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Having a First Versus a Second Child: Comparing Women's Maternity Leave Choices and Concerns

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Abstract

There are good reasons to suspect that the transition parents go through when having their second child may be different from when having their first, yet these differences remain understudied. This study focuses on one specific area of possible divergence by looking at how first-time versus second-time mothers decide on maternity leave length. To address this question, a series of in-depth semistructured longitudinal interviews were conducted at three different times over the course of 1 year with 16 pregnant public school teachers; 8 of whom were having their first child and 8 their second child. Findings indicate that some areas in which differences emerged include the level of influence of the Family and Medical Leave Act guidelines, comfort level with using paid child care, and the gendered nature of their parenting ideologies.

Keywords

transition to parenthood, maternity leave, motherhood, gender ideologies

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The images of the transition to parenthood that appear in popular culture are often full of contradictory images—first smiles and sweet snuggles, utter exhaustion, and overanxious new parents. Scholars who examine the transition to parenthood (pregnancy through the first year) are frequently doing so because they are concerned with the increasing marital dissatisfaction and conflict, and/or the increasing gender differentiation that often emerges during this time period (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Walzer, 1998). How these two sets of issues interact also has been examined, as the increasing gender differentiation appears likely to be one source of marital problems for contemporary couples (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Walzer, 1998). The increasing gender differentiation that occurs among new parents is especially concerning to those troubled by the continuing gender inequality in American society (Bianchi, 2000; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Singley & Hynes, 2005; Walzer, 1998).

One of the reasons that the transition to parenthood is such a complex phenomenon to investigate is because studying it involves examining continuing life transitions of specific individuals while also recognizing that family roles and gender norms themselves are also in transition. For example, research has found that young couples today are frequently happier when they more equally share the division of domestic labor, although this was not necessarily true several decades ago (Cowan & Cowan, 2003). How much of this is because of changes in society versus changes in individuals is difficult to know. Trying to pinpoint where and what sort of changes are happening becomes even more complex when scholars take a life course perspective and recognize that the short time they may examine participants is just one moment in the participants' lives, which will continue to evolve.

This study attempts to tease apart some of these complex issues involving the transition to parenthood by comparing parents having their first child with those having their second child. Although sociologists and other social scientists have explored many of the challenges that couples experience in their initial transition to parenthood, too often couples having their second child are either excluded from studies or included but not differentiated from first-time parents. Except for preliminary anthropological research by Rebecca Upton (2000), the few studies that have differentiated between first- and second-time parents are cross-sectional and quantitative, restricting the scope of the findings (Salmela-Aro & Aunola, 2006; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997).

There are good reasons to suspect that the transition from having one child to having two would be different from the initial transition—the parents' expectations may be much more realistic than the romanticized versions of first-time parents-to-be (Miller, 2000). Yet how these differences in

expectations and actual child-rearing experiences affect the choices and beliefs of parents of second children is unclear. Initial research examining gender differentiation does suggest that after the birth of their second child, mothers may be more likely to leave the paid labor force and that the division of household labor may even become more traditional (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Upton, 2000). Furthermore, it makes sense that it may be after the second child is born that financial and time constraints come into sharp relief for parents of young children (Upton, 2000). The needs of second-time parents have real-life policy implications as it is important that the needs of all new parents are taken into account when parental leave, job benefits, and other parenting interventions are designed.

The purpose of this study is to begin to clarify some of these questions concerning how the transition to parenthood is different for those mothers having their second child from those having their first. It focuses on one specific aspect of the transition to parenthood by looking at how first-time versus second-time mothers decide on maternity leave length as an entry into examining some broader differences. Grounding this study in a specific social location, the study is anchored by the lives of 16 women who were all working as public school teachers (K-12) at the time of their participation. Teachers were chosen as a fruitful occupational group to focus on, in part because they usually have access to more generous parental leave than that available under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). To understand their ideas about maternity leave, a series of three qualitative longitudinal interviews were conducted with each woman during pregnancy and the first year of their new baby's life.

Background

Gender and the Transition to Parenthood

In this study, gender was seen as an important theoretical concept in understanding the lives and decisions of the participants during this time period. Most previous research has found that when men and women become parents, their patterns of work and family behaviors become increasingly differentiated. After the birth of a baby, men tend to do more paid work, whereas women tend to do less (Bianchi, 2000; Cowan & Cowan, 1992). In addition, the amount of housework and carework that women do increases much more than men's (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Cowan & Cowan, 1992). When taken collectively, previous research suggests that biological, cultural, interactional, and institutional forces come together during the transition to parenthood to

provide a gendered influence on the content of men's and women's work-family involvement and on their decisions concerning parental leave (Bianchi, 2000; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Singley & Hynes, 2005; Walzer, 1998).

Suzan Walzer (1998) describes the social and cultural mechanisms through which gender differentiation occurs in new parents when she writes,

“Mother” and “father” are social categories that existed before the individuals I interviewed became parents—or were born. These social categories have particular meanings attached to them—meanings that are socializing influences on new parents and that are institutionalized in cultural imagery associated with motherhood and fatherhood. (p. 7)

Walzer and other scholars argue that cultural ideals about what “good” mothering requires provides pressure on women to act as the primary caregiver (Hochschild, 1989; Risman, 1998; Walzer, 1998). Studies have found that a parent's gender ideology (usually tied to cultural beliefs) can influence the length of parental leave taken and the number of hours worked while one's children are very young (Hyde, Essex, & Horton, 1993; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000).

Scholars have pointed out that gender differentiation is also reinforced through interactional processes, as men and women strive to “do” gender by trying to live up to the expected gender behavioral norms (Berk, 1985; Coltrane, 1989; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It has been suggested that people may “do” parenthood in the same ways that people “do” gender, in that they are defined in social interaction (Garey, 1999; Walzer, 1998). Especially when young women believe that to “do” motherhood they need to live up to the time-consuming, emotionally absorbing, and expensive practices of “intensive motherhood” that are often conflated with “good” mothering (Hays, 1996), it may amplify the pressures on them.

