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22. Couples' transitions to parenthood: Why the female partner's earnings advantage fails to predict efficient specialisation

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1. INTRODUCTION

All over Europe and beyond, men and women in newly forming couples have become more similar to each other with respect to their market and non-market skills. In the early twenty-first century, gender differences by educational level, time spent on housework, and early employment patterns have declined or even turned around, while homogamy has increased (Anxo et al. 2011; Blossfeld et al. 2005, 2015; Van Bavel 2012). In spite of these trends, the transition to parenthood continues to prompt couples to adopt gendered household production models, with the woman specialising in unpaid domestic (care) work and the man specialising in market production (Grunow 2019a; Grunow and Evertsson 2016a, 2019). It has been argued that this dynamic accounts for persistent discrepancies in men's and women's average aggregate time use, fostering gender inequality in human capital accumulation, a gender gap in earnings, and the further segregation of tasks within families over time (Gershuny 2018).

The claim that women tend to specialise in unpaid domestic work (including childcare) while men tend to specialise in paid work because the latter are the more productive earners and the former are the more productive carers has been put forward most prominently by the economic theory of the family (i.e., Becker 1981). Challenging Becker's theory, bargaining proponents have argued that both partners should have an interest in maintaining their market productivity rather than in specialising in unpaid domestic work. First, these scholars observed, because market work is paid, its rewards can be used and transferred more flexibly than domestic commodities. Second, they pointed out, market productivity determines each partner's future bargaining power over the allocation of time and resources within the family (Lundberg and Pollak 1993; Ott 1992). In light of these two theoretical strands, and given the massive gains women have made in terms of absolute and relative market productivity, the question of why gendered transitions to parenthood persist remains a puzzle.

A desire to solve this puzzle has motivated a growing body of research in the work–family field, which we review in this chapter. Most importantly, we seek to provide new insights into the mechanisms that lead couples to specialise in economically efficient and inefficient models of market production during the transition to parenthood. The chapter provides evidence that sheds light on the question of why egalitarian and other 'non-normative' models of production remain exceptional in co-residential heterosexual parental couples, despite being efficient. We refer to gendered production models as 'non-normative' when couples (1) maintain gender-balanced production models across the spheres of paid work and unpaid (care) work during the transition to parenthood; or (2) specialise in gender-atypical ways, i.e., the female partner specialises in market production and the male partner specialises in domestic produc-

tion (Grunow 2019b). The term ‘non-normative’ is used here based on the country context in which a couple lives. For example, a mother may return to her job soon after childbirth or for more hours than is the norm for her particular national context, or a father may engage in care work to an extent that is not typical in his particular country. In contrast, we refer to arrangements as ‘normative’ when couples specialise in gender-typical household and market production during the transition to parenthood, reflecting an orientation towards separate spheres for men and women (Davis and Greenstein 2009). The conceptual distinction between ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ couple specialisation was first introduced by Grunow and Evertsson (2019) and, as this chapter will show, it is key to understanding why couples often deviate from specialising in economically efficient ways.

2. COMPETING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Economic Theory of the Family

Based on the theory of comparative advantage, Gary S. Becker developed a Nobel Prize-winning economic model that was focused on family members maximising a joint household commodity production function by allocating their time to market and domestic production according to their ‘relative efficiencies’ (1981, p. 32). The approach initially rested on the assumption that resources for market and domestic production are complementarily distributed between the sexes. Becker proposed that in contrast to men, women ‘have a heavy biological commitment to the production and feeding of children’ (1981, p. 37), and would therefore be more willing to specialise in domestic work. Other scholars have argued that Becker’s proposition of women’s biological commitment was unconvincing in light of the bridge assumptions he used (Ferber 2003; Folbre 1986; Grunow et al. 2012); most importantly, the assumption that biological mothers have been the primary childcare providers ‘in virtually all societies’ (Becker 1981, p. 23). Instead, research has shown that childrearing was rarely exclusively tied to the biological mother in earlier historic periods and in non-western national contexts (Ahnert 2005; Bentley and Mace 2012; Hrdy 2000, 2012; Rotkirch 2000). Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that the framing of mothers as being primarily responsible for reproduction and care work has been a by-product of, and is essential to, the growing distinction between paid market work and unpaid domestic work following the onset of the Industrial Revolution (Berg 1992). Thus, there is a large body of literature showing that women’s primacy in domestic (care) work is not biologically determined, but socially created; and is, therefore, context-dependent and subject to social change (Bühlmann et al. 2010; Grunow and Evertsson 2016a; 2019).

