



Undoing Gendered Identities? Centrality and Meanings of Parental and Work Identities in Semi-Traditional, Equal-Sharing and Role-Reversed Couples

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study explored the centrality and meanings of men’s and women’s parental and work-related identities by comparing semi-traditional, equal-sharing, and role-reversed couples. Quantitative analysis involved 2,813 British parents (1,380 men, 1,433 women) who were primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or equal sharers with at least one child aged 11 or under. Qualitative analysis drew on 60 in-depth interviews with 10 couples from each of the three groups. Results indicated that the centrality of parental and work identities varied by role rather than gender, as both male and female caregivers reported less central work identities and more central parental identities compared to breadwinners and equal-sharers. Equal-sharers and role-reversers were characterized by women’s central work identity and men’s low centrality of work identity. In these couples, a ‘half and half’ parenting ideology underlined the construction of mothering and fathering as equivalent interchangeable identities, each forming only one half of a child’s parenting. Intertwining their maternal identity with an equivalent construction of their partners’ identity allowed women to reconcile a good mother ideal with central work identities, by redefining mothering as a responsibility for only half of the caregiving.

Keywords Identity · Gender · Fathering · Mothering · Childcare · Work and family

Over the past decades, developed countries have witnessed significant convergence in men’s and women’s involvement in paid work and childcare (Pailhé et al., 2021; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2018). This gradual change has been driven by women’s increased time in the workforce as well as men’s increased time with children (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017). Alongside these changes, there has been a corresponding shift in cultural norms and expectations surrounding motherhood and fatherhood (Adams et al., 2011; Pedersen, 2016; Scheibling, 2020). Whereas traditional gendered norms have centered fathering around breadwinning and mothering around caregiving,

growing evidence suggests that a large majority of parents view their role as combining both breadwinning and caregiving and believe childcare should be shared equally (Harrington, 2022; Knight & Brinton, 2017; McGill, 2014). Drawing on identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), the present study aims to explore the centrality and meanings of men’s and women’s parental and work-related identities. Specifically, it addresses the question of whether and to what extent the construction of these identities provides evidence for the occurrence of “undoing gender” in the family domain (Deutsch, 2007). As self-identities are shaped by individuals’ social and cultural environment and, in turn, guide and motivate their behavioral choices (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Yarrison, 2022), identities form an important link between societal forces and individuals’ everyday lived experiences.

To examine the processes underlying degendering of parental and work identities, the current study is the first to compare mothers and fathers across three distinct parenting arrangements in one comprehensive design: semi-traditional couples, where the mother is the primary caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner; couples who share paid work and childcare equally; and role-reversed couples, where the mother is the primary breadwinner and the father

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is the primary caregiver. Whereas prior studies often focused solely on primary caregiving fathers (e.g. Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020; Rochlen et al., 2008; Solomon, 2014), breadwinning mothers (e.g. Chesley, 2017; Medved, 2016; Meisenbach, 2010), or couples who share equally (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020), we gathered data from both fathers and mothers across each of the three parenting arrangements to enable comparative analysis and exploration of couple dynamics. In addition, whereas previous research primarily relied on small qualitative samples, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, drawing on quantitative samples of British fathers and mothers from the three groups as well as 60 in-depth interviews with 30 different-gender couples to address complementary questions about contemporary parents' identities.

Specifically, we utilized quantitative data to assess whether the centrality of parental and work-related identities varies by gender, family role, or both, and whether gender differences in identities are eliminated among equal-sharers and role-reversed couples. We further employed qualitative data to explore the meanings of parental and work-related identities for men and women who are the primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or equal-sharers. We sought to determine whether gendered identity meanings can be undone when family roles are degendered and individuals' daily functioning in these roles deviates from the traditional meanings attached to them. Our research questions concerning the centrality and meanings of identities are interconnected, as specific meanings render an identity important to the individual. Answers to these questions can shed light on potential pathways to achieving greater gender equality through the reconstruction of mothering and fathering identities.

Identity Theory and Gendered Identities

Identity theory defines role identities as the meanings applied to the self in a social role (Stryker, 1980, 2008). Whereas roles are external and refer to social positions and relationships, identities encompass the internalized meanings and expectations attached to a social role (Stryker & Burke, 2000). According to this theory, individuals have multiple identities that are organized in a hierarchy of importance (Stryker, 1980). The psychological centrality of an identity refers to the subjective importance attached to it by the individual (Rosenberg, 1979; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The theory further suggests that the self is a primary motivator of behavior (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker, 2008), with more central identities guiding behavior to a greater extent than less central identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Terry et al., 1999). Thus, the greater the centrality of an identity, the more time and effort individuals are willing to invest in

its enactment. A core premise of identity theory is that the centrality and meanings attached to identities are shaped through life experiences and embedded within individuals' particular circumstances (Merolla et al., 2012; Yarrison, 2022). That is, while the subjective importance and meaning of an identity are developed individually, they are influenced by the social and cultural environments in which a person lives and interacts (Yarrison, 2022). Social structures of various levels – large (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status), intermediate (e.g., organizations), and proximate (e.g., family) – affect the likelihood that the individuals located within them will develop certain identities (Merolla et al., 2012). Gender is considered a “master status” that often overrides other personal characteristics and affects the centrality and meanings of role identities (Carter, 2014; Stryker, 1987; Thoits, 1992).

Applying identity theory to the domain of family roles, the gendered sociocultural context within which individuals operate is of major significance. Extensive research has documented the differentiated expectations associated with the caregiver and provider roles depending on gender, wherein good fathering is associated primarily with breadwinning, while good mothering is associated with caregiving (e.g., Gaunt, 2013; Vink et al., 2023; Wall, 2013). Men and women internalize these gendered social expectations and develop self-identities that align with them (Carter, 2014; Thoits, 1992). Consequently, both the structure of the self-concept and the meanings attached to different identities (e.g., parent, worker) may vary based on gender (Stryker, 1987; Thoits, 1992).

More specifically, intensive mothering has been identified as a dominant ideology (Hays, 1996) which portrays women's parental role as child-centered, emotionally and physically demanding, and irreplaceable (Liss et al., 2013; Wall, 2013). The expectations and standards set by intensive mothering ideology inherently contradict involvement in paid work, and thus subscribing to this ideology increases women's experience of family-work conflict (Meeussen, & Van Laar, 2018). Studies have demonstrated the considerable cognitive efforts made by mothers to rationalize their employment and reconcile it with the ideology of intensive mothering (Hodges & Park, 2013; Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Lankes, 2022). This is achieved, for example, by emphasizing quality time with children and interpreting accessibility in terms of emotional availability rather than physical presence (Johnston & Swanson, 2006); or by constructing an alternative ideology of extensive mothering, wherein being a good mother involves ultimate responsibility for the child's wellbeing while delegating significant aspects of childcare to others (Christopher, 2012). Good fathering, in contrast, has been traditionally associated with breadwinning rather than active caregiving, and fathers' adherence to traditional masculine norms is associated with

lower involvement in childcare (Kaplan & Offer, 2022; Petts et al., 2018). Alongside growing expectations for intimate and involved fatherhood, cultural norms still largely portray fathers as secondary caregivers in comparison to mothers (Adams et al., 2011; Douglas et al., 2022; Schmitz, 2016; Vink et al., 2023).