It is also crucial to keep in mind that apart from gendered cultural ideologies, most women in dual-earner marriages continue to make less money than their husbands, although some equalization has occurred over the past 5 years (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009). The continuing gender wage gap and occupational segregation reinforce that the financial costs of a woman's time at home are less than for her spouse. This in turn supports a traditional division of labor in the home.

Parental Leave Policies

Of the many decisions made during the transition to parenthood, how much leave each parent will take is a significant one. Parental leave is positively

associated with factors such as mother's continued employment, the division of labor, parental bonding, and infant and maternal health (Kamerman, 2006; McGovern et al., 2000; Moss & O'Brien, 2006; Pleck, 1993; Tanaka, 2005). Especially while couples are struggling with gender differentiation, marital satisfaction, and forming new family patterns, these are highly significant issues.

In the United States at this time, there is only one type of federal "family" leave available, which is regulated by the FMLA of 1993 (although a handful of states and some private companies offer their own parental leave). Both men and women have equal access to it, which guarantees eligible employees 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave in a 12-month period. It is supposed to guarantee eligible employees the right to a protected leave of absence from their job because of childbirth or the placement of a newly adopted or foster child. Because of specific requirements of both employers and employees, approximately half of American workers are not covered because they work for small employers, have recently changed jobs, or are part-time workers (Commission on Family and Medical Leave, 1996). That the parental leave available is not universal, is unpaid, and is relatively brief is in strong contrast to the vast majority of other industrialized nations (Moss & O'Brien, 2006; Tanaka, 2005).

Scholars have found that how women combine family and work, and when (or if) a woman decides to return to work following the birth of a child is strongly influenced by the amount of job-protected leave available to her (McGovern et al., 2000; Singley & Hynes, 2005). The availability of paid leave, as opposed to unpaid leave, also increases the average length of leave taken (McGovern et al., 2000). The informal workplace culture is another aspect thought to influence the length of leave, as women with employers they perceive to be "supportive" take more time off (Fried, 1998; McGovern et al., 2000). Other job-related characteristics also play a role, with those women who perceive their jobs to be "flexible" and/or women who reported greater "work pressures" both taking less time off from work (McGovern et al., 2000). Spousal earnings have been found to have a sizable effect on maternity leave length, with those women whose husbands make more money taking a longer maternity leave (McGovern et al., 2000). In addition, those women who pay more money for child care take a longer leave than those with access to less expensive child care (McGovern et al., 2000).

What differences may exist in either the preferences or needs of mothers having their first versus second child has not been adequately addressed in the literature thus far. The underlying assumption appears to be that parental leave serves the same function regardless of whether it is the first child or not; however, there are theoretical reasons to question this. During the initial

transition to parenthood, the first few weeks after the birth of a couple's (first) child are when preliminary family patterns are formed. These patterns can have a lasting effect on the division of domestic labor and father involvement, which is why paternity leave for new fathers is believed to be so important (Hyde, Essex, Clark, & Klein, 2001; Kamerman, 2006; Pleck, 1993). When a couple has their second child, these initial family patterns would already be in place, but the challenges inherent in managing the needs of both a newborn and an older child would logically be higher.

Method

This research was conducted as part of a larger longitudinal study examining how married couples negotiate work and family decisions during the transition to parenthood. The study participants included 16 heterosexual couples (16 men and 16 women), of whom 8 were having their first child and 8 were having their second child. In-depth semistructured interviews were conducted at three interview points: (a) during the final trimester of pregnancy, (b) 8 to 21 weeks after the baby's birth, and (c) near the baby's first birthday. Conducting longitudinal interviews had several advantages, including avoiding the bias that may exist in relying on only retrospective narratives and offering an opportunity to get corrective feedback on previously obtained information (Reinharz, 1992). At each of the three interview points, I attempted to interview the husband and wife each separately and then jointly, as part of the larger study. Minor deviations because of fathers being unavailable at either the second or third time period¹ resulted in a total of 48 individual interviews with the wife, 43 individual interviews with the husband, and 39 joint interviews, for a total of 130 interviews overall. The data for this particular research were largely drawn from the 48 individual interviews conducted with the women over the course of the year.

The semistructured interview guides used when interviewing covered many topics, including the women's plans for leave (while pregnant) and later how long a leave they actually took, why and when they made the decision, who was influential in the decision-making process, and how they felt about their decision in retrospect. Other relevant topics included why and when they decided to become a teacher, the division of housework and child care at each time point, their gender role beliefs, their marital history, their childhood experiences, including the work histories of their parents, and their expectations of and later experiences with motherhood. As gender was one of the central concepts guiding the study, each of the couples was categorized according to whether their division of labor was equal in time and effort and

whether this division followed normative gender expectations. This categorization relied on information provided by both the husband and wife, with any discrepancies discussed at the joint interviews. Each participant also filled out a demographic survey and twice completed a survey concerning the division of housework and child care. At each interview point, the individual interviews took approximately an hour. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed.

I loosely relied on grounded theory methods of data analysis, which involves taking an open-ended approach to one's data and modifying hypotheses as the analysis proceeds (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As part of the grounded theory techniques, I used a thematic or "issue focused" approach to data analysis. During the course of the research, my preliminary analysis informed and shaped subsequent interviews and analysis because of the iterative nature of data collection and analysis. My final coding categories were developed and defined in an ongoing interaction with the data and data collection process. I also used NVivo qualitative software as an organizational tool in some portions of the coding process. I first coded for specific themes and then worked on integrating the separate themes into a single coherent story (Weiss, 1994). This thematic method of analysis has been used successfully by many authors doing research on work and family (Garey, 1999; Gerson, 1985; Hochschild, 1989, 1997; Walzer, 1998). Because this study uses a nonrandom sample, it is not generalizable to any larger population; however, like most other qualitative studies, generalizability is not the major purpose of this research, but instead, it focuses on describing in detail a particular process and experience (Krefting, 1999).

