

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: PLATONIC CO-PARENTING: A NEW LENS
INTO THE UNFINISHED GENDER
REVOLUTION

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The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the extent to which platonic co-parenting (PCP), an alternative family form in which parenting is separated from romantic relationships and often also from coresidence, is creating and sustaining gender egalitarian parenting relationships. In other words, how gender egalitarian are these parenting partnerships? Using 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews with men, women, non-binary and trans people, who were at different stages of the PCP journey, I investigated the practice of platonic co-parenting by focusing on the motivations for people to choose the PCP path to parenting; and how they navigated gendered patriarchal norms in the process of becoming PCPs including division of household labor.

I found two broad categories of people who were drawn to PCP: those who attempted to subvert hegemonic, heteronormative ideals of family and parenting; and those who attempted to reproduce these ideals. The subverters aspired to form gender

egalitarian and equal partnerships whereas the reproducers desired/imagined the mother as the primary parent and the father's role being closer to a sperm donor's—a father figure as opposed to an involved father. Among the subverters, the realities of the division of labor once they had a child turned out to be far less gender egalitarian than they had intended as the pull of traditional gender norms was quite strong for both men and women. PCPs engaged in gendered boundary work to separate aspects of their family that fell in the transactional realm and those that fell in the intimate/sacred realm free of monetary or other exchanges. Framing certain activities (childbearing, breastfeeding, relocation, and parental leave) as intimate had the unintended consequence of creating inequality between the male and female co-parents. By using the language of altruism to naturalize their arrangements, PCPs intend to be seen as “real” families while leaving in place traditional cleavages of the gendered division of labor.

PLATONIC CO-PARENTING:
A NEW LENS INTO THE UNFINISHED GENDER REVOLUTION

by

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Dedication

To all the feminists who came before me who made the life that I now live possible.

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I am deeply indebted to my co-chairs Julia Chuang and Sangeetha Madhavan for believing in this dissertation and my abilities; and for enriching this project with their brilliant sociological and feminist minds. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Reeve Vanneman for being a wonderful, kind, and caring advisor during the first five years of my PhD program, for helping me shape this study as it evolved from an exciting idea in my personal life to a dissertation proposal, and for serving on my dissertation committee. I would like to thank Liana Sayer and Bonnie Thornton Dill for not only serving on my committee but also influencing and inspiring me with their scholarship and teaching on gender.

I want to thank my four-year-old child, Surya, for being super adaptive all his life especially when I could not give him the quality time that was rightfully his (thanks to public policies and social structures in the U.S. that are grossly inadequate in supporting low-income families). I also want to thank my coparent Matt for being a reliable, fully involved, tireless, and entertaining father for our child, allowing us to create an equal parenting relationship in which parenting roles and responsibilities are degendered.

Last but not the least, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Raghav who got me through the finish line by being an incredibly supportive partner. His emotional support, his (million) words of encouragement and his high regard for sociological research, intellectual work, and fighting inequalities of all kinds helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel when the obstacles I faced seemed overwhelming. I wish every graduate student could have a support person as amazing as him.

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1: Introduction

Seven years ago, Tanya relocated to Seattle where Eli lived and worked, to start a family with Eli. Tanya had just finished her postdoctoral fellowship while Eli was well established in his high-earning career as a software engineer. Tanya had to turn down her dream job in DC in order to relocate. Post birth, Tanya stayed home for 14 months to care for their son while Eli returned to work once his six weeks of paid leave ended. During this year long period after Eli returned to work and before Tanya did the same, Tanya was a stay-at-home mom doing the lion's share of childcare and housework and was financially dependent on Eli. When she eventually returned to paid work, she had to settle for a lower paying and lower status career path than the one she gave up in DC. As someone who specializes in Asia policy work, her career prospects in Seattle weren't as good. She knew about her diminished career prospects in Seattle when she decided to relocate. Eli was not willing to relocate to DC as it would negatively impact his career. As Tanya desperately wanted to become a mother, she traded her dream career for motherhood. Their son is now seven years old. Their little family is settled in Seattle and Tanya feels it's not worth disrupting the family to move to DC for the sake of her career. She feels it's too late now.

Sounds like the average traditional marriage in the U.S.? Far from it. Eli and Tanya are not married or even in a romantic relationship. Eli is gay and Tanya is straight. They are best friends who decided to have a child together when each couldn't find suitable romantic partners to have a child with. They conceived their son through artificial insemination, and they live next door to each other in adjacent townhomes. Eli and Tanya are in what is called a 'platonic co-parenting' relationship. One might expect such non-traditional family arrangements to be gender egalitarian. After all, platonic co-parenting is a global (North) movement founded around a

recognition that traditional, patriarchal family structures are ill-suited to the modern situations of potential parents.¹ Both Tanya and Eli consider themselves feminists and envisioned this family as a gender egalitarian one, in which parenting roles are degendered and both are equally involved in raising the child. However, in practice, their family fell into the same gendered patriarchal traps as heterosexual families.

It is actually worse. Unlike in most married couples, where women's sacrifices around having a child (like the opportunity cost of relocation, childbearing, doing a greater share of unpaid childcare and housework) are at least partially compensated by the legal expectation of shared finances, assets and retirement income, Tanya has no such protections. Having a child has cost her her dream career and has impacted her income and savings significantly. She doesn't own a house because she doesn't make enough money to buy a house in expensive Seattle. Eli owns both townhomes and Tanya sometimes worries about losing her housing once her son turns 18 and leaves home.

This dissertation attempts to better understand the puzzle of why and how traditional, heteronormative and patriarchal values are reproduced in even the most progressive arrangements. Specifically, I show that aspirations for gender egalitarianism are often not realized in practice because the partners are engaged in a project of boundary marking that deems some activities as *transactional* and others as *intimate*.

Research question

In platonic co-parenting, an alternative family form in which parenting is separated from romantic relationships and often also from coresidence, co-parenting practices are deliberately

¹ In an "Ask me anything" Reddit dialogue, the founder of Modamily, a platonic co-parenting site, cites delayed fertility and rising divorce rates as a motivation for customizing co-parenting practices to fit the requirements of modern lives (Fatovic 2012).

reimagined, often around gender-egalitarian ideals. However, most platonic co-parents I spoke to engage in practices that tend to recreate gender inequalities. Why, in the most deliberately utopian of communities, are these efforts to reimagine the family failing to address gender inequalities deeply embedded in the traditional family structure? To answer this question, I investigate practices of platonic co-parenting by focusing on the motivations for people to choose the PCP path to parenting; how these parents navigated gendered patriarchal norms in the process of becoming PCPs; and for some families, the long-term and material outcomes of negotiations over co-parenting.

What is platonic co-parenting?

Platonic co-parenting (PCP)² includes a variety of arrangements in which **two or more** individuals of any gender or sexual orientation who are not romantically involved, come together to have a child. These partnerships are established between friends, relatives or discovered online. Platonic co-parenting goes by other names: ‘platonic co-parenting by choice’, ‘partnered parenting’ and ‘elective co-parenting’. The proliferation of co-parenting websites in the last decade and news media articles about it suggests that this relatively small group of people forming such families is on the rise. A popular book on platonic co-parenting, which serves as a guide to potential PCPs, characterizes it as a “social evolution and an answer to many modern concerns about avoiding divorce, racing a biological clock, and having a family when you’re ready even if you’ve not yet met your soul mate” (Hope 2014).

Platonic co-parenting renders marriage or even a romantic relationship unnecessary to have a child while one is still able to share responsibilities with another parent and provide the

² I use the acronym PCP to refer both to the platonic co-parenting community at large, and to individuals within the community, platonic co-parents themselves.

child with at least two parents. While this practice has its origin in the lesbian and gay communities, it is increasingly being embraced by aspiring parents of all sexual orientations. The most common way to conceive a child in these relationships is artificial insemination (Jadva, Freeman, Tranfield et al. 2015). The male co-parent, if there is one, is almost always the sperm provider.

Though the two-parent different gendered (mom-dad) PCP families, when living in separate residences, may resemble a post-divorce or post-separation family, it is fundamentally different as made clear on the Facebook group ‘Platonic co-parenting by Choice Support’, a support group for platonic co-parents: “We voluntarily chose to conceive a child as platonic co-parents even though we were never romantically involved with each other... This is not a group for parents co-parenting after a divorce or separation or break-up.” PCPs intentionally come together as non-romantic partners; their relationship is platonic from the very beginning, and they often have differing sexual orientations that rule out the possibility of the relationship developing into a romantic one at a later point.

Platonic co-parenting arrangements push the boundaries of what a family means and raises new questions about gender division of labor. It also offers a new lens to interrogate the gender revolution by separating childbearing and parenting from romantic partnerships. Platonic co-parenting could be a growing phenomenon in the 21st century, at least in advanced industrial countries. However, this family type remains understudied by sociologists despite broad interest in other new and alternative family forms. There are currently only four articles on PCP that I know of. Two of them are based on the same larger study and has participants from different countries (Bower-Brown, Foley, Jadva et al. 2024, Jadva et al. 2015); one is based in Israel (Erera and Segal-Engelchin 2014) and the other in Belgium (Herbrand 2018). None of them

focus on gender division of labor or gender egalitarianism explicitly, but they do shed some light on the gendered expectations of the PCPs. The studies, summarized below, are focused mostly on motivations of PCPs.