Partly in response to his critics, Becker argued that his model of efficient specialisation based on comparative advantage worked even if differences in efficiency were not driven by ‘biological or other intrinsic differences’, and thus purely resulted from ‘investments in human capital’ (1981, p. 32). According to this line of reasoning, specialisation in the form of both ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ work–care arrangements would be possible purely based on the partners’ relative productivities. Consequently, household specialisation would, in principle, be gender-neutral (Blossfeld and Drobnič 2001; Gupta 2007). In recent decades, as women’s educational and occupational attainment levels have been increasing, and more longitudinal data on couples’ relative earnings trajectories and unpaid work trajectories have

become available, the number of studies refuting Becker's economic theory of the family has been rising, and researchers have turned to investigating alternative explanations for couples' 'normative' work–care divisions over time, and especially during the transition to parenthood (see also Baxter and Tai 2016; Coltrane 2000).

2.2 Bargaining and Economic Dependency

A recent review of the comparative empirical research on this topic published from 2000 onwards has shown that economic rationality still plays an important role in the search for the mechanisms that drive gendered work–care divisions (Grunow 2019a). Most importantly, proponents of the bargaining mechanism, also referred to as economic dependency (Basu 2006; Gupta 2007), have emphasised the existence of economic power relations in heterosexual couples that stem from comparative earnings advantages. Comparative earnings advantages influence the partners' allocation of time and other family decisions as a result of bargaining. Accordingly, the partner with the comparative earnings advantage uses his/her power to influence family decisions over work–care divisions and other aspects of family life (Lundberg and Pollak 1993; Manser and Brown 1980; Ott 1992; for a review see Gupta 2007). Following this line of reasoning, it would be in the best interests of both partners to keep unpaid domestic work to a minimum, and to invest in their own market productivity instead. As one partner's own market productivity increases (or decreases), the comparative earnings advantage shifts from one partner to the other. This situation, in turn, causes the partners to engage in bargaining, leading to a subsequent adaptation of the division of work and care. Bargaining and the adaptation of the work–care division may also arise due to new demands on the partners' allocation of time and effort, which can, for example, occur during family formation.

From this perspective, the transition to parenthood requires another consequential round of bargaining, as raising a child puts an enormous strain on the partners' capacities to engage in market production. Whether the partners participate jointly in the increasing amount of domestic (care) work or specialise in either domain should be a function of whether one partner has a comparative earnings advantage (for an extended discussion, see Grunow et al. 2012). Whereas parenthood is considered to increase the utility of both partners, it is also assumed that having a child will weaken the woman's bargaining position, and not the man's, because the mother is usually the parent whose employment is temporarily interrupted (Ott 1995). Indeed, motherhood earnings penalties are well documented in the literature. In some countries, including the United States (US), these penalties are completely explained by the time mothers spend outside the labour market, and by changes in mothers' work hours and employers. In other countries, including Germany, a considerable share of the motherhood earnings penalty remains unexplained, even after accounting for mothers' employment behaviour (i.e., Gangl and Ziefle 2009). It is, moreover, unclear (1) how large this penalty would be for mothers who returned to work immediately after their mandatory maternal leave ended; (2) why fathers are less likely to interrupt their paid work, especially when the partners have earnings parity; and, in particular, (3) how parenthood affects couples in which the female partner has a comparative earnings advantage over the male partner at the time of pregnancy.

3. COMPARATIVE EARNINGS ADVANTAGE AND PARENTHOOD: STATE OF RESEARCH AND CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the mechanisms suggested by the economic theories sketched in the previous section, a woman's comparative earnings advantage should lead to her partner specialising in the domestic sphere, while she specialises in paid work. This dynamic should occur during the relationship in general, and in particular during the couple's transition to parenthood. Thus, the higher the share of couples in which the woman has a comparative earnings advantage over her partner, the more widespread gender 'non-normative' work-care divisions should become. Based on data from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, Klesment and Van Bavel (2015) have shown that the proportion of childless women who had a comparative earnings advantage over their partner varied between 20 per cent and close to 50 per cent across European countries in 2010. For mothers of children below age three, this proportion was much smaller, and varied between 3 per cent and 25 per cent. Similar estimates obtained from 2011 European Social Survey data indicated that the proportion of couples and families in which the female partner held a comparative earnings advantage was only slightly larger (Grunow 2013). These cross-sectional findings, though potentially biased by self-selection into parenthood, suggest that the female partner's comparative earnings advantage often fails to lead to economic specialisation among couples during the transition to parenthood. This interpretation is in line with the findings of longitudinal quantitative research, which shows that couples typically divide up both unpaid domestic work and care (Baxter et al. 2008; Grunow et al. 2012; Hamplová et al. 2019; Kühhirt 2011; Nitsche and Grunow 2016, 2018) and paid market work (Baxter 2013; Gonalons-Pons and Schwartz 2017; Grunow 2006; Schober 2013) in more gender-normative ways during the transition to parenthood, largely irrespective of the partners' relative earnings. In other words, research designs that have adequately captured the dynamics of the partners' relative earnings over time have frequently found no or only weak evidence supporting either Becker's economic theory of the family or bargaining/dependency approaches.

