

The mental load in separated families

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Abstract

Objective: This paper asks how evolving contact and gendered working lives, gendered identities, and conflict and parental relationships influence cognitive labour in separated families.

Background: The fact that the often-invisible work of planning, researching, and executing decisions concerning children and household maintenance is borne by women/mothers, receives growing research attention, yet, the bulk of this research focuses on the gendered division of the mental load in intact families. Given the high prevalence of separated families with high levels of father contact, more work is needed to understand how cognitive labour is divided by parents residing in separate households.

Method: This paper draws on 31 semi-structured interviews of separated parents, including 7 former couples. Interviews were sampled from a nationally representative longitudinal survey, *Understanding Society*, professionally transcribed and thematically analysed with Nvivo.

Results: Analysing the interviews reveals both continuity and change in the division of the mental load following separation. For some families, gendered identities and working lives continue to justify an unequal division of the mental load, even when children spend large amounts of time solely with fathers. In others, conflict can reduce communication between parents, either increasing fathers cognitive labour through parallel parenting or decreasing it when fathers are excluded from decision-making altogether. Finally, separation can present a turning point where working lives and identities are re-evaluated, and the mental load can be negotiated anew.

Conclusion: We provide new evidence that the mental load remains gendered even among those practicing a relatively “modern” family form of shared care post-separation, while highlighting possibilities for variation and change.

Key words: shared care, cognitive labour, separation, childcare, contact



1. Introduction

For decades, scholars have sought to uncover sources of variation in the degree to which women take on an unequal proportion of housework and childcare, examining differences across space (Craig & Mullan, 2011), across time (Sayer et al., 2004), and across parental education levels (Dotti Sani & Treas, 2016). Within this body of work, attention has recently shifted specifically to the cognitive dimension of housework and childcare, that is, the often invisible “management” tasks of running the family home (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Daminger, 2019; Offer, 2014). This research finds that cognitive labour – also called the mental load (Emma, 2018) - is a particularly gendered and unequally shared form of work in married and cohabiting households.

In this paper, we draw on 31 in-depth interviews with separated mothers (18) and fathers (13), including both parents from 7 separated couples, to ask how evolving contact and gendered working lives, gendered identities, and conflict and parental relationships shape the division of the mental load among separated parents who share care of their children¹. Our research addresses an important gap, given the high proportion of families experiencing parental separation across the world. Although divorce rates have declined in many wealthy societies (R. K. Raley & Sweeney, 2020), currently one fourth of all families with dependent children in the UK are single parent households (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Whereas it might have been reasonable for earlier research to assume that separation marked the end of a shared mental load in the household, the rise in shared care as a form of post-separation parenting means that the mental load surrounding childcare may now be actively negotiated by parents residing in two separate households.

Similar to existing work on intact couples (Damingier, 2019; Offer, 2014; Rehel, 2014), we find that gendered working lives, identities and ideology can justify an unequal division of the mental load even across two households, with separated women deemed to “naturally” have better organisational skills and fathers’ contribution conceived as financial and in-kind transfers. However, we also find that separation can create the opportunity for disruption in the gendered mental load division. For those who split amicably, an increase in the father’s solo-care and the resulting need to arrange new work and care lives can create opportunity to renegotiate the division of the mental load. For those experiencing conflict, a breakdown in communication between former partners can force the creation of two parallel parenting and household management structures that operate independently of one another, with mental loads that are correspondingly borne by each parent alone.

1 This sample includes members of separated former couples where both members of the couple are biological parents. Please note that throughout this paper we restrict our definition of parents only to heterosexual biological parents. We recognize that this omits a great diversity in the experiences of parenting and of parental separation, in particular homosexual partnerships with children, adoptive parents and children residing with other family members. Unfortunately a project of this scope cannot provide sufficient attention to these multiple sources of variation, and so we restrict our focus to the children who have two known biological parents and currently reside with one biological parent.

This study advances two areas of research. First, it builds on feminist work on the “stalled and uneven” gender revolution (England, 2010) by illustrating continued inequality in the division of mental load associated with children within separated families. Second, it intervenes in academic and policy debates about post-separation shared care by shifting the focus from contact patterns and impacts on children to the understudied topic of impacts on *parents* (Steinbach, 2019), and the dynamic, negotiated process of “doing” family (Hertz, 2006) among separated parents with high levels of contact. By bringing these two strands of research together, our study supports the emerging consensus that the well-being of mothers and fathers needs to be understood within a couple-level framework (Musick et al., 2020), while also acknowledging that “family practices” may change as members reconfigure and parents reside in separate households (Morgan, 2011).

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Gendered Division of Labour in Couples*

It is now well known that despite increasing levels of maternal employment, and an associated increase in participation of men in housework and childcare, a substantial gender differential in housework and childcare remains (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Common explanations for the gendered division of household labour and childcare are centred around economic time utility (Becker, 1965) and household production models that assume bargaining around the division of labour between partners in the allocation of market (work) and non-market (housework and childcare) tasks (Becker, 1974). In one perspective derived from these models, women’s greater allocation of time to non-market work is understood as the result of their greater relative time availability, given that men generally take on a higher share of market labour. In the second and complementary perspective, because men work more, they both have more relative and absolute material resources, which enables them to bargain out of household tasks (Kühhirt, 2012).

Although these models are still widely used to understand gendered divisions of housework in partnered couples, it is less clear how well they apply to childcare more generally (S. Raley et al., 2012), and especially to the mental load. An alternative set of hypotheses, broadly derived from a gender ideology (Davis & Greenstein, 2009) or gender culture (Pfau-Effinger, 1998) perspective, argues that biological essentialist ideas about who is best suited for childcare (Gaunt, 2006), alongside broader societal norms surrounding gendered social spheres and separate roles for men and women at home and in the workplace, all contribute to the continued gendered division of household labour even in the absence of household level inequality in time or material resources. Recent research on the division specifically of the cognitive dimension of household labour suggests that while it may be related to time availability, the mental load is a particularly gendered form of labour (K. Christopher, 2012; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Craig et al., 2014), with women still more likely to carry a higher proportion of the mental load even in families where they work a longer number of hours (Daminger 2019: 624).