Bower-Brown et al. (2024) interviewed 10 cisgender heterosexual men and women (5 men; 5 women) in PCP relationships located in different countries about their motivations and how they manage their co-parenting relationships. They found that traditional parenthood ideologies remain pervasive, as parents aim to imagine and pursue parenthood on their own terms. The parents experienced a tension between two ideas: ‘Reproducing the traditional family’ and ‘Modernizing the traditional family’. Participants aimed to manage their co-parenting relationship with shared values and friendship, but defining their relationship was complex, and gendered parenting patterns were ubiquitous. This paper was based on a subsample drawn from a larger study.

In another paper that drew from the same larger study, Jadvá et al. (2015) analyzed the result of an online survey with 102 participants about characteristics, motivations and expectations of men and women who were searching for a co-parent on the co-parenting site, prideangel.com. The authors found that male and female prospective co-parents differed in terms of their motivations, choice of co-parent and expectations of co-parenting, while differences according to sexual orientation were less marked. Approximately one-third of men and one half of women seeking co-parenting arrangements were heterosexual. The majority of participants were single, although significantly more gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women had a partner compared with heterosexual men and women.

According to the study, the most important motivation for seeking co-parenting arrangements was in order for both biological parents to be involved in the child’s upbringing.

Comparisons by gender found women to rate ‘I am getting older’ and ‘I am single’ as more important than men. Men rated ‘To pass on my genes’ as more important than women. Comparisons by sexual orientation within each gender found that lesbian and bisexual women rated ‘co-parenting is an ideal situation for bringing up a child’ and ‘Family/friends have used sperm/egg donation’ as more important than heterosexual women. A gender difference was found for ‘race/ethnicity’ showing that a significantly higher proportion of women than men selected this as a restriction although the number of people selecting this option was small. Most female co-parents expected the child to live with them, whereas male co-parents either wished the child to reside with the mother or to live equally in both households. A higher proportion of gay and bisexual men than heterosexual men wanted daily contact with the child.

In a study of PCP families headed by a heterosexual mother and gay father (the “hetero-gay family”) in Israel, the authors interviewed nine gay fathers who were co-parenting with straight women to learn about motivations and attributes sought in their female co-parents (Erera and Segal-Engelchin 2014). The study found that there were three key motivations for establishing a hetero-gay family: belief in the essential mother, belief in biological parenting, and the belief that the child’s best interests dictate having two parents of the opposite sex. The authors argue that these beliefs, along with seeking female co-parents with maternal attributes, reflect traditional attitudes and a wish to reproduce the traditional family. The comments of most of the fathers in the study reflected essentialist and stereotypical views about the superiority of biological parenthood and about men’s and women’s essential aptitudes for child rearing. Women were characterized as having inborn uniquely feminine nurturing qualities that are absent in men, gay or straight. At the same time, however, these men all planned on being “new,” actively involved fathers who shoulder child-rearing responsibilities.

In a Belgium-based study about multi-parent families (Herbrand 2018) comprising lesbian women and gay men ('lesbian and gay collaborative co-parenting'), 26 co-parents were interviewed about their motivations to form platonic co-parenting families. Herbrand noted that there were four recurrent reasons given by participants for choosing co-parenting: the desire for biological descent; to experience pregnancy for women, to know the child's background; and most importantly to provide the child with a mother and a father. Herbrand argues that these motivations were not only aimed at normalizing their family situation, but also reflected deeply anchored family values, and concluded that "innovative and reflexive family forms can arise from conventionally based assumptions regarding gender roles and kinship" (Herbrand 2018:1) which includes, what she calls the 'mom and dad ideal'.

The gender dynamics between the co-parents in this study was similar to the hetero-gay family mentioned earlier. Herbrand found that most co-parents were simultaneously in favor of gender equality, while essentializing abilities and roles when it comes to parenting. Herbrand noted that the biological mother was indeed perceived as playing an essential role in the child's life, not only because of her perceived 'natural' ability to take care of the child but also because of the special physical bond she had created with the child through pregnancy and breastfeeding, something that the biological father was seen as lacking.

My dissertation will add to these existing studies to enhance our understanding of this family type, specifically our understanding of **how** these parents navigated gendered patriarchal norms in the process of becoming PCPs including how they shared childcare responsibilities.

Sociological significance

Learning about how gender egalitarian PCP families are should be of interest to all family sociologists, but especially feminist and gender scholars who are interested in 'post-gender' and

‘postmodern’ families but have rarely looked beyond romantic partnerships. Learning about the motivations of PCPs also sheds light on the more general challenges of finding romantic partners in present day Western societies. This dissertation contributes to the sociology of family in three critical ways. It will contribute to the literature on 1) our ongoing examination and understanding of the unfinished gender revolution, 2) changes in norms, values and attitudes pertaining to marriage and family life in advanced industrialized countries, and 3) changes in the gendered division of labor in families in recent decades in these countries. In the following section I discuss these in more detail.

Gender revolution

Studying PCP families, especially their gender division of labor, offer us a new lens to interrogate the unfinished or stalled gender revolution because this family type is new and unique in separating childbearing and parenting from romantic relationships; and these families are deliberately reimagined, often around gender-egalitarian ideals. The gender revolution is the wide-ranging changes to women’s roles, opportunities, and achievements since the 1960s. The study of division of household labor, especially parental labor, is vital to understanding the state of the gender revolution because of its cyclical ties to the employment sector and its potential to produce and strengthen traditional labor arrangements between men and women (Yavorsky, Kamp Dush and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). Though the gender division of household labor has become more equal over time at least until the 90s, it remains an important unfinished part of the gender revolution (Cotter, Hermsen and Vanneman 2011, England 2010, Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård 2015). Women have entered previously male-dominated domains such as the labor force and higher education, but men have not embraced female-typed activities, such as childcare and housework, with similar vigor. Goldscheider et al. (2015) argue that the

increased involvement of men in the private sphere of home and family is the “second half” of the gender revolution.

Change in norms, values and attitudes pertaining to marriage and family life:

The declining prominence of the nuclear family in the West and the rise of diverse family types, can be attributed to the cultural shift toward postmodern norms that stress individuality and self-actualization (van de Kaa 2001). Commonly referred to as the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986), this shift entails a decline in fertility, a multitude of relationships other than marriage, the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin 2004) and the disconnection between marriage and childbearing. Scholars have also observed the declining power of social norms and laws as regulating mechanisms for family life, and the expanding role of personal choice (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Giddens 1992).

Marriage rates in the West have been declining and a wide variety of alternative family structures have emerged and are becoming increasingly common. These include cohabitating couples with children, stepfamilies, single parent families, and families formed by lesbian, gay, queer, transgender, polyamorous, and asexual individuals among others. Platonic co-parenting is now one such unconventional family form, where parenting is separated from romantic relationships and often, also from coresidence. Learning about platonic co-parenting, especially the reasons why people are choosing this path, will contribute to our understanding of changing values, norms and attitudes pertaining to family life in the Global North.

More recently, the rapidly changing landscape of family life in the US (where marriage is on the decline; and divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and diverse family types including single-parent families are on the rise) has led to a heightened interest in family structure and children’s well-being. There has been a tripartite clustering (Cohen 2024) of opinion about family change:

conservatives want a return to the family's glorious past—returning to the norm of the two-parent heterosexual marriage; liberals are nonjudgmental and laissez faire about family diversity; and progressives advocate for actively dismantling traditional forms. The latest round of debate among family sociologists, journalists and commentators on whether marriage is best for children was sparked by the launch of the book “The Two Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind” (Kearney 2023). The book advocates for the two-parent married family (which is rapidly declining among lower class and Black families in the US) arguing that it offers a host of economic and emotional benefits for children, while critics of marriage promotion point out, like they have time and again, that inequality in children's outcomes is caused not by family structure but by economic inequalities in the country, and that the benefits of marriage, both economically and in other indicators of children's wellbeing, are greater for White children than for Black (Bruenig 2023, Cohen 2024, Cross 2019, Cross, Fomby and Letiecq 2022, Traister 2023).

While children's outcomes are outside the scope of my dissertation, studying PCP arrangements, which have **at least** two parents, can contribute to the ongoing debate on family structure and children's wellbeing. Stability for the child is one of the primary reasons people, especially women, are drawn to PCP. They see PCP as enhancing child wellbeing in at least two ways: 1) by helping them avoid single motherhood, the child gets more than one parent 2) the absence of the complications of romantic relationships (and coresidence) will keep the relationship between the parents more stable thus providing more stability for children, unlike romantic relationships which when it ends tend to negatively impact children.

While there hasn't been any research on how platonic co-parenting influence child outcomes, Segal-Engelchin and Cwikel (2005) who have studied the hetero-gay family extensively, expect positive outcomes for children of hetero-gay families. They note:

It might well be that the development of children raised in hetero-gay families would be more like that of children raised in two-parent families than that of children raised in divorced families. These children experience a more stable and predictable family environment, and the non-residential father is likely to be more involved with their upbringing than the average non-residential father in divorced families (2005:5).

Changes in the gendered division of labor in families in recent decades

The changes in norms, values and attitudes pertaining to marriage and family life in advanced industrial countries, and the diverse family types that have emerged over the last few decades have been accompanied by shifts in the gender division of domestic labor in families. However, women still perform a greater share of domestic labor even though their participation in the labor force increased dramatically in the last few decades. Most families are still based on an unequal division of unpaid domestic labor which constrains women's, especially mothers', paid work opportunities making them economically vulnerable. Many women suffer from the triple shift where they must do paid work, domestic work and emotional work – being expected to take on the emotional burden of caring for children and other dependents.

