEW

Throughout the book, extended vignettes from three first-time, heterosexual couples illustrate the larger themes around gender, intimacy and equality which are explored in the research as a whole. The vignettes sit outside the usual chapter-based structure and can be read separately from the normal narrative flow. Including these extended narratives in an unbroken fashion is one of the huge privileges of publishing research findings in a monograph rather than in shorter articles, building over the course of the book as a whole to provide an in-depth, rich and detailed picture of the workings of couple relationships over a prolonged and critical period. The couples featured are those who struggled the most to reconcile the competing narratives around relationships and parenting, and who suffered the greatest relationship breakdown. They are not intended to be representative of the sample, nor, as a qualitative study, is the sample intended to be representative of the wider population. Indeed, the accounts in this book are those of a highly privileged, largely white, middle-to-upper-income group of participants, and the workings of intimacy and inequality in less privileged households cannot be extrapolated to here. However, given all of the resources at the disposal of the couples featured, these extended narratives arguably both magnify and clarify tensions faced by couples making the transition to parenthood today: the ‘ideal’ of the reflexive, pure relationship is revealed to be very hard work, particularly after the arrival of children, as it makes absorbing the practical difficulties—and joys—of life extremely difficult.

By way of background, the first chapter reviews the literature on current parenting culture and relationships, pointing to some of the contradictions between them. The second chapter gives an overview of the political context into which new babies are born in the UK, including the kind of parental leave or childcare their parents can expect (if any). This chapter also provides a discussion of the methodological design of the study, following 20 sets of parents intensively during pregnancy and the first year of their child’s life, and then intermittently for the next five years.



The three central substantive chapters—which draw on the accounts by all couples in the sample—take as a starting point the practices (and the issues which flow from them) of birth, feeding and sleep, three heated topics in contemporary parenting culture. These are ‘practices’ of parenting which to varying degrees are unavoidable, and on a sliding scale of physiology. Birth might be said to be nearly 100% physiological (particularly as all mothers in this sample were birth mothers, and no babies were adopted or conceived via surrogacy, for example). By contrast, feeding is only potentially constrained by physiology, if women are breastfeeding or expressing milk, or if doing either of these in combination with the use of formula milk. Sleeping practices, by contrast, are not necessarily tied to physiology at all—although often seem to be. As such, these three practices provide an interesting spectrum which are highly physiologically constrained at one end, and more socially constrained at the other (although of course these overlap, as will become evident). Secondly, these are topics that are discussed at length by professionals and experts, and which are central to contemporary social policy, connecting to debates around gender, workload distribution and intimacy. Finally, birth, feeding and sleep can also be seen as the first major parenting issues, again which are dealt with as varying matters of urgency. They are practices which help establish a pattern of behaviour between parents—namely who, how, when and why one or other parent will respond. As work on the ‘structuring principle’ suggests, it is also the case that these early patterns can be extremely difficult to break (Searing et al., 1973).

By way of conclusion, the book returns to ideas about equality, subjectivity and relationality, pointing to some of the problems that arise when people (individuals, couples or parents) have to live and create meaning in their lives when normative assumptions are contradictory.

### VIGNETTE 1: ANTHONY AND CLAUDIA

I first met Anthony and Claudia at their house in South London, when Claudia was eight months pregnant with their first child. At that time, she worked as an academic at a central London university, whilst Anthony worked in the city as an IT manager. They were a high-earning and well-educated couple (Anthony earned more than Claudia, but their household income was around £150,000), who were highly reflexive. In our meetings (four in-person, joint interviews over the course of the next 12 months, followed up by email exchanges two-and-a-half, and five years