Thinking About the Baby: Gender and Divisions of Infant Care*

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This paper discusses the invisible, mental labor that is involved in taking care of a baby and suggests that gender imbalances in this form of baby care play a particular role in reproducing differentiation and stimulating marital tension between mothers and fathers. Using qualitative data from interviews with 50 new mothers and fathers (25 couples), this paper describes three categories of mental baby care and argues that how new parents divide the work of thinking about their babies reflects an accountability to socially constructed and institutionalized differentiation between women and men.

The tendency for women and men to become more differentiated from each other in work and family roles upon becoming parents has been documented in longitudinal studies of transitions into parenthood (see summaries in Belsky and Kelly 1994; Cowan and Cowan 1992). New mothers are more apt than new fathers to leave or curtail their employment (Belsky and Kelly 1994). And despite couples’ previous intentions (Cowan and Cowan 1992), mothers provide more direct care to babies than fathers do (Belsky and Volling 1987; Berman and Pedersen 1987; Dickie 1987; Thompson and Walker 1989). Fathers tend to act as “helpers” to mothers, who not only spend more time interacting with babies, but planning for them as well (LaRossa 1986).

This pattern of increased gender differentiation following the birth of a baby has been associated with decreases in marital satisfaction, particularly for wives (Belsky, Lang, and Huston 1986; Cowan and Cowan 1988; Harriman 1985; Ruble et al. 1988). A number of researchers have interpreted new mothers’ marital dissatisfaction as connected with “violated expectations” of more shared parenting (Belsky 1985; Belsky, Lang, and Huston 1986; Ruble et al. 1988), although some researchers express surprise that wives expect so much in the first place (Ruble et al. 1988). Nevertheless, traditional divisions of household labor have been implicated in marital stress following the birth of a first baby (Belsky, Lang, and Huston 1986; Schuchts and Witkin 1989).

In this paper I focus on the more invisible, mental labor that is involved in taking care of a baby and suggest that gender imbalances in this form of baby care play a particular role in reproducing differentiation between mothers and fathers and stimulating marital tension. My use of the term “mental” labor is meant to distinguish the thinking, feeling, and interpersonal work that accompanies the care of babies from physical tasks, as has been done in recent studies of household labor (see, e.g., Hochschild 1989; DeVault 1991; Mederer 1993). I include in the general category of mental labor what has been referred to as “emotion” work, “thought” work, and “invisible” work (Hochschild 1983; DeVault 1991); that is, I focus on aspects of baby care that involve thinking or feeling, managing thoughts or feelings, and that are not necessarily perceived as work by the person performing it (DeVault 1991).

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1. DeVault’s (1991) examination of feeding work, for example, elaborates the notion that feeding involves mental labor preceding and beyond the physical act of meal preparation. Feeding the family includes planning, strategizing, juggling various individuals’ needs as well as facilitating group interaction.
Using qualitative data from interviews with 50 new mothers and fathers (25 couples), this paper describes three categories of mental baby care and suggests that the tendency for mothers to take responsibility for this kind of work is an underrecognized stress on marriages as well as a primary way in which mothering and fathering are reproduced as gendered experiences. While the tendency for mothers to feel ultimately responsible for babies has been identified in other studies (see, e.g., McMahon 1995), this paper describes some of the interactional and institutional contexts within which differences between maternal and paternal responsibilities are reproduced. I suggest that the way that new parents divide the work of thinking about their babies reflects an accountability to socially constructed and institutionalized differentiation between women and men.

Data and Method

The data grounding this discussion are from a qualitative interview study of 50 mothers and fathers who had become new parents approximately one year before the time of the data collection. The sample was located through birth announcements published in the local newspaper of a small city in upstate New York. This method for locating new parents was an attempt to improve upon the self-selection bias present in many studies of transitions to parenthood in which voluntary samples are generated through obstetrics practices, childbirth classes, or community announcements.

Preliminary letters were sent in stages telling potential respondents about the study and inviting them to be interviewed. These letters were then followed with a phone call to answer any questions and schedule interviews. The response rate for those couples who received letters, were reached by telephone, and fit the sample parameters was 68 percent.

The parents in the sample ranged in age from 21 to 44 years old and the age of the babies ranged from 11 to 18 months. Fourteen of the babies were boys and 11 were girls. Fifteen of the pregnancies were planned while 10 were not. Twenty-three of the couples in the sample were married while two were not. Four of the fathers and three of the mothers had had a previous marriage.