Participants

All participants were currently working as public school teachers (K-12) in Connecticut at the time of their participation. Limiting the female participants to public school teachers allowed me to focus on comparing differences between first- and second-time parents while holding constant the women's occupational characteristics, benefits, and access to parental leave. Teachers are a theoretically important occupational group to examine because in many ways they are representative of the non-elite female-dominated fields that the majority of women still work in (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Additionally, on a very basic level, the number of women who work as primary and secondary teachers in the United States is large enough to form a significant population, as more than 2.5 million women work in these jobs each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b).

The participants for this study were recruited by sending e-mails inviting them to participate in a study on how teachers balance work and family responsibilities. The e-mails were sent to their publicly available work e-mails with a request to forward the e-mail to others who may fit the sample profile. E-mails were sent to all teachers with female sounding names in 48 schools in three counties in Connecticut and included elementary, middle, and high schools. The counties and the schools within the counties were chosen to allow for diversity on several characteristics, including urban/rural, affluent/poorer, and larger/smaller student populations. Ten of the couples were recruited when they responded to the e-mails. In addition, snow-ball sampling methods were employed, where initial participants were asked if they knew other pregnant public school teachers who would be interested in participating. Six of the couples were recruited through snow-ball sampling methods.

The decision to focus on women who all worked in the same occupational position minimized some of the socioeconomic diversity in the sample because of the similar incomes and educations of the participants. The diversity that existed was largely because of the participant's husband's class position. Although 5 of the women were married to men who were also public school teachers, the remaining 11 women had spouses who were employed in a wide range of occupations, namely, scientist, technical writer, draftsman, construction foreman, soccer coach, HVAC (heating, venting, and air conditioning) repairman, athletic director at a private school, website designer, self-employed landscaper, salesman, and one working in a construction-related family business. The household income of the couples in this study ranged from \$80,000 to \$160,000 per year with a mean yearly household income of approximately \$109,000. The female participants earned a significant portion of the household income, with an average income of \$52,000. In Connecticut, at the time of the study, the mean household income was \$87,000 and the average standard of living was higher than the United States as a whole (American Community Survey, 2008). In lay terms, all the participants lived in families that were either middle or upper-middle class within their region of residence. There was a fairly wide range in the social class of the participants' family of origin, which ranged from working class households (where both parents had very low levels of education and income) to upper-middle-class backgrounds. There was no significant difference in social class or average income between couples having their first and having their second child.

There was minimal racial-ethnic diversity in the sample, as 14 of the 16 women in the study were White; 1 participant was Hispanic and 1 biracial

(White and Asian). This lack of racial diversity may have been influenced by the decision to focus on public school teachers, as this occupation is largely White. As of 2008, 83% of public school teachers were non-Hispanic White, 7% were non-Hispanic Black, and 7% were Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a). The women were born between 1974 and 1979, putting them in their late 20s and early 30s at the time of the study.

Participants' Parental Leave Benefits

Concerning access to parental leave, all the women in this study were similarly situated, as they all qualified for the 12 unpaid weeks under the FMLA. In addition, they were allowed to take the first 6 of the weeks as paid, as long as they had accrued enough sick days to do so, which they all had (it commonly took 1 year to do so). In addition to the FMLA weeks, each woman could also request to take off either the rest of the semester (September to January; January to June) or the rest of the academic school year in which she gave birth. This type of "extended" leave was unpaid but allowed the woman to return to her job at the same level of pay. Unlike the FMLA weeks, taking an extended leave generally also affected the women's health benefits, as the woman would be responsible for paying the entire amount of the health insurance policy (her premium and the school's premium) for the time period beyond the 12 weeks.

Although there were general state-level guidelines in place, how the towns administered the benefits varied to a noticeable degree. Although all the towns offered 6 paid and 6 unpaid weeks, how summer vacation influenced the leave varied by school district, as some kept the 12 weeks running throughout the summer. For example, one woman who had her baby toward the beginning of July was able to take the rest of summer (7 weeks) and then choose whether to take either 6 or 12 weeks off once school started (she chose just 6 paid weeks for a total of 13 weeks). A woman in another district who had a baby the same week was told that because she had already been away from work 7 weeks, she was only eligible for 5 weeks of leave total under the FMLA. There were similar differences in how the health insurance was administered by individual school districts, with some school districts insisting that women with summer births needed to start working much sooner to maintain the school's payments on their behalf. How each woman's salary was affected also depended on whether she normally chose to be paid in 9- or 12-month payments.

Additionally, there were differences in what type of arrangement each woman negotiated with the school districts, so that two women in the same

district might have significantly different agreements. These differences appeared to be mostly based on how well the woman negotiated with the school district. Those women who personally knew of other teachers in the past who had “sweet” arrangements were able to use this knowledge to increase their odds of getting a better deal, particularly concerning how the summer would affect their 12 weeks of leave and health benefits, and if they could use their sick days to stay home in the final week or two before their due date. In addition to knowledge about past arrangements, those women who had been working in their school districts for several years often felt more comfortable drawing on their social networks and personal relationships with administrators to press for more advantageous arrangements. Although the female teachers in this study were generally not aware of the different policies across districts, they were more likely to be aware if their own school district negotiated specific arrangements with individual women. The inconsistent policy implementation between school districts and the importance of informal negotiations by employees illustrates why research on parental leave has trouble catching the nuances that are influential in work and family decisions. As Singley and Hynes (2005) point out, “Availability is to some extent impossible to measure accurately, because individual factors—such as willingness to negotiate informal arrangements and willingness of employers to grant them to particular workers—is typically unobservable” (p. 394).