2.2 *The Mental Load*

Interest in the cognitive dimension of household labour has increased rapidly in recent years; following the viral dissemination of the political cartoon which spotlights the term by feminist cartoonist Emma in 2017, the number of google searches for “mental load” jumped immediately and has stayed high ever since². In the cartoon, the distribution of the household mental load is compared to the distribution of tasks between managers and subordinates in a workplace environment. Daminger (2019: 609), conducting qualitative interviews with 35 couples in the United States, identifies the components of the mental load as “anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress.” This work often happens behind the scenes and can be invisible to family members and researchers alike; as explicitly *cognitive* work, much of it happens inside the individual’s head and thus is difficult to measure. It is often only when the person carrying the mental load is no longer present - when there is no toilet paper in the house [anticipating needs], when a new babysitter needs to be found [identifying options], when parent-teacher meetings are missed [monitoring progress] - that its impact becomes visible. Daminger finds that these dimensions of the mental load are highly gendered, with only the power dynamic of decision making more equally shared between men and women in a household. Separating parents residing in two households thus provide a key site to examine how the gendered division of the mental load can change.

Similar to work on housework and childcare more generally, emerging research on the mental load shows how a couple’s relative time availability and resources, in particular as configured during the transition to parenthood, can shape the division of cognitive labour. The fact that women disproportionately work part time after becoming mothers (Harkness et al., 2019), and that the transition to fatherhood generally increases, rather than decreases fathers’ labour supply (Hoherz & Bryan, 2019), creates the conditions for mothers to emerge as managers of the household even when a more “50/50” division of labour is desired (Faircloth, 2021). Further evidence linking working lives to the mental load comes from recent research in Canada and the United States, and across Scandinavia (Evertsson, 2014; Rehel, 2014), that finds that when fathers take paternal leave, their parenting identities and practices more closely mirror those of their partners, in particular skills at identifying needs and levels of confidence to fulfil and monitor them in solo-care. In the UK context, complicated eligibility rules and low financial support mean that take up of shared parental leave is dismally low, somewhere between 2 and 8 per percent of eligible couples³.

Yet, both seminal and more recent research finds that, due to the prevalent gender ideology in both the US and the UK, even when women work similar hours and earn on par with or even more than their male partners, they still work a “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) as household managers. One reason for this is that the notion of gendered spheres and the gendered division of work and home rests most closely on *responsibility* (Aassve et al., 2014; Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Men and women are

2 Google search term timeline 10/07/2020

3 Parliamentary questions 2021: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-02-01/146798>

responsible each for their separate spheres, and this responsibility can be enacted invisibly within one's head, taking place independent of space and time while mentally creating a to-do list at work or during the evening drive home. Importantly, the mental load of responsibility remains even when the actual physical labour of the tasks – for instance doing the dishes or watching the children – is outsourced to other family members or hired help.

Taking charge of the household is central to a gendered sense of self for women (Hochschild, 1989), and the importance of performing this role is intensified by motherhood (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997), with responsibility for children a key part of being a “good mother” (K. Christopher, 2012; Craig & Mullan, 2011; Doucet, 2009). Christopher (2012) for instance shows that for married mothers who work longer hours, the managerial tasks – “being in charge” and choosing and allocating childcare tasks to partners and hired help – are seen as the particular domain of good mothers even if they do not want to be stay at home caregivers for their children. Using an illustrative term, “captains of the household”, Ciciolla and Luthar (2019) confirm these qualitative studies with quantitative data, demonstrating how the “mental and emotional labour” inherent in household management is disproportionately borne by women and negatively impacts their mental health. Despite its invisibility, other scholars have pointed to the toll that the mental load can take on the leisure time (Shaw, 2008) and mental health of the household manager (Daly, 2001; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Offer & Schneider, 2011) as well as their satisfaction with their marriage (Frisco & Williams, 2003).

3. Analytic Framework

Research explicitly on the mental load is a burgeoning field, but its focus to date has primarily been on intact couples. In the section that follows, we develop an analytic framework to address the division of cognitive labour specifically in separated couples who are sharing care of their children. While we believe that many elements identified in the literature on two-parent households – such as working lives and gendered identities – will continue to be influential, we also posit that parental separation can create space for change, and that particularly the evolution of working lives in response to separation and the disruption in the parental relationship are key determinants for the division of the mental load in separated couples.

3.1 *Contact and Gendered Working Lives*

Given mental load's relative invisibility, its particularly gendered nature, and its lack of anchor in specific spaces and times, we might expect that separated families will display a gendered division of the mental load that is similar to the intact families on which current research is based. Drawing on the existing literature above as well as related work on childcare in separated families, we expect that time availability and relative and absolute resources will influence the mental load in separated families, but that these will be also be related to contact patterns and child maintenance structure.

In the UK, post-separation contact patterns continue to be highly gendered, despite increased interest and legal support for shared care arrangements (Haux et al., 2017). Nine out of ten single parents are women in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2021), and in a representative cross-national survey of school children conducted in 2011, only 11% of children reported their living arrangement as “co-parenting” – in contrast to 36% in Sweden (Kalmijn, 2015). In these more “traditional” post-separation family configurations, taking on the role of primary carer often corresponds to part-time work and lower earnings for mothers with fathers providing child maintenance payments. In these families, fathers have been shown to use payments (as well as in-kind transfers) as a way of maintaining a traditional breadwinner role even when they have left the family household (Natalier & Hewitt, 2010).

The issue of time with children and its division post-separation is central to post-separation parenting and, we would argue here, the division of the mental load surrounding childcare. In the minority of families where fathers have higher levels of contact, they may have children several days in a row, with limited contact with the mother. These fathers will likely need to accommodate (if they did not already) increased childcare responsibilities by reducing or rearranging paid work; even when working lives do not evolve, they will then be more likely to have to independently arrange childcare on “their” days as well as play dates, school uniforms and lunches, and communications from school - cognitive labour associated with the mental load. While, as we show below, it remains possible for mothers to carry the mental load even in situations where fathers maintain high levels of contact, it is less common, and moreover relies on the goodwill of the mother which may not always be present.