All of the parents in the sample had finished high school or a GED, 23 had a college degree, 4 had masters degrees, and 2 had professional degrees. The median family income range was $40,000-$49,999 with 6 families under $30,000 and five over $75,000. Two couples reported having received some public assistance. About 40 percent of the sample described growing up in households that could be characterized as poor to working class while 60 percent grew up in middle- to upper middle-class households.

Ten of the mothers were employed full time, 7 were employed part time, and 2 were students. Six of the mothers described themselves as stay-at-home mothers, although two of them provided regular baby-sitting for pay. All except one of the fathers were employed at the time of the interview.

In most cases, wives and husbands were interviewed on the same occasion, first separately and with as much privacy as possible, and then more briefly together upon the completion of their separate interviews. Interview sessions ranged from two to four hours long. In three cases, wives and husbands were interviewed on separate occasions. All of the interviews took place in the couples’ homes except for one father who requested an interview in his workplace.

The data used in this paper are part of a larger data set about new parents’ transitions into parenthood. The interview protocol was semi-structured and designed to elicit parents’ experiences of having become mothers or fathers as well as to discuss possible influences on the nature of their transitions into parenthood. All of the interviews were taped and then transcribed, coded, and analyzed using a constant comparative method (see Glaser and
Thinking About the Baby as “Women’s Work”

Three categories of mental labor associated with taking care of a baby surfaced in my respondents’ reports: worrying, processing information, and managing the division of labor (see also Ehrensaft 1987; LaRossa and LaRossa 1989).

Worrying

In this section I contextualize the disproportionate amount of worrying that new mothers do in interactional dynamics between mothers and fathers; that is, I suggest that mothers worry about babies, in part, because fathers do not. In this sense my analysis emphasizes other dynamics surrounding worrying besides the internalization of gendered personality differences (as in Ehrensaft’s 1987 account). I also suggest that gender differences in whether and how new parents worry are linked to socially constructed expectations for mothers and fathers to which new parents feel accountable (see West and Fenstermaker 1993 on the role of accountability in reproducing gender).

The “mental” experience of being a new mother — thinking about the baby, worrying “about everything” — is one that many of the women in my sample shared (see also Ehrensaft 1987; Hays 1993):

I don’t walk around like a time bomb ready to explode. I don’t want you to think that. It’s just that I’ve got this stuff in the back of my head all the time.

I worry about her getting cavities in teeth that are not even gonna be there for her whole life. Everything is so important to me now. I worry about everything.

It’s like now you have this person and you’re always responsible for them, the baby. You can have a sitter and go out and have a break, but in the back of your mind, you’re still responsible for that person. You’re always thinking about that person.

These new mothers described thinking about their babies as something that mothers do: “Mothers worry a lot.” Worrying was such an expected part of mothering that the absence of it might challenge one’s definition as a good mother. One of my respondents described returning to her job and feeling on her first day back that she should be worrying about her baby. She said that she had to “remind” herself to check on how her baby was doing at the baby-sitter’s “or I’d be a bad mother.”

Fathers do not necessarily think about their children while they are at work or worry that this reflects on them as parents (Ehrensaft 1987). My respondents did not report feeling like “bad” fathers if they took their minds off of their babies; some even expressed stress when their babies had to have their attention:

Sitting two hours playing with him, when I first did it was like, this is a waste of my time. I said, “I have more important things to do.” And I’m still thinking, “Look at the time I’ve spent with him. What would I have done otherwise?”

This father’s concern with his perceived lack of productivity while spending time with his baby might be a response to the social construction of fathers’ roles as primarily economic

Another new father in my sample described a sense of loss about time he missed with his baby when he had to travel for work, "but," he said, "it goes back to the idea of being a father . . . I do think in a traditional sense where I'm the father. I'm the husband, it's my job to support the family."

A couple I will call Brendan and Eileen illustrate the relationship between parental worry and social constructions of motherhood and fatherhood. Brendan and Eileen both have professional/managerial careers, each reporting salaries of more than $75,000. When Eileen had to travel for work, Brendan would function as Jimmy's primary caregiver. But when she was home, Eileen wanted to do "the baby stuff." She referred to her caregiving of Jimmy as her "stake" in his life:

This is going to be hard to say. It's really important to me that Jimmy understands I'm his mother, whatever that means, because I'm probably not a traditional mother by any stretch.

When I asked what it means to her for Jimmy to know that she's his mother, Eileen responded:

It means that if I come home some night and he's with [his] day care [provider] and he doesn't want to leave her, it'll kill me, is what it means. So I don't know if the rest of this is trying to ensure that doesn't happen. I don't know if the rest is trying to ensure that I have that very special role with him.