These depictions of motherhood and fatherhood shape women's and men's identities as parents, resulting in more central parental identities in mothers compared to fathers (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Gaunt & Scott, 2017; Katz-Wise et al., 2010) and more central work identities in fathers compared to mothers (Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Manzi et al., 2022). Moreover, the significance of breadwinning to men's parenting role results in a greater alignment between their parental and work identities, unlike the perceived conflict between mothers' identities. Findings indicate that men's work and family identities are positively related to each other (Gaunt & Scott, 2014); their work identity centrality increases the more and younger children they have, and their parental identity centrality increases with their income (Gaunt & Scott, 2017; Hodges & Park, 2013). In contrast, women's work and family identities correlate negatively (Gaunt & Scott, 2014); their work identity centrality decreases the more and younger children they have, and their parental identity centrality decreases the more they earn (Friedman & Weissbrod, 2005; Gaunt & Scott, 2017; Hodges & Park, 2013).

Undoing Gendered Identities

The literature reviewed above draws on samples from the general population, thus involving couples who share family roles along normative gendered lines where the mother is the primary caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner (e.g. Gaunt & Scott, 2017; Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Manzi et al., 2022). This includes varying degrees of traditionality, from stay-at-home mothers married to single breadwinner fathers, to dual-earners wherein the mother combines paid work with ultimate responsibility for childcare. Despite this wide range, these couples generally adhere, at least to some extent, to traditional ideologies of mothering and fathering. However, the continuing trend over the past decades toward greater gender equality in employment and family work (Pailhé et al., 2021; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2018) incorporates a small but growing minority of couples who resist these ideologies and choose instead to share work and childcare equally, or reverse roles such that the father is the primary caregiver and the mother is the primary breadwinner (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020). The centrality and meanings of these individuals' identities are likely to differ from those of conventional male breadwinner/female caregiver

couples, both because their non-normative choices may have been driven by less gendered identities, and because their non-gendered family roles may further shape the centrality and meanings of their identities. Identity theory assumes bidirectional relationships between identities and individual circumstances; that is, identities drive behavioral choices, which create certain circumstances, which in turn shape identities (Merolla et al., 2012; Yarrison, 2022). Thus, for example, a mother's central professional identity may guide her choice to continue to commit to full-time employment, which in turn is likely to further enhance her professional identity. Similarly, a father's central parental identity may guide his choice to reduce his involvement in paid work to become an equal or primary caregiver, which in turn is likely to further enhance his parental identity.

Studies on couples who deviate from gendered expectations by sharing breadwinning and caregiving equally or reversing roles reveal substantially different conceptions of these men's and women's parental and work identities. Although not focused specifically on the centrality and meanings of role identities, qualitative studies on breadwinning mothers document their strong attachment to paid work and the importance they attribute to their independence and career progression, as well as the associated sense of accomplishment and pride (Chesley, 2017; Medved, 2016; Meisenbach, 2010). Studies on fathers who are equal or main caregivers similarly document their sense of pride in their parental role and close relationships with their children, alongside reduced connections between paternal identity and breadwinning (Deutsch et al., 2020; Rochlen et al., 2008; Solomon, 2014). Primary caregiving fathers in Solomon's study (2014), for example, defined good fathering in terms of emotional closeness rather than providing financially for their children. These fathers viewed paid work as interfering with their family lives and chose to leave employment to become primary caregivers (Solomon, 2014). Caregiving fathers in other studies often assumed their role due to a combination of circumstances, however embracing this responsibility led them to develop the skills, self-efficacy and identities that align with their caregiving role (Chesley, 2011; Deutsch, 1999; Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020). Importantly, the notion of interchangeability emerged in several studies, wherein both fathers and mothers who shared equally or reversed roles saw themselves as interchangeable parents, fulfilling fully equivalent parental functions rather than distinct functions of mothering and fathering (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020; Ranson, 2010; Solomon, 2014). This 'undoing' of gendered family roles (Deutsch, 2007) raises the possibility that the centrality and meanings of couples' identities are similarly degendered, that is, that men and women who share equally or reverse roles develop similar parental and work identities which are not gendered by conventional ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood.

Supporting this reasoning, quantitative studies have shown that the centrality of parental identity correlates positively with mothers' and fathers' involvement in childcare (Gaunt & Scott, 2014; Goldberg, 2015), and the centrality of work identity correlates positively with their work hours (Gaunt & Scott, 2014). However, studies exploring how the centrality of role identities varies by distinct family roles are scant. In two British samples, significant differences were found in the centrality of parental identities between primary caregiving mothers and their male breadwinning partners, whereas no differences were found among dual-earner (Gaunt & Scott, 2017) or role-reversed couples (Pinho & Gaunt, 2023). Similarly, significant gender differences were found in the centrality of work identities between fathers and mothers in traditional arrangements, whereas no differences appeared between dual-earners (Gaunt & Scott, 2017), and breadwinning mothers had more central work identity than caregiving fathers (Pinho & Gaunt, 2023). Taken together, these initial findings suggest that the centrality of parental and work identities varies more by family role than gender.

Overview and Research Questions

This study aimed to reveal the extent to which the underlying effect of gender on role identities (Carter, 2014; Thoits, 1992) can be undone when family roles are degendered and individuals' daily functioning in these roles diverges from the traditional gendered meanings attached to them. Using a combination of quantitative survey methods and qualitative in-depth interviews, we compared three groups of different-gender couples to explore how the centrality and meanings of identities vary by gender and family role; namely, semi-traditional couples in which the mother is the primary caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner, equal sharing couples, and role-reversed couples, in which the mother is the primary breadwinner and the father is the primary caregiver. The criteria for inclusion in each of the three groups were developed to account for both breadwinning and caregiving activities and were based on a combination of time distribution and task allocation measures. These included the participants' and their partners' weekly work hours, hours spent as sole caregivers, the division of childcare tasks, and the proportion of family income contributed by each partner. In each of these measures, we examined the gaps between the partners to identify participants who are primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or sharing caregiving and breadwinning equally with their partners. All the participants had at least one biological child aged 11 or under living with them and their partner. Although limiting the child's age restricted the sample to somewhat younger couples, this captures the life stage when childcare needs are most demanding and work-family conflict is highest.

The mixed-methods comparative analysis was designed to address the following set of questions:

- *Research Question 1:* Does the centrality of parental and work-related identities vary by gender, role, or both? Are there gender differences in the centrality of identities among semi-traditional couples, with fathers having more central work identities and mothers having more central parental identity compared to their partners? If so, are these differences eliminated among equal sharers, and reversed in role-reversed couples?
- *Research Question 2:* What are the meanings of parental and work-related identities for men and women who are the primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or equal sharers? Is there greater similarity in these meanings among partners who share equally? To what extent do the meanings attached to the male caregiver's parental identity align with those of the female caregiver, and the meanings attached to the female breadwinner's work identity align with those of the male breadwinner?

