Mothers’ accounts of work and family decision-making in couple families
An analysis of the Family and Work Decisions Study

Kelly Hand

This paper explores mothers’ accounts about how decisions concerning parenting and paid work were made in their families. Mothers’ perceptions about the extent to which their partners contributed to these decisions, and how their beliefs about the role of fathers in the lives of children and families influenced their decisions about these arrangements, are also explored.

While the work and family arrangements of Australian families continue to be a matter of great interest to researchers and policymakers, the decision-making process involved in formulating these arrangements within couple families has received little attention. Further, while women’s beliefs about motherhood have often been explored as a driving factor in how women choose to combine caring for children and employment, less clear is how these patterns are established within families in the lead up to having children and when the first child is born.

This paper uses in-depth interview data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies’ Family and Work Decisions Study to explore the way partnered mothers talk about how decisions concerning parenting and paid work were made in their families. In addition, mothers’ perceptions about the extent to which their partners contributed to these decisions and how their beliefs about the role of fathers in the lives of children and families influenced their decisions about these arrangements are explored.

Background

While attitudes to female employment have changed significantly in Australia over the past 50 years, community attitudes to the employment of mothers of preschool aged children have shown less significant change over this period (de Vaus, 2004). Mothers in couple families tend to decrease their participation in, or withdraw from the labour market upon the birth of their first child, while most fathers continue in full-time employment (ABS, 2006; Baxter, 2005; de Vaus, 2004). In addition, within couple families, women still do most of the household work and caring work involved with children regardless of their labour force status (Craig & Bittman 2005; HREOC 2005; Smyth, Rawsthorne & Siminski, 2005). Hence it seems that patterns of paid and unpaid work within couple families with dependent children, although slowly shifting, continue to be highly gendered. Less clear is how these patterns are established within families in the lead up to having children and when the first child is born.

The question of how couples decide to combine parenting and paid work compared to the ways in which they share these responsibilities has received relatively little attention in the broader work and family literature. However, from the research that does exist some key themes have emerged. Firstly, that an underlying belief about gender and the roles of men and women within relationships influence both the types of decisions and the ways these are made, as do the dominant gender ideologies within their wider social contexts such as their extended families, friendship networks and the communities in which they live (Himmelweit, 2002; Walzer,
or no negotiation took place and often partners were reported as simply wanting to agree with the arrangements mothers made to care for their children (Duncan, 2003).

In addition, mothers’ experiences of the labour market and their capacity to earn compared to their partner’s capacity have also been found to influence decisions within couple families (Smyth et al., 2005; Walzer, 1997).

Findings from the wider body of research about mothers’ employment decisions also suggest that they are closely tied to attitudes, values and preferences (Duncan, 2003; Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Hakim, 2000, 2003; Himmelweit, 2002). In addition, research in Australia and overseas about mothers’ employment decisions suggests that women have mixed feelings about the importance of mothers compared to fathers as primary caregivers, with the idea that mothers are the best caregivers for small children tending to remain the normative belief (Lupton, 2000; Probert, 2002; Smyth et al., 2005). For example, interviews with Australian mothers in the late 1990s found that the majority of those interviewed thought that young children should be with their mother, with only one third feeling that a father or grandparent could provide care to a standard equal to the care provided by mothers (Probert, 2002). As Probert argues, while attitudes to women and employment seem to have changed significantly over recent decades, the social norms about the essential meaning of motherhood and what mothering involves appear to have undergone very little change, if any.

Beliefs about the role of fathers compared to the role of mothers in the care of young children may also be important in influencing the decisions made by couples about how they will share paid and unpaid work within their own household. Australian research has suggested that first-time mothers’ ideas of what a good mother is take a child centred perspective and include the idea that “a good mother should have patience, remain calm and be able to cope and be able to deal attentively with the demands of infants and small children” (Lupton, 2000, p. 54). Many mothers saw breastfeeding as key to being a good mother during infancy and hence, at least in the first few months of their child’s life, staying at home was seen as important for facilitating breastfeeding – as well as being something that their partners could not do.