For Eileen, anything that she was not doing for Jimmy had the potential to damage her "special role" with him. If she was not the most special person to him, she was inadequate as a mother — something she noted that Brendan did not feel. She connected these concerns with what she referred to as "the good mother image": "She's somehow all nurturing and all present and always there." And she added: "Now, I'm not even going to be able to have a shot at it because I'm not a lot of those things."

Brendan said that his behavior with Jimmy was not driven by guilt and anxiety as he perceived Eileen's to be:

I think she feels that need. She wants to be a good mother . . . Being a father, it's not a guilt thing. It's not like I'm going to do this because I don't want to be a bad daddy.

Brendan noted that his relationship with Jimmy was based on fun while he perceived Eileen's actions to be driven by insecurity. Eileen recognized that her concerns made her less of a good mother in Brendan's eyes. "I think his issue with me as a mother is that I worry a lot. The fact is that I do, but I also think mothers worry a lot." Although Eileen worried that she couldn't match the good mother image she described herself as "absolutely" buying into, worrying itself made her feel like a good mother.

Why is worrying associated with being a mother? I suggest two general reasons, which generate two kinds of worry. The first reason is that worrying is an integral part of taking care of a baby; it evokes, for example, the scheduling of medical appointments, babyproofing, a change in the baby's diet. There appears to be a connection between taking responsibility for physical care and carrying thoughts that reinforce the care (see Coltrane 1989; Ruddick 1983). This kind of worry, which I refer to as "baby worry," is generated by the question: What does the baby need? And babies need a lot. As Luxton (1980:101) points out, women are often anxious because babies are "so totally dependent" and perceived as highly vulnerable to illness and injury.3

A second reason that new mothers worry is, as I suggest above, because they are expected to, and because social norms make it difficult for mothers to know whether they are doing the right thing for their babies. I call this "mother worry," and it is generated by the

3. See Lamb (1978) and LaRossa and LaRossa (1989) for discussions of how babies' dependency contributes to traditionalization in parental roles.
question: Am I being a good mother? While it has been suggested that mothers are more identified with their children than fathers are (Ehrensaft 1987), I suggest that mothers' worrying is induced by external as well as by internal mechanisms. That is, perhaps mothers experience their children as extensions of themselves as Ehrensaft (1987) argues, but mothers are also aware that their children are perceived by others as reflecting on them. Mothers worry, in part, because they are concerned with how others evaluate them as mothers:

I think that people don't look at you and say, "oh there's a good mother," but they will look at people and say, "oh there's a bad mother."

Being a mother I worry about what everyone else is going to think.

The mother just quoted perceived mothers as uniquely responsible for their children's behavior, and even street violence:

The behavior of the child reflects the mother's parenting... I mean kids, you have all these things with kids shooting people, and I blame it on... mothers not being around.

The association of mothers with worrying provides a source of differentiation between mothers and fathers and presents women with a paradox, often played out in interactions with their male partners. Worrying is associated with irrationality and unnecessary anxiety, and some fathers suggested that their partners worried too much about their babies:

Sometimes I say, "He's fine, he's fine," but he's not fine enough for her.

However, worrying is perceived as something that "good" mothers do. A number of fathers made an explicit connection between good mothering and their wives' mental vigilance:

She's a very good mother. She worries a lot.

She's always concerned about how she's doing or she's always worried about if [child's] feelings are hurt or did she say something wrong to her.

This paradoxical message — good mothers worry; worrying too much isn't good — underlies the tendency for mothers to worry and for fathers to express ambivalence about their worrying. One mother described a division of labor in which she was stressed and got things done while her husband's job was to tell her to lighten up:

I'm the one who stresses out more. He is very laid back. He doesn't worry about things. In fact he procrastinates. And I'm the one, run run run run run run... But one of us has to get things done on time and the other one has to keep the other one from totally losing it and make them be more relaxed. So it kind of balances us out.

A father described the care that his wife's worrying ensures for their baby while also suggesting that some of it might be unnecessary:

She worries a lot. I'm probably too easygoing, but she makes sure he goes to the doctor, makes sure he has fluoride, makes sure he has all of his immunizations. She's hypervigilant to any time he might be acting sick. She's kind of that way herself. I kid her about being a hypochondriac. She makes sure he gets to bed on time, makes sure he's eating enough, whereas I'm a little more lackadaisical on that.