These questions were examined using samples of married or cohabiting different-gender British parents. Despite increasing similarities in British men's and women's involvement in paid work and childcare over the past decades (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017), family roles continue to reflect traditional gendered norms (Craig & Mullan, 2011). Compared to other European countries, British men tend to work longer hours (Eurostat, 2022), and although mothers' employment rates are relatively high, rates of mothers' full-time employment are among the lowest in Europe (Costa Dias et al., 2020; Kanji, 2011). These characteristics can be attributed to cultural conventions surrounding motherhood and fatherhood as well as gendered state policies concerning parenting leave and a lack of state-funded provision of childcare for young children.

Method

We adopted a mixed-methods approach to combine a quantitative examination of variations in the centrality of parental and work-related identities based on gender and family roles, with an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings associated with these identities. Together, these data illuminate how identities shape and are being shaped by men's and women's roles as primary breadwinners or primary caregivers within their families.

Quantitative Sample and Procedure

Quantitative data involved a sample of 6,072 British parents recruited as part of a larger research project on work and childcare (Gaunt et al., 2022). Of these, 5,605 participants

were selected at random from members of the YouGov UK panel, and 467 participants were recruited via advertisements in community centers, playgroups, social media and parenting websites/forums. Participants were married or living with a partner and had biological child/ren together, with at least one child aged 11 or under. Those who had more than one child were asked to respond to questions based on their youngest child. The survey took approximately 20 min to complete. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Lincoln Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study.

Of the full sample, 2,813 participants (independent samples of 1,380 men and 1,433 women) met the criteria for inclusion in one of the three study groups and were retained for further analysis. Specifically, 258 participants, including 144 men (55.8%) and 114 women (44.2%) were identified as role-reversed; that is, the father worked at least 7 h per week less than the mother, provided at least 7 h more of childcare, carried out at least half of the childcare tasks, and contributed up to 40% of the family income. Another 2,208 participants, including 1,010 men (45.7%) and 1,198 women (54.3%) met the inclusion criteria for the traditional group; the mother worked at least 7 h less than the father, provided at least 7 h more of childcare, performed at least half of the childcare tasks and contributed up to 40% of the family income. Finally, 347 participants, including 226 men (65.1%) and 121 women (34.9%) were identified as equal sharers based on up to 5 h difference between partners in their work and childcare hours, carrying out approximately half of the childcare tasks ($M=2.6$ to 3.4 on the 1–5 scale described below), and contributing approximately half of the family income (up to a 40/60 ratio).

Most of the participants were married or in a civil partnership and lived in England. The sample had a slight overrepresentation of participants who identified as White (90% compared to 86% of the general population) or White British (84.1% compared to 80.5% of the population) and had a university degree (61% compared to 47% of the population) (Department for Education, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2020). There were no significant differences between the three study groups in educational qualifications, ethnicity or region where they lived.

There were no significant differences in income between fathers and mothers within the same role (i.e. between male and female breadwinners, caregivers, or equal sharers). Of the caregivers, 73% of the women and 66% of the men earned significantly below average, whereas most of the main breadwinners and equal sharers earned either an average income (40% and 45% respectively), or slightly above the average (32% and 34% respectively). Parents in traditional arrangements tended to have more children ($M=1.99$, $SD=0.87$) compared to parents in equal-sharing ($M=1.80$, $SD=0.78$) and role-reversed arrangements ($M=1.78$,

$SD=0.89$), $F(2, 2807)=11.92$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.008$ (21.7% in the traditional group had three children or more, compared to 12.4% in equal-sharing and 15.9% in role-reversed). In addition, the youngest child of equal sharing couples tended to be older ($M=5.06$, $SD=3.32$) compared to traditional ($M=4.24$, $SD=3.30$) and role-reversed couples ($M=3.70$, $SD=2.77$), $F(2, 2807)=13.23$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.009$.

Quantitative Measures

Hours of Work and Childcare

Participants indicated the number of weekly hours they and their partners spent in paid work. They also reported the number of hours per week during which they were the sole care providers when the child was awake, and the number of hours per week in which their partner was the sole care provider when the child was awake.

Share of Childcare Tasks

To assess involvement in childcare in terms of task performance, a "Who does what?" measure asked participants to indicate their involvement relative to their partner in 19 childcare tasks (adapted from Gaunt, 2005; Gaunt & Scott, 2014). The tasks were selected to reflect daily physical care activities (feeding, dressing, putting to bed), social and emotional care (reading, playing, helping with social/emotional problems), and management/responsibility for childcare (planning activities, scheduling meetings, choosing daycare/school). Participants were asked: "In the division of labor between you and your partner, which of you does each of these tasks?" Responses were indicated on a 5-point scale ranging from *almost always my partner* (1) through *my partner more than myself* (2), *both of us equally* (3), and *myself more than my partner* (4) to *almost always myself* (5). Participants were also given the opportunity to rate *not applicable to my child* (9), which was treated as missing data. An average of the 19 task ratings was calculated to obtain a score of total involvement in childcare tasks. Higher scores on this measure indicated greater involvement of the participant relative to their partner. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .93 for women and .88 for men.

Identity Centrality

Gaunt and Scott's (2014) measure of the psychological centrality of identities was utilized. Participants were asked to distribute 100% between various identities in a way that reflected the extent to which each identity was important to them. They were presented with a list of eight identities (friend, sibling, wife/husband/partner, work, son/daughter, parent, national identity, religious identity) and could also

add other identities to the list (for similar lists, see Cassidy & Trew, 2001; Pinho & Gaunt, 2023). This measure of identity centrality allows participants to express the equal importance of two or more identities by allocating them equal percentages. The percentages allocated to parental and work identities were then coded to obtain participants' psychological centrality scores.

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Participants indicated their level of education, monthly personal income after tax, and the percentage of family income they and their partners contributed. They also reported their age, the number of children in the household and the age and gender of each, their ethnicity, and the region where they lived.

Qualitative Sample and Procedure

Qualitative data were gathered from 60 parents (30 couples) via in-depth semi-structured interviews. Couples living in the UK who had at least one child aged 11 or under were invited through social media, organizations' mailing lists and parents' groups to complete an online screening survey. Based on their data, those who met the inclusion criteria for one of the three study groups (as described above) were interviewed; 10 couples in each group and 30 in total. Both partners from each couple were interviewed separately. The interviews covered a broad range of topics related to their current division of parenting and breadwinning activities, the history of their division and the decision-making process it involved, and the participants' experiences and subjective perceptions of their family roles. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h and were conducted online via video call platforms between November 2020 and July 2021. Participants were given a £30 Amazon voucher as compensation once both partners had been interviewed.