3.2 Gendered Identities

Similar to the gendered story telling documented by Hochschild (1989), we expect separated parents to continue to evoke gendered moralities and identities of parenthood deriving from general gender ideology in the UK, with mothers as main carers, despite rhetoric of equality and “fairness” between former partners (Philip, 2013). Indeed, a related literature on maternal gatekeeping in separated families finds that some women continue to assume – and indeed fight for – the right to maintain a managerial role regarding childcare following separation (Miller, 2018; Trinder, 2008). Particularly in the most common post-separation childcare configuration, where mothers have the bulk of contact time with children, they may end up regulating the access of the non-residential parent through what Trinder (2008) has termed “gate work”. This can *increase* inequality in the mental load when mothers facilitate fathers’ contact via “proactive gate opening”, conducting the necessary organisational work to ensure fathers see their children, as well as in “contingent gate opening,” where mothers further exclude fathers from decision making, intervene in planned activities and supervise father access. Gate closing, where mothers seek to reduce or cease father contact altogether, can also increase the mental load of both parents when conflict over contact ensues.

On the father’s side, *paternal* gatekeeping – in which fathers assume incompetence or avoid engagement as a way of avoiding their share of the mental load (Miller 2018), can similarly increase mental load inequality post-separation. Residing in separate

households, and with potentially weekend-only or less frequent contact patterns, fathers may be excluded from – or avoid - routine or responsibility care altogether. Even when fathers have higher levels of contact, a related literature on father involvement post-separation notes that increases in engaged and direct care (playing, helping with homework) are not necessarily associated with increased in indirect and responsibility care (making appointments for, purchasing clothing for) (Lamb, 2000; Pleck, 2010). Interviewing fathers with 50/50 care arrangements in Australia, Lacroix (2006) finds that the only fathers who explicitly mentioned planning and monitoring as part of their caregiving were the very small minority who were working part-time – and that they only engaged with the mental load during their specific contact time, in contrast to mothers who were managers and “default” carers regardless of contact patterns. This corresponds with more recent work in the US which finds that mothers operate as “captains” of the “caregiving team” even when the team includes fathers, stepfathers and stepmothers as valued members; mothers still perceived themselves as responsible for children in more complex post-separation parenting configurations (Ganong et al., 2015).

At the same time, separation can provide the opportunity for change in the mental load division. Even in the absence of conflict, separation can provide a disruption and catalyst for reflection and change in gendered identities. As poignantly presented by Smart and Neal (1999) and Gatrell et al (2015), for some fathers separation presents an opportunity to rethink their role as fathers as merely being “available” (Dermott, 2005) or supplementary, with solo-care providing a chance to develop a deeper and more intimate relationship with their children. Especially in separated families where fathers engage in intensive, routine caring for their children, “maternal thinking” (Ruddick, 1995) can create caring identities and less gendered approaches to parenting. For instance recent research in Canada and the United States, and across Scandinavia (Evertsson, 2014; Rehel, 2014) finds that when fathers take paternal leave, their parenting identities and practices more closely mirror those of their partners, in particular skills at identifying needs and levels of confidence to fulfil and monitor them in solo-care.

Separation can also disrupt gendered norms and identities for mothers. Studies of married women have shown how working and parenting identities can shift rapidly in response to changing circumstances (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Johnston & Swanson, 2006); similarly, particularly for mothers who acquired greater financial freedom through a return to work or who were already in a privileged socioeconomic position prior to divorce, separation could result in a higher level of well-being as well as a more balanced work and parenting identity (LaPointe, 2013). In a study of Australian parents post-separation Natalier and Hewitt (2014) argue that childcare is “de-gendered” in the discourse of separated parents, where father and mother care are seen as equally valuable, even as financial contributions remained integral to the hegemonic masculinity adhered to by the majority of their sample. These evolutions may encourage mothers to make room for (or increase demand for) cognitive labour from fathers.

3.3 Conflict and Parental Relationships

For the mental load to be negotiated, or even to be “divided” in any real sense, a civil relationship is required – a precondition that cannot be assumed, particularly in separated

families. Carrying the mental load for a household, a set of managerial tasks, is likely to be impossible when the decisions of the “manager” are not respected or where communication breakdown means that decisions cannot be transmitted nor adherence to decisions monitored across households. Studies of parenting types post-separation find that higher conflict post-separation is more likely to lead to the disengagement of the non-resident parent, usually the father, altogether (Kelly, 2007). In less extreme cases, where primary carer mothers have concerns about father competence but contact still occurs, maternal gatekeeping can prevent fathers from making decisions on behalf of their children (Puhlman & Pasley, 2013), or restrict the amount and kind of contact when relationship quality with the former partner is poor (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). In such families the mental load for childcare becomes the complete responsibility of the resident parent.

However, where both conflict and father contact is high, the potential for “parallel” parenting can emerge, where input from both resident and non-resident parents are relatively high but there is little discussion between them (Amato et al., 2011). While such family structures are strongly associated with lower levels of satisfaction for both parents (King & Heard, 1999), they may also give rise to a more evenly divided mental load: where communication is low between former partners, reminders, decisions and organisational efforts will need to happen in parallel and be borne by both parents during “their” time with the children. Thus, the expected relationship between parental relationship quality and mental load division is not a straightforward one. A civil relationship can lead to the continuity of a manager-subordinate relationship, but may also enable renegotiation of roles after separation. A conflicted relationship may result in gate closing on the behalf of the resident parent, usually the mother; or it may pave the way for a more completely equal division of the mental load with each parent independently managing their children without input from the other.

4. Data collection

This paper draws on 31 interviews with separated parents conducted as part of an *Understanding Society Associated Study*.⁴ *Understanding Society* is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of 40,000 households in the UK. The large size of the survey and its tracing programme, which follows household members even as they leave the original sample household, makes it a unique resource for studying separated families over time. Gaining permission for an associated study enabled us to use the rich, longitudinal survey data to purposefully sample separated parents for qualitative interviews. In an Associated Study, the researchers compile a list of personal identification numbers with the desired characteristics for interview, and then work closely with the *Understanding Society* scientific and participant liaison team to develop recruitment materials. Participants are contacted by *Understanding Society* team members and researchers are provided with the contact information for those who agree to participate.