Gendered division of domestic labor is the linchpin in a broader system of gender inequality (Treas and Tai 2016). The gender revolution in the West has been profoundly asymmetric—more women entered “male” fields than vice versa, and women's employment hours went up much more than men's household work hours went up (England, Levine and Mishel 2020). Feminist economists and sociologists have long demonstrated how women's role in parenting constrains their ability to pursue careers and compete for demanding jobs (Bergmann 1986, Folbre 1994, Folbre 2020). Many mothers in heterosexual relationships

therefore remain economically dependent on their male partners, and vulnerable in the event of divorce or separation. Women who have devoted themselves to raising children usually have lower job qualifications than their husbands and is one of the main reasons for the discrepancy in earning opportunities between men and women. The recent pandemic, as we know, has only exacerbated these inequalities as the sudden increase in childcare responsibilities for parents of young children fell on women thus forcing them to leave paid work or reduce their participation in it (Landivar, Ruppanner, Scarborough et al. 2020).

The difference between men's and women's contribution to domestic labor has been found to vary with family structure, with heterosexual marriages being the least gender egalitarian. In heterosexual relationships, though there is some evidence that the gender gap in household labor may be declining with time (for eg., Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer et al. 2000, Shelton 1992) women, in general, and especially mothers spend significantly more time on domestic labor than men.

Non-traditional families, while more egalitarian than heterosexual nuclear families, have also been found to follow gendered norms. Research on same-gender couples calls into question explanation of division of labor that rely solely on gendered assumptions of men and women as opposites (Doan and Quadlin 2019, Geist and Ruppanner 2018, Reczek 2020). Gender norms and patriarchal constructs (i.e., masculinity and femininity) still emerge in non-heterosexual arrangements. Studies have found that although same gender couples are less reliant on traditional gendered norms and are more likely to be both employed outside the home, childcare and feminine-typed tasks such as laundry are often clustered together unequally (Goldberg, Smith and Perry-Jenkins 2012, Goldberg 2013) and division of labor is shaped not by gender per se, but by levels of traditionally feminine and masculine traits (Civettini 2015).

Goldberg et al. (2012) examined the division of childcare and housework in lesbian, gay and heterosexual newly adoptive couples in the US and found that same-sex couples shared childcare and housework more equally than heterosexual couples. However, their findings also revealed significant within-couple discrepancies in childcare and housework in all three family types, showing that, even in the absence of within-couple differences related to biological processes (e.g., breastfeeding), adoptive couples, regardless of sexual orientation, do not share childcare and housework entirely equally.

This asymmetry holds even in less common family types like Black lesbian stepfamilies (Moore 2008) where biological mothers undertook significantly more household chores and were more likely than stepmothers to assert dominance over childcare and household tasks to enact power in lieu of financial equity. Among gay fathers, biological fathers who have a child from a previous heterosexual relationship are more likely to specialize in childcare than their partners (Tornello, Sonnenberg and Patterson 2015).

Studies on ciswomen partnered to transmen show that cis women do more housework than their transgender partners to assert gender order and affirm their partners' masculine identities (Pfeffer 2010, Ward 2010). For example, the cis women in Pfeffer's study often reported inequalitarian, gender-stereotyped divisions of household labor between themselves and their transmen partners, which wasn't too different from inequalities in division of household labor between men and women in heterosexual relationships.

Scholarship on heterosexual families suggest that egalitarian families are rare and more of an ideal type (Gerson 2010, Tereškinas 2010, Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). While trying to recruit couples who are in an equal or "fair" relationship, Risman and Johnson-Sumerford (1998) found that out of the 75 parent couples who self-identified as equal partners,

only 15 passed the study's "not-so stringent standards" of an equal relationship. Literature also suggests that young people *want* to create enduring and egalitarian partnerships, but few are able to achieve it (Gerson 2009, Gerson 2010).

Why is an equal division of domestic labor in households so elusive? Structural conditions systematically support male privilege which impacts what goes on in families, especially heterosexual families. But at the level of the family, could there be something inherent about family relationships that create inequality in most family types. Given that most family types, whether it's heterosexual, gay, lesbian, trans, adoptive or polyamorous families, have at its core a romantic partnership, could intimacy be at the root of inequality within the family?

Much of the literature on non-traditional families does not question the role of intimacy itself in recreating traditional patterns. Scholarship on egalitarian families (Beckett and Smith 1981, Goldscheider, Goldscheider and Bernhardt 2011, Risman 1998, Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998, Weisner, Garnier and Loucky 1994) has mostly limited their samples to those formed by couples who are romantically linked. Are families that are not built on a romantic relationship i.e., platonic co-parenting families, any different from families based on romantic partnerships in creating traditional gendered patterns? This is the question I am asking in my dissertation.

Theoretical framework

To understand the motivations and the lived experience of PCPs, I draw on some key scholarship from sociologists. I draw on this work to understand the barriers to attaining conventional parenthood and the process of meaning making in constructing a family.

Men and women come to PCP in order to overcome barriers to parenthood. To understand the cumulative and intersectional barriers to parenthood, I use the term 'intersectional

injuries’. I use the term ‘injuries’ in the same way as Celeste Watkins-Hayes uses the term “injuries of inequality” in her 2019 book about women living with HIV/AIDS and how they confront inequalities. For her, injuries of inequality describe how the confluences of people’s race, class, gender, sexuality, and other statuses disproportionately expose them to injury and harm. She explains: “Injuries of inequality—big and small wounds to personal, familial, and community well-being—represent the mental, physical, and social toll of acute inequity. They are the cumulative markers and scars of economic and social marginalization, the visible and invisible evidence of disadvantage.” (2019:8)

For those who are drawn to PCP, their barriers to parenthood include but go beyond social inequalities mentioned above to include exclusions resulting from biology. Their injuries stem from their intersecting identities (like sex, gender, sexual orientation, age), social structures (like patriarchy and heteronormativity), public policies informed by these structures, and inequalities resulting from those policies. Unlike concepts like ‘patriarchy’ or ‘racism’, the term ‘injuries’ has much more wide-ranging application. For instance, the expectation of heteronormative parenthood inflicts a wide variety of ‘injuries’ on people. The men and women that I interviewed felt differently injured by the hegemonic ideal of a heterosexual nuclear family: men, predominantly sexual minorities, felt excluded from biological fatherhood, while women often voiced a desire to avoid difficulties of single motherhood, something that is made more challenging due to the expectations of intensive mothering and inadequate state support. The concept of ‘injuries’ helps us make sense of why people come to PCP.

PCP offers people a way to respond to their intersectional injuries. However, the PCP family inhabits a non-normative space that lies somewhere between the traditional family and surrogacy. To understand how people make sense of and navigate this space, I draw from

theories about the intersection between transaction and intimacy, or between money and morals, in relationships. The central premise of the money-morals literature, starting with Viviana Zelizer's 'Pricing the Priceless Child' (1994), is that people create moral boundaries between acts they deem commodifiable and those they believe are sacred and should not be subjected to market logic. Scholars have documented how this applies to sex work (Bernstein 2007), blood and organ donation (Healy 2019), surrogacy (Hochschild 2017, Hochschild 2012, Laufer-Ukeles 2013, Lustenberger 2016, Rudrappa and Collins 2015, Stuvøy 2018, Zelizer 1988) and how some industries have been built on making what was previously deemed sacred into a market commodity (for example, Zelizer 2017 on the life insurance industry) and how working mothers draw separations between routine acts of child care which can be done by a nanny and sacred bonding moments which cannot (Macdonald 2011).

In her landmark book, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (2005), Zelizer distinguishes between the standard separate spheres account or the 'hostile worlds' account of the relationship between economy and intimacy—which sees the domains of intimacy and economic relations as two separate entities with distinct and opposing logics of operation—and her own account of 'connected lives', in which economy and intimacy coexist and are mutually constitutive. Zelizer used the concept of relational work (come to be known more popularly as 'boundary work') to explain how this connection is made possible, especially since the commonsense image of mixing intimacy and economy can be so unsettling. Zelizer explains that "people create connected lives by differentiating their multiple social ties from each other, marking boundaries between those different ties by means of everyday practices, sustaining those ties through joint activities (including economic activities), but constantly negotiating the exact content of

important social ties” (Zelizer 2005:32). That is, connected lives are possible because of relational work in which people engage.

In her article explicitly discussing relational work, Zelizer defined relational work as follows: “For each distinct category of social relations, people erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation. I call that process relational work” (2012:145). PCPs engage in such boundary work when they deem certain economic transactions like splitting childcare expenses as appropriate and acceptable, while deeming compensation for childbearing inappropriate and unacceptable.

In this dissertation, I discuss the ‘gendered’ boundary work that PCPs engage in. By gendered boundary work, I mean the common distinctions PCPs make between aspects of their family that fall in the transactional realm and those that fall in the intimate or sacred realm free of monetary or other exchanges, which invariably result in gender unequal outcomes, like in the Tanya-Eli family. I draw from the above theories to understand and explain the heteronormative and patriarchal structures that lead women like Tanya to make the sacrifices they did to fulfill their desire of becoming a parent; and why PCPs like Tanya and Eli keep relocation, childbearing or infant care in the sacred realm free of monetary exchange, rather than negotiate a more equitable sharing of costs and burdens of having a child. Overall, the above concepts help understand the puzzle of how traditional, heteronormative, and patriarchal values are reproduced in the most progressive and non-traditional arrangements.