Although people might expect school teachers to desire summer births, there was actually little agreement on the best time to have a child—partially because of the variety of ways that school districts enforced the leave policies. Although some women thought that the beginning of June was ideal, other women argued that if you had a child right before the school year ended and only received a week or two of leave, you were getting “ripped off,” as you deserved to receive the other weeks. A few women suggested that a March birth was ideal because then a teacher could take all 12 weeks of the FMLA leave, go back to work for a week or two to ensure her medical insurance was in place and then have the rest of the summer to spend with her baby. Within the sample, six of the first-time mothers and four of the second-time mothers gave birth over the summer. However, only three of the eight first-time mothers described specifically trying to time the pregnancy around her work schedule (as opposed to “letting whatever would happen, happen”), whereas seven of the eight second-time parents tried to time the pregnancy for a certain time of year, although not all were successful at it.

In contrast to the women who all had similar levels of benefits, their husbands had a wide variety in benefits. Only five of the husbands had paid paternity leave available to them (four had a 2-week leave and one had a

6-week leave) and all five of them took advantage of this benefit. The other 11 men took between 3 days and 1 week off following the birth of their baby. All but 2 of the 11 men were able to get these days paid for as sick days. The five men who were also working as teachers were restricted to only taking either 5 or 6 days off in a row (depending on the district), regardless of how many sick days they may have accrued. None of the men chose to take any unpaid time off under the FMLA, which (as far as they were aware) would have been an option for all but three of them.

Results

Although the women had similar benefits available to them, they made a variety of choices concerning how long a maternity leave to take, which were naturally clustered into three groups. The first group included those women (4 of 16) who took a *shorter* amount of time off—choosing to return to work less than 10 weeks after the birth of their babies. One woman gave birth at the end of June and returned 9 weeks later when school started in the fall. The other three women gave birth during the school year (in September, January, and March) and chose to take less than the available 12 weeks, although all of them took at least the 6 paid weeks. Three of the four women in this group were pregnant with their second child. Although a few of the other women who returned to work 12 to 16 weeks after giving birth only officially took 6 weeks leave, this was because the other weeks they did not work were in the summer and thus did not “count” against the FMLA weeks.

The second group included the majority of the women in this study (9 of 16) who took between 12 to 16 weeks off before returning to work. Statistically, as well as in their own judgments, they took an *average* amount of time off. Six out of the nine women in this cluster gave birth over the summer, and in addition to having the remaining weeks of summer off, they took either 6 or 12 weeks of leave at the beginning of the school year. The other three women in this cluster gave birth in the fall, and chose to take their 12 weeks and then return. Only two of the nine women who took an average leave were second-time mothers.

The final three women took an *extended* leave, as they took more weeks of leave than the 12 weeks available under the FMLA. All three of the women had their baby during the school year and chose to return to work at the beginning of the next school year. One woman’s child was born the first week in September, so she took almost 12 months off before returning. The other two women had their babies during the winter months and returned 6 or 7 months after their birth. All three of these women were having their second

child at the time. One of the women had also taken an extended leave with her first child, whereas the other two had taken an average amount of time off following their first child's birth.

Overall then, there were differences found in the patterns of first- and second-time mothers concerning the length of maternity leave taken. First-time mothers were more likely to take an average leave, whereas second-time mothers were more likely to take either a shorter or extended leave. In many ways, the decisions and perspectives of first-time parents were more uniform as a group, as they knew less of what to expect and, although they had different levels of indirect experience, none had any direct parenting experiences on which to base their decisions. In contrast, the decisions of second-time parents showed disparate forces at work. Some second-time mothers were more likely to return to work after a short leave, reinforcing the belief that pressures may apply extra stress on parents of two. Conversely, mothers having their second child were also the only ones to decide to take an extended leave.

Although the pregnant mothers discussed the decision of how long a leave to take with their husbands and said they valued their opinions, in general, the husbands deferred to their wives. Several of the men said that their wives made the decision nearly completely on their own. Women's greater power in making this decision could also be seen in the two instances where the husband and wife disagreed over how much leave the wife should take, and the wife ended up "winning" by ultimately taking the amount of leave she preferred. The wife had noticeably more say in making the decision among those couples with an unequal division of labor, at least partially because the couple anticipated the mother doing the majority of child care after the baby's birth. Interestingly, there was no simple correlation between women taking a longer leave if their husband took a shorter leave. Of the five women whose husbands took an official paternity leave (as opposed to just a few days off), one woman took an extended leave, one took a shorter leave, and the other three women took average-length leaves. The only woman whose husband took more than 2 weeks of leave (he received 6 weeks paid leave) was one of the women to take an average length of leave.

Differences in the Importance of the FMLA

First-time mothers appeared to base their maternity leave length more strongly on general societal expectations about maternity leave length, which were largely shaped by the construction and limitations of the FMLA. Half

of the first-time mothers reported that they were taking 12 weeks off because that seemed to be “the thing to do.” When asked how they had decided on taking 12 weeks off, these women referred to FMLA’s 12-week policy in shaping their expectations for how long a maternity leave “should” be. The way in which the women didn’t appear to seriously consider options other than the 12 weeks was clear in some of the interviews.

[How did you decide to take that amount of leave?]