The repeated finding that the partners' relative earnings failed to predict specialisation during couples' transitions to parenthood has motivated a number of qualitative longitudinal studies in several European countries over the past 15 years. The aim of these studies was to determine for which couples (relative) earnings mattered, how their earnings mattered, and what alternative motivations may have been driving their decision processes and ultimate division of labour during the transition to parenthood. While these studies were open to alternative mechanisms emerging from the data, their main focus was on gaining deeper insights into the role played by internalised gendered parenting norms, given that sociological theories suggest that internalised norms drive gendered work-care divisions (i.e., West and Zimmerman 1987). The first of these qualitative studies was conducted in single European countries, largely separately from one another.¹ With the establishment of the TransParent network (Grunow and Evertsson 2016b) and the APPARENT project (Grunow 2017), these data were re-analysed using harmonised, purposeful (sub-)samples under a joint conceptual framework and research question. In addition, more studies were conducted in a wider range of countries, following a joint research design and interview guidelines (for details, see Grunow 2016). Most importantly, the joint conceptual framework and research design emphasised the analytical importance of recruiting and analysing couples in which the partners had resource parity at the

time of pregnancy, as well as couples in which the female partner had a comparative earnings advantage over the male partner at the time of pregnancy. For these couples, economically rational work–care divisions would lead to efficient but ‘non-normative’ specialisation, or to ‘normative’ but inefficient specialisation during the transition to parenthood. Thus, these couples were forced to reflect upon the importance they attached to economically rational decision making in light of the prevalent gender norms and other factors that could lead to changes in how they divided paid and unpaid work. In addition, the purposeful sampling strategy facilitated comparisons of couples’ accounts across countries (Grunow 2017).

In line with the available quantitative longitudinal evidence (Baxter et al. 2008; Grunow 2006; Grunow et al. 2012; Hamplová et al. 2019; Kühhirt 2011; Nitsche and Grunow 2016, 2018; Schober 2013), this qualitative research has shown that couples who had been practising relatively gender-balanced models of domestic and market production prior to the birth nonetheless specialised in gendered ways during the transition to parenthood (Grunow and Evertsson 2019). This shift had consequences for the post-birth earnings balance within the partnership, and rarely came as a surprise to the couples interviewed (Grunow and Evertsson 2016a, 2019). Instead, most of the couples reported that during pregnancy, they had anticipated – and, in some cases, carefully planned – a shift towards (or away from) gendered specialisation. Interestingly, the couples’ reasoning varied based on the gender of the partner who had the earnings advantage; i.e., they tended to emphasise economic reasons when the man had the earnings advantage, and to neglect or downplay economic reasons when the woman had the earnings advantage or the partners had similar earnings. Whether and, if so, how couples downplayed the woman’s advantage (or earnings equity) depended on both partners’ internalised parenting norms, especially their convictions concerning the existence of ‘natural’ maternal instincts and maternal (not paternal) duties towards the yet-unborn child (Evertsson and Grunow 2016, 2019). Regardless of which partner had the earnings advantage, the stories told by the parents(-to-be) revealed the influence of their internalised parenting norms. The views expressed by most of the couples reflected a belief in maternal primacy in care and separate spheres for men and women, although some of the couples expressed opinions that reflected a deep conviction that the partners should have joint responsibility for the child, and that work and care should be divided equally (Evertsson and Grunow 2019). Taken together, the available evidence suggests that specialisation is not a process that follows a gender-neutral economic script.

4. QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE OF GENDERED SPECIALISATION: A SUMMARY OF A COMPARATIVE STUDY CONDUCTED IN NINE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

This section reviews the main findings from several cross-national qualitative projects that have studied the gendered meaning of money and of relative earnings advantages during couples’ transitions to parenthood in nine European countries. The research has been conducted in the framework of the cross-national TransParent network (Grunow and Evertsson 2016b) and the APPARENT project, a large cross-national mixed-methods study that was carried out between January 2011 and December 2016, and was supported financially by the European Research Council (Grunow 2017). The aim of this research was to provide answers to the following question: Why do couples who had been practising relatively gender-balanced

Table 22.1   Stylised overview of (in)efficient work–care arrangements by the gender of the partner with the earnings advantage

	Normative	Non-normative	
<i>Work–care arrangement</i>	Specialisation following separate spheres for men and women	Maintaining joint spheres	Gender-atypical specialisation
<i>Efficient</i>	♀ < ♂	♀ = ♂	♀ > ♂
<i>Inefficient</i>	♀ > ♂	♀ < ♂	♀ < ♂
	♀ = ♂	♀ > ♂	♀ = ♂

Note: Own depiction. Cells display whether the woman’s earnings are lower (♀ ♂) than the man’s during pregnancy.

models of domestic and market production start to specialise in gendered ways during the transition to parenthood? The present section utilises and further develops central components of the conceptual framework and empirical output produced in the APPARENT project (Grunow 2019b). We demonstrate the importance in both qualitative and quantitative research of distinguishing analytically between *the woman’s* and *the man’s* earnings advantage when seeking to understand what drives economically efficient and inefficient work–care arrangements during the transition to parenthood. Table 22.1 shows which post-birth work–care arrangements would be considered efficient depending on which of the partners has the earnings advantage among couples expecting their first child. Please note that, in contrast to Becker (1981), couples in which no earnings advantage exists are considered efficient when they maintain joint spheres because the family budget would be severely reduced by specialisation.