In contrast, for the women interviewed by Lupton, their image of a good father was conceptualised quite differently from their ideas about what constituted a good mother. Fathers were seen as taking a more supportive role in helping with the care of

1997; Zvonkovic, 1996). Secondly, it appears that in many cases, little negotiation or discussion takes place between partners. Instead, understandings and assumptions built up over time have been found to form a basis for the arrangements that are put into place (Duncan, 2003; Lewis, Hand & Tudball, 2001). For example, a recent Australian study in which couples were interviewed about their work and family decisions found that very little discussion took place before children were born or at critical points such as during the pregnancy or when children started school (Lewis et al., 2001).

In the United Kingdom, research suggests that the extent to which the division of labour between partners is negotiated within couples varies according to ethnicity and social class. For example, Duncan (2003) found that for career-oriented working class women, active negotiations about how labour was to be shared between couples were the norm. But for mothers whose beliefs systems incorporated more traditional ideas about gender roles, very little
some women who had strong attachments to their work had had to leave or take on lower status work to enable them to provide care for their children. In these cases their partners were not willing to change their own work commitments or ambitions and seemed to just expect their partners, as mothers, to make the changes needed to accommodate raising children.
This analysis focuses on the 32 couple mothers interviewed as part of the FAWD qualitative study, although some of the themes discussed were echoed by lone mothers who reflected on these experiences when in couple relationships. Lone mothers are excluded from this analysis as they tended to take a more negative view of their former partners’ abilities to parent and to contribute to family life. This perspective could be influenced by the relationship breakdown – or this may have been an issue that created difficulties in the relationship. As it is difficult to distinguish the reasons behind these views they have not been considered for the current paper.

**How do couples decide on work and family arrangements?**

In almost all couple families involved in the FAWD qualitative interview, mothers reported that when they first had children, the arrangement was that they would stay home with the children and be the primary carer, perhaps returning to work on a part-time basis when the children were seen to be old enough to be left in the care of others. In a small number of families, both parents continued to work or the mother continued working while the father was at home (see Hand, 2005 and Hand and Hughes, 2005 for a more detailed discussion of these arrangements).

When asked about how these decisions were made the most common response was that it was not a conscious process of decision-making or negotiation about the degree to which each parent would engage in paid work and care for children. It simply wasn’t discussed. Rather it was always assumed or “agreed”, to use the term most often used by the mothers interviewed, that the mother would take the primary caring role and the father the breadwinning role. Further, in families where the possibility of mothers’ working was considered, this was usually seen as her choice, even when financially having only one income was seen as being a source of financial hardship or strain.

“I wanted to be there and be the mother, not palm them off to someone else and go off and work. I mean some people have got to do that to survive, but we were lucky enough – my husband’s always been a really hard worker, worked 2 jobs and we’ve been able to manage without me working... I think he was happy to go along with me. He’s never pushed me to go back out to work, never wanted me to go to work, he was quite happy to be the provider and go out to work. He saw that as his role, to go off to work and provide for the family, its always been like that, I suppose you could call us a bit old-fashioned in that way – that’s how we’ve always been, we’ve been happy to do that.” (Couple mother, 4 kids aged 10 to 17, studying)

“Oh he hasn’t got a view – he likes me working... he never told me don’t work. Never said work less or anything. Never told me to work, it was my own decision whether I wanted to work or not. But he helped a lot at home, did a lot of cleaning and he cooked, he did everything when she returned to work shortly after the birth of her first child). And then when I stopped work he stopped doing all of that (laughs).” (Couple mother, 2 children aged 3 and 3 years, neither in paid work)

As discussed in previous work on the FAWD qualitative study (Hand & Hughes, 2004; Hand & Hughes, 2005; Hand, 2005), the rationale behind mothers’ staying at home with their children is linked with their beliefs about mothering, particularly the belief that children need their mothers during infancy and early childhood. While some mothers linked the need to breastfeed as a primary reason for their role as caregiver, others argued that children had an intrinsic need for their mothers at a young age – and some spoke of their own need to be around their children at this time.