Participants in the interviews were aged between 32 and 56 years old. 83.3% had one or two children and 16.7% had three or four children. The age of their youngest child ranged from 4 months to 11 years and 36.7% had at least one child under three years old. Most of the participants described themselves as White British ($n = 50$, 83.3%) and 16.7% described their ethnicity as 'Irish', 'Mixed White and Asian' or 'Any other White background'. Our sample tended to be highly educated, however individual incomes varied greatly between less than £7,000 per year to over £52,000 per year, and couples' household income ranged from the 2nd lowest to the 10th (top) decile group, with the majority in the 6th or 7th decile group (55k–65k per household). Of these interviewees, 40% of the men and 23% of the women had white-collar jobs, mainly in business administration, civil service, or IT. A third of the men and two-thirds of the women had pink-collar jobs, mainly in

education, retail or healthcare; and 26% of the men had blue/gray collar jobs, including police officers, gardener, carpenter and factory workers. Finally, 58% worked full-time (defined as 30 or more hours per week), 32% worked part-time or held zero-hours contracts (29 or less hours per week), and 10% individuals were retired or unemployed.

Analyses

Quantitative analyses examined the differences in identity centrality between men and women who are primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or equal-sharers. A set of two 2 (gender: men vs. women) X 3 (parenting arrangement: semi-traditional vs. equal-sharing vs. role-reversed) between-participants analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to explore gender and arrangement effects on work-related and parental identity centrality. Significant main effects and interactions were followed up with simple-effects analysis.

Qualitative analyses explored the subjective meanings attached to parents' work-related and caring identities. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded in qualitative analysis software (NVivo). We analyzed the data through a process of thematic analysis which involves the generation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We began with familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts, as well as writing a detailed 'pen portrait' for each participant (Neale, 2016). Noteworthy aspects of the data were then systematically coded, and relevant extracts were grouped under each code. Codes were then organized into potential themes, which were further reviewed and checked in relation to the coded extracts. The initial themes were refined, named and described, and commonalities and differences within and across mothers and fathers in the three study groups were considered. Throughout this process, we maintained reflexivity by critically examining our own positionality as cisgender women and how it might shape our interpretation of the data. Our analysis enabled us to interrogate the subjective meanings of parental and work identities for fathers and mothers in different family roles, thus unravelling the experiences and perceptions behind the patterns of statistical findings.

Results

The Centrality of Work-Related Identities

A 2 (gender: men vs. women) X 3 (parenting arrangement: semi-traditional vs. equal-sharing vs. role-reversed) ANOVA on participants' work identity centrality revealed significant main effects of gender, $F(1, 2752) = 14.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$, and parenting arrangement, $F(2, 2752) = 13.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$. These effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction, $F(2, 2752) = 111.51$, $p < .001$,

$\eta_p^2 = .075$. Simple effects analyses (Fig. 1) indicated that fathers had more central work identity ($M = 12.93$, $SD = 10.57$) than mothers ($M = 6.36$, $SD = 7.63$) among the semi-traditional parents, $t(1, 2160) = 16.33$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.72$, whereas mothers had more central work identity ($M = 16.25$, $SD = 11.23$) than fathers ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 10.26$) among the role-reversed parents, $t(1, 229) = 7.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.98$. There was also a difference in work identity centrality between mothers ($M = 13.76$, $SD = 10.86$) and fathers ($M = 11.31$, $SD = 10.28$) who shared family roles equally, $t(1, 342) = 2.06$, $p = .040$, $d = 0.23$. Additionally, post hoc Tukey tests indicated that primary caregiving fathers had less central work identity than fathers who were equal sharers or primary breadwinners ($ps < .001$) and primary caregiving mothers had less central work identity than mothers who were equal sharers or primary breadwinners ($ps < .001$).

The Centrality of Parental Identities

Analysis conducted on the participants' parental identity centrality revealed significant main effects of gender, $F(1, 2752) = 14.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$, and parenting arrangement, $F(2, 2752) = 22.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$. These effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction, $F(2, 2752) = 31.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .022$. Simple effects analyses (Fig. 2) indicated that mothers had more central parental identity ($M = 42.01$, $SD = 16.00$) than fathers ($M = 31.17$, $SD = 13.69$) among the semi-traditional parents, $t(1, 2160) = 16.97$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.72$, whereas no significant differences were found between the parental identity centrality of equal-sharing mothers ($M = 30.42$, $SD = 14.55$) and fathers ($M = 30.82$, $SD = 15.48$), $t(1, 342) = 0.23$, $p = .817$, $d = 0.03$, and between mothers ($M = 36.81$, $SD = 12.94$)

and fathers ($M = 37.27$, $SD = 16.47$) who reversed roles, $t(1, 250) = 0.24$, $p = .806$, $d = 0.03$. Additionally, post hoc Tukey tests indicated that primary caregiving fathers had more central parental identity than fathers who were equal sharers or primary breadwinners ($ps < .001$), and primary caregiving mothers had more central parental identity than equal-sharing mothers ($p < .001$) or primary breadwinners ($p = .002$). However, primary breadwinning mothers had more central parental identity than mothers who shared caregiving equally ($p = .006$).

The Meanings of Work-Related Identities

“A Big Part of Who I Am”: Central Work Identities in Equal-Sharing and Breadwinning Mothers

In line with the findings from the quantitative survey, women who shared equally, as well as men and women who were the primary breadwinners, were characterized by central work-related identities. These interviewees often used terms such as “fulfilment,” “purpose,” and “pride” to articulate the subjective meanings of their paid work. Women who shared equally or reversed roles were particularly inclined to view their work as a significant component of their self-definition, as expressed by equal-sharing mother Abby: “part of my identity is who I am at work and that’s part of my purpose and achievement.” Breadwinning mother Lucy reflected, “my career has always very much been my sole identity ... my career’s always been, not my number one priority, but it’s my happiness and my identity.” For female breadwinners like Lucy, reduced involvement in paid work was experienced as a loss of identity. Lucy explained that she initially attempted to reduce her work hours to 60% after