That’s the time they give, so I’m taking it.” (Susan, Grade 5 teacher, first-time mother)

Well, I guess because you usually hear that people take 12 weeks. (Kate, high school English teacher, first-time mother)

The fact that, as public school teachers, they also had the option of taking an extended leave was something first-time mothers seemed less likely to consider. In addition, almost none of them seemed to have seriously considered taking *less* time. Although mothers often described their decision as at least partially because of financial reasons, clearly those reasons cannot explain why they did not return to work sooner, rather than accepting 6 weeks without pay.

In contrast, second-time mothers were more likely to draw on past experiences and base their decisions on what they believed would work best for their particular family and less on the norms created by the FMLA. Although those women who took a shorter leave reported getting pressure from others (often family members and friends, and sometimes spouses) to take a longer amount of time off, they could draw on their experiences with their first child and their knowledge of child development to resist these pressures.

[Have you experienced pressure to take more time off?]

Oh yeah! I remember having a conversation with Matthew’s sister. She said, “What! Oh! Only taking six weeks? Blah, blah, blah.” And I was thinking, “I am not going to put us in debt so that I can stay home for six more weeks!” I’m just not going to do it. It’s ridiculous. The baby’s not going to remember if I was there or not. You know? She’ll be fine! (Jill, elementary special education teacher, second-time mother)

Second-time mothers were also more likely to try to intentionally “work” the system to try to decrease the loss of money while still taking what they perceived to be an acceptable maternity leave. All three women who were having their second child and took a short maternity leave chose to return on a day of the week other than Monday. When they would end their maternity leave was often quite strategic. One woman explained,

This [baby] is due the end of January, but I’m going back in April, so I’m actually going back a little sooner [than with the first baby]. I’m going back right before the April break. I’m going to work three days and then I have the week off—I’m going back on a Tuesday and then there’s Good Friday that week, so I’ll work my way into it. By doing it, I’ll get a paycheck two weeks sooner . . . Because I’m starting back a few days before [vacation], it counts as me being back at work and I’ll get paid over the vacation. (Jennifer, kindergarten teacher, second-time mother)

In general, the women having their second baby talked more confidently and intentionally about when they were returning. Even though the leave was calculated on a day-by-day (per diem) basis, it didn’t seem to occur to first-time mothers to take 2 or 3 days less than the full 6 weeks or strategically return in the middle of the week.

As policy makers consider revisions to the current parental leave policies, the ways in which guidelines not only practically limit women’s access to leave but also set societal norms for how long a leave “should” be has to be considered. First-time mothers who did not have firsthand mothering experience to depend on relied on the parental leave guidelines to shape their decisions. In contrast, the decisions of second-time mothers highlight the importance of flexibility and choices, as these mothers often were more able to take advantage of the various options they had available to them.

Gendered Parenting Ideologies

One issue that influenced all the mothers’ decisions regarding how long a leave to take was their parenting ideologies. I am using the term *parenting ideologies* to refer to the ideas and ideals they expressed about mothering and fathering. It was clear in the interviews that a considerable portion of the participants believed that the mother (simply because she was the mother/female and not the father/male) should take the primary parenting role.

Those women who believed this were less likely to take a short leave and more likely to take an extended leave. A significant portion of the participants (7 of 16) also stated that men and women may be “naturally or biologically” better at particular aspects of child care, whereas several more (5 of 16) said that they were “unsure” about whether this was true or not.

I think there [in parenting] the gender might matter a little bit more because we're physically connected to these kids. It's like, they came from us. And even though the dad had a pretty big role in that, you carried this baby. And I think that you just automatically have the instincts to do certain things and want to do certain things. Sometimes you have to train yourself to let him do it. (Sarah, high school special education teacher, second-time mother)

Well just by nature it's different, because women are different than men. It has to be different. I think it's different in the kind of attachments you make with your child. (Marcie, Grade 1 teacher, first-time mother)

As these women believed that the mother “should” take precedence over the division of baby care and felt that women were “naturally” better at baby care tasks, they felt a greater tug to do more of the child care tasks and take a longer leave to do so. Their spouses frequently shared their beliefs as five of the husbands also reported that men or women might be “naturally” or biologically better at particular aspects of child care, whereas six said that they were “unsure.”

Although the majority of women thought parenting roles should be gendered or were unsure, this was not because they simply held widespread beliefs in traditional gender roles. In fact, all the couples who participated in this study expressed a general belief in gender equality and (except for one couple) in “modern” gender roles. This was frequently expressed through their statements that couples “should” determine the division of housework based on what each person “was good at” or enjoyed instead of on the person's gender.

By no means do I think that just because I'm a girl, I have to do the laundry or the dishes. Or because he's a boy he has to mow the lawn. No, I don't think that way at all! (Tara, Grade 1 teacher, first-time mother)

I think it depends on the personality not on gender. There should be a division of who does what, but it doesn't have anything to do with gender. (Rita, Grade 5 teacher, first-time mother)

For these women who experienced childhood largely in the 1980s, acknowledgments of gender equality seemed natural to them and a matter of course. At the time of the first set of interviews, half of the couples (four first-time and four second-time parents) had divisions of household labor that appeared to be equal in time and effort, and nearly all the men at least sometimes did female-type household tasks. The majority of women who had divisions of labor that were not equal (five of eight) were unhappy with this situation and felt justified in actively complaining about it. Their statements that there was nothing inherent in being a man or a woman that meant you would be better at particular *household* tasks made their ideas on parenting stand out even more.

Although only half of the couples were unequal in their division of housework during the first set of interviews, all the women were doing the majority of baby care and housework during the second set of interviews (perhaps not surprising, considering the inequity in parental leave), and by the end of the first year, 12 of the 16 couples had divisions of labor that were unequal, with the majority of baby care tasks being done by the mother. The few women who did not play the dominant role described sometimes feeling “guilty” about this arrangement. Their guilt may demonstrate an awareness that they can be held accountable to gendered standards of parenthood, even if they do not agree with or try to live up to them. That nearly all the couples were clearly gendered in the ways they were “doing parenthood” (Garey, 1999; Walzer, 1998) presented a contrast to the division of housework prebaby. At that point, the women appeared to be less concerned with “doing gender” in the role as a wife, as evidenced by the greater levels of equality in the division of housework and their feelings of annoyance when it was not equal.