“I’m actually quite against it. I just think it’s a dreadful thing for a child and a mother to be separated at a very, very early stage. It’s dreadful. I’ve only had 2 children so I still find babies to be extremely precious and I wouldn’t trust anybody with my little babies. Also, I’m a breastfeeder. I mean, you know, you kind of have to be really organised and it’s not my style, you know. Breastfeeding on demand is kind of like the path of least resistance. I’ve got nothing against other women who feel that they have to. But I just think little babies should be with you, still part of your body. I’d feel terrible when I didn’t have my little baby with me. Even just going shopping and leaving him with [partner], I’d feel wrong. It would be like wearing your shoes backwards, back to front, on the wrong foot.” (Couple mother, 2 children aged 3 years and 20 years, works part-time)

In the context of these discussions, fathers are rarely mentioned as potential primary care providers for their children. In many cases it seems that fathers are simply not considered – their role for many mothers is seen to be primarily as a good provider and mothers who were able to stay home often talked about how lucky they were to have a husband who achieved this. It is important to note – at least from the reports/perceptions of the mothers interviewed – that this was a shared notion of the appropriate roles for men and women within the context of their family. Even if not explicitly discussed within the context of their relationships, most of the mothers interviewed who had a more traditional division of child care and employment along the lines of a male breadwinner model within their own households, believed this was based on shared rather than conflicting beliefs with their partners.

“I was lucky cos I had a husband who was a hard worker and always found work. But if I had a husband who gave up, there’s no way I could’ve stayed home as well, I would’ve had to have pushed and found some work.” (Couple mother, 3 children aged 14 to 18, not in paid work)

“It would kill him to have to stop work. The only time he would stop work is if he absolutely had to. He’s always been the main breadwinner, although when (he had a different job) there were times (before we had children) when I made more than him, he’s the main one, and he’s quite happy to do that, as long as gets his sleep and support and that, he’s happy to go out there and work like a Trojan.” (Couple mother, 1 child aged 26 months, not working)

In a few families there had been some discussion about partners staying home while mothers took on the breadwinning role but this option was usually ruled out based on who was capable of earning the most money.
“He was quite happy for me to stay at home… he has a full-time job, and it’s very hard up here to have one. It’s something that’s full-time, he gets paid holidays, sick days. He said that if I can beat his wage, I can go back to work.” (Couple, 2 children aged 2 years and 2 months, not working)

A small number of mothers mentioned that they felt pressured into staying at home and were not supported by their partners to maintain their attachment to paid work when they had children. Further some mothers said that their partners were simply not interested in moving beyond a traditional breadwinner role and were not comfortable with being at home even if their partner could earn more.

“It nearly happened that he stayed home with [child] and I went back to work but I don’t think he was real keen on the idea. He was having a few arguments with one of the guys at work, and he kept saying “I’m going to quit, I’m going to quit. You’ll have to get full-time work,” and I came home one day and I said “well I think I’m going to get it, I think I’m going to get the full-time work”; and he said “oh, but the guy’s left now, I don’t need to leave”, so I had to go back and tell my boss, “you know how I’ve been hassling you the last month that I want full-time… well forget about it cos [partner] isn’t going to quit his job after all”.

So it was a bit of a nightmare, I think in an ideal world then [partner] would stay home, but when it finally came to the crunch – when I said “yeah you can,” he was like – “oh I don’t really think I want to, I don’t think I’d cope.” (Couple mother, 1 child aged 3 years, not working)

Not all of the women who took on the primary caregiving role did so by choice. Some women who had strong attachments to their work had had to leave or take on lower status work to enable them to provide care for their children. In these cases their partners were not willing to change their own work commitments or ambitions and seemed to just expect their partners, as mothers, to make the changes needed to accommodate raising children. These women talked about choices in somewhat contradictory terms – they were happy with their choice as the best choice among a very limited array available to them but expressed sadness and regret at having to give up what they loved – which was something they didn’t have a choice about.

“We were both chefs, and luckily [partner] was the head chef and I was the 2nd chef so on days where he worked, I had off, and so we, always someone was home looking after the kids and stuff, so it was good that way, we could sort of alternate that way, but then it got really hard because I became pregnant again, and he sacked me cos I wouldn’t leave, I was like nearly 9 months and I wouldn’t leave…” (Couple, 4 children aged 1 to 6 years, works part-time in partner’s business)

Ironically one mother also described her partner’s disappointment in her decision to take a lower status (and paid) job even though it was his own refusal to change his work arrangements to share the care of their child that had pushed her to do so.