Fig. 1 Work Identity Centrality by Gender and Parenting Arrangement

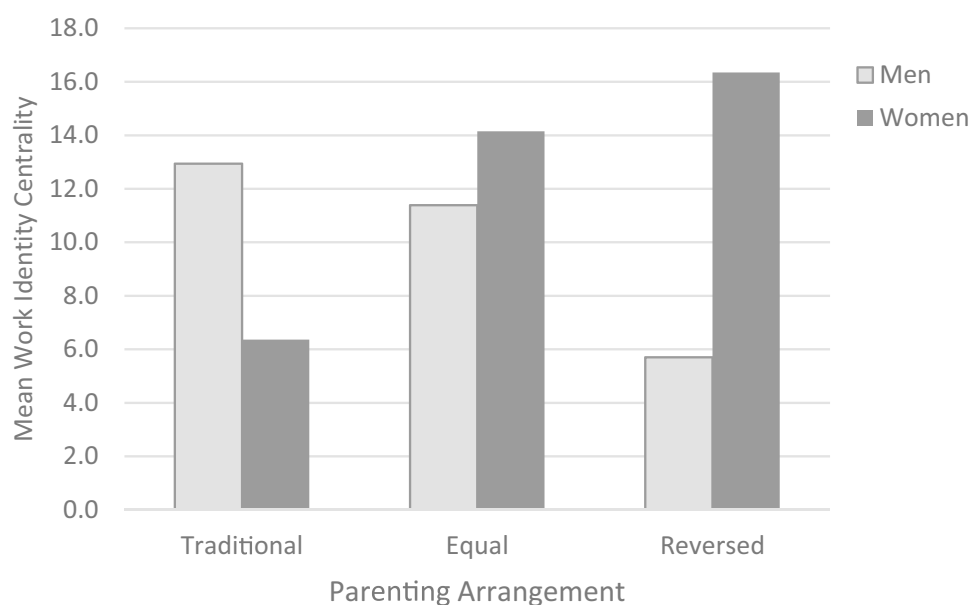
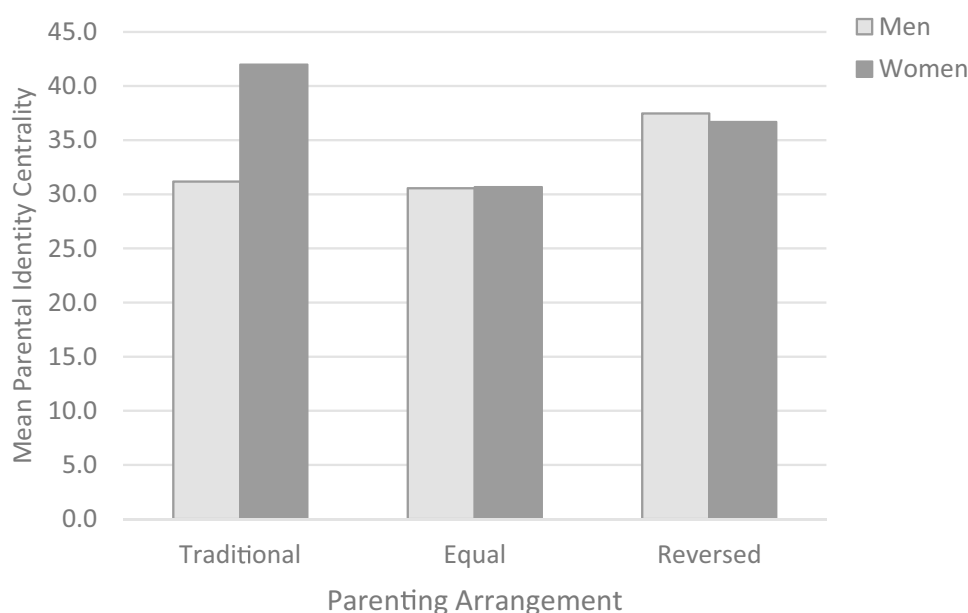


Fig. 2 Parental Identity Centrality by Gender and Parenting Arrangement



maternity leave “because that’s what everyone did,” however she soon increased her hours again:

Because, and it definitely related to my identity of being a doctor ... as much as it’s a tough career, I do feel quite miserable if I’m not able to do it, cause it feels a big part of who I am. (Lucy, breadwinning mother)

A sense of identity loss was also reported by equal-sharing mothers such as Mary, who reflected on her maternity leave, “looking back, I couldn’t wait to get back to work, ... I just felt like I’d lost my identity. I was just mum. I just wanted to be Mary again, like Mary the nurse with some sort of purpose of work.” Some female breadwinners faced and resisted expectations from others to scale back on paid work (Young & Schieman, 2018). Jennifer, for example, received a comment from her mother-in-law, “and I was like, I’ve been working on this career for like 20 years, do you really think I’m just gonna decide to give it up?” Similarly, Christine, a civil servant, encountered expectations from colleagues to transition to a less demanding part-time role after maternity leave, which she swiftly dismissed saying “no actually, I fully intend on continuing to do the big interesting sexy jobs, thank you very much [laughs].”

Interestingly, when asked about the potential influence of their parents as role models, a couple of female breadwinners mentioned that their fathers served as sources of inspiration. In the absence of maternal primary breadwinner role models, these career-oriented women looked to their fathers for inspiration, for example, Abby explained:

If anything I’ve, it’s not the childcare responsibilities I take from my parents, it’s the work side of things that I’ve taken from my dad if that makes sense? He was

always very, very hard working and very ambitious and very successful. And I guess in a way he’s a role model on my professional side. (Abby, equal-sharing mother)

Overall, female equal sharers and breadwinners expressed strong, unapologetic attachment to paid work as an important part of their self-concept. While almost all male breadwinners in our sample expressed similarly strong work identities, their accounts tended to be shorter and more straightforward. Unlike their female counterparts, male breadwinners’ attachment to paid work or decision to continue working full time after having children have never been challenged and therefore justifications were not required. John’s perspective on his work was representative of breadwinning fathers: “I enjoy my work, I’m very passionate about my work. And I would, I would be in full time employment if it was for children or no children.”

“My Job Doesn’t Define Me”: Low Centrality of Work Identities in Equal-Sharing and Primary Caregiving Fathers

Unlike fathers in semi-traditional parenting arrangements, most male equal sharers and primary caregivers did not view paid work as an important part of their self-concept. Some of these fathers expressed that while they liked their paid work, they were not particularly motivated or ambitious about it. They often described their job as a means to an end rather than the center of their lives or their main focus, and some cited financial needs as the sole motivation for their work. Edward’s account, for instance, exemplified that of equal-sharing fathers:

I’m not driven by the work in terms of, you know, this is my purpose in life; my purpose is more my

family and so I'm much more driven by being around for them than I am by what work is. (Edward, equal-sharing father)

When asked about their paid work, fathers in role-reversed arrangements often referred to their partners as a standard for comparison and highlighted the contrasting levels of career drive. Nick for example, explained:

I'd never really found like jobs that I'd enjoy and I would, I would never, I don't really like working [laughs] to be honest. And, whereas my wife's career driven and like ... she wants to do things and achieve things. (Nick, primary caregiving father)

Jason, a primary caregiver working part-time, expressed a sentiment that resonated with many other non-traditional fathers in our sample:

Yeah it's good, I like it. So generally I'm not somebody who likes work in general. So I like, since I started working I've been looking forward to the day where I don't have to work any more. I just see it as a huge inconvenience to living my life [laughs]. (Jason, primary caregiving father)

Disrupted Work Identities in Primary Caregivers

Studies show that mothers of young children are more likely than fathers to modify their work conditions to accommodate childcare (Young & Schieman, 2018). This includes a range of strategies such as scaling back on work hours, seeking flexible work arrangements, transitioning to less demanding roles and part-time employment. In our study, both mothers and fathers who were primary caregivers employed these strategies to enable them to take care of babies and toddlers within an environment of unaffordable childcare provision. However, the narratives surrounding their work-related identities suggests that while most male caregivers were already characterized by lower centrality of work identities before becoming primary caregivers, most female caregivers had central work identities which shifted following the birth of a child.