In both of these cases, as with Brendan and Eileen, the respondents described a kind of balance between the mother and father: The mother worries, the father doesn't; his job, in fact, might be to tell her not to worry. This dynamic reinforces a gendered division of mental labor. Although there is a subtext that the mother's worrying is unnecessary and/or neurotic, she does not stop. In fact, the suggestion that the mother "relax" serves to reinforce her
worrying because although she does not recognize it as work, she does recognize that worrying gets things done for the baby. If the father offered to share the worrying rather than telling the mother to stop, the outcome might be quite different.

While I would not argue that it is possible for a baby to be cared for without having some assortment of adults performing “baby worry,” the “mother worry” I have described here is heightened in our society by assumptions that good parenting is done exclusively and privately by a mother (with perhaps some “help” from a father) and that veering from this model may have severe consequences for children (see Coontz 1992 for a critique of “American standards of childrearing”). Examining another area of mental labor — the work of processing “expert” information about baby care — further reveals the norms attached to the work of thinking about babies.

**Processing Information: “What to Expect”**

LaRossa and LaRossa (1989) make a direct connection between the fact that wives tend to buy and read how-to books on parenting and their being “in charge” of the baby. Because mothers read the books more thoroughly, they are more informed, and both parents assume that the mother will orchestrate and implement the care: “Her purchase of the books reflects what is generally accepted: Babies are ‘women’s work’ “ (LaRossa and LaRossa 1989:144). In this section, I suggest that processing information about baby care is itself part of the work of taking care of a baby. I also argue that the assumption that mothers will do this work is embedded and reinforced in the “information” that mothers get from expert advice (see also Hays 1993).

There are a number of steps that may be involved in the mental labor of processing information about babies:

1) Deciding on the need for advice  
2) Locating the advice (often from more than one source)  
3) Reading/listening to the advice  
4) Involving/instructing one’s partner  
5) Contemplating and assessing the advice  
6) Planning for the implementation of the advice

What I label here as steps 1-3 are carried out by mothers usually (LaRossa and LaRossa 1989; Hays 1993). In my sample, 23 out of 25 of the mothers reported reading parenting literature while 5 of the 25 fathers did.

Step 4 occurs in a number of variations: Mothers tell fathers what to read; mothers tell fathers specifically what they have read; mothers tell fathers what to do based on their own reading. These approaches to disseminating information were apparent in my sample:

He would say, “Well you’re the mother, so what’s the answer here?” And I said, “What do you think I have that I would know just because I’m the mother?” But I would do a lot more reading.

Sarah [wife] has read quite a few and I just pretty much go with her. She hasn’t really told me I’m doing anything wrong.

Every once in a while she might pull something out and show me if she found something she thinks I should read, but I usually don’t have time.

Step 5 — contemplation and assessment of the advice — is often complicated, since what women find in advice books is ideology as well as information. According to a content analysis performed by Hays (1993; see also Marshall 1991), underlying the advice provided by child care experts is an “ideology of intensive mothering” that, among other things, holds individual mothers primarily responsible for child-rearing and treats mothering as expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, and labor-intensive. Mothers therefore take responsibility for
gathering information from sources that reinforce their primary responsibility for the care of babies. As described by one respondent below, mothers have to confront the ideology underlying the advice in order to assess whether they can or want to implement it (Step 6).

The book relied on by a majority of the mothers in my sample was *What to Expect the First Year* (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1989), a book that one of the authors writes was conceived to address new mothers’ “numerous worries.” Several of the women in my sample referred to it as their “bible,” and, because it is not included in content analyses of expert advice books (see, e.g., Hays 1993; Marshall 1991), I include some excerpts in this paper. These excerpts illustrate how gendered divisions of mental labor are reinforced on an institutional level through “expert” advice for new parents.

The book is divided into two main parts — “The First Year” and “Of Special Concern” — and has a third “Ready Reference” section at the end. “Becoming a Father” is the 25th of 26 chapters in the book and is included in the issues “of special concern.” Much of the information given throughout the book is in the form of answers to specific questions that are presented with quotation marks, as if particular mothers had asked them.

One of the mothers in my sample who preferred *What to Expect* over other books nevertheless had questions about its “accuracy.” Her statements were sarcastic in response to the book’s advice about the effort that mothers should exert to see that their babies eat healthy foods:

I like to read *What to Expect*. Although I don’t think they’re too accurate... So your baby should be doing this and the other thing. And never give him any white sugar. Don’t give him any cookies. Make sure they’re muffins made from fruit juice. Yeah, okay. I’ll just pop off in the kitchen and make some muffins.