The following quotes stem from the harmonised data analyses of individual qualitative longitudinal interviews with 334 couples before the birth of their first child (Grunow and Evertsson 2016a), and 350 couples before and after the birth of their first child (Grunow and Evertsson 2019). The interviews were conducted in nine European countries. The quotes are taken from the country chapters published in two edited volumes, and are intended to illustrate the diverse types of reasoning presented by couples grouped in the different cells of Table 22.1. Thus, the following quotes are organised according to whether the couples were entering efficient or inefficient work–care arrangements, and which of the partners had an earnings advantage. Which of the partners had an earnings advantage was determined for each couple by a short, standardised questionnaire containing questions about both partners’ earnings, work hours, etc. The couples completed the questionnaire jointly, either immediately before or after the interview. The contextualised information on the partners’ work situations stems from the qualitative interviews. The symbols show which type of comparative earnings advantage existed in the couples during pregnancy and, thus, at the time when consequential decisions about the couples’ future work–care divisions and relative earnings were being made.

4.1   Couples Heading towards Efficient Specialisation

The following quote is from the Swiss case study. Aline, a management and sales clerk who was working close to full time and was married to Arnaud, an adult trainer who was working full time (♀ < ♂), said in a pre-birth interview: ‘I reckon we cannot have a great professional career and a family at the same time. I think one has to make choices and my choice is to say I want to dedicate a little bit to my children, but also keep some time for me’ (Girardin et al.

2016, p. 158). In this quote, Aline indicated that the couple's pre-birth plan was to specialise in the direction of separate spheres for men and women. Thus, she was arguing that women cannot 'have it all', while implicitly accepting that her partner Arnaud could, and perhaps had to do 'it all' now that he was becoming the family earner. She also framed the decision as her own choice, not as the outcome of a joint decision-making – much less a bargaining – process. In addition, Aline downplayed the consequences of her plan to reduce her work hours to 50 per cent (Girardin et al. 2019, p. 131). First, she neutralised the term 'dedication' by prefacing it with the qualifier 'a little bit'. Second, by revealing an apparently selfish motive for her plan, she was indicating that she did not anticipate being busy all the time, and that she expected to have some time for leisure.

The following quote is from the Austrian case study. Anna and Alex (♀ < ♂) were both working in public administration. The story told by this dual-earner couple sheds light on why 'objective' circumstances, such as the partners' respective earnings and the availability of childcare, sometimes had little effect on the father's willingness to take paid parental leave. Due to a lack of childcare options, Anna and Alex had initially planned for, and saw no alternative to, Alex taking four months of paid parental leave after Anna had exhausted her paid leave entitlement of 20 months. Even though Alex's pre-birth income was only slightly higher than Anna's, Alex ultimately did not take any leave. He explained: 'I really thought about it [claiming parental leave] for quite a while, but from an economic point of view. From an economic point of view, eh, yes. It would have been possible somehow, but, I somehow also didn't want to' (Schmidt et al. 2019, p. 116). This quote is illuminating, because it shows that Alex initially tried to justify his change of plans by citing economic considerations, but then realised while speaking that economic reasons were not really his main motivation. Since the difference in the partners' pre-birth earnings was small, and the couple had planned for Alex to take leave, the change of plans was more likely due to Alex's unwillingness to spend four months as the main carer of his child. The pre-birth interviews show that Anna had actually been more in favour of Alex taking parental leave than Alex himself had been. It appears that couples with this constellation – in which the woman favoured a 'non-normative' work–care division more than the man – often took a normative turn (Evertsson and Grunow 2019). Quantitative research has confirmed that when couples disagree on the question of joint and separate spheres, the partner who has the earnings advantage is more likely to get his/her way (Nitsche and Grunow 2018).

The next quote from the Czech case study illustrates this point even more clearly (Nešporová and Stuchlá 2016). Prior to the birth of their child, Miroslav, a car mechanic, earned more than twice as much as his partner Mariana earned as a clerk (♀ < ♂), even though they both worked full time (Grunow and Evertsson 2016a, p. 310). After the birth, Mariana stayed home full time, as the couple had planned. Thus, this couple fully adopted 'normative' work–care arrangements, and specialised more fully than the other couples quoted so far. Miroslav explained: 'Like, I don't know, I haven't heard from the boys that a man would take maternity leave. Well, when the two agree and like it that way or I don't know how it goes but the mother always stays at home, I think. And the man should earn money' (Nešporová and Stuchlá 2016, p. 249). This quote clearly reflects Miroslav's conviction that there should be separate spheres for men and women; a view that Mariana seemed to have shared. Even though Miroslav could have referred to his earnings advantage as an economic motive for the couple's 'normative' specialisation, the couple did not present this aspect as important.