This dissertation brings the money-morals literature and the gender division of labor literature together in such a way that one contributes to the other. I argue that the boundary work, that is, mental work that co-parents engage in to distinguish between acts which they classify as part of the intimate realm and those which can be appropriately viewed as transactional, contributes to disadvantages for mothers in any type of family that has men and women. It leads to greater disadvantages for mothers in PCP families as they don't enjoy the benefits of being in a romantic relationship and/or legal marriage. I also argue, based on my findings about PCPs, that coresidence, which often accompanies romantic relationships, could be a major contributing factor to gender inequality in division of unpaid domestic labor in families. In the next section, I provide a general roadmap of the dissertation with a brief summary of my findings.

The roadmap

In chapter 2, "Methodology", I discuss the research design and methods, the target population, the recruitment process, demographic information about the study participants, data collection process and analysis, and my own positionality as an insider and outsider.

In Chapter 3, "Subverters and Reproducers," I examine the push and pull factors that bring people to platonic co-parenting. Why are the more traditional and normative ways of having children including single parenting unfeasible or exclusionary for those seeking alternatives like PCP? How does PCP help them overcome those barriers to parenthood and increase their chances of having children in a way that they can share the responsibilities with another person (or at least provide their children with more than one parent even if the responsibilities are unevenly shared)? I discuss the variation in the motivations of people to form PCP families. I found two broad categories of platonic co-parents: those who turn to PCP

practices in order to subvert hegemonic, heteronormative ideals of family and parenting; and those who turn to PCP in an attempt to reproduce these ideals. The ‘subverters’ often used PCP to form multi-parent families (i.e., three or more parents), partner up across sexual orientations, and/or across gender identities including non-binary and trans-people. People in this category **aspired** to form gender egalitarian and equal partnerships where parenting roles are degendered and parenting responsibilities are shared equally. They prioritized compatibility in values over conforming to heteronormative family ideals and thus subverted them.

On the other hand, those who turned to PCP to replicate the heterosexual family as closely as possible were motivated by different priorities. For them, PCP was a way to create the much-desired traditional family along with its gendered norms and roles. When the actual traditional family became inaccessible for different reasons, they were willing to take the non-traditional path of PCP to create a family which aligns with their values, and their desires for the traditional family, including mimicking the husband-wife structure of two different gendered parents, one mother and one father. For them, the traditional family was the ideal and mostly unproblematic. They believed in gendered parenting roles, including the idea that the birth mother should be the child’s primary caregiver at least when the child was young. These partnerships were far from equal, with the mothers being the primary parent and the father’s role being closer to a sperm donor’s—a father figure as opposed to an involved father. The father’s role was limited and restricted with approximately a 90:10 split in responsibility, rights, and time with the child between the mothers and fathers.

In Chapter 4, “Egalitarian Intent vs. Unequal Realities,” I examine the gender egalitarian intentions of current co-parents as laid out in their co-parenting agreements and compare it with their lived realities. I found that in the two-parent different gendered families (mom-dad

families), the realities of the division of labor once they had a child turned out to be a lot less gender egalitarian than they had originally intended. Despite their generally progressive beliefs about gender roles, the pull of traditional gender norms was quite strong for both men and women, especially when they coresided. And despite the extensive planning that went into having children together, there were certain things related to gender division of labor that they probably did not or could not have adequately planned for. Their intention to carry out egalitarian co-parenting was complicated by various factors, not necessarily unique to platonic co-parenting. These include a) women's significantly longer break from work compared to their male co-parent's which led to the women becoming the main caregivers during infancy; b) the weight of the cognitive labor involved in parenting which these first-time parents did not adequately plan for or take into consideration during negotiations; c) living together under one roof which led to recreating the gender roles of heterosexual nuclear families including an unequal division of unpaid domestic labor (this was largely undone once they moved out to separate residences) and d) relocation of one parent to the other parent's city to start a family which impacted careers, incomes and finances and which in turn affected the division of labor.

In Chapter 5, "Moral Boundaries and Asymmetrical Co-parenting," I examine the gendered boundary work that PCPs engage in to separate aspects of their family that fall in the transactional realm and those that fall in the intimate/sacred realm which invariably result in gender unequal outcomes. Given that PCP partners are not romantic partners but at the same time engage in the intimate act of intentionally having and raising a child together, the co-parenting relationship mixes intimacy and transaction in ways that are odd and uneasy. Platonic co-parents therefore draw boundaries to separate aspects of the family that they view as appropriately transactional from those which they view as sacred and intimate, which they decline to

compensate or negotiate through monetary or other exchanges. This boundary making is necessitated by the fact that PCPs inhabit a non-normative space, somewhere between the world of traditional familial relationships and a transactional relationship such as surrogacy that requires legal contracts.

PCPs police their actions in order to distance PCP from surrogacy and other overly transactional forms, and also to distance PCP from traditional families and other overly intimate relationships. For instance, framing transactions such as childbirth or relocation or mothers' longer breaks from work as intimate ends up creating material inequality between co-parents, which usually disadvantages women. PCPs have left such acts in the intimate/sacred realm by not compensating the co-parent who has to bear those opportunity costs in a relationship that is highly transactional in many ways. Such asymmetric sacrifices made by one parent are **not** subjected to negotiation or factored into trade-offs the way many other decisions (including splitting childcare expenses) are. They use the language of altruism to naturalize arrangements that they leave unequal in order to preserve boundaries between PCP and adjacent social structures and make theirs a "real" family.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The platonic co-parenting community, being a small one, has a strong presence online, where people at different stages of the co-parenting journey support one another by seeking and giving advice on co-parenting and legal matters, and sharing resources, recommendations, and personal experiences. For those who are yet to find a co-parent, there are seven co-parenting sites dedicated to connecting prospective co-parents. These are modamily.com, co-parents.com, co-parentsmatch.com, justababy.io, familybydesign.com, pollentree.com and prideangel.com. They are like dating sites for co-parents. In addition, there are social media support groups with membership that include both current and aspiring co-parents. This includes Facebook groups ‘Platonic Co-parenting by Choice Support’ and ‘Co-parenting Sperm Donor group’, and Reddit communities including ‘r/plannedcoparenting’ and ‘r/aromantic’.

Research design

Since this study is exploratory in nature, the process of allowing the data to speak for itself supports a qualitative method of inquiry. Also, there exists little research on the topic; therefore, an inductive qualitative method is better suited. Given that qualitative methodology uses context, individual experience, and subjective interpretation, generalizability is not possible, nor is it a goal.

I used purposive sampling to recruit my participants via social media groups. I posted my recruitment flier (see appendix) on two Facebook support groups ‘Platonic Co-parenting by Choice Support’ and ‘Co-parenting Sperm Donor Group’; and on the ‘r/aromantic’ community page of the social media website Reddit. I also used snowball sampling by asking participants that I interviewed to connect me with others they knew that would qualify for my study including their own co-parents or their potential co-parents.

I was myself part of the PCP community as I was looking for a platonic co-parent to have my second child with. I was registered on a few co-parenting sites, and I was a member of the social media support groups mentioned above. I had spent countless hours reading the posts and discussions on these support groups. I was so fascinated by this community—one that I did not know existed until I discovered it by chance in the year 2020—I decided to make it the topic of my dissertation.

Demarcating a complex space

I sought to interview people who had, or wished to have, a child in a platonic co-parenting relationship. However, the platonic co-parenting community, especially online, is a complex space in many ways. For one, boundaries between this community and the sperm donors/seekers community are porous. Most of the sites and support groups cater to both platonic co-parents and sperm donors/seekers. This is because many women searching for co-parents want to keep their options open. If they cannot find a compatible co-parent, they may settle for a ‘known sperm donor’ and take the single mother-by-choice route. The sperm donor’s access to the child, in such cases, would vary from absolutely no contact, to receiving regular updates about the pregnancy and child, to limited contact with the child. Some sperm donors who seek or have this limited contact, use the term ‘co-parent’ for themselves. Such men don’t expect to take on any significant childcare responsibilities. They use the term co-parent because, as biological fathers, they think of themselves as a parent, whether they take on childcare responsibilities or not.

In addition, most people, especially men, cannot afford to be picky. While some men want to be sperm donors, and some want to be ‘real’ co-parents, most of the men on these sites seem to be willing to take whatever they can get. Just the way many women simultaneously look

for a platonic co-parent and a sperm donor with a strong preference for the former, many men are open to multiple arrangements. While they prefer being a ‘co-parent’ (known donor with limited contact with the child), they also offer to “help” women who don’t want any contact between donor and child, sometimes charging a fee or travel expenses for their service. There are very few men on these sites who seek an equal co-parenting arrangement, one in which they can be involved fathers. The fact that such men are a small minority on these sites frustrates women who seek ‘real’ co-parents who would be involved fathers. To add to the complexity, some women haven’t given up hopes of having a child in a romantic partnership. So, they are registered on dating sites as well as co-parenting sites.

Given these complexities, I had to make decisions about who will be eligible for this study and who will not. For instance, if a woman is simultaneously looking for a romantic partner (even if with very little hope) and a platonic co-parent, is she an ‘aspiring PCP’? If a man says he wants to be a ‘co-parent’, but doesn’t plan to take on any responsibilities, is he an ‘aspiring PCP’? What about women who have decided to conceive using donor sperm but are simultaneously looking for a (non-biological) platonic co-parent for the child that’s on the way?