4 <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/get-involved/associated-studies>

We used information gathered in *Understanding Society* in 2015-2018 (waves 7 and 8) to identify separated parents with children under the age of 16 (University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2018). To focus on the majority of separated families with mothers as main carers, we restricted our sample to separated couples where the main carer / resident parent is the mother and the non-resident parent is the father (87% of all separated couples with children under 16 in *Understanding Society*). We further restricted our sample only to those separated parents where either the mother or the father reported that the father had at least weekly contact with his children. In the majority of cases *Understanding Society* only surveys the main carer or non-resident parent; however, for a smaller portion where a formally intact family splits in earlier waves of the survey, the non-resident parent is also followed in their new household and so we have observations of both former partners. We chose a random sample of 100 separated parents (50 men and 50 women) to contact for interview, and to increase the likelihood of interviewing both former partners, we also attempted contact with both members of all former couples observed in the survey (40 former couples). By explicitly selecting respondents based on non-residential contact frequency, including former partners, we were able to reach theoretical saturation with a smaller number of total interviews. Using the survey also enhanced the coverage of our study: we achieved interviews with respondents of varying levels of educational attainment (15/31 interviewees had a University degree), varied number and age of children (average age of children in the home was 11, though included parents with infants to children in their 20s), with varying time since separation (still formally separating to over 10 years since separation), and from across England, Wales and Scotland.

Clearly, interviewing former couples apart presents some unique ethical challenges (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013), due to the risk of disclosure during the interview process as well as in the disseminated findings (Tolich, 2004). To reduce the risk of within-interview disclosure, former partners were interviewed separately by different interviewers before transcription. Study participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the study, their rights to confidentiality and to withdraw from the study at any time, and on our plans to archive the anonymized transcripts, and all participants gave recorded verbal or written consent to take part.

We feel that having the perspectives of both former partners when examining post-separation parenting is extremely valuable, allowing us to obtain gendered perspectives from both sides of a generally contentious issue. We found that while parents generally agreed about the basic form of post-separation care (contact frequency, division of parenting tasks) the emotional valence and weight given to different dimensions of parenting could vary strongly.

The interview guide, recruitment materials and sampling plan received ethical approval from the University of Essex in March 2018, and we conducted interviews in May and June 2018. The interviews were professionally transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo. We went through several iterations of identifying themes and dimensions in the data before agreeing on a final analytical framework for this study. We then coded all the interview material into the analytical framework and subsequently went over the coded material looking for patterns of association and developing explanations. All materials and

anonymised transcripts have been deposited with the UK Data Archive (Haux & Luthra, 2020). Descriptive information on our interview sample is found in table 1 below.

Table 1: Interview Sample

Interview Pseudonym	Partner Pseudonym	Contact Pattern	Working Lives
<i>Former Couple Interviews</i>			
Andrew	Polly	1-2 nights per week and every other weekend	Father FT, Mother SHM / Unemp
Susan	Graham	Varied: 1 night per week + every other weekend, but variable around father's schedule	Father FT, Mother PT Caring
Rose	Larry	1 night per week and every Saturday	Father FT, Mother FT Caring
Marcello	Emily	3 nights per week	Father FT, Mother FT Caring
Colin	Sheila	3 nights per week	Father FT, Mother FT
Jonathan	Anna	1 night per week and every other weekend	Father FT, Mother PT Caring
Felicity	Martin	3 nights per week	Father FT, Mother PT
<i>Single Parent Interviews</i>			
Karen		Varied: several times per week - fortnightly depending on seasonal job	Father FT Seasonal, Mother FT Caring
Teresa		1 night per week and every other weekend	Father FT, Mother FT Caring
Tom		Week 1 - 5 nights, Week 2 - 2 nights	Father FT, Mother FT
Janine		4 days on, 4 days off	Father FT, Mother PT
Caroline		2 nights per week, every other weekend	Father FT, Mother FT
Rachel		1 night per week, every other Saturday	Father FT, Mother FT
Louis		2 overnights per week	Father FT, Mother FT
Erik		Varies around shifts: whole week - no overnights	Father FT, Mother FT
Nick		3 nights per week	Father FT, Mother FT
Maryanne		3 nights per week	Father FT, Mother FT Caring
Cheryl		2 nights per week, every other weekend	Father FT, Mother FT
Gina		2-3 nights per week	Father FT, Mother FT
Cathy		Daily visits, 1 weekend night	Father FT, Mother SHM / Unemp
Sarah		School drop off / pick up 3 days per week	Father FT, Mother PT
Diana		1 night per week and every other weekend	Father FT, Mother FT, both Caring
Brian		Flexible through week, every other weekend	Father FT, Mother PT
Melinda		1 night per week, every other weekend	Father FT, Mother 2 PT jobs

Note: Caring includes carers and teachers in school and nursery settings. SHM: stay at home mother

5. Findings

In discussing parenting practices with separated mothers and fathers, three major dimensions of care emerged: physical parenting, emotional parenting, and finally cognitive parenting, or the mental load. In this paper we focus on mental load, taking the four components of cognitive labour as described in the previous literature as the starting point for our analysis: anticipating needs, identifying options, making decisions, and monitoring outcomes.

In the section that follows, we describe the influence of working lives and gendered identities in creating continuity in mental load division following divorce. We also describe the counteracting influences of evolving work lives in response to new contact patterns, and the disruption of separation and conflict, in creating opportunity for change. Our interviews reveal that justifications of household-level specialisation of labour can operate in separated families who are no longer sharing a household, in particular when mothers worked part-time. Gender ideology of motherhood and fatherhood, with mothers as “natural” organisers and fathers as breadwinners, emerged from our interviews and were reinforced when mothers were in caring professions. At the same time, less traditional working lives could also create a more equal division of the mental load, in particular for parents who used non-overlapping shift work to cover childcare pre- and post-separation.

More unique to separated couples, however, was the importance of conflict and the parental relationship and perceptions of maternal and paternal competence, closeness and control alongside the role of maintenance and contact time specifically for determining decision-making. Moreover, we further observed how separation could provide a disruption in the division of the mental load. For some of our higher conflict couples, separation created parallel parenting lives where a lack of communication between parents resulted in fathers bearing the mental load alone during their time with their child(ren). In other couples, the greater logistical complexity of managing childcare across two households and increased solo-care for fathers created opportunity for a renegotiation of the mental load after separation.