Following are the comments that open a consideration of when to introduce solid foods to a baby — something that a father can do whether or not the baby is being breast-fed:

The messages that today’s new mother receives about when to start feeding solids are many and confusing... Whom do you listen to? Does mother know best? Or doctor? Or friends? (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1989:202)

This passage illustrates the mental labor that is expected to accompany the introduction of solid foods: choosing when to do it, consulting with others about the issue, making a decision about whose advice to take. It also presumes that it is the mother who is making the decision in consultation with her mother, doctor, friends, yet her male partner is not mentioned.

The one chapter addressed to fathers begins with the following question from a presumably typical father:

“I gave up a lot of my favorite foods when my wife was pregnant so I could support her efforts to eat right for our baby. But enough’s enough. Now that our son’s here, shouldn’t I be able to eat what I like?” (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1989:591)

The tone of the question suggests that the father is getting guff from someone about his diet. Implication: It may not be only babies whose diets new mothers need to worry about. Regardless of who is nagging this father, the question suggests that fathers will not be independently motivated to eat a healthy diet in the interest of their babies and themselves (although given the comments of the mother in my sample, this father may just want some cookies and white sugar in his diet).

As Hays (1993) points out, authors of advice books may not have created gender differentiation in parenting responsibility, but they certainly play a role in reproducing it. Mothers in my sample who already felt that they had the primary responsibility for their babies did not get any disagreement from the advice book they consulted most frequently about “what to expect.”
If your husband, for whatever reason, fails to share the load with you, try to understand why this is so and to communicate clearly where you stand. Don’t expect him to change overnight, and don’t let your resentment when he doesn’t trigger arguments and stress. Instead explain, educate, entice; in time, he’ll meet you — partway, if not all the way (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1989:545).

This advice directs women to do “emotion work” (Hochschild 1983) to contain their responses to their husbands’ lack of participation. Rather than experiencing stress or conflict, new mothers are directed to keep a lid on their feelings and focus on instructing and enticing their husbands into participation (and after all this, not to expect equity).

This kind of “advice” provides reinforcement for new parents’ gendered divisions of mental labor, including the tendency for mothers to have the responsibility for getting the advice in the first place. The suggestion from these experts that new mothers should not argue with or expect equity from their husbands may also be a factor in the decreases in marital satisfaction that some experience.

*Managing the Division of Labor*

In this section I expand the concept of “managing” that has already been applied to infant care in past studies and suggest that it is not only the baby’s appointments and supplies that mothers tend to manage (Belsky and Kelly 1994), but their babies’ fathers as well (see also Ehrensaft 1987). To use the language from What to Expect the First Year, “enticing” fathers into helping out with their babies is another invisible, mental job performed by new mothers, as one respondent said of her husband:

Peter is very good at helping out if I say, “Peter, I’m tired, I’m sick, you’ve got to do this for me, you’ve got to do that,” that’s fine, he’s been more than willing to do that.

Even in situations in which fathers report that they and their partners split tasks equally, mothers often have the extra role of delegating the work, as the following fathers in my sample indicate (Coltrane 1989 and Ehrensaft 1987 also describe “manager-helper” dynamics in couples who “share” the care of children):

I don’t change her [diaper] too often—as much as I can get out of it.

Then at night either one of us will give him a bath. She’ll always give him a bath, or if she can’t, she’ll tell me to do it because I won’t do it unless she tells me, but if she asks me to do it I’ll do it.

These quotes from two fathers, who perceived that they split tasks equally with their partners, reflect a division of labor in which the mothers are the ultimate managers. Both of these fathers had described themselves as sharing tasks with their wives—when their wives told them to.

Diaper changes were a particular area in which enticing was evident:

I mean diapering, that’s hard to say. He won’t volunteer, but if I say, “Honey, she needs a diaper change, could you do it?” he does it.

It took me a little while to get him to change the nasty diapers...but now he changes ‘em all. He’s a pro.

Mothers also made decisions about when not to delegate:

I do diapers. Joel can’t handle it well. You know, he does diapers too, but not if there’s poop in them.
I'm pretty much in charge of that, which is fine because it's really not that big of a deal. And she's more, it seems like she's easier for me than she is for him when it comes to diapering 'cause I just all the time do it, you know?

The mother just quoted illustrates how habitual patterns become perceived as making sense — doing becomes a kind of knowing (Daniels 1987; DeVault 1991) — just as being the one to read the book makes the mother the expert. Another woman described how her husband sits and eats while she "knows" what is involved in feeding their baby (and him):

I know what has to be done. I know that like when we sit down for dinner, she [child] has to have everything cut up, and then you give it to her, you know, where he sits down and he eats his dinner. Then I have to get everything on the table, get her stuff all done. By the time I'm starting to eat, he's almost finished. Then I have to clean up and I also have to get her cleaned up and I know that like she'll always have to have a bath, and if she has to have a bath and if I need him to give it to her, "Can you do it?" I have to ask ... because he just wouldn't do it if I didn't ask him. You know, it's just assumed that he doesn't have to do it.