More generally, the couples heading towards efficient specialisation clearly indicated both before and after the birth that they believed in separate spheres for men and women. Even though some of these couples also referred to economic considerations in line with the efficiency mechanism, couples heading towards other work–care arrangements did so as well, as we will see in the next section. It is, therefore, useful to compare the economic reasoning of couples heading towards efficient specialisation with that of couples heading towards inefficient specialisation.

4.2 Couples Heading towards Inefficient Specialisation

The next quote is from the Italian case study. Gaia, a female hairdresser, and her partner Giacomo, a gardener, had roughly equal earnings at the time of the pre-birth interview. However, Gaia ran an established hairdresser's shop, while Giacomo's job was informal and unstable ($\text{♀} = \text{♂}$). This constellation suggests that for this couple, a 'non-normative' division of work and care would have been the most rational economic choice. Instead, Giacomo presented himself during his pre-birth interview as the main family provider:

I would stay at home for about ten days because it's something new and to see things from the start, but then I would need to get back to my normal life ... for the baby's sake, too ... What can you do with only 30 per cent of your salary? [laughs] You have to pay for things at the end of the month. We have to pay rent. (Bertolini et al. 2016, p. 192)

Clearly, Giacomo was citing standard economic reasoning in this quote, while failing to acknowledge that his partner, Gaia, was earning the same amount of money, and that the salary loss he mentioned was going to occur in any case because Gaia was not working. When probed by the interviewer about why the couple had decided that Gaia should be the one to take leave and stay home, he appeared to struggle in his answer:

I think it's fair that way. I don't know ... I can't answer this question ... because it's convenient and because the mother is the mother. Not that I wouldn't be able to look after our child, but I think that this is also the right way of doing things. (Bertolini et al. 2016, p. 192)

Again, the case of Giacomo and Gaia shows that internalised gender norms are key to understanding the division of work and care in couples. It might be speculated that these norms also explain why Giacomo characterised himself as the family earner in the pre-birth interview, even though that was not based on the earnings information the couple had provided.

A more extreme example of the power of such internalised gender norms is provided by a quote from a couple's pre-birth interview taken from the Swiss case study. Christophe, the male partner, falsely presented himself as the main family earner, even though he was unemployed at the time of the interview, while his pregnant wife, Caroline, was employed full time, and was providing the family income ($\text{♀} > \text{♂}$):

My wife, she will probably work 80, maybe 60 [per cent of her full time job] ... and I'm gonna work 100 [per cent] ... that's for sure ... I'll be following the tradition where the father brings home the money and the mother ... she will look after [the child] ... because now we enter a circle where a lot of money has to be paid out to a childminder anyway ... you see what I mean ... taxes ... the childminder ... that costs 1000 to 1200 francs per month ... and plus taxes. If I earn ... 8000 francs ... in the end ... we earn ... 4000 and 6000 ... the difference is not great if my wife maintains 60 per cent

and keeps one additional day for the little one ... you see it is all stuff like this ... but I will work 100 per cent. (Girardin et al. 2016, p. 152)

Christophe was explicitly employing economic reasoning in this quote, but he was completely disregarding the fact that he was unemployed at the time, and that it was not yet clear whether and, if so, how much money he would be earning after the birth of his child. Since Caroline was the one with the stable job and earnings, Christophe would have been the more efficient care provider. However, this quote also illustrates that Christophe was determined to follow the 'tradition' of separate spheres for men and women.

The next quote, taken from the Czech case study, is another example of the male partner presenting himself as the main family earner, even though he was not. In this couple, the female partner, Gabriela, clearly earned more than her male partner, Gustav, prior to the birth, and was still providing more than 40 per cent of the family income after the birth, excluding her parental leave benefits (♀ > ♂). Nonetheless, Gustav presented Gabriela's contribution to the household income as if she was merely earning some pocket money for herself:

Well, we agreed on that [that she would also work]; we can say both of us did. Of course, again, it is more convenient when Gabriela wants to buy something, she can buy it and doesn't have to tell me, doesn't have to save money and so on. So, even for her I think it's more convenient even though she has a lot on her plate and sometimes feels that she'd rather give up working altogether; but, she can work from home, which is great. (Nešporová 2019, p. 213f.)