In order to capture the full breadth of ‘co-parents’, I decided to go by respondents’ self-identification as co-parents. My recruitment flyer said: “If you have or wish to have a child in a platonic co-parenting relationship, I invite you to participate in my study.” If the respondents felt they qualified, they were deemed eligible for the study, as long as they were indeed looking for or were in what they thought was a platonic *co-parenting* relationship. This meant that women who were simultaneously looking for romantic partners and platonic co-parents were eligible (women in this category were a lot more hopeful about finding a platonic co-parent than a romantic partner but wanted to remain open to romantic partners as that was their ideal path to

forming a family). Men who were not planning to take on any childcare responsibilities were not disqualified either (two of the 10 male participants fell in this category). I also decided to include pregnant women who were looking for (non-biological) fathers for their child as they would be raising their child in a PCP relationship even if the male coparent would come into the picture only after conception.

There were also some ambiguities about whether the nature of a relationship was platonic or not. I did not define the term ‘platonic’ in my recruitment flier. Some think of platonic as a non-sexual relationship, some as a non-romantic relationship and some as a relationship that is both non-sexual and non-romantic. As we know, relationships can be very complicated, and they cannot always be neatly categorized into platonic or sexual/romantic. For instance, does kissing between a teenage girl and teenage boy in high school, before the boy came out as gay, make the current relationship between them, 30 years later, non-platonic? I decided to deal with such ambiguities about determining whether a relationship is (strictly) platonic or not on a case-by-case basis. There were two hetero-gay (straight woman, gay man) PCP relationships where the mother and father dated briefly when they were much younger before the father came out as gay. In one of them the parents had kissed as teenagers. In another they had had sex about 20 years before they decided to partner up as PCPs. I decided to include both families considering the fact that the men have been gay and their relationships with their current coparents platonic for almost 20 years.

There was another related dilemma. Two male respondents said they were open to conceiving through any method including natural intercourse. For them, the fact that their future co-parent would not be their *romantic partner* made the relationship platonic. They didn’t see a one-time sexual act for the sake of conception as making their relationship non-platonic. I

decided to include them in the study and go by their understanding of platonic as being non-romantic (as opposed to non-sexual).

Finally, some PCP families had three parents with a romantically linked dyad among them. For example, in the Elizabeth-Robert♥Blake family, Robert and Blake were a married couple, and Elizabeth was a friend of the couple. I decided such families would be eligible for the study as there were two platonic connections among the three parents. For instance, in the family mentioned above, the relationships between Elizabeth and Robert, and Elizabeth and Blake are platonic.

Demographics

Experiences of the PCPs and aspiring PCPs vary with intersecting identities of gender, sexual orientation, age, (romantic) relationship status, class, race/ethnicity, nationality, and the country they are living in. However, because there was very little that was known about the demographic and social characteristics of this population, I did not impose any demographic or social limitations on the sample. The only criterion was that they should be at least 18 years of age.

Since this study is primarily about people coming together to have a child and sharing childcare responsibilities, it made sense to study current PCPs with young children rather than adult children. But I did not find the need to have an upper age limit for the children while recruiting participants. Given the newness of this family type and the online PCP communities where I recruited participants, I thought it would be unlikely to find current PCPs whose children were already adults. The oldest children were a pair of twins who were 14 years old.

Demographic limitations

Location: All the media reports I could find about platonic co-parenting were about families based in North America and Europe and given that non-normative families such as these are linked to the second demographic transition, I expected this study to be focused on the Global North. Not surprisingly, 31 of the 32 participants lived in the Global North. The only participant who was from the Global South was an asexual Indian man living in India. As the interviews were conducted virtually, there were no logistical barriers posed by distance between me and the participants' locations. However, given my location in the US, and the fact that the Facebook and Reddit groups from where I recruited participants were started in the US and the user base tends to be more American, my sample had more participants from North America than Europe. Also, the snowball sampling tactics used and the fact that the discussions in the support groups were in English contributed to having more North Americans in the sample.

This demographic skewing in terms of geographic location was similar to the other study conducted by researchers in the UK (Bower-Brown et al 2023; Jadvā et al 2015) where the majority of the sample were located in the UK. They recruited their sample from prideangel.com, a site that was founded by an English woman. Though all the coparenting sites and social media groups are open to members located anywhere in the world, these sites and groups tend to have a regional cluster, since members mostly seek matches locally or at least within the same country.

Online presence: My recruited sample also reflects the demographic that is represented online and self-identifies as platonic co-parents. This demographic tends to be largely highly educated, politically liberal, white and either part of or adjacent to the LGBTQIA+ community. There may be working class families and racial minorities, for instance, that might have platonic child-rearing arrangements, but not identify explicitly with this community. My study does not address them. Nor does it represent people who don't use social media and online sites. The

Facebook groups I recruited from were private which means that only those who were already members of the group could see my post with the flier. Reddit groups work differently. Posts in any Reddit group can be accessed by anybody by using the right search words. For instance, one of my participants was led to my post when she searched for ‘co-parenting’ on Reddit though she had not joined the ‘r/aromantic’ group that I posted in. The snowball sampling that I used hopefully mitigated the effect of the online recruitment on the sample, at least to some extent.

Data collection

To answer my research questions, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 32 people (including men, women, non-binary and trans people) who were at different stages of the PCP journey. In-depth interviews allowed me to access the depth of participants’ reasonings, fears, anxieties, desires, struggles, dilemmas, uncertainties, and joys as they treaded an unconventional and non-normative path to fulfill their dreams of becoming parents. Interviews are particularly useful for capturing “representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals.” (Lamont and Swidler 2014). This dissertation deals with all of the above to varying degrees. By keeping the interviews semi-structured I was able to maintain a consistent set of questions and topics with each participant while also allowing some flexibility for each of them to explore related topics of their choosing.

Interviews were conducted between Nov 2021 and Sept 2022. The interviews lasted between one and 5.5 hours long. Some were completed in a single session. And some, especially the longer ones were done over two or three non-consecutive days. Interviews with current co-parents were much lengthier than with aspiring co-parents as they had had the lived experience of co-parenting and had more to share. All interviews happened over Zoom and were video recorded.

I interviewed my participants about what led them to explore platonic co-parenting (motivations); what attributes their ideal co-parent would have (preferences); how they share or plan to share parenting responsibilities (including physical, cognitive, and emotional labor) and custodial and legal rights; and how decisions about the child will be (or were) made. For current co-parents, I additionally focused on how their current realities compared to the agreements they made before the child was conceived. For families where I interviewed more than one parent, I interviewed the parenting partners separately and confidentially from each other.

After the interview, each participant was asked to fill out a demographic information questionnaire that included questions about their age, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, city and country of residence, education level, employment status, occupation and number of children, if any, that they currently have (or are currently expecting) in a platonic co-parenting arrangement. In addition to the interviews, I also analyzed co-parenting agreements that some respondents shared with me. These are documents in which PCPs jointly write down agreements about parenting before having a child.

Sample characteristics

Twenty four of the 32 respondents **aspired** to have a child in a platonic relationship and were in different stages of the journey (I call them ‘aspiring platonic co-parents’, or ‘aspiring PCPs’ for short). Some of the aspiring PCPs were actively searching for a platonic co-parent; some had found a prospective co-parent and were getting to know each other to see if they were a good fit; some were trying to conceive having already finalized a person to co-parent with; some had found a co-parent and were already pregnant; and some women were pregnant (using donor sperm) and were looking for a platonic co-parent who could be a (non-biological) parent for the child that was on the way. The other eight participants had already had a child in a

platonic co-parenting relationship (I call them ‘current platonic co-parents’, or ‘current PCPs’). They belonged to five families as some of the eight current co-parents were paired with each other. The ages of the children in the five families at the time of the parents’ interview ranged from six weeks to 14 years. The 32 participants were spread across six countries, with the majority from the US. Twenty-one participants were located in the US, five in Canada, three in the UK, two in Australia, one each in Poland and India.

Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of the full sample. There were 16 women, ten men, four who identified as non-binary, and two trans women. All four who identified as non-binary were assigned female at birth (AFAB) and were planning to be or already pregnant. In the table below I have separated the non-binary from the ‘women’ category, but in the text of the following chapters, I include them in the women category for convenience and for analytical reasons. As parents who will be pregnant and give birth, the non-binary people would still be seen as women by institutions and would be subject to patriarchal structures and gendered norms similar to those who identify as women. However, when I discuss their and their partners’ gender roles, I will discuss how their non-binary identity influenced their roles and relationships.

Most of the women were straight. Most of the men were of minority sexual orientations. The ages of the participants ranged from 22-54. The mean and median age were both 38. The majority were white, living in the US, and had a master’s degree or higher. Interestingly, but maybe not surprisingly, the ‘current PCPs’ group was even more homogenous and privileged in terms of race, class, and education. All the eight current co-parents I interviewed were white, and so were their partners and children. These families were middle to upper-middle class. All the parents had white-collar jobs. All but one, live separately from their co-parent(s) but close by.

Their class (and racial) privileges are relevant to my analysis of their gender division of parental labor because their financial resources afford them a lifestyle that can make parenting more manageable and less overwhelming. For instance, they could all (financially) afford to take an adequate amount of time off from work when their child was born without having to worry about living expenses when not earning. Though the length of paid parental leave available to them in their respective countries and jobs varied widely, none of them were restricted by it - the birth mothers stayed home post birth for as long as they wanted to. In addition, all five families could easily afford paid childcare.