While on one level it appears that women are "in charge" of the division of labor, the assumption of female responsibility means that, on another level, men are in charge — because it is only with their permission and cooperation that mothers can relinquish their duties. One mother talked about feeling that she had to check with her husband before making plans that did not include their baby, while her husband did not check with her first. She described herself asking her husband, "Can I do this in 3 weeks?" Another young woman complained that her partner would leave the house while their child was taking a nap:

It's always the father that can just say, "Okay, I'm gonna go." Well I obviously can't leave, he's ready for a nap, you know? It's nap time. Mommy seems to always have to stay. I think that fathers have more freedom.

These statements go against suggestions that mothers may not want to relinquish control to their male partners because motherhood is a source of power for women (see, e.g., Kranichfeld 1987). What is powerful, perhaps, is the desire of mothers to be perceived as good mothers, and this may be what they feel they are trading off if they are not taking responsibility for the care of their babies. While mothers may instruct their husbands to do things, the data here suggest that husbands' responses to and compliance with orders are not compulsory (see also DeVault 1991). Fathers who considered themselves equal participants in the division of labor would use the fact that they were "willing" to do diapers as an example:

We each will do whatever we have to do. It's not like I won't change diapers.

Mothers did not necessarily see any baby task as optional for them:

It's kind of give and take. As far as diaper changing, I think I do more...It's not one of his favorite tasks.

Women are the "bosses" in the sense that they carry the organizational plan and delegate tasks to their partners, but they manage without the privileges of paid managers. Their ultimate responsibility for baby care may, in fact, disempower them in relation to their husbands, since for many women it means a loss of economic power (see Blumberg and Coleman 1989) and greater dependence on their male partners (LaRossa and LaRossa 1989; Waldron and Routh 1981).
Mental Baby Care and Marital Changes

While having a baby may foster greater dependence by women on their husbands, Belksky and Kelly (1994) report that new mothers are often disappointed by the level of emotional support they get from their husbands. I suggest that women’s disproportionate responsibility for mental baby care plays an important role in generating women’s dissatisfaction. Mothers in my sample were not necessarily appreciated and were even criticized by their partners for worrying; the advice they were in charge of getting told them not to be open with their husbands about their experiences; and their sense of being ultimately responsible for their babies’ care affected their access to other sources of validation and power, such as paid work and social networks.

One of the primary ways in which women’s sense of responsibility for babies surfaced was in decisions they made about employment. In my sample, many women changed their paid work patterns, quitting jobs or cutting back their hours (see also Cowan and Cowan 1992). These changes had implications for the balance of power in their marriages:

It’s funny now because he is the breadwinner so there have been opportunities where he has interviewed for positions, had opportunities to relocate and get a better position and the money was better. You’re just put in a position where you have to just follow. Before when we were both working we would talk it out. I’d say, “No, I want to stay here.” And now you really can’t.

On an institutional level, men’s bigger pay checks and women’s experiences of low-wage, low-prestige jobs structured some of my respondents’ traditional parenting arrangements. But there were also women in my sample, such as Eileen, who made as much money as their husbands and were very satisfied with their jobs, yet felt that they had to answer for their work in ways that their husbands did not. Laura, for example, described her decision to let go of a part of her job that she enjoyed the most because she did not want to see her baby at the sitter for more hours:

I can’t do that, I can’t emotionally. I probably could, we’d have to pay more money for the sitter, but I don’t want him at the sitter like for 10 hours a day. To me, that’s, I’m doing something that I want to do, but in the long run I’m hurting him, you know? In my mind, I think that.

Laura’s husband, Stuart, had not cut back on any parts of his job and was struggling with maintaining his performance in extracurricular activities:

I either want to be involved and do it the right way or I almost don’t want to be involved at all. Because I don’t want to do a less than good job.

Laura did not mention how the hours required by Stuart’s activities influenced the time spent by their child at the baby-sitter’s, but she did acknowledge that her marriage was stressed by her resentment of her husband’s “freedom.” Even though both Laura and Stuart were employed and made similar wages, Laura felt more directly accountable for their baby’s care. She could not allow herself to stay at work, she said, because it would hurt their baby: “In my mind, I think that.” What Laura resented perhaps is that her husband was free from these kinds of thoughts.