5.1 Working Lives and Gendered Identities: Continuity

As is common in the UK (Tomlinson, 2006), the working lives of the parents in our sample often followed a traditional gendered pattern, with women working part-time and/or in caring professions, such as teaching, and their ex-partners working full time. This combination of gendered time availability and the related gendered spheres of expertise within the family that emerged pre-separation continued to justify unequal mental load division for separated parents we interviewed. Returning to the analogy of the mother as a “household manager,” for these families the mother continued as the manager of the children even as the parents were separated across two households – and even when the children spent significant time with the father. In these families the father often became a deputy during his time with the children: carrying out the options arranged by mothers to fulfil needs, such as driving children to arranged playdates or showing up at parent-teacher meetings when instructed to do so, as well as monitoring outcomes when children were in his care and reporting on the child’s general well-being back to the mother. This kind of mental load division was built on an amicable relationship between the parents, requiring high levels of contact and coordination.

In these families mothers took over the first two dimensions of the mental load – anticipating needs and researching solutions, and generally led on the second two – making decisions and monitoring results, with input from fathers. As we can see in the following quote, both working lives (working as a teacher) and gendered paternal

gatekeeping (I'm not good at that) combine to justify a highly unequal mental load division following separation:

She did everything. Well, obviously, she's a teacher, she knows about education, which I'm not that educated really. Yeah, so she knew what she was doing. And more than that, I'm not very good at that." – *Larry, 1 night per week and every Saturday*

A common theme was that mothers carried the mental load post-separation because both parents followed the gender ideology that mothers are more competent at that form of work. We also see that traditional working lives and identities shape mental load division even in families where fathers have high levels of contact. In the following instance, contact is shared 50/50 and the father provides all the physical and emotional aspects of childcare during his contact time – but is carrying out plans as set out by the mother, for instance regarding the bedtime routine for his two young sons:

In terms of what they're allowed to do at bedtime, we give them some supplements at bedtime as well, which again, is [something their mother decided] --I mean, my ex is very good at looking things up and finding new and interesting ways to solve problems, much more so than I am, much more creative and much better at researching things. – *Martin, 3 nights per week*

Again, in these amicable, high-contact separation families, mothers remain trusted captains of the household, with fathers practicing paternal gatekeeping strategies of incompetence to continue to follow gendered role divisions even across two separate households.

Similar to what has been found in intact families (Daminger, 2019), despite highly gendered inequality in identifying, researching, and monitoring needs, the power-related dimension of decision-making was a form of mental load that remained more equally shared between high contact and high communication post-separation parents. In the following case, the mother remained an (unemployed) stay at home parent performing nearly all the mental load tasks, but when asked about what form their post-separation childcare took, she states:

I guess more about if it's proper co-parenting rather than ...that's my time, that's your time... It's not everything, all the decisions are made as one unit still. We just happen to live in separate houses and finances. – *Cathy, father visits daily plus 1 night per week*

When discussing with separated parents how and why they continued to share decision-making power despite separate households, fathers and mothers drew on both traditional and "new" ideology (Johansson & Klinth, 2008) surrounding the role of the father in the family. On one hand, the role of child maintenance as the father's contribution (breadwinning) remains an important part of what respondents defined as co-parenting and justified sharing decision-making about children:

I think that to me is co-parenting. Somebody who wants to provide... When Ashleigh wants to go to on school residential, 200 quid, don't contribute. Uniforms, don't contribute. He doesn't contribute. He pays me my maintenance which has been kicked out at either £28 or £38 pound a week. And that's it and he's told me that. – *Melinda, father 1 night per week, every other weekend*

On the other hand, elements of the “new father” role concerning closeness and emotional connection to the children, the need for children to have a father in their lives, was evoked particularly by mothers who may have had otherwise wanted a cleaner break from their ex-partners, in contrast to earlier work on separated families which found that fathers were seen as less necessary to a child's well-being:

I mean, she needs her dad in her life ... she'll have a stepdad, but at the end of the day, nothing changes, he is her dad. [I: What makes that important to you?] Because we both brought her into the world and he has parental responsibility and, you know, he has a role [to play in her life]... - *Teresa, father 1 night per week and every other weekend*

The themes of both financial contribution and father contact as important elements of co-parenting, that justifies “a say” in the decision-making around children even when the rest of the mental load was carried by mothers, was echoed by both fathers and mothers in our interviews.

The importance of gendered working lives and identities in continuing to shape mental load division after separation is underscored by examining the families that did not conform to traditional gendered working lives, and where the mental load was more evenly divided both before and after separation. Working arrangements where dual-earning shift couples arranged non-overlapping shifts so that they could fully cover the day without relying on external childcare, for instance, meant that fathers had long stretches of solo-care with children as soon as the mothers left maternity leave. As noted in research on shared parental leave (Pilkauskas & Schneider, 2020), this meant that fathers had often acquired expertise and responsibility early in a child's life, as can be seen in this response to the question of how household tasks were allocated pre-separation:

It would depend on what shifts we were both on, so if I was at work, he would do tea. If I was at home, I'd do tea. We just did whatever. We didn't have anything specific that we did. We just did what was needed and what fitted really.” – *Gina, 2-3 nights per week*

In contrast to those families with more traditional working lives above, where mothers were seen as naturally better at organisational tasks, in this family jobs were not gendered but rather shared equally based on who was available at any moment – a common theme where fathers had high levels of solo care prior to and following separation. Interviews with men who carried more of the mental load explicitly juxtaposed their pre-separation situation with the typical gendered division of labour:

...the roles weren't as historically delineated, separated. I was perhaps too nice in helping out with the kids, which is the wrong way to say it. But that's how the man historically looks at it. He was helping out with the kids, rather than 'How are we going to deal with this... you know, lack of sleep together; How are we going to deal with the...?' You know, whereas the approach that we would have to it [was shared]. – *Marcello, 3 nights per week*

Both fathers and mothers in these situations espoused less of a gendered parenting identity, with contributions of mothers and fathers to parenting more evenly valued. Mothers in these families equally trusted their husbands to make necessary arrangements as well as to handle any emergencies that would arise; it was not assumed that mothers would be the “default parent,” for instance in cases where a child was unwell during the day or in moments in crisis:

[I: How do you share the doctors, is it usually you making the appointments or is it both of you?] I'm going to say both of us really, because if one of them needed to go, you know, we would both just take it on ourselves to go, to take them, but I think this one particular time, he was at work and his mum had had [our daughter] that day and I texted [ex-partner] to say, you know, I wasn't in contact with his mother, so I said, 'How is she today?' He said, 'I contacted my mother, she said she's a bit worse.' So, of course, he was at work and I wasn't, so, you know, that's for me to do it then." – *Janine, father 4 days on, 4 days off*

Key in this quote is that it was the father who was in contact with the caregiver, and that the anticipating needs and monitoring work are expected to be carried out by both parents when it was “their turn,” fathers did not wait for directives from mothers. Like the traditional families, these parents had high levels of communication and a civil relationship. But rather than a manager-deputy relationship, these former couples operated more as co-captains based on trust and competence arising from working lives that enabled high levels of solo-care for fathers prior to and following separation.