Differences emerged when examining the parenting ideologies of the first- versus the second-time mothers. Mothers having their second child were more likely to emphasize the “natural” differences between mothers and fathers—even though, like first-time mothers, they generally expressed egalitarian gender beliefs concerning housework. First-time mothers (and fathers), who have not yet experienced parenthood, were generally more uncertain about what they thought parenthood would be like, with good reason. First-time mothers (and fathers) were also more likely to express ambivalence than second-time mothers about whether the roles of mothers and fathers should be similar or different.²

Although it is impossible to know what the beliefs of the second-time mothers were when they were pregnant with their first child because of the study methodology, this research suggests that the experience of motherhood itself increases the likelihood that a woman will hold more highly gendered parenting ideologies. An important caveat is that the strengthening in belief in gendered parenting appeared to be more common among those women with an unequal division of labor. Second-time mothers who had an unequal division of labor from the beginning of the study were more likely to state this belief, and there were indications of more highly gendered parenting ideologies developing throughout the year of study among the first-time mothers who had an unequal division of labor, which did not appear among the women who had an equal division of labor with their spouse. Therefore, I would argue that it is not something inherent in *all* experiences of motherhood but, instead, that having an unequal division of domestic work during a couple's initial transition to parenthood encouraged the growth of parenting ideologies based on ideas of gender difference. Nonetheless, it needs to also be acknowledged that the causal direction between gendered parenting ideologies and an unequal division of labor is at least somewhat multidirectional, with preexisting gendered ideologies also encouraging a less equal division of labor to emerge during the transition to parenthood.

Differences in the Perceptions of and Experiences With Child Care

One issue closely related to parental leave is child care, for usually when parental leave ends, paid child care begins. When talking to pregnant women about parental leave length, important aspects of their decision included their feelings about using child care and their ability to find suitable child care. Except for one first-time mother, who was able to rely on her mother to watch her child for the whole first year, every other woman needed to use paid child care when returning to work. Four women/couples had family members who were able to watch their baby 1 or 2 days a week (while relying on paid child care the other days), and the remaining couples used full-time paid child care. Except for one couple who was able to split the costs with a relative to have a nanny come to their house, all the couples used licensed day cares set up in private homes. As the largest percentage of children in the United States who are in paid day care are at day care centers (Clawson & Gerstel, 2007), the fact that none of the couples in this study used a center was unusual. This may have been because home day cares were more likely to follow the school calendar (not be open in the summer or

school breaks), which meant they didn't have to pay child care over the summer or pull their child out and risk losing his or her space. In addition, several women mentioned that home day cares are usually less expensive than day care centers.

In about three quarters of the couples, the wife was seen as having "more influence" over the child care decisions, and in the other quarter, it was described as an equal decision, even though the work involved was not necessarily equally distributed. Although several of the husbands visited potential child care sites with their wives, nearly every couple saw the wife as being the more knowledgeable partner about child care options. To some extent, the attribution of the mother as the partner with more "expertise" in the area may be linked to their job. Although none of the women worked in early (pre-K) childhood education, many of them had worked in child care centers before obtaining their current job. In addition, the assumption that the women's knowledge about teaching older children would transfer itself to day care centers was also implied by several couples. Designating the mother as the child care expert happened even in those couples where the husband was also a teacher. Although the couples tended to use the wife's expertise about children as a reason, other studies that also had similar findings, suggest that there might be other gendered reasons why the pattern exists (Uttal, 2002).

In some instances, the wife wanted her husband to be more involved than he was and felt the choice of a day care to be a burden. Mothers having their second child and those with an unequal division of labor, were the most likely to say that they wished their husbands would be more active in the decision-making process. A joint interview with one set of second-time parents illustrates this dynamic, when they were asked how they chose their day care.

Nate: The day care is more her decision. I would say it was mainly Jenn who makes those decisions. Ultimately when it came down to making the final decision, we discussed it. But she took more of the lead on finding things out, especially with the first [child]. The second time around, she did the leg work and then—that one might have been more equal, but ultimately it was her decision on where they were going to go.

Jennifer: Yeah, the first time Nate had no part in it. The second time, I think he did more because I said to him, "You need to help me with this!" I was torn . . . and he was kind of like, "Whatever you think is right." I got annoyed and I said, "I'm asking you. I want your help with this! What do you think?" I was like, "They're your kids too!

What do you really think?” Because I didn’t want it to just be choosing [a day care] based on which person was cheaper or whatever.
Nate: Whatever.

[There is a pause, and then we all laugh at his clear dismissal of the issue]

That child care was traditionally seen as “women’s work” is surely one of the factors that allowed fathers and fathers-to-be to pass on the responsibility for finding paid child care. In this case, men not taking on the responsibility for researching, contacting, and ultimately deciding on a child care can be seen as a form of gender privilege.

During pregnancy, almost all the first-time mothers discussed having to engage in emotion work (Hochschild, 1985) or “convince themselves” that there was nothing wrong with putting an infant in paid child care.

[So the decision to return after 9 weeks was based largely on finances?]

It was the money, and it was talking to friends and calming myself down that I really could send an 8-week-old, or 9-week-old baby to day care. I had to get rid of that fear—that was even more important than the money. My friends really did help me with that. (Lauren, high school physical education teacher, first-time mother)

Most first-time mothers while pregnant and especially right after the baby’s birth were quite worried about what the experience with child care would be like and unsure about whether they had chosen the best option. After a few months of successful child care usage, the mothers felt much better about their decisions.