The views expressed by this couple, Gabriela and Gustav, exemplify an idea commonly found among couples specialising in gender-normative ways; namely, that the care of the child is the mother's sole responsibility, even if she continues working (Evertsson and Grunow 2019). In the case of Gabriela and Gustav, this meant that Gabriela continued to work 20 hours per week, at night when the child was asleep (Nešporová 2019). According to the interview excerpts, Gabriela clearly suffered from her dual burden as primary carer and part-time worker. Still, it did not seem to cross Gustav's mind to consider sharing the childcare, and it appears that Gabriela did not demand that he do so. Instead, she indicated during the post-birth interview that she had seriously considered quitting her job. This dynamic, in which a working mother felt overburdened and discouraged from continuing to pursue her career, was commonly found among the couples interviewed (Grunow and Evertsson 2019). Thus, it is likely that the motherhood earnings penalty and the motherhood employment gap, which are well documented in quantitative research, are attributable in part to a lack of hands-on support at home for mothers, who continue to be considered – and to consider themselves – the primary carers.

4.3 Couples Heading towards Efficient 'Non-Normative' Work–Care Arrangements

This section features quotes from couples who efficiently specialised in 'non-normative' ways, and offers interpretations of these quotes based on the country context in which the respective couple was living. As we explained in the introduction, a non-normative arrangement is defined as one in which the new mother returns to work more quickly or for more hours than would be the norm in this particular national context, and/or the father changes jobs or reduces his paid work hours in order to engage in care work to a greater extent than his peers. The work–care arrangements adopted ranged from sharing work and care equally

to gender-atypical specialisation. Among the couples who reported planning to enter an efficient 'non-normative' work-care arrangement, some consciously and actively rejected a gender-normative transition to parenthood. An example of such a couple are Elke and Erik (♀ > ♂), whose interviews were part of the German case study. Elke explained:

Well, when we talked about children, for me it was absolutely clear that I'm not going to take a break from my job. And that I'm not going to choose the model where you stay at home for three years and then return to work ... Without working, I would miss something. It is the same for [my husband] as professional self-fulfilment is important ... And I think that both of us would become unhappy very quickly with the role as housewife or househusband with child. (Dechant and Rinklake 2016, p. 116)

This quote presents continuing to engage in paid work not primarily as a means to obtain economic resources, but rather as a path to professional fulfilment that has a non-monetary value for both the mother and the father. This line of reasoning, which was frequently cited in the interviews conducted in the various countries, offers a non-economic perspective on dual-earner arrangements.

A related, though more utilitarian perspective on continued dual employment was offered by Ginevra, who was earning more than her partner, Giuseppe, both before and after their child was born (♀ > ♂):

Yes, we're thinking that we will both continue to work because it also guarantees our possibility of living a better life: children are expensive, they are so cute, and so with current salaries and the cost of living, a single salary is not enough, but then I also like the idea of working. (Bertolini et al. 2016, p. 187)

After being probed by the interviewer about how certain she was about their plans, Ginevra elaborated:

Well [partner's name] doesn't know, but I won't change my mind, I'm sure that work can be reconciled with family life, and it's important to understand that in Italy, too, in the sense that all over the world there are women who have also become executives and manage to have a family in a balanced way, so it's only right that we Italians should be doing the same, we have to convince ourselves, I am convinced of this. (Bertolini et al. 2016, p. 187)

As this quote illustrates, Ginevra and Giuseppe, who participated in the Italian case study, were determined to share paid work and care in a way that they considered unusual in the Italian context; a view that is supported by quantitative research (Buchler 2019). Ginevra did not want to reduce her working hours after giving birth, as her job was highly paid and she had good career prospects. Giuseppe agreed with her decision, and was willing to adjust his expectations accordingly. They had planned to use day care so that they could both continue to work, but because Giuseppe lost his job after the birth, the child went to a day-care centre part time, and Giuseppe took care of the child for the rest of the time while Ginevra continued working full time.

Whereas Ginevra and Giuseppe and Elke and Erik exemplify a group of couples who indicated that they were determined to adopt and maintain 'non-normative' work-care arrangements after having a child, other couples opted for 'non-normative' work-care arrangements mainly out of financial necessity or as a way of securing the more stable source of income. Hana and Honza (♀ > ♂), who participated in the Czech study, exemplify this latter group.

Hana was a successful financial adviser who was working full time and investing heavily in her career soon after giving birth, whereas Honza stayed home because he was unemployed. The interviews with Hana indicate that violating social norms of male breadwinning and female homemaking caused the couple to suffer, as they were frequently criticised for their work–care arrangements by their parents and by colleagues at work. Hana explained their work–care trajectories in the following way:

[In order to secure a higher position] I had to work very intensively for three months. That was the reason that I really saw Hugo [the son] only in the evenings. I was a bit of a heartless mum I admit. But, then again, I knew that if I worked very hard I would have more time [later on], that I could make up the time some other way. (Nešporová 2019, p. 214)

Later in the interview she elaborated: ‘Both [my] parents were clearly unhappy from the beginning that Honza was at home so much, that is, they were uncomfortable with the woman working and earning money and the man staying at home with the child; but I put that down to normal generational prejudices’ (Nešporová 2019, p. 215). Hana tried to distance herself from the criticism she received for violating the motherhood norms that were widely shared in the Czech Republic (Nešporová 2019; Buchler 2019). Still, nine months after the birth of their child, the couple gave in to these pressures by returning to a more socially accepted work–care arrangement. Hana hired Honza as her manager so they were able to divide their paid and unpaid work equally (Nešporová 2019).