Women’s disappointment with their partners may stem from their loneliness in particular with the thinking they do about their babies. One woman in my sample, who did not question her primary responsibility for baby care, was upset by her perception that her husband did not recognize what goes on inside her head (emphases added):

It really hurts, because he doesn’t know how high my intentions or whatever or goals for being a good mom are. . . (crying) He doesn’t know what I think and when he’s at work he doesn’t know when she starts screaming and throwing fits, or pulling everything out of the dishwasher when I’m trying to load it, and I’ve got all this in the back of my head that I have to do for school, and the house is a mess, and supper’s not cooked and he’ll be home in 30 minutes. He doesn’t know that I have to keep
Hochschild (1989) notes that when couples experience conflict about housework, it is generally not simply about who does what, but about who should be grateful to whom. This “economy of gratitude,” Hochschild suggests, relates to how individuals define what should be expected of them as men and women. Applying this notion to divisions of baby care, if mental labor is defined as an idiosyncrasy of mothers rather than as work, there is nothing for a man to feel grateful for if his wife does it. If fathers are seen as doing mothers a favor when they participate in baby care, fathers will receive more appreciation from their partners than they give back, which may contribute to new mothers’ disappointment in the lack of emotional support they receive from their husbands (Belsky and Kelly 1994).

Mothers’ sense of responsibility may also keep them from other sources of support, which is another factor that puts stress on their marriages. Several of the mothers in my sample reported that their ability to keep up with social networks was affected by their sense of needing to get home to their babies. Women who lost contact with work or other social networks became more aware of what they did not get from their husbands:

- I need him sometimes to be my girlfriend and he’s not. . . I feel sorry for him because he wasn’t ready for that. . . You don’t realize how much you need those other people until you see them less frequently.

Decreases in new mothers’ marital satisfaction, I am suggesting, are related both to the lack of recognition and sharing of mental labor by their husbands and to the loss of independence and support from other people that mothers’ exclusive mental responsibility generates. If men and women who become parents together shared the mental labor associated with taking care of a baby, neither one would be “free,” but perhaps neither one would be unhappy.4

**Invisible Work and Doing Gender**

One prominent explanation for gendered divisions of baby care in general is that the capacity to soothe or respond to a baby’s hunger is more innate in mothers than fathers, yet it is not clear why a new mother would feel more worried and driven to read baby-care books if she has more “natural” ability. While the notion that mothers and fathers differ in caretaking competence has been refuted by some research (see, e.g., Parke and Sawin 1976), even those social scientists who argue for the salience of sex differences in caretaking capacity suggest that societies will ascribe more or less meaning to these differences. In Rossi’s (1985) “biosocial” approach, biological and cultural factors interact in determining male and female parenting roles. In this discussion I focus on the cultural part of this equation and examine the role of gender in the reproduction of differentiation between new mothers and fathers.

As discussed, new parents experience distinct and different norms attached to motherhood and fatherhood. While fatherhood is equated foremost with economic provision, motherhood is socially constructed as a “constant and exclusive responsibility” (Thompson and Walker 1989:860). These norms have been linked in sociohistorical accounts with Western, dichotomized images of public and private, work and love, that became especially pronounced during nineteenth-century industrialization. As manufacturing took paid work out of households, the “public” sphere of the economy and state became perceived as a male

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4. Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber (1983), for example, find that wives are less depressed when their husbands help with housework; and the husbands are no more depressed as a result of their contributions. Marshall and Barnett (1995) find that when husbands share supervision of children, both husbands and wives report lower psychological distress.
sphere and economic provision the job of fathers, while women were left (at least ideologically if not in reality) to the "private" domain of the household and children (see Glenn 1994; Osmond and Thorne 1993).

This ideology continues to be reflected in pay inequity, occupational segregation, and other gendered workplace processes that both assume and reinforce divisions of labor in which women take primary responsibility for families (Reskin and Padavic 1994). The devaluation of "women's work," both paid and unpaid, has been a particular point of entry for the feminist argument that the ideological separation of public and private, production from reproduction, is a source of exploitation of women (see, e.g., Hartmann 1981).

One question that has puzzled social scientists, however, is why many women do not experience their disproportionate responsibility for household labor as oppressive (Berk 1985; Thompson 1991; Thompson and Walker 1989). The theoretical answers to this question are relevant for understanding divisions of mental baby care. DeVault (1991:11) suggests, for example, that women often do not recognize feeding their families as work because it is perceived as "embedded in family relations," "part of being a parent. . . or of being a wife." The notion that housework is considered to be an integral part of being a wife is reinforced by South and Spitze's (1994) finding in their analysis of housework patterns across marital statuses that married couples have the highest gender gaps in housework.