All the mothers in our semi-traditional group were involved in paid work to some extent but tended to perceive themselves as non-driven. Most of them described their current work as something they are not passionate about, chosen primarily to accommodate childcare needs. Susan, for example, stated "I just very much go in, do my thing, go home." These mothers reported being career-oriented before becoming mothers and described significant changes in their work identity after the birth of their child. Susan expressed this transformation, saying "it's a very different world to what it was a couple of years ago [laughs] ... before I had him, my

work was my life ... it was always work, work, work. And now, work is, you know, very far down the list [laughs]." The caregiving mothers' accounts of their shifting identities convey an underlying assumption of conflicting parental and work roles. Karen explained, "I would have wanted to further my career but I also want kids. And the two doesn't work together [laughs], I can't do both." Often, this shift in identity was experienced as a sacrifice, sometimes described in terms of identity loss:

so with my second [child], I think I kind of, I always reflect back on this and think I'd, I'd accepted the identity of being a mum by that point. I think with my first, I was very career orientated and I found the concept of becoming someone's mum odd. I lost my name. I was just mum of, and it took me a while to kind of figure that out. (Lily, primary caregiving mother)

Many of the primary caregiving mothers struggled to come to terms with their sacrifices, as they had worked hard to advance in their careers before becoming mothers. Eva's reflections are representative of this challenge:

I always said to my friend that's what I struggle with, that you know, something that you've worked hard and you've built up, you know, over the years and, you know, I was quite high up, to be honest. Before I got pregnant with [daughter] ... I find that hard ... to let all that go, and then like I say, the role I'm in now, I just kind of feel I only took it cause it fitted well with, you know, with the girls. (Eva, primary caregiving mother)

Experiences of identity shift were less prevalent and significant among fathers in our sample, although some mentioned that "having a baby has taken my focus off work" (Anthony, equal-sharing father). Only two primary caregiving fathers clearly had a similar experience of sacrifice. Both fathers stopped working completely to care for their babies and support their partners' demanding careers. Both fathers talked about the loss of identity and looked forward to resuming paid work as soon as their children started school. Ryan shared, "I feel like I made a very, you know, big sacrifice stopping working," and Liam commented "I very much miss my old career." He elaborated:

I got a lot of satisfaction out of being good at my job. ... that's where I got a lot of my self-worth from, you know. ... that's where I got my sense of self, sense of satisfaction and everything like that. Obviously, I get that from [son] ... and I feel very good about doing the best I can for him, ... but the sense of satisfaction you get from parenting is a different sense of satisfaction than you get from a career, so I am very much looking forward to going back to work. (Liam, primary caregiving father)

The Meanings of Parental Identities

Semi-Traditional Mothers Negotiating Intensive Mothering

Exploring the meanings of maternal identities among our interviewees revealed varied degrees of adherence to the good mother ideal and intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996) along with reinterpretations and resistance. All mothers, including the semi-traditional group, rejected the portrayal of mothers as a constant presence in their child's life and returned to at least part-time employment after maternity leave. However, semi-traditional mothers still implicitly subscribed to the notion of mothers carrying the ultimate responsibility for the child, leading them to modify their paid work to accommodate childcare. Both mothers and fathers in the semi-traditional group tended to assume that the fathers' full-time employment was a given, and presumed that when fathers are at work, childcare would be split between the mother and other childcare arrangements. Mark, for example, a semi-traditional father of a 4-month-old baby, shared:

In the last few weeks now, we've started to talk about what happens after maternity leave and how Ellie sort of starts to go back to work and what balance we want to strike there. But yeah, the conversation is all about Ellie finding that balance and we're not really thinking how do I contribute more to the care. (Mark, breadwinning father)

Similarly to other semi-traditional mothers, Mark's partner, Ellie, described herself as career-oriented, who "worked very hard to get where I am." Yet, she explained, "I always knew that if we had a child it would be me that had to make that sacrifice ... it's just how it had to be." Another semi-traditional mother, Eva, reflected similarly: "it wasn't even a discussion, it was automatic that he would, he would stay full-time, I would find a role part-time."

Another evidence for the influence of the good mother ideal was the tendency to justify paid work with reference to the benefits for the child (Johnston & Swanson, 2006), either due to the developmental advantages of attending nursery or indirectly through the mother's mental health. For instance, Susan, a semi-traditional mother who divides her weekdays between part-time work and caring for her 2-year-old son, expressed that "I think it's really good for him to not be with me 100% of the time. I don't think that's very healthy."

Importantly, semi-traditional couples also demonstrated endorsement of egalitarian ideology and resistance to intensive mothering ideology by sharing childcare equally when fathers were at home. Thus, although the time balance between these fathers' paid work and childcare responsibilities was not being actively considered or discussed as much, they were still expected to contribute their fair share

of housework and childcare tasks when not at work. Consequently, in virtually all the couples we interviewed, regardless of their parenting arrangement, parents shared housework and childcare tasks when both partners were present, rather than considering these tasks as confined solely to women.

The Good Enough Parent: "Doing Your Own Best"

Evidence for the diminishing impact of intensive mothering ideology lies in the scarcity of expressions of maternal guilt in relation to being away at work (Hays, 1996; Maclean et al., 2021; Sutherland, 2010). Such expressions were equally infrequent across the three groups of mothers, suggesting that the greater involvement of equal-sharing and breadwinning mothers in paid work did not give rise to significant feelings of guilt. For example Lucy, a breadwinning mother, stated, "I don't have guilt around the kind of parent I am" and "I think I've got the balance as good as I can get it".

Instead, guilt was expressed by equal numbers of parents in all groups, both mothers and fathers (except for caregiving fathers – see below) regarding instances of sometimes lacking patience with the child, displaying excessive harshness, or allowing work-related stress to affect their responses to the child. For example, semi-traditional mother Lily, shared, "I know I don't get it right all the time and yes, I am impatient and maybe I shout a bit louder than I should sometimes." Breadwinning mother Jennifer expressed a similar sentiment, saying "there are times when I shout too much, and then I feel guilty ... especially if I'm shouting because I'm stressed." Breadwinners sometimes experienced guilt for being distracted by work, for example Meera expressed, "sometimes I feel like I, I'm not as present as I should be. Like sometimes I'm checking my phone, I'm checking my emails. I'm doing those things that people do and then regret." However, she then clarified, "I don't feel wracked with guilt."

It is important to note that these feelings of guilt did not seem to reflect endorsement of intensive mothering, as evidenced by the equal numbers of fathers expressing them. The perspective of semi-traditional father Harry on his relationship with his 3-year-old daughter exemplifies this point:

Sometimes I feel bad because ... I'm not always present. Like, you know, when you're playing but then you're thinking about, especially if you're really busy and stressed with work, you think about work. That happens sometimes. And then sometimes, like, maybe sometimes I'm a bit too short-tempered with her. Like, probably tell her off sometimes before I should. Yeah, and then just like you just sort of feel, if you tell your kid off, you always feel a bit guilty afterwards. (Harry, breadwinning father)

Overall, when asked how they felt about the kind of parents they were, the most frequent response from both fathers

and mothers expressed satisfaction with themselves as parents along with acknowledgment of their imperfections and an emphasis on striving to do their best. Resisting intensive mothering ideology and pressures toward perfect mothering (Hays, 1996; Henderson et al., 2016), mothers (as well as fathers) in all three groups concurred that perfection is unrealistic and thus the ultimate goal is to do their best. Breadwinning mother Nicole explained: “motherhood to me seems like one of those things where you have to just say at a certain point, ‘you’re doing your best’. It might not be the best, but you are doing your own best.” Semi-traditional father Nicholas similarly claimed: “I hope I’m doing the right thing is all I can do. I do my best and I’m, very, I try as hard as I can.” Although very few parents explicitly used the term “good enough mother/father,” their narratives suggested that their ideals of being a good mother or a good father have been adapted to include the acknowledgment of their flaws without undermining the overall perception of being a good parent (Pedersen, 2016).