The case of Hana and Honza is illustrative for many of the ‘non-normative’ interviewed couples. In most contexts, dominant gender norms made it difficult for the efficient ‘non-normative’ couples to realise or maintain the work–care division they desired, or felt forced to adopt in order to get by financially. Thus, having to deal with disapproval and judgement by relevant others (i.e., family, colleagues, bosses) was frequently reported by the ‘non-normative’ couples, although there were also cases in which relevant others provided explicit normative and practical support (Evertsson and Grunow 2019). Most notably, the couples’ stories show that the financial benefits associated with efficient ‘non-normative’ specialisation often come with high normative costs. It appears that only the couples who were truly determined to maintain a gender-balanced work–care division were able to resist engaging in gendered specialisation in the medium run (Evertsson and Grunow 2019). This observation is backed up by recent quantitative research, which has described efficient ‘non-normative’ couple arrangements in which both partners maintained egalitarian gender ideologies and practices throughout the transition to parenthood as ‘egalitarian island couples’ (Nitsche and Grunow 2018, p. 1). This type of couple appears to be ‘relatively immune to traditional outside gendered expectations. Hence, they are “more free” to teamwork fair solutions for both partners, in terms of time and energy investments in paid and unpaid work’ (Nitsche and Grunow 2018, p. 10). In other words, these couples likely adopted and maintained efficient work–care solutions because they felt free to do so.

4.4 Couples Heading towards Inefficient ‘Non-Normative’ Work–Care Arrangements

The normative costs discussed in the previous section also affected couples who opted for inefficient ‘non-normative’ work–care arrangements. In addition to these normative costs, the inefficient ‘non-normative’ couples were willing to accept the financial costs of their preferred

work–care arrangement. An example of such a couple are Maria and Patrik, who participated in the Swedish study. Maria, a social community planner, was earning more than Patrik, a lighting technician (♀ > ♂). They stressed their dedication to sharing their parental leave equally, with each taking about seven months of full-time leave, even though engaging in gender-atypical specialisation would have been more efficient financially. Patrik characterised their decision as ‘obvious’:

It was rather obvious that we would share it equally ... it felt natural. Maria was quite determined from the start that we would share it exactly equally, while I thought ... Well, that's our starting point, but if it differs a bit here or there, it's not that important to me ... Someone might want to start working sooner [than planned] ... or someone wants to stay on parental leave longer, or you don't get exactly the same amount of leave due to the summer vacation. (Alsarve et al. 2019, p. 70)

Upon being probed by the interviewer about whether he was satisfied with having shared the leave equally, or would do it differently based on his experience, he responded: ‘No, no. It was great. I've also had the possibility to see all this ... Like, when you're at home all day on your own, then you really long for the other [parent] to come home and help and take over ... To share the responsibility’ (Alsarve et al. 2019, p. 70).

In the case of Patrik and Maria, it is important to stress that in Sweden, parental leave is financially very well compensated, and that fathers taking care leave is widely accepted (Alsarve et al. 2019, p. 68f., 83f.). Consequently, neither partner was worried about or actually experienced negative repercussions at work for having taken paid leave. Thus, even though it is uncommon in Sweden for a couple to share leave equally, the economic and non-economic costs Patrik, Maria, and their ‘non-normative’ Swedish peers were facing were clearly lower than those faced by their non-Swedish peers.

An example from a context that is largely unsupportive of joint caring comes from Poland. The following quote is from an interview with Gabriela, a non-governmental organisation manager, and her partner Gustaw, a manager in a private company. Gabriela and Gustaw had similar earnings (♀ = ♂) at the time of Gabriela's pregnancy. After the birth of their child, Gustaw voluntarily changed jobs to be able to spend more time with the child, even though the new job paid less. His adjustment was meant to compensate for the fact that Gabriela had to reduce her working hours after the birth, which appeared to frustrate her: ‘My professional life [long pause] is like this: a) I think I still work a lot, but b) I am constantly frustrated because before [childbirth] I could do much more, both in terms of interesting stuff [work-related projects] and earning money, because those two are connected’ (Reimann 2019, p. 196).

Later on in the interview, Gabriela elaborated on why she and Gustaw chose to accept that both of their incomes would be lower: ‘our relationship is built on partnership and equality, when it comes to finances and everything else. Also, neither of us has a job that would provide for the other’ (Reimann 2019, p. 196).