5.2 Working Lives and Gendered Identities: Evolution

While many separated parents experienced continuity in their working lives and gendered identities after separation, leading to continuity in a less or more equally divided mental load, an alternative theme to emerge from our interviews is that of *evolution*, with the result that new skills and perspectives around the mental load could emerge. In these families the mental load division became more equal due to an opportunity to renegotiate the mental load following a separation.

For some parents in our sample, traditionally gendered working lives no longer worked once fathers had after school and holiday contact time that now needed to be arranged for; mothers working lives also changed, as women often needed to increase their labour supply to deal with a loss of their partner's income, especially in cases where they were no longer sharing a mortgage on the family home. This combination could

result in a more equal gendered division of the mental load, as fathers were compelled by the mother's absence to perform the cognitive labour for their children:

I started working away for a little while, and so I was spending two nights a week [away]. So for these two nights, he had to have them, and I just wasn't there to do it. ... I used to hand the children over with school uniform like washed and ironed in a little pile, for them to give to them for the next day. And I was not there to do that, so he had to do it, so he had to start washing their uniform, he had to start making sure he got their pack lunch. I used to get them there with a pack lunch made and snack and their drinks made, so that he would literally just have to get them up and dressed in the morning, hand them their bag and take them to school. So I don't do that anymore, so even he commented to me a little while ago that he'd finally got his act together, because it forced him to do it. – *Felicity, father 3 nights per week*

This change in working lives and the resulting increase in solo-care for fathers created a new opportunity for increased competence on the part of fathers. Where this went well, greater time and attention to work and increased levels of trust for fathers could shift mother identities as traditional caregivers and reduce the need to “do it all” as the mother:

I think it's got so much to do with the communication and not being... controlling as such... Because, just because I'm a mum doesn't mean I should have all the say. That's also her dad. The other person who I may not love or like anymore or such, that's her dad. So we need to be more accepting of things and biting your tongue, not getting so angry and biting your tongue, not letting important things go, but letting some stuff go is really, really good I think. It's helped us both. – *Maryanne 50/50 care*

Several of the women interviewed mentioned that they needed to take a “step back” and allow fathers to parent in their own way, opening the gate to greater decision-making for fathers and allowing the mother herself a greater sense of freedom when the child was not in their care.

When asked, most of the mothers and fathers interviewed stated that the pre-separation division of labour arose “naturally” – very few described discussing that mothers would bear most of the mental load but rather that it “just happened ended up” that way. For some families, separation presented a break and cause of reflection:

In the past I've had to kind of repeatedly say, 'Right, I need you to do this, I need help with this.' But I think eventually his dad's seen, OK, this is quite a lot for her to do, so whether it's getting all the homework done, making sure things are sorted and things, I think it's just taken a little bit of time because, I suppose, before, when you were together, if they're here, they're helping with other things, but when you're not together, you're responsible for, say, everything in the home, so it just helps if he picks up some of the things that need doing...

In this quote, we see that that when the parents were together, the father might have been helping with “other things” while the mother carried most of the child-centred mental load, a decision that was not discussed but something that:

just ended up being my responsibility, so I would have to sort of pin letters around and things like that to remind me or put alarms in my phone. So, now I'd say it's probably shifted actually and he keeps an eye on those things more than I do now... I think it's because it's a gadget and it's on a phone... I think with men maybe, sometimes they like their gadgets and things. – *Sarah, father school drop off and pick up twice per week, every other weekend*

Once separation occurred and each parent had their own household, parental contribution needed to take new forms. Sarah and her ex-partner had to renegotiate the mental load, with him picking up more of the work of identifying and researching needs: a process that was helped by him acquiring a shiny new organisational app on his phone.

5.3 Conflict and Parental Relationships: Disruption

Whereas central themes were (dis)continuity in (non-) traditional working lives and identities to explain post-separation division of the mental load, another theme specific to separated couples was the role of conflict as a catalyst for change. Even though our interview sample does not cover the most high conflict post-separation families, for two of the families in our sample, the fraught relationships between former partners resulted in a more equal division of the mental load by turning into what others have called parallel care (Amato et al., 2011). In these families, gendered identities and expectations might not have changed, but as conflict made communication very strained or even impossible, both manager-subordinate and co-captain roles were not possible.

[I: can you think of the main positives or negatives that you've taken from your experiences?] I would say positive, the girls do see more of their dad now, even though it's split. I would say ... before, he would never take them to a park or take them to a party, where now when he's got them, he does take them to the park and if they are invited to a party, he will take them to a party. So, I would say, the girls get to do more things like that with their dad, which is good. [Pause] A negative is that he does vocalize [more now], for example, he's not happy about moving schools and he's really vocal with the children about it, and talking to the children about it. – *Cheryl, father two weekday overnights, every other weekend*

From the point of view of this mother, the positive of separation was that the division of labour became more equal. At the same time, the concordant loss of decision-making power and control – about school choice, for instance, over which the family was currently in formal mediation - was a negative aspect.