The one exception was primary caregiving fathers, who rather than viewing themselves as “good enough fathers” and struggling with some doubts and regrets, tended to express overwhelmingly positive views of themselves as fathers. Ryan explained that he has “a bond with [son] that ... a lot of fathers would be very jealous about” and Nick felt that “there’s not much I would change I think if I had to do anything all over again.” Jason’s account of his fathering is representative of the primary caregiving fathers:

I guess the best way I can describe it is I can’t think of any way that it could be improved. It’s pretty much as, like if I was to, before, say years before having kids if I was to like sit down and like make like a strategy about how, you know, I’d want it to go or whatever, or how my relationship with the kids would be, I couldn’t really have drawn it up much better, it’s really good. (Jason, primary caregiving father)

These high levels of satisfaction with oneself as a parent can be interpreted drawing on the shifting standards model (Biernat et al., 1991; Gaunt, 2013), which suggests that stereotypic expectations serve as standards against which an individual is compared and evaluated. When judging their own fathering, these men’s unusually high levels of involvement compared to other men seem to yield particularly positive self-views.

Half and Half Parenting: “You Only Own 50% of That Child”

The discussion above indicates a nuanced ambivalence within the semi-traditional group regarding intensive mothering ideology. On one hand, these couples embraced the notion that it was the mother’s responsibility to strike a balance between paid work and childcare duties, leading

mothers to experience their work and parental identities as conflicting. On the other, most of these couples expected and practiced equal sharing of housework and childcare when both partners were present.

In comparison to semi-traditional couples, equal sharers and role-reversers demonstrated a more complete rejection of intensive mothering ideology. Closer to the concept of interchangeability (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020; Ranson, 2010), these couples eschewed the notion of maternal responsibility for childcare and practiced equality in both task allocation and time distribution. They not only perceived mothering and fathering as interchangeable, thus conceptually and practically degendering the meanings of those identities (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020), but also intertwined the meaning of their parental identity with their perception of their partner’s identity, thereby constructing mothering and fathering as equivalent components, each forming just one half of the child’s parenting. For instance, equal-sharing mother Ashley stated that “you only own 50% of that child, you both created that child, therefore you’re only 50% responsible for that child.” She elaborated further:

I’m very much of the mindset that we both brought her into the world, so we’re both 50% responsible for her. I know meeting other mums on being on maternity leave, they feel solely responsible for their child, and if the dad helps then that’s great. I don’t feel like that ... I feel like we both own half of her, so we’re both half responsible for all the tasks that, you know, come along with having a child. (Ashley, equal-sharing mother)

This sense of shared ownership was also evident in fathers’ narratives. For example, Liam, a primary caregiver, explained that “my main priority is [son], cause, you know, even if I didn’t feel fully like oh, [son] is my world, kind of thing, he’s still my responsibility and my primary responsibility.” Expressing the same notion of fathering as half of parenting, Matthew, an equal-sharer, referred to his 50% responsibility as “natural”:

It’s just, just seems like a natural function and, and sort of taking responsibility for this is a thing. I went into this with my eyes open, I chose to have a child and was aware of the responsibility that I was taking on and, and did that. And, have done the childcare, done my bit. (Matthew, equal-sharing father)

Matthew’s partner, Diane, conveyed this perception of equivalent parent roles by referring to a hypothetical scenario in which he would need to become a single parent. She stated: “I know it’s not very nice to say but like if I were to die he’d be fine. Like, you know, ... he’s 100% a full rounded parent.”

As previously observed in other studies, traces of intensive mothering ideology were also evident among

equal-sharing and role-reversed couples in terms of the mental labor and logistics around childcare. Consistent with prior research (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020), equal-sharing and breadwinning mothers were more likely than their partners to handle tasks such as nursery and school administration, arranging medical appointments, and planning family activities and playdates. However, unlike semi-traditional couples where these responsibilities fell exclusively on mothers, some non-traditional couples shared them more equally. Moreover, while primary caregiving mothers tended to accept these responsibilities as given, equal-sharing mothers expected to share the mental labor equally and were dissatisfied with the unequal division, sometimes making it a main source of conflict.

Discussion

Our mixed-methods study explored the possibility of undoing gendered identities among couples who share paid work and childcare equally or reverse roles (Deutsch, 2007; Pinho & Gaunt, 2023). Overall, both quantitative and qualitative findings confirmed that equal-sharing and role-reversing of breadwinning and caregiving are enabled by and reinforce degendered parental and work identities, wherein fathering and mothering are constructed as equivalent interchangeable roles (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020; Ranson, 2010; Solomon, 2014) rather than two distinct roles with differential connections to involvement in paid work.

Analysis of the quantitative survey data indicated that the centrality of work identities varies by family role rather than gender. Specifically, mothers and fathers who were the primary caregivers had less central work identities compared to both male and female main breadwinners and equal sharers. There was also a small but significant difference in work identities among equal sharers, wherein equal-sharing mothers had more central work identities than their partners. These findings were validated by the qualitative data which revealed strong, unapologetic attachment to paid work among female equal sharers and breadwinners, who viewed their work identities as an important part of their self-concept. These were often described in contrast with their partners' identities, as male equal sharers and primary caregivers tended to have less central work identities already before becoming parents. A combination of women's strong attachment to paid work and men's low centrality of work identity might therefore form one of the conditions that enables women to negotiate equal or reversed distribution of tasks and time in paid work and childcare (Deutsch et al., 2020). This combination may sometimes reflect mate preferences among career-oriented women, who tend to seek a more communal-oriented partners (Meeussen et al., 2019). Unlike female equal sharers and breadwinners,

mothers who were primary caregivers reported being career-oriented before becoming mothers and undergoing significant changes in their work identity. These changes were sometimes experienced as identity loss and many struggled to come to terms with their sacrifices. In contrast, most male caregivers were already characterized by lower centrality of work identities before assuming the primary caregiver role.

The centrality of parental identities also varied based on family role more than gender. Specifically, primary caregiving fathers had more central parental identities compared to fathers who shared equally or were the main breadwinners for their families, and primary caregiving mothers had more central parental identities compared to mothers who shared equally or were the main breadwinners. However, the parental identities of primary breadwinning mothers were as central as those of their caregiving partners, and more central than those of mothers who shared caregiving equally. This finding might reflect a greater diversity among role-reversed couples compared to equal-sharers in terms of the motivations and circumstances behind their parenting arrangements. Previous studies showed that equal sharing most often results from intentional choices driven by egalitarian ideology (Deutsch et al., 2020). In contrast, while role-reversing sometimes stems from the mother's stronger attachment to paid work and the father's central parental identity, some role-reversed couples find themselves reluctantly driven into this arrangement due to employment circumstances (e.g. unemployment, retraining) (Pinho et al., 2021). This variability might account for the higher mean centrality of breadwinning mothers' parental identity; some of them may be breadwinners who would prefer to take on the primary caregiving role in other circumstances (Pinho et al., 2024).