The example of Gabriela and Gustaw exemplifies how highly some of the couples interviewed valued equality and jointly sharing the spheres of paid and unpaid (care) work. Especially in the Polish study, we found that many couples were willing to cut back on work in order to maintain this level of equality (Reimann 2019). While these inefficient ‘non-normative’ couples were a small minority in the whole sample of the couples analysed in the context of the APPARENT project, these cases call into question the relevance of household bargaining and economic advantage among European couples today.

In light of the economic and non-economic reasoning that was observed among the other groups investigated – namely, the couples who were specialising efficiently in ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ ways – it is safe to conclude that relative earnings advantages did not greatly affect how the parents-to-be decided to divide up their work and care responsibilities, nor how the new parents ultimately did so. The evidence found in the qualitative research clearly confirms the available quantitative evidence that parenthood frequently has negative career and earnings consequences for mothers. It also confirms that the increased volume of unpaid domestic work associated with the birth of a child is mostly taken on by mothers, and only very rarely by fathers. However, while these dynamics clearly lead to motherhood wage penalties and maternal career breaks, they are not a causal result of women’s earnings disadvantages during pregnancy.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Our aim in this chapter was to explain why the woman having an earnings advantage frequently fails to predict efficient specialisation within a couple during the transition to parenthood. We provided a review of recent research and theory on the economic and non-economic mechanisms that may explain gendered transitions to parenthood. The evidence presented here yields four main conclusions. First, couples are most likely to specialise and to maintain economically efficient work–care arrangements during the transition to parenthood in cases in which the male partner is earning more than the female partner prior to the birth. While this type of comparative advantage is shrinking, it is still dominant in Europe (Klesment and Van Bavel 2015), and it aligns well with prevalent norms emphasising the mother’s primacy in care and the father’s primacy in market production (i.e., intensive parenting, see Grunow et al. 2018). However, we found very little evidence to support the claim that the male earnings advantage causes gender-normative specialisation. Second, couples tend to specialise and to adopt economically inefficient work–care arrangements in cases in which the female partner is earning more than the male partner prior to the birth (Grunow et al. 2012, 2018). Thus, it appears that internalised norms regarding separate spheres for men and women, and especially of the ‘good’ mother, overrule production efficiency in family decision making (Evertsson and Grunow 2019). Third, even when the female partner has an earnings advantage, economically efficient specialisation occurs only in exceptional cases. This may, for example, occur if (1) both partners express and maintain a strong commitment to supporting joint spheres and egalitarian gender norms, irrespective of the disapproval of or the negative sanctions imposed by extended family, bosses, or colleagues (Evertsson and Grunow 2016, 2019); or (2) the male partner is unable to engage in market production, or can work but would earn too little income to provide for the family. In this latter case, couples often engage in efficient specialisation only temporarily, and then switch to an (often inefficient) model as soon as the male partner finds a job that provides sufficient income (Evertsson and Grunow 2019). In the former case (dual commitment to joint spheres), couples appear likely to adopt and maintain efficient work–care arrangements (Nitsche and Grunow 2018). Qualitative research has shown that there are also cases in which egalitarian-minded couples adopt inefficient work–care arrangements in line with their values; although how widespread or stable this pattern is remains unclear. Fourth, in contrast to model-based assessments that have argued that gender-balanced work–care arrangements are inefficient per se (Becker 2009), we conclude that contemporary

families are well advised to adopt a gender-balanced division of market and domestic production that can sustain the family income even if the family is disrupted or the main earner loses his/her job. A multitude of studies from Europe and the US have identified continued maternal employment and paternal time investment in childcare as work–care strategies that can help protect both parents and children from adverse effects of economic uncertainty and marital instability (i.e., Aassve et al. 2007; Cooke 2004; Erola and Jalovaara 2017; Killewald 2016; McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Smock et al. 1999). Thus, Becker's (2009) perspective on household efficiency rests on model assumptions that are no longer relevant in contemporary families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme/ERC Grant Agreement no. 263651. In addition, the present chapter has been supported by a Goethe-Fellowship stipend at the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften, Bad Homburg. The author thanks Luisa Bischoff for research assistance.

NOTE

1. In the Netherlands, Wiesmann (2010) conducted qualitative interviews with parents-to-be in 2004–2005; a mini-panel derived from a small sub-sample of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study. In Germany, qualitative interviews with parents before and after the birth of their first child were conducted at the Institute for Family Research at the University of Bamberg between 2006 and 2007. During the same period, the Swiss Devenir Parent project started conducting several waves of qualitative interviews with parents before and after the birth of their first child (Le Goff and Levy 2011). In Austria, several waves of qualitative interviews with parents-to-be were conducted between 2013 and 2015. Following the German sampling strategy and interview guidelines, additional cross-nationally harmonised qualitative data collections were conducted in Sweden (2009–11), Italy (2010–15), Spain (2011–13), Poland (2011–14), and the Czech Republic (2011–14); for an overview, see Grunow (2016).

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