The financial resources and the careers of these parents also allowed them to buy/rent homes close to each other, something they all agreed was crucial to the health and success of their partnership. The parents in three of the five families moved into separate homes in close proximity to each other after living together for a short period following the birth of their child. For these co-parents, this separation of living spaces when cohabitation didn't work very well, alleviated frictions in their relationships **and** made the division of labor more egalitarian than it was when they lived together.

Of the eight current co-parents, four are men, and four are women. All four men are of minority sexual orientations: three gay, one asexual. All four women are straight. They were all in their late 30s and 40s when they had their child. Four of them live in the US, two in the UK and two in Australia. Since current co-parents have been successful in finding platonic co-parents and sustaining their co-parenting relationships, I consider their demographic characteristics to be more representative of platonic co-parents, than the bigger sample of aspiring plus current co-parents. Table 2 below shows a side-by-side comparison of the sample characteristics of aspiring and current PCPs. I was interested in aspiring co-parents as I saw them

as being in an earlier *stage* of the PCP process than current PCPs. However, I do realize that many aspiring PCPs may never become current PCPs. Going by the PCP community online, there are a lot more aspiring PCPs than current PCPs.

Data analysis

I did a grounded theory analysis of my data. Grounded theory analysis aims to develop theories by continuously and iteratively analyzing and comparing data (Corbin and Strauss 1990, Glaser and Strauss 1999). It takes an inductive (bottom-up) approach, with a focus on letting the data speak for itself, without being influenced by preexisting theories or the researcher's preconceptions. Though I did not come to the study with preconceptions about gender egalitarianism in PCPs, news media articles that portrayed them as modern, progressive and gender egalitarian was one of the main factors that drew me to studying PCP families. I was interested in learning to what extent these families embraced gender egalitarian practices. I was expecting to find that the main motivations for women to take the PCP route would be that it offered a more gender egalitarian alternative to the traditional family. And, that the women who choose this path are mostly progressive and feminist women who find conventional arrangements too patriarchal for them. Even the social media groups that I was on gave me the same impression.

However, as I collected data and spent more time on co-parenting sites, I realized that there was variation in the kind of women who were drawn to PCP and the reasons they were drawn to it. Yes, there were some feminist women who found PCP liberating because they could form egalitarian arrangements, but there were also other women in the PCP community who did not want equal arrangements for a variety of reasons. Overall, I found that there were two kinds of aspiring co-parents across genders, those who ideally wanted an equal 50:50 relationship in

responsibilities, rights, and time with the child and those who ideally wanted an arrangement where the birth mother was the primary parent and the father had very limited responsibilities (if at all), rights, and time with the child. The split in childcare responsibilities in the second group ranged between approximately an 80:20 and 100:0 but the men desired more access to the child than the responsibilities would warrant. For convenience, I refer to the two groups as the **50:50** and **90:10** groups respectively. The kind of families the news media covered and that motivated me to study PCP families was the 50:50 families.

Over time as I did more interviews, I realized that the gender division of labor (which I was using as a measure of gender egalitarianism) was merely one aspect of higher-level differences between the two groups. At the core of their differences were their beliefs about the heterosexual family. The 50:50 group was subverting heteronormative ideals about family and parenting in more ways than just in the sharing of childcare responsibilities. The 90:10 group was reproducing those ideals in multiple ways — unequal sharing of childcare responsibilities was just one of many manifestations of their views about the heterosexual family (see chapter three for the different ways in which the two groups subverted and reproduced heteronormative ideals respectively). I then arrived at the final version of the two categories: the ‘subverters’ and ‘reproducers’.

In my analysis of current PCP families, all of whom were subverters, I found that the two parent families, despite their egalitarian intentions, fell into the same patriarchal traps of heterosexual relationships once they had a child. However, what stood out for me was the asymmetry in the sacrifices and contributions made by the mothers and fathers and the costs to career and income associated with them, a burden that only mothers were bearing, and not the fathers. Having a child hurt women’s careers and income much more than men mainly due to

biology. And at the same time women didn't enjoy the financial and emotional benefits they would have likely received if they were in a romantic relationship. This led me to look for other such non-biological asymmetries in the costs of having a child (relocation, longer break from work). Most of these asymmetric sacrifices and contributions were gendered. The opportunity costs of having a child were not shared equally between the mothers and fathers because the only way that could be achieved was for the fathers to pay the mothers, which would have seemed odd. This got me interested in how PCP arrangements mix transaction and intimacy in their relationships; and how respondents organize their relationships within these realms.

Since it became clear that intimacy-transaction would be the primary focus of the dissertation, in the later interviews I spent more time talking about money, not just how they shared childcare expenses but also if they felt the mother needed to be compensated for the greater costs she had to bear for having their child. I cut down on the time I spent asking about their preferences in a co-parent since that was not going to be as important to the study. I also found that inequalities resulting from keeping certain acts in the intimate/sacred realm and therefore free of any monetary exchange created more inequality in these families than the unequal division of unpaid labor which was mostly restricted to the first year of birth. This led me to the conclusion that the practice of boundary making that deemed some activities as transactional and others as intimate and sacred (and therefore not subjecting them to negotiation or monetary exchanges) created gender inequalities in PCP families.

On a separate note, in my analysis of gender division of labor, it was unclear how to treat three-parent PCP families which had two fathers and one mother. If we conceptualize *gender* division of labor as how labor is divided between the man and woman in a household, then there were two men in these families to carry the male load. So, these families could not be easily

compared to the two-parent families. So, I focused on the share of women's workload in three-parent families and compared them with that of women in the two-parent families. It's hard to tell how much of the reduced workload of the women in three-parent families was due to the number of parents vs the practice of egalitarianism. But women's load in these families were more manageable because labor was spread over three parents rather than two. So, this family structure was at least beneficial to these women, even if not necessarily gender egalitarian.

Positionality: Insider/outsider status

I shared certain characteristics with both the aspiring and current co-parents. When I conducted the interviews, my child was two and then three years old. The age of the children of current PCPs ranged from six months to 14 years. Being a parent of a young child meant that I could relate to their experiences, and they could talk to me about children and parenting the way they would with a fellow parent rather than a non-parent. Also, my relationship with my child's father is not too different from a PCP relationship.

Like the aspiring PCPs I was also looking for a platonic co-parent to have my second child with. I was therefore familiar with their experiences of the search for a PCP including the frustrations of navigating co-parenting websites. For instance, some men saw these sites as a place to find women to have sex with and didn't mind being sperm donors to achieve that. Most women on these sites figure out early on that when a man writes in his profile that he wants to "help" women by being a sperm donor or co-parent and also says "nature intercourse only", his primary motivation behind being on the site is to get sex in return for donating/inseminating sperm. Venting about such "creeps" and laughing about it helped establish ease in the interviews.

Many of the women I interviewed were trying to conceive, were pregnant or in their postpartum period. I had experienced these phases not too long before the interviews, allowing

us to chat about having ‘baby fever’, and the joys and struggles of carrying a child, giving birth, breastfeeding, pumping, and caring for babies and young children. As someone living in the U.S., my US participants and I had the shared experience of being an aspiring parent or parent in this country specifically in how inadequate parental leave, high childcare costs and the absence of universal health insurance impacts the decision to have a child, the number of children to have, the experience of pregnancy, birthing, and the postpartum period and most importantly experiencing all these as a single mother versus having a co-parent.

During the interviews, when it seemed useful, I did not hesitate to share that I was a parent or that I was looking for a co-parent as it helped build rapport. Some asked questions about my personal experiences of parenting, co-parenting, and searching for a co-parent, which I answered briefly and redirected the focus back to them and elaborated on my experiences after the interview. The shared experience of being a parent and an aspiring PCP facilitated sharing of information that they felt only a parent or aspiring parent would understand.

While discussing compatibility with one’s co-parent, some progressive and left-leaning participants made some assumptions about my personal views by saying things like “I am assuming you are not a Trump supporter” Or “I am hoping you are not a pro-lifer” before they shared something like “I can’t imagine co-parenting with a Trump supporter/Republican/pro-lifer/anti-vaxxer”. In some instances, I used a facial expression, nod or a few words like “of course” to indicate that their assumption was right, so that they could proceed with whatever they were going to say. But in most cases, their statements or assumptions about my political views did not require a response from my side.

In some ways, I was also an outsider. As an Indian who spent the first 30 or so years of my life in India, part of the Global South, many aspects of my cultural background including

parenting styles are very different from almost all my participants who are from and live in the West/Global North. I shared a racial/ethnic similarity with only two of the 32 participants.