An emerging theme across all family roles and genders was the adaptation of the ideals of being a good mother or a good father to include acknowledgment of imperfections and striving to do 'your own best'. Accepting the 'good enough parent' as an ideal and a goal was common to both mothers and fathers, thus reflecting partial rejection of intensive mothering ideology and pressures toward perfect mothering (Pedersen, 2016). This interpretation is supported by the infrequent expressions of maternal guilt in relation to being away at work across all three groups of mothers (Hays, 1996; Sutherland, 2010).

The qualitative analysis further revealed a nuanced ambivalence within the semi-traditional group regarding intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996). These couples subscribed to the notion of mothers carrying the ultimate responsibility for the child, thereby accepting fathers' full-time employment as a given and expecting mothers to adjust their paid work to accommodate childcare. However, there was also evidence of resistance to intensive mothering

ideology as most couples in this group expected and practiced equal sharing of housework and childcare when both partners were present. Although this equal distribution of tasks deviates from intensive mothering ideology, it still maintains a gendered aspect compared to equal-sharers who expected and practiced an equal distribution of both tasks and time.

Previous investigations into mothers' identities and how they navigate cultural expectations have identified a range of cognitive strategies and identity constructions women use to reconcile intensive mothering ideologies with their work identity. Mothers in Johnston & Swanson's study (2006), for example, framed their employment decisions as beneficial to their children, whereas in Christopher's study (2012), mothers reframed good mothering as being in charge while delegating significant childcare duties to others, a concept she termed 'extensive mothering'. Our findings highlight an alternative approach to reconciling a good mother ideal with central work identities, namely the 'half and half' parenting. This entails a construction of maternal identity in tandem with the construction of fathering; mothering and fathering are understood as equivalent interchangeable roles (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020; Ranson, 2010), each carrying only half of the responsibility for caregiving. In this way, the conflict between mothering ideals and paid work is resolved by redefining mothering as a responsibility for only half of the parenting. This allows mothers to be relieved from half of the childcare duties, enabling them to maintain significant involvement in paid work.

A mother's fulfilment of such maternal identity is only viable when paired with a man whose paternal identity is constructed in the same way. Similar to previous studies on caregiving fathers, male equal-sharers and primary caregivers in our study constructed their parental identities around caregiving and emotional closeness rather than breadwinning and did not center their self-concept around their work identity (Deutsch et al., 2020; Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020; Solomon, 2014). For these men, responsibility for childcare was an integral part of their parental identity, motivating them to reduce or rearrange their time in paid work to allow time with children. Thus, equal-sharing couples consisted of two primary caregivers who both made some adjustments to their paid work to accommodate childcare, whereas role-reversers sometimes took turns and swapped caregiving and breadwinning roles based on the construction of fathering and mothering as carrying equal responsibility for caregiving and breadwinning.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The strengths of this study include a mixed-methods approach, data from both mothers and fathers, and a comparative analysis of semi-traditional, equal-sharing and

role-reversed arrangements in one comprehensive design. However, a few limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, our study focused on identities among married or cohabiting, different-gender British couples, leaving out single or separated parents, same-sex couples, or non-cis parents. Additionally, although our samples had only a slight over-representation of White-British parents with university degrees, our focus on the three parenting arrangements, with two of them being relatively rare in the parent population, limited the sample size for exploring the role of class and ethnicity in shaping parental and work identities within each arrangement. Further research is needed to examine work and parental identities of parents who are main breadwinners or caregivers across diverse family structures, social positions, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. Another limitation is the complexity introduced by the artificial categorization of parents into distinct groups. Although our conscious decision to focus on three parenting arrangements served our aim of exploring commonalities and differences in identity centrality and meanings, these three groups exist within a spectrum of arrangements, ranging from fully traditional to fully reversed. Our choice to focus on these three segments excluded a wide variety of parenting arrangements and complexities from our analysis. In addition, to ensure the selection of three distinct groups, we based the inclusion criteria on a combination of measures, including each partner's time in paid work and childcare, the division of childcare tasks, and the proportion of incomes. However, these measures were based on self-reports, and thus subject to social-desirability concerns and reduced reliability, as partners tend to overestimate their own contribution to household labor or underestimate each other's contribution (Lee & Waite, 2005). Moreover, variability and complexity remained within each of the categories, as couples may be typical for their group depending on the specific measure. Another layer of complexity was introduced by changes over time; whereas some couples consistently fit into one category, others transitioned across categories over the years. While analyzing emerging themes we were mindful of the complexity of the classification, especially with regard to couples who were closer to the border between categories or experienced changes over time.

Practice Implications

Our findings suggest that decisions about paid work and childcare among semi-traditional couples are taken almost automatically according to gendered norms. Most of the female primary caregivers reported being career-oriented before becoming mothers, and described significant changes in their work identity which they experienced as a sacrifice or even identity loss. However, the findings also suggest that for women to remain fully involved with paid work as equal

or main breadwinner, they often need a partner whose work identity centrality is relatively low and parental identity high. This condition may result from the state policy environment of our British samples, in which childcare costs amount to 29% of an average two-parent household income (Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2022), rendering early years formal childcare unaffordable. This puts pressure on couples to identify a main caregiver and a main breadwinner. Many families thus require one parent to scale back on work hours, seek flexible work arrangements, or transition to less demanding roles and part-time employment. Affordable, high-quality formal childcare provision should be made available from an early age to enable both parents to maintain their work identities and involvement in paid work.

More generally, our findings point to a discrepancy between current UK state and workplace policies and parents' actual identities and preferences. Gender norms and parents' priorities are slowly changing, whereas outdated gendered policies, particularly regarding parenting leave, continue to reinforce traditional norms and encourage mothers to stay at home or work part-time and fathers to work full time. These policies are incompatible with mothers' central work identities and desire to share family work with their partners. They are also incompatible with some fathers' central parental identities and desire to spend more time with their children and work shorter and more flexible hours. Introducing nontransferable parental leave for fathers would remove some of the barriers faced by couples who seek to maintain both partners' parental and work identities and would contribute to normalizing less gendered and more diverse parenting arrangements.

Conclusion

This study has taken a significant step towards understanding the processes of undoing gender in work and parental identities. Integrating findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study suggests that equal-sharers and role-reversers construct fathering and mothering as equivalent interchangeable roles (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020; Ranson, 2010; Solomon, 2014) rather than two distinct roles with differential connections to involvement in paid work. Although these two groups are still statistically rare, they represent a steadily growing phenomenon of utmost theoretical and practical importance (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020). Societal change is caused not only by the effects of macro-level norms and policies on individuals, but also by pressures exerted by the actions of individuals on public discourse and policy (Sullivan et al., 2018). Couples who defy prevailing societal expectations and develop degendered identities and practices contribute a gradual pressure that has the potential to lead to policy changes, which, in turn, influence the actions of others.

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Data Availability Data are available from the University of Lincoln Research Repository.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Lincoln Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study. The participants provided informed consent before participating and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

Conflict of Interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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