When communication breakdown led to parallel care, parenting practices could cease to be coordinated across households. This disruption resulted in the families having two

separate childcare domains with their own clothing, sets of rules, and playdates organised independently on both sides:

It was quite a messy time to be honest. But she'd moved her new partner in at the time and she ... hadn't got the decency to tell me. And I told her to shove it. I wasn't going to be pay her any more money. If the kids needed something, I would get it. There would be no questions about that. They were living with me. They were living with me probably 2/5 of the time and 3/5 of the time with her. So if you needed school shoes, if you needed football boots, if they needed coats, or anything like that, I would get them. – *Erik, varied high contact around shift patterns*

In addition to a shift towards identifying and fulfilling his children's material needs, what is also clear from the quote above is the way that the increase in mental load was intimately tied to a decrease in maintenance for this father. For this father, conflict led to a disruption in his breadwinning role, with financial support previously mediated via the mother, to one of direct support – with the consequence of a more equal division of the mental load.

Beyond the emergence of parallel care, conflict could also lead to new configurations of the mental load as mothers and fathers vied for greater contact and decision-making power over their children. Contrary to typical household bargaining models of non-market work, where couples use power imbalances to bargain *out* of the mental load, a theme in our interviews was that conflict led some mothers and fathers to wield power in pursuit of *more* contact with and greater decision-making power over their children. In some cases, the form of power was economic, where fathers withheld or promised maintenance, as in the case of Erik above. In other cases, fathers resorted to the court system to gain greater access to children:

Yes. I mean, in the beginning, I didn't want Henry to have them four days a week... and then he actually took me to court because I was not agreeing, formally agreeing to a rota that he gave me... So, yeah, we went to court, but they see it as fair because the children know where they are, it's continuity for them. – *Janine, father 4 days on 4 days off*

In this case, previous shift-work patterns meant that the father had high levels of solo-care pre-separation, creating power in his negotiations with the court: his desired higher levels of contact were honoured because, due to pre-separation shift arrangements, they represented continuity for the children. Because of his non-traditional working and care arrangements, he was able to fend off attempts by the mother to reduce his contact time, with the result that he also continued to carry decision-making power for his children after separation.

In more traditional families, however, mothers could use higher levels of contact pre-separation to bargain into higher levels of post-separation contact and to exclude fathers from decision-making – what Trinder (2008) has called “contingent gate opening.” In these cases, mothers essentially negotiated *into* higher mental load, but also greater power over children. Mothers rationalised excluding fathers from decision making because of

their greater competence and knowledge of the children's needs. This was particularly the case when a child had special needs, as in the case of this mother with an autistic son:

[I: And decisions for the children?] It's me dictating what goes when, and where they're going and what they're doing. I will allow some slight changes, within reason. It totally depends whether it'll sort of affect my son in any way, so behaviour-wise, or whether it could set off a meltdown, and unfortunately I have to stick to my guns and just be like, 'No. You're not-- You can't do that. This is how it's going to be,' unfortunately. – *Karen, father varies from several daily visits per week to fortnightly*

In Karen's assessment, the father could not be trusted to make decisions in the best interest of their son. In these cases, a traditional mental load division was not accompanied by a manager-deputy relationship, because the deputy was excluded from decision-making altogether.

In other cases where the parental relationship was poor, particularly for families with older children, greater pre-separation contact enabled "collusion" between children and mothers in the exclusion of fathers from decision-making processes:

Yeah, it could be civil, but they have this kind of code of confidence between the three of them when they're there in that house, it's that they don't snitch on each other to dad. [Laughter] Their mum's just as bad as the kids, so they don't, you know she can't say who said what, and it's really quite silly. – *Andrew, 1-2 nights per week and every other weekend*

In this family information was withheld from the father by both of the children and the mother. The contact with the father remained and overt conflict between parents was minimal, but following his remarriage, the children and mother banded together to exclude him from important decisions, especially around schooling.

In these cases, as in other similar cases where care continued to be distributed in a highly gendered way but with low levels of trust, both parents agreed that decisions *should* be shared. Yet, a critical difference between our study and previous work on mental load division in intact families is that interviewees in conflicted relationships (especially women) revealed that decisions were not shared, using terms such as "unfortunately" fathers were not included in decision-making (see above) or revealing that they only pretended to include fathers:

We pretend to talk. Me and Ashleigh discuss it. Me and Ashleigh decide what we're doing. Me and Ashleigh make the plan. Then we involve the dad. And then we pretend we're listening to him. And then unfortunately we do exactly what we want. So, I do feel for him. He has zero say, but he hasn't earned the say. In my opinion, he has never put her first... So, he doesn't have a right, in my opinion, to overrule what she wants." – *Melinda, 1 night per week, every other weekend, 50/50 holidays*

As can be seen in the quotes above, the disruption of separation and the mothers' assessment of the father's competence leads them and their children (where the children

are old enough) to exclude fathers from decision-making processes. In higher conflict separated families, mothers' higher levels of care pre- and post-separation, and the resulting increased closeness and trust with children that this brings, can provide the power to keep fathers excluded from decision-making. At the same time, it means that they bear the responsibility for all four of the dimensions of the mental load alone.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates how parental relationship quality, gendered working lives and gendered identities influence cognitive labour beyond nuclear family households. Two major themes emerged in the study: continuity and change. For many separated families, the mental load division remained remarkably similar to that observed in previous research on intact families. Although households, and the mental load surrounding *housework*, are no longer shared, the mental load particularly related to childcare continued to be born disproportionately by mothers. Both mother and father interviews revealed shared gender ideologies with mothers as “naturally” better particularly at identifying needs and researching options. This was justified via gendered *working lives* as well as *gendered identities* prior to separation, leading to more traditional contact patterns following separation. As is typical in the UK context, the women in the families we interviewed were more likely to be in caring professions, and to be out of the labour force or working part time, both prior to and after separation. In accordance with general theories about divisions of market and non-market labour, these pre-separation decisions led to an uneven divide in the mental load as well. Mothers were more often at home, monitoring household and childcare needs. Moreover, this pre-separation division of labour interacted with gendered identities and maternal and paternal gatekeeping behaviour, both prior to and following separation. Fathers noted that they were “not good at” various dimensions of the mental load, and mothers remarked how fathers simply did not compute children's' needs or that they would perform poorly when tasked with providing for them. In these families, separation might have increased the amount of father solo-care or engagement with children, but the mental load dimensions of identifying needs and options continued to be the primary responsibility of mothers.