Studies of divisions of housework provide support for the theoretical notion that imbalances in household labor when men and women live together is a way in which they "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987); that is, they construct their social identities as "women" and "men" through their performance (or not) of "women's work" (Berk 1985; DeVault 1991). The fact that much of the mental work associated with household labor is invisible to the women who do it reinforces the notion that it is simply part of their identities and something for which they are perceived as having a "natural" propensity (Daniels 1987). For women to not do this work might challenge their social definition as women.

Taking responsibility for babies is socially constructed as "women's work," and men and women participate in reproducing this construction through their interactions with each other. One of the women in my sample said of what it means to be "the wife and mother":

If I hear him [baby] cry during the night, I'm more apt to get right up than Jake. Or if it's time to get up in the morning and I hear him, I'm more apt to get up and go get him. Jake is more apt to stay in bed and see what happens.

According to this respondent, "wives and mothers" do not wait to see if their male partners will take care of the baby. Her husband agreed that although they share their baby's care, his wife does "a little more . . . because she is his mother."

In a hypothetical game of "chicken," in which the winner is the parent who can wait longer for the other parent to take responsibility for a baby's needs, it is difficult for mothers not to lose. There is a much greater threat to their social identities as mothers than there is for fathers if, in any particular moment, they are not taking responsibility for their baby (see also McMahon 1995). One explanation for why new parents reproduce differentiated images of mothering and fathering therefore is because they feel accountable to these already established images, "to normative conceptions regarding the essential womanly nature of child care" (West and Fenstermaker 1993:165).

Perhaps more than any other aspect of gender, Glenn (1994:3) suggests, mothering is perceived as "natural, universal, and unchanging," and in this sense, worrying and knowing about the baby may be constructed simply as part of being a mother in the way that feeding the family is. As with the invisible parts of feeding, men and women becoming parents differentiate themselves as "mothers" and "fathers" by how much they think (or think they should think) about their babies.
I am suggesting here a different spin on new parents' apparent identification with gender-differentiated parental functions. Ehrensalt (1987), for example, suggests that men perceive fathering as something they "do," while women experience mothering as something they "are." Cowan and Cowan (1992) report that new mothers experience a subsuming of themselves into mothering while new fathers become more preoccupied with their abilities as breadwinners. Rather than simply identifying with gender-differentiated images of mothers and fathers, I suggest that new parents feel accountable to these images and reinforce their partner's accountability to these images in order to accomplish parenting and gender at the same time (see Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 1991; West and Fenstermaker 1994).

Whether still employed or not, being in charge of baby care places mothers in a different relationship to paid work than their male partners, whose accountability to the breadwinner image may induce more distance between themselves and their babies. A father can be perceived as a "good" father without thinking about his baby; in fact, his baby may pose a distraction to his doing what he is expected to do. Mothers, on the other hand, are expected to think about their babies. They perform a disproportionate amount of mental baby care not because they are "good" mothers, but in order to be.

Conclusion

This discussion has been an attempt to suggest some of the interactional and institutional processes underlying differences in how men and women who become parents together think about babies as well as to highlight the importance of this issue for marital relationships. To the extent that the discussion has emphasized common experiences by gender, this has been intentional, though not necessarily an expected finding. In embarking on the larger study of gender differentiation in transitions into parenthood from which this paper is derived, I expected to find variations in the couples in my sample. Although there were indeed variations in how couples approached the care of their babies, the tendency for mothers to be responsible for a variety of forms of mental baby care emerged strikingly in my data as a source of gender differentiation, even in situations of relatively shared physical care.

While this pattern appeared in my sample across employment statuses and family experiences, this study does not claim to be a test of the mediating power of work, family, and other variables, which might be areas for future research. These data are part of a theory-generating study about gender-differentiation in the transition to parenthood and should not be seen as a test of hypotheses. Rather I have tried here to make a theoretical case for the importance of recognizing the mental labor that accompanies physical infant care; I suggest that the way mental labor is divided in male-female couples in transition to parenthood is a way in which women and men recreate motherhood and fatherhood as differentiated social experiences.

Finally, I have suggested that gendered divisions of mental labor may be an under-recognized factor in decreases in marital satisfaction following the birth of a first baby. Women who experience marital dissatisfaction upon becoming new mothers will not necessarily be relieved simply by trading off diaper changes. Only when the work of thinking about the baby is shared can new fathers claim to be truly equal participants and new mothers able to make their economic and other contributions to their babies with less stress and guilt.
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