Table 1: FULL SAMPLE n=32

Gender and sexual orientation		
Women		16
-->Straight	11	
-->Lesbian	1	
-->Asexual	1	
-->Asexual and Aromantic	2	
-->Fluid	1	
Men		10
-->Straight	3	
-->Gay	3	
-->Asexual	3	
-->Queer	1	
Non-binary (AFAB)		4
-->Queer	4	
Transwoman (AMAB)		2
-->Queer	1	
-->Asexual	1	
Age		
Range		22-54
Mean age		38
Median age		38
Race/ethnicity		
White		22
Black/African American		4
Black/Nigerian immigrant in Canada		1
Black/Nigerian immigrant in the US		1
Indian in India		1
Indian immigrant in Canada		1
Puerto Rican in US (child of immigrants)		1
Chinese in US (child of immigrants)		1
Country of residence		
U.S.		21
Canada		5
UK		3
Australia		2
Poland		1
India		1
Education level		
PhD		2
Master's degree		18
Bachelor's degree		11
High School		1

Table 2: COMPARISON OF ASPIRING AND CURRENT PCPs

	n=24	n=8
Gender		
Women	12	4
Men	6	4
Non-binary (AFAB)	4	0
Transwoman (AMAB)	2	0
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	10	4
Minority sexual orientations	14	4
Age*		
20-24	2	0
25-29	1	0
30-34	4	0
35-39	12	5
40-44	4	1
45-49	0	2
50-55	1	0
Race/ethnicity		
White	14	8
Black/African American	4	0
Black/Nigerian immigrant in Canada	1	0
Black/Nigerian immigrant in the US	1	0
Indian in India	1	0
Indian immigrant in Canada	1	0
Puerto Rican in US (child of immigrants)	1	0
Chinese in US (child of immigrants)	1	0
Education level		
PhD	1	1
Master's degree	13	5
Bachelor's degree	9	2
High School	1	0

***Note: The age for aspiring PCPs was the age at the time of interview. The age for current PCPs**

Chapter 3: Subverters and Reproducers

What drives people to PCP?

Who gets to be a parent today? In our contemporary social structure, parenthood is believed to be best undertaken by heterosexual couples, with mothers undertaking the majority of childcare work, and fathers acting as primary financial providers. This expectation is upheld by a wide variety of structures. In the U.S., where the majority of my participants are located, diverse organizations, ranging from Christian conservative groups like Focus on the Family to the federal government with its 2002 Healthy Marriage Initiative, promote heteronormative norms like marriage before children (Randles 2016a, Randles 2016b). Adoption and foster care agencies still preferentially assign children to married couples rather than single parents, through the use of minimum income requirements which by default select for dual-income households. Legal structures enforce this norm as well. Alimony laws, for example, are designed to protect married parents, usually mothers, who may have given up a career to raise children, thus implicitly reinforcing heteronormative expectations of a female primary caregiver. Child custody laws privilege legal and adoptive parents, but most states recognize two parents, with only eight states recognizing three-parent families.³ By promoting and protecting two-parent married heterosexual nuclear families with parenting roles which reproduce gendered expectations of intensive motherhood and masculine breadwinning (Chodorow 1978, Hays 1996), these various structures limit access to parenthood to specific groups of people, usually women and heterosexual men. Many of these limitations hold in other countries of the Global North as well to varying degrees.

³ Emanuel, Gabrielle. "Three (parents) can be a crowd, but for some it's a family." National Public Radio All Things Considered. Accessed via <https://www.npr.org/2014/03/30/296851662/three-parents-can-be-a-crowd-but-for-some-its-a-family>

Second, young people now expect to find fulfilling careers, become financially independent, and find a partner who can be their best friend, effective co-parent, and compatible lover all in one. This can be attributed to the cultural shift toward postmodern norms that stress individuality and self-actualization (van de Kaa 2001). Commonly referred to as the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986), this shift entails a decline in fertility, a multitude of relationships other than marriage, the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin 2004) and the disconnection between marriage and childbearing. Scholars have also observed the declining power of social norms and laws as regulating mechanisms for family life, and the expanding role of personal choice (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Giddens 1992).

In this context, young people's expectations of finding fulfilling careers, being financially independent, and finding a partner that checks all boxes impact men and women differently: men often delay marriage and parenthood, and women do so as well, but face a ticking clock: they must do all this before their biological age prevents pregnancy. Both men and women are facing difficulty finding romantic partners that check all the boxes, but women who want to have kids are struggling to find compatible romantic partners who also want to have kids, and who want kids in the timeframe that meets the time restrictions imposed by their biological clocks.

Third, expectations of child rearing have become extremely intensive, particularly for urban, well-educated women. 'Intensive mothering,' is an ideology that holds the individual mother primarily responsible for child rearing and dictates that the process is to be child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive (Hays 1996). The ideology is a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children. The intensive mothering philosophy which began in the US has swept Europe where historically parents have been more relaxed when it

comes to raising their children. More and more parents in Europe are increasingly adopting the kind of intensive parenting style common in the US (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016). While the expectations of childrearing have become intensive, little government support is available in countries like the US by way of subsidized childcare and paid parental leave. This makes **single parenthood far less viable**.

The above three factors, i.e., structures that privilege heteronormative norms, the second demographic transition and intensive parenting, together and separately contribute to the difficulties people face in fulfilling their desires to have kids.

Gendered barriers

Though men and women may face some common barriers to parenthood which draw them to explore alternatives like PCP, their primary push factors (i.e., factors that push them away from the more normative ways to have children) are different. Their barriers also vary based on sexual orientation, relationship status and financial resources available to them. For women, the barriers and challenges are mainly tied to patriarchy. Although voluntary single motherhood has become a more widespread and less stigmatized practice, the absence of supportive social infrastructure to have kids means that single motherhood is not a good option or even a feasible one for many women. The absence of family friendly policies relating to paid parental leave and publicly funded childcare (though this varies by country), inadequate social support like a ‘village’ to raise one’s child in, gender pay gap and gender discrimination that impacts women’s resources, and social stigmas surrounding single motherhood make single parenting far from ideal for most women even though they may have the biological tools to have a child on their own. Similarly, women do a disproportionate amount of unpaid housework and

childcare in heterosexual families, something that many straight women drawn to PCP families were attempting to subvert.

For men (of any sexual orientation), the barriers to parenthood are mainly tied to biology, but also patriarchy. The lack of access to the means of biological reproduction coupled with heteronormative structures specifically exclude men of minority sexual orientations from parenthood since they cannot access parenthood via girlfriends and wives the way partnered straight men can. This is also true for transwomen who don't have AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) romantic partners. Another barrier for men is the patriarchal expectation to be breadwinners which disadvantages men with low income and education. While men of any sexual orientation can potentially take the surrogacy route to biological parenthood, adopt or be a foster parent, few men I interviewed could afford surrogacy or even solo parenting; even those who could afford surrogacy did not want to be or felt it was not feasible to be single fathers, for pretty much the same reasons women did not want to be single mothers.

Men and women come to platonic co-parenting with hopes of overcoming the above barriers which I refer to as 'intersectional injuries'. I draw the term 'injuries' from "injuries of inequality," a term coined by Celeste Watkins-Hayes in her 2019 book about women living with HIV/AIDS and how they confront inequalities. For her, injuries of inequality describe how the confluences of people's race, class, gender, sexuality, and other statuses disproportionately expose them to injury and harm. "Injuries of inequality—big and small wounds to personal, familial, and community well-being—represent the mental, physical, and social toll of acute inequity. They are the cumulative markers and scars of economic and social marginalization, the visible and invisible evidence of disadvantage." (2019:8)

In the context of parenting, I use the term ‘intersectional injuries’ to refer to the cumulative structural and biological barriers to parenthood that lead to people seeking non-normative alternative paths. They include social inequalities but also exclusions resulting from biology. Their injuries stem from people’s identities (like gender, sexual orientation, age), structures (like patriarchy and heteronormativity), public policies informed by these structures, and inequalities resulting from those policies. Unlike concepts like “patriarchy” or “racism”, the term ‘injuries’ has much more wide-ranging application. For instance, here, the expectation of heteronormative parenthood inflicts a wide variety of “injuries” on people. The men and women that I interviewed felt differently injured by the hegemonic ideal of a heterosexual nuclear family: men, predominantly sexual minorities, felt excluded from biological fatherhood, while women often voiced a desire to avoid difficulties of single motherhood, something that is made more challenging due to the expectations of intensive mothering and inadequate state support.

The **women** (straight and lesbian) I interviewed had had difficulty finding a compatible romantic partner who wanted kids; they didn’t have much reason to believe they would find the elusive romantic partner and didn’t want to wait as they needed to beat their ticking biological clock. Unlike men, they had the biological tools to go solo, but single motherhood was the last resort for most and not an option at all for a few. They wanted to avoid single motherhood for a variety of reasons including not having the financial means; not having family and/or friends who can help raise the child; concern about the negative impact on their careers and livelihood; wanting their child to have more than one parent especially if they had health concerns; feeling that it was not in the child’s best interest. The **men** had a strong desire to have a biological child but few options to make it happen. Gay men faced more barriers than straight men, and asexual men faced more barriers than even gay men.

How does PCP redress injuries?

Men and women come to platonic co-parenting with hopes of redressing their injuries because PCP offers them a pathway that increases the likelihood of fulfilling their desires of having kids. It increased their chances or at least their hopes of having kids in three main ways: 1) It increased the pool size of potential parenting partners 2) PCP market valued them more highly than the dating market 3) It provided men, especially gay men, a no-cost alternative to surrogacy.

Bigger pool, more fish

PCP opened up the pool of potential co-parents to include those who they are not or will not be romantically attracted to. This includes people of sexual orientations different from theirs, people in their social circles like friends, friends of friends, acquaintances, and people registered on co-parenting sites and social media groups. The search for a PCP seemed more efficient than their search for a romantic partner, since they knew that 1) people in the PCP market definitely wanted to have a child and are ready to become parents (unlike romantic relationships which may take longer to get to the place of trying to have kids, if at all; 2) they could focus on looking for someone who would be a good parent, which often boiled down to values and stability, whereas, there would be other boxes to check in the romantic partner search including sexual attraction and sharing the same sexual orientation. In this sense PCP felt like a more realistic alternative to having kids with a romantic partner.