“And I even did some work [in previous area of employment] when we moved to Melbourne but uh, it was too hard to keep up…I think [partner] was very disappointed that I opted to (change to new job). I think he would’ve preferred me to stay working in [previous employment] and um, given the fact that we have a lot of support from [partners’ mother] and she’s very close by and quite prepared to have the input, but she is more cognisant than he is of how stressful it was on me…She’s been very supportive of me going to this full-time… 9-5 type job, because its just kinda keeping me sane, yeah.” (Couple mother, works full-time, 1 child aged 6)

**Mothers’ perceptions of the roles of fathers in childrearing**

Some mothers explicitly stated that fathers were simply less important as primary caregivers than mothers. As mentioned in the above section, there was a sense that these mothers saw an intrinsic role for mothers as caregivers that does not apply to fathers. These women were not criticising their partners’ ability to parent as such, they simply believed that the role of primary caregiver for children was not a fathers’ domain.

“I always personally held the belief that a mother should always be there for her children, and a father obviously, but work commitments allow differences for fathers. I always believed that if I was going to ever be able to be at home with my children I would be at home for them. I would be home when they got home from school and so on and so forth.” (Couple, 4 children at home aged 6 to 16 years, not working)

“Be there for them. Simple things like hear their first words. See them walking for the first time. Helping with the first time they do homework, the spelling…yeah, simple things like that. I think it’s important that the mums are there. Not so much the dads.” (Couple, 3 children aged 6 to 9 years, not in paid work)

If pushed on the issue, however, some mothers also questioned the ability of their partners to parent adequately and to be as good a primary carer as they could be as mothers. This was particularly highlighted in the small number of cases where fathers were not employed – often as a result of illness or injury. While in these families the mother had the capacity to be employed and usually the extent of the fathers’ injury itself did not impact on their ability to care, they felt that their partners were not able to provide the level of care that they could as they lacked the patience and interest in children required. In a small number of cases mothers felt that the care offered by fathers negatively impacted on the wellbeing of children.

“… and my husband’s not really into that – he won’t, he won’t sit down and play with them. He’ll take them somewhere, but he won’t sit down and kind of, colour in with them. I think that’s important and I try to do that, or read a book to them. He won’t do that… because ahm… I don’t know, he just won’t. But if I, I have to do everything, I have to read to them, I’ve got to play with them…” (Couple mother, 2 children aged 3 and 5 years, neither in paid work)

“Even though my husband’s home all the time he still hasn’t got that connection.” (Couple, 3 children aged 6 to 9 years, not in paid work)
“And they go, ”Oh, he can watch the kids.” But, he’s got no patience for children. Like, fair enough the girls…but the boys, he just hasn't got the patience to, give 'em what they want, is what I'm saying. And I can't go to work, and honestly, be settled at my job, knowing that they might be stressing out at home. You know what I mean? It's sort of hard for me to explain. But yeah, I can't go to work and relax, and that’s probably why I came undone last year. Because I tried going to work, and I found myself worrying myself stupid, and how everything was at home. … A couple of times I came home and things were a bit of a mess…. [Pause] I found it hard to deal with it.” (Couple, 4 children aged 17 to 7, both not working)

Other women also noted that their partners tended to see them as being more capable and hence left the primary care and decisions about childrearing to them.

“My partner] tends to leave the main decision-making of children and school to me because he seems to think that I know

It is important to note that a focus on breadwinning rather than childrearing by fathers was not seen by mothers as a lack of participation in fatherhood but instead their key role as a good father.

Returning to paid work

As noted above, mothers who did not return to paid work after having children tended to describe this as something that was agreed with their partners. However, in many cases the mothers interviewed felt that their partners saw the decision about whether or not to return to paid work as one that the mothers themselves should take and were “happy” to go along with her decisions. Eventually though many mothers reported that there is a point where the decision-making becomes more shared, with their partners beginning to talk to them about returning to work and the advantages of this additional income to the family budget. This shift most often took place in the lead up to their youngest child starting school.

For some mothers, this resulted in a return to employment – even if at times this seemed a bit daunting after an extended absence from the labour market.