Another worry unique to first-time mothers during pregnancy was that their feelings about how much leave to take would change after they actually had their baby. This was often linked to the worry that they would be unhappy with the child care arrangements that they set up while pregnant, especially if they were relying solely on full-time paid child care. For some of the new mothers, these worries were at least partially fulfilled, and they did express ambivalence or unhappiness during the postpartum period.

Now, being home with her, I can’t even imagine dropping her off at day care, and trusting a stranger to be with her eight or nine hours a day. That’s a long time! And you get home at 5:00 pm and she’s going

to be going to bed at 8:00 or 9:00. So that whole worry has come true . . . but that's the way it has to be. (Heather, Grade 4 teacher, first-time mother)

Although these new mothers were dissatisfied with the situation following childbirth and wished for more time at home or a different child care situation, none of the mothers attempted to change or lengthen their leave in response. This may be because public school systems require all leave to be approved by several levels of administration in advance to the leave beginning, and none of the mothers were prepared to quit their jobs and leave the work force entirely.

Nearly all the second-time mothers appeared more comfortable with paid child care, which may have made it easier for them to return to work quickly. They generally described their child care in positive terms.

I think that where [older daughter] is now, it's the next best thing to being home with her. The woman is just awesome; she does so much for these kids. You could have someone who just sat and watched TV all day. They do not do that. They do art, and crafts, and she takes them on field trips, and I can't even tell you everything she does with them. (Rebecca, Grade 5 teacher, second-time mother)

The most basic reason for the increased level of comfort with paid child care is that the second-time mothers had already experienced leaving a baby in day care and had generally come to terms with this arrangement. In addition, second-time mothers also appeared to be reassured because of the relationships that they had formed with their day care providers. All the mothers having their second child were planning on using the same home day care provider that their older child was currently attending whether they were taking a shorter, average, or an extended leave. Some of these women discussed negative child care experiences they had in the past involving their older child; however, they had already dealt with the situation by changing child care providers. At the time of the first interview, all of them were currently happy with their provider and planned on having them care for their new baby, except for one who was on a waitlist (and eventually was accepted).

Second-time mothers did bring up a range of complex issues concerning child care that first-time mothers did not have to consider. A few of the second-time mothers emphasized how happy they were that their two children would be able to be in the same room and play together at the chosen child care center; however, finding a location that allowed this was often difficult. For

mothers who were having children who would be three or more years apart in age, their main challenge was balancing drops-offs and pickups between multiple child care locations that would work for their husbands' and their schedules. Locating child care facilities they were satisfied with for each child and doing so in close proximity to each other, in addition to being close to at least one parent's employer, was often very difficult. Unfortunately, as their kids continued to age out of their current child care location (day care, preschool, pre-K, kindergarten), these decisions often needed to be revisited every year by parents of two children. In addition, the cost of paying for day care for two children was also discussed as a factor that made finding high quality yet still affordable and convenient child care locations especially difficult.

One of the second-time mothers who took an extended leave (she stayed out the rest of the school year—almost 6 months) reported that one of the factors in her decision was that there was no opening at the day care her older daughter was at.

[How did you decide to take the rest of the year off?]

It's the timing, and that there's no opening in the day care that we go to. It's a family day care, and there's no opening for a baby under 2 until September. So I was like, oh well, I'll just have to take the rest of the year off! It was fine with me. I didn't want to choose another day care, we're very happy with her. We've been going there for 2 years—since Josie was 7 months old. (Marcie, Grade 1 teacher, second-time mother)

She felt very loyal to the child care provider and did not want to look for another provider or consider splitting up her children, which influenced her decision.

Although all the second-time mothers were more comfortable with paid child care, not all of them were necessarily convinced that it was the best option for a very young baby. One second-time mother made it clear that an important part of her decision to take an extended leave was that she was not comfortable sending a very young baby to paid child care.

I personally could not send a 6-week-old to day care. I don't judge anyone who does, my sister-in law did, and a couple of my friends did. But I wouldn't do it, I don't care what I had to do, I'm not going to do it. To me, it's like those first six months are mine, and preferably that

first year is mine. I'm going to do whatever I have to do to get that. Whether I have to eat Ramen noodles, save soda cans—that's what works for me, and that's what I do for my own kids. (Sarah, special education teacher, second-time mother)

Although this mother also reported a good relationship with her current child care provider (and only one mediocre experience in the past), she is adamant that she doesn't want her young baby at day care. She also supported her statement by deciding to stay out almost a full year with her second child, before returning to work. There may be some evidence that her belief that young babies shouldn't be in paid child care developed through her mothering experiences. With her first child, she took only 4 months leave before returning to work, so she clearly chose to take more time with her second child than her first. She also held very gendered parenting ideologies when interviewed during her second pregnancy. When asked about the difference in leave length, she offered several explanations. These included that she was in the process of becoming a teacher during her first pregnancy and needed to begin her student teaching when her first child was 4 months old, and consequently, she (and her husband) were also less well off financially. She also discussed how her perspectives on motherhood had changed from before she had children saying, "It all just falls on you automatically. I think in general that happens to women that you're the manager of your household most of the time . . . Now I realize how much work it all is!" All these various aspects (beliefs about child care, beliefs about motherhood/parenting, finances, job characteristics) appeared to come together to create her decision to take a full year of leave with her second child.