By enabling family formation outside of a romantic relationship, it gave hope to men who were excluded from access to parenthood. For single women who had not found compatible romantic partners, and for whom single motherhood was the last resort or not even an option, PCP increased their chances of forming a family, sharing parenting responsibilities with another

adult and giving their child more than one parent. In the absence of romantic entanglements, it also provided the potential benefit of greater stability of the parenting partnership and thereby more stability for the child, something that they valued greatly.

Higher value, higher chances

PCP increased their hopes and/or chances of finding a co-parent to have kids with because some of their characteristics were valued higher in the PCP market than in the dating market. In the PCP market, the primary focus is the biological production of a child. Therefore, women who have the biological tools to bear children are, in general, valued more than men and therefore have more bargaining power. After all, women always have the fallback option of single motherhood-by-choice through the use of donor sperm. On the other hand, the only other option for single men who want a biological child is surrogacy, which is prohibitively expensive for most.

This difference in men's and women's alternatives (to PCP) meant that men could not be as selective as women. This was best demonstrated in men's and women's responses about their preferences in a potential co-parent (in their responses to the question "what are you looking for in a potential co-parent?"). It was hard for men to answer questions about preferences in a potential co-parent because they felt the chances of finding any woman willing to co-parent with them was already slim. Their responses were vague at best. Women on the other hand had significantly higher and very specific expectations from their potential male PCP regarding values, fitness to be a dad, race, socio-economic status, financial stability, and parenting compatibility. Since women had more bargaining power, their preferences in a male co-parent dictated which kind of men were valued more. This included characteristics like race, values, political ideologies etc.

In the PCP community, individuals who might otherwise be perceived as less desirable in the dating market are often highly valued for some of their other characteristics. In some contexts, PCP partnerships generated unique cross-class, interracial relationships. For example, Mark, an African American, queer, low-income man who described having difficulties in the dating world, was picked by his white friend Liz, partly due to her desire, shared by many white women, to have mixed race children. Liz perceived his low income, usually perceived as a turn-off by dating partners, as a boon: her comparatively higher income could justify a co-parenting arrangement in which she was the primary parent with more rights and responsibilities. For his part, Mark was eager for access to fatherhood, an opportunity which he may not have otherwise had, due to his minority sexual orientation and possibly his low income.

Similarly, Elizabeth who had no luck finding a compatible romantic partner let alone one she could have a child with is now co-parenting with a gay couple that is significantly wealthier than her partly because she had the biological tools to carry a child that the gay couple did not have. Since some straight women prefer to co-parent with gay men to avoid romantic entanglements, gay men who are otherwise excluded by heteronormative structures are particularly desired in the PCP world. In the PCP world, privileges and disadvantages intersect in unique ways: identities that are undervalued in the dating world become re-valued in the PCP community, allowing people with marginalized identities to increase their chances of having a child.

People also came to PCP to redress the injuries of patriarchy. Many women perceive PCP as enabling family structures which are more liberating, free of the unequal power dynamics that they encountered in their past romantic relationships. For instance, Araka, a Nigerian immigrant in Canada, felt oppressed in her romantic relationships with people from her own nationality -

both the Nigerian men she dated when she was in Nigeria as well as the Nigerian immigrant men she dated in Canada. And she is sure she doesn't want to have a child with a Nigerian man. As a "feminist", she finds their traditional patriarchal views suffocating. She prefers to date white men and men from Western cultures, since she believes they have more gender progressive views and anticipates having a more gender egalitarian relationship with them. But she hasn't found a white romantic partner who wants kids. Araka just broke up with a white man she really loved because he decided he didn't want kids after being initially undecided. There is nothing she wants more now than to become a mother and she fears time is running out. She believes her desire to have a child with a white man is more likely to be realized in a PCP relationship than with a romantic partner, simply because there are more white Western men ready to be dads and looking for women like her on PCP sites than on dating sites. She is also excited about the possibility of having a multiracial child.

A genetic offspring for men at no cost

For men in the study, regardless of their sexual orientations, the primary motivating factor was the opportunity, not just to have any child, but to have their own genetic offspring. All but one male respondent expressed a strong desire for **biological** fatherhood. In the absence of wives or girlfriends who could carry their biological child, platonic co-parenting offered men, especially gay men, a path to biological fatherhood without having to pay for surrogacy and without having to parent solo. Gay and asexual men who want to be parents are typically presented with three choices: surrogacy, adoption and co-parenting. If they want a biological child, then their choices are reduced to two: surrogacy and co-parenting. Surrogacy is expensive and they would need to be single fathers (if they didn't have a romantic partner who wants a child). Having a child with a female PCP means that they don't have to spend on surrogacy, and

they don't have to be single fathers. Even if gay men have a husband/boyfriend who wants kids, PCP offers gay couples the benefit of a zero-cost genetic offspring compared to surrogacy *and* the child will have a maternal/female parent, something they seem to value.

PCP was a very attractive option for Eli who was sure he wanted a biological child and would have gone that route if he had not partnered with Tanya. Eli says he wanted a biological child because he was the “last stop on the [family] line, and so continuing it was a priority and worth the energy and expense of surrogacy.” He was one of the few men in the study who could afford surrogacy but ended up not needing to pay for it or becoming a single father, thanks to the PCP arrangement with Tanya.

It is not so uncommon especially in recent decades for gay men, single or in a relationship, to partner with single (straight, lesbian or queer) women within their social circles to co-parent platonically. It's a mutually beneficial relationship—the men get a genetic offspring, and the women can avoid single motherhood. PCP also appeals to single straight men who are willing to pursue non-traditional family forms, but not to give up the expectation of sharing a genetic link to their child. Though most women in the study also preferred a biological child, the desire for a biological offspring was not the primary draw for women because, unlike men, they could potentially have a biological child on their own even outside PCP.

Subverters and Reproducers

All the respondents came to PCP to redress their intersectional injuries that prevented them from having a child in more conventional ways. But respondents varied in terms of how they were using PCP to fulfill their desires of having a child and the **kind** of PCP family they wanted to form or formed. I found two broad categories of platonic co-parents: those who turned

to PCP to subvert hegemonic, heteronormative ideals of family and parenting, and those who aspired to and reproduce these ideals.

What do I mean by the term ‘hegemonic, heteronormative family ideals’? I follow Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume et al. (2009) in understanding heteronormativity as the presumption and privileging of gender conformity, heterosexuality, and nuclear families over all other “deviant” forms of gender expression, sexuality, and families. Here, heteronormativity can be applied to multiple axes: gender, sexuality, and family. For example, the gender binary of heteronormativity positions “real” males and females (i.e., cisgender, masculine presenting men and cisgender, feminine presenting women) against “gender deviants” (Oswald, Blume and Marks 2005). Heteronormativity has fundamentally, primarily, and historically privileged cisgender men and women, heterosexuality, and nuclear families (Ingraham 2005, Jagose 1996), and these three binaries remain the primary means through which heteronormativity operates to constrain and privilege individuals today. Hegemony is fundamental to heteronormativity (Allen and Mendez 2018, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) because it manifests in each of the three heteronormative binaries wherein real men and women, natural sexualities, and genuine families are diametrically opposed to their deviant, unnatural, and pseudo-counterparts, respectively; the former categories afforded dominance, privilege, and normalcy (Oswald et al. 2005).

Heteronormative family structures are powerful because they are taken for granted: our collective ‘idea’ of what a family is reflects hidden assumptions of female domesticity, male breadwinning, and heterosexual reproduction. In other words, these family ideals are hegemonic: they present a powerful sense of what families *should* be, exactly by portraying these roles as natural. In the heteronormative family, a woman bears children, cooks and cleans, and bears the majority share of childcare responsibilities. A man works outside of the household and provides

financially for the family, but maintains a more distant, authoritative role in the family (Chodorow 1977). PCP offers an alternative path to these family ideals.

Though PCP relationships are, by definition, non-romantic/sexual and therefore those in PCP partnerships are not in a heterosexual relationship with each other, heteronormative **ideals, norms and values** can be practiced by anybody, including those who are not heterosexual and even if the relationship is not sexual.

Before I proceed to discuss the two kinds of PCPs, I would like to define another term, ‘the traditional family’, as PCP is a non-traditional family and a comparison of PCP with the ‘traditional’ family is inevitable. By traditional family, I mean “a cisgender, heterosexual mother and father who are living with their bio-genetically related children” and typically married (Bower-Brown et al. 2024) and where mothers are the primary caregivers. While historical analysis has questioned the widespread existence of this traditional family before the 1950s (Coontz 1992), this family form remains an ideal to which other family types are compared to, at least in the West, even if its prevalence is rapidly declining. Sometimes, I discuss families that are based on same gender romantic relationships (gay/lesbian families) in the same vein as the traditional family because such families are becoming more normative these days in the West, at least compared to the more novel and non-normative PCP families. When I talk about the traditional family (whether married or unmarried) and gay/lesbian families (married or unmarried) together I will use the term ‘romantic’, i.e., having a child with a romantic partner, to distinguish these families from those based on platonic relationships.

Subverting hegemonic heteronormative ideals of family and parenting

In the process of forming PCP families, some participants subverted hegemonic ideals of heteronormative parenting. They created or aspired to create families customized to meet their

needs rather than replicate the norms of the traditional heterosexual family including norms where the mother undertakes the majority of childcare work. People in this category did not care about their co-parent's **sexual orientation** being the same as theirs. If anything, some women preferred gay men so that the relationship can stay platonic and free of the complications of a romantic relationship, which they felt would create more stability for the child. Some straight women in this