“A big thing was the confidence curve. We sat down and talked about it and it was probably more my husband “Lily, you can do it, we need the money, come on!” It’s better to start, before we actually really critically needed it, to just start saving a little so that we can work out our financial concerns.” (Couple mother, 3 children aged 10 to 16, works part-time)

Others acknowledged that there was indeed a financial impetus to return to work but simply resisted this by not actively seeking work but agreed that they would do so if a job literally “fell into their laps”.

“Oh I would prefer not to work. I really would. I love being at home. I just enjoy it. I’m here when the girls go to school. I’m here when they come home. We’re pretty close… money’s been very tight now… and [partner]’s working all this overtime, that makes it a bit hard because he’s very tired and cranky …. The tensions are there. Because there’s not enough money. So, I’ve sort of been thinking if something fell into my lap again, that I might be able to work. Yeah maybe, during the school hours and that….” (Couple mother, 2 children aged 13 and 15, not in paid work)

Some women will resist this request explicitly stating that they did not believe their partners’ desire for an increased household income was an adequate reason to return to work, particularly if this was for what they believed to be materialistic purposes such as an overseas holiday or a bigger house rather than a contribution to the costs of childrearing.

“But, no I think everything’s an individual thing. You know like, whether you’ve got a supportive spouse or not, or whether it’s economic and you’re really forced to. I think you can still manage without but [partner] doesn’t. He’d like to go overseas because he saved up for four years to go overseas and he says he’d like to go over every year, well that’s not a good enough reason for me to work I’m sorry.” (Couple mother, 1 child aged 12 years at home, not in paid work)

Conclusion

Analyses of the FAWD qualitative data with couple mothers suggest that decisions about who works and who cares for children when couples become parents are not always based on explicit discussions about the division of labour around these roles. Rather, assumptions based on broader social expectations about the roles of men and women in both childrearing and the labour market appear to be more important. It seems in the contexts of the lives of mothers who participated in the FAWD study, that mothers are still more likely to take on the primary caregiving role while men take primary responsibility for providing the income on which the family lives. This finding is not unexpected and is consistent with other research
conducted in Australia and overseas (see, for example, ABS, 2006; de Vaus, 2004).

However, it is important to note that a focus on breadwinning rather than childrearing by fathers was not seen by mothers as a lack of participation in fatherhood but instead their key role as a good father. In the eyes of mothers who strongly believed that small children needed their mothers to be at home with them all of the time, a partner (usually husband) who “worked hard” and was a “good provider” enabled them to stay at home and fulfill this crucial mothering role – and hence were fulfilling a most crucial aspect of fatherhood. However, for most mothers, beyond this role of provider the issue of fathers as caregivers was largely ignored. Few mothers considered their partners as equally able to take on the role of primary carer suggesting that men could not be trusted with the emotional aspects of parenting and running a household, lacking the patience and interest in small children required.

The mothers’ narratives hinted that their partners were supportive of this arrangement, and that in most cases each parent seems to comfortably fit into the their expected gender roles – at least while their children were of preschool age. It would of course be interesting in these families to hear what fathers have to say about these expectations.

Earlier Australian Institute of Family Studies research from the Family and Work: the Family’s Perspective Study suggests that many fathers desire more time with their children and cherish the opportunity to care for and play with them. In addition some fathers reported their partners exclude them from parenting or taking on caring rather than breadwinning roles either explicitly or implicitly by taking the “default position” of being a mother at home. Further as its seen as her choice he can’t challenge her either way – with some fathers suggesting it was not socially acceptable to do so (Hand & Lewis, 2002). An example of one such father’s feelings about this is given in the quote below.

“I know [my wife] has changed jobs and careers and that’s fine, but she does it with not a lot of consultation. She seems to be able to do that. Whereas if I wanted to change, and up and do something else, it’s a family thing – so its very much still a “breadwinner” role – although [my wife] would probably deny that.” (Father, works full-time, sourced from Hand & Lewis 2002)

Looking at the two studies together, it may be that while some men would prefer a different arrangement that allows them to take a greater role with childrearing and to share the responsibility of providing the family income with their partners, they feel unable to challenge the arrangements already in place in their families. It should also be considered, however, that the inability of men to challenge these expectations may not just be because their partners do not allow the option. For fathers, being the breadwinner may still fit in with his own gender expectations about the right way to live and to raise and support a family – even if it is a role that they find personally challenging.

References


Kelly Hand is a Senior Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.