Separation could also engender change. Our interviews with separated parents revealed the importance of conflict and the parental relationship in driving change in the mental load division. Where the relationship was civil, an unequal and gendered division of the mental load could persist even as decision making remained equally shared. However, in line with the gatekeeping literature (Trinder 2008), high conflict or perceptions of fathers' incompetence could result in the breakdown of shared decision-making, where mothers reported that shared decision-making was a performance rather than a reality. For these households higher levels of childcare prior to and continuing after separation, and the resulting heavier burden of mental load that followed, was used as justification for mothers to exclude fathers from key decisions in their children's lives. This gatekeeping was often met with resignation on the part of the fathers, especially where it was accompanied by collusion from older children.

A more novel theme of this study, however, is the way that the mental load can be intertwined with power over children in high contact post-separation families. Fathers that counteracted gatekeeping by mothers to obtain higher contact with their children often simultaneously bargained into higher mental load requiring them to identify and provide for their children's material needs. Fathers with non-traditional working lives could conversely use the justification of high levels of pre-separation care within the mediation or court system to oppose mothers' gatekeeping strategies, helping fathers to retain decision-making power. In some of these high conflict families, gendered identities might have remained intact, but conflict disrupted the communication necessary for a continued "manager – deputy" relationship between former partners, resulting instead in two completely separate childcare domains with their own clothing, sets of rules, and playdates organised independently on both sides.

Even when there was a more amicable separation, evolution in working lives altered time availability of either the mother, the father or both. This was associated with a corresponding change in gendered identities, as mothers came to allow fathers to "get on with it" and accepted childcare as a less gendered task (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014). Finally, as in the case of Sarah described above, communication did not break down, but separation created a evolution in the taken-for-granted division of labour and enabled a renegotiation of the mental load burden.

Although our study is one of the first to expand work on the gendered division of the mental load to separated families, our findings are limited by our sampling design and the fact that our research covers only one national context. Our interview sample was chosen to represent high-contact separated biological parents, which generally excludes separated families with the highest levels of conflict, as well as the high proportion with no or less frequent non-resident contact. In restricting our sample to "typical" post-separation families with mothers as the main / resident carers, but where both parents are attempting to share care of their children, we have purposefully sought cases where the mental load was likely to still be actively negotiated between biological mothers and fathers. This means, however, that our study cannot speak to the mental load division among the small, but growing number of non-biological families or families where separated fathers are the primary caregivers. And while our research is likely applicable to countries with more liberal welfare regimes and fairly traditional gendered working lives and post-separation contact patterns, we cannot say how these results might apply in countries, such as Sweden, where shared care patterns are much higher. Future research on the mental load division after separation could more closely examine the interaction between family separation and family law and the welfare state, shifts in gendered working lives and identities in families where the father is the main / resident carer, as well as the way that shared care and the mental load vary in families with differing levels of financial well-being or extended family support.

Despite these limitations, we expand on current knowledge by providing new evidence of the gendered division of the mental load even among those practicing a relatively "modern" family form of shared care post-separation. Yet, our work also intervenes in this literature to show possibilities for variation and change. Working lives that enable more solo-care for fathers can equalize the mental load both prior to and following separation. While conflict was an important vehicle in shifting the mental load division among

separated parents in our sample, so too did increases in contact time for fathers, and the decreased availability of mothers, foster less gendered work and parenting identities and a more equal division of identifying and arranging for children's needs. Finally, this study also contributes to the growing evidence base on both the positive and negative impacts of parental separation on parents, illustrating the way that changes in contact time, conflict and re-negotiation can shape the mental load as experienced by both mothers and fathers after separation.

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Data Availability

Anonymised transcriptions of all interviews used for this study are available through the UK Data Service.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

„Mental load“ in getrennten Familien

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Diese Studie untersucht, wie die unsichtbare Arbeit (Mental Load) nach der Trennung von Eltern verteilt ist und inwieweit vorherige, geschlechterspezifische Arbeitsverteilungsmuster von Erwerbs- und Hausarbeit und das jeweilige Elternzeitmodell diese beeinflussen.

Hintergrund: Die Tatsache, dass die oft unsichtbare Arbeit der Planung, Erforschung und Durchführung von Kinder- und Haushaltsentscheidungen, vorwiegend von Müttern getragen wird, findet in der Forschung zunehmend Beachtung. Allerdings konzentriert sich der Großteil dieser Forschung auf die geschlechtsspezifische Aufteilung der unsichtbaren Arbeit in intakten Elternfamilien. Angesichts der hohen Prävalenz von getrenntlebenden Familien mit einem hohen Grad an Vaterkontakt ist mehr Arbeit erforderlich, um zu verstehen, wie die unsichtbare Arbeit in getrennten Haushalten lebenden Eltern aufgeteilt wird.

Methode: Diese Studie stützt sich auf 31 qualitative Interviews von getrenntlebenden Eltern, darunter 7 ehemalige Paare. Die Interviews wurden aus einer landesweit repräsentativen Längsschnittumfrage, Understanding Society, entnommen. Die Interviews wurden von beiden Autoren mit Nvivo transkribiert und thematisch analysiert.

Ergebnisse: Die Analyse der Interviews zeigt sowohl Kontinuität als auch Brüche in der Aufteilung der unsichtbaren Arbeit nach der Trennung. Für manche Familien rechtfertigen die Geschlechteridentität und die Erwerbs- und Carebiographien auch dann noch eine ungleiche Verteilung der unsichtbaren Arbeit, selbst wenn Kinder viel Zeit allein bei den Vätern verbringen. In anderen Fällen können Konflikte die Kommunikation zwischen den Eltern reduzieren, indem sie entweder die unsichtbare Arbeit der Väter durch parallele Erziehung erhöhen oder sie verringern, wenn die Väter von der Entscheidungsfindung ganz ausgeschlossen sind. Schließlich kann die Trennung einen Wendepunkt darstellen, an dem Arbeitsleben und Identitäten neu bewertet und die unsichtbare Arbeit neu verhandelt werden kann.

Schlussfolgerung: Wir liefern neue Belege dafür, dass die unsichtbare Arbeit auch bei einer relativ „modernen“ Familienform der gemeinsamen Pflege nach der Trennung geschlechtsspezifisch bleibt, und zeigen Variations- und Veränderungsmöglichkeiten auf.

Schlagwörter: gemeinsame Betreuung, unsichtbare Arbeit, Trennung, Kinderbetreuung, Kontakt

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