Conclusion

This study began the process of teasing out some of the differences between those parents having their first child and those having their second child by looking at how women decide on maternity leave length during the transition to parenthood. The results found that although first-time mothers were often similar to each other in their uncertainty and ambivalence when they began the year, second-time mothers held viewpoints and made decisions quite different from each other. When examining the women's decisions concerning maternity leave length, it was obvious how powerful the federal parental leave policies (i.e., FMLA) were in influencing their decisions—especially for first-time mothers. In addition to shaping the number of days of leave the

women were offered by administrators, the 12-week guideline also played a cultural and normative function for first-time mothers who used it to form their understanding of how much time they “should” be taking. In contrast, second-time mothers were more aware of their individual family needs and preferences—shaped by a combination of factors including finances, parenting ideologies, and comfort level with and availability of appropriate child care.

Although first- and second-time mothers made different decisions regarding length of leave, they shared the belief that 6 weeks of paid leave was insufficient and that more should be made available to new mothers in the United States. Every participant took all of the paid parental leave that was available to her regardless of how long an overall leave she took, and international research shows that paid leave is frequently fully used by mothers (Moss & Deven, 2006). All the women felt that at least the entire 12 weeks of leave should be paid, and some of them argued that women should have access to 5 or 6 months of paid leave. They also shared the desire for their husbands to have paid paternity available to them, although there was not a consensus about the appropriate length. Policy makers frequently have a difficult time determining the ideal length of parental leave because they need to take into account seemingly contradictory policy objectives that include promoting gender equity in child rearing, optimizing women’s labor market outcomes, protecting maternal health and successful postpartum recovery, and enhancing young children’s health and development (Moss & Deven, 2006). These outwardly conflicting needs and the interplay of different political, economic, and cultural influences help explain the great diversity in leave policies that exist between industrialized nations (Moss & Deven, 2006).

Among the women, second-time mothers were especially likely to say that they wished for more flexibility in their leave. Although they did not take a longer leave on average, they demonstrated this greater emphasis on making their leave fit their family situation through their greater likelihood to plan their pregnancies around their work schedules, their careful calculations regarding when to return from leave, and their willingness to consider other leave options besides the “standard” 12 weeks of leave. One flexible arrangement that three second-time mothers said that they desired was to be able to return to work part-time for the baby’s first year. The option of combining part-time employment with part-time leave until one’s child reaches a certain age is something that some European countries have already introduced (e.g., France, Germany, Portugal, Sweden; Moss & Deven, 2006). Other types of flexibility that second-time mothers mentioned that they wanted included

being able to use their leave in multiple blocks instead of all at once. This desire was usually to solve child care dilemmas, in which second-time mothers often had different needs and challenges than did first-time mothers.

Another finding that emerged when comparing first- and second-time mothers was the way in which they talked about parenting a young child. Not surprisingly, mothers who were pregnant with their second child spoke more confidently, especially during the initial two sets of interviews than did mothers who were pregnant and/or had recently given birth to their first child. What was somewhat surprising to find among a fairly young cohort of women was how gendered many of their beliefs about parenting were in contrast to their ideas about housework and men's and women's roles in the workplace. At the beginning of the study, more second-time mothers than first-time mothers felt that men and women were "naturally or biologically" better at particular aspects of child care and this belief seems to have emerged through their experiences with unequal parenting practices. Although the relationship is certainly multidirectional, there were also indications of more highly gendered parenting ideologies developing throughout the year among the first-time mothers who had an unequal division of labor, which did not appear among the women who had an equal division of labor with their spouse. In some ways, this belief in gendered parenting ideologies supports other research on parenting that has found that men and women "think" about babies/parenting differently (Walzer, 1998) and that gender becomes more salient for women when confronted with motherhood (McMahon, 1995).

One of the central issues for many scholars studying the transition to parenthood continues to be identifying the causes of the increasing levels of gender differentiation that occur during this time. Parental leave is an important aspect as research shows that when only women take parental leave and/or they take an extended leave, it tends to reinforce gender differences, instead of gender equality (McGovern et al., 2000; Moss & O'Brien, 2006; Pleck, 1993). As this study (and others) has shown, the decision of how long a parental leave to take is clearly tied to other factors including gender beliefs, parenting ideologies, attitudes about child care, occupational characteristics/benefits, and many more. If decreasing the levels of gender differentiation that occur during the transition to parenthood is a goal—and research that finds that contemporary couples who are more egalitarian (i.e., share domestic labor) are happier than those who are not (Cowan & Cowan, 2003)—then continuing to study how all these aspects fit together and evolve over a woman's or couple's life course is important for future research.

Although this study provided some new insights into some of the differences between mothers having their first and second child, there are many other areas of differentiation yet to be explored. Although the longitudinal

nature of this research is a strength, an even better research design would be to continue to follow the same couples from before they had any children, through their first, second, and any subsequent pregnancies and examining the differences. Another limitation of this study is that it was conducted with a generally homogeneous sample of heterosexual, educated, middle-class, and largely White participants. The extent to which these findings can be generalized to other parents with different characteristics is an important future research question.

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Notes

1. Of the 16 couples who took part in this study, I was not able to conduct all three (both individuals and the joint) interviews at all three points in time (pregnancy, 3 months after birth, and 12 months after birth) with 4 of the 16 couples. The deviations from the research design were as follows: One father was not available to be interviewed at the second stage (although he was interviewed at the first and third), two fathers were not available to be interviewed at the third stage (although they were interviewed at the first and second), and one father was not available to be interviewed during either the second or third stage (but participated in the initial interviews). At these times, only an individual interview with the mother was conducted. In addition, there were four other couples where both individual interviews were conducted at all points in time but a joint interview was not conducted at one point (two at the second point and two at the third). In these cases, the joint interview was not conducted because either the couple said that they had no further time (one couple) or because the follow-up interviews were being conducted over the phone where joint conversations were more difficult (three couples).
2. Among first-time mothers, two said that there were “natural” gender differences in baby care tasks, three said that there were not, and three were unsure. Among second-time mothers, five said that there were “natural” differences, two said that there were not, and two were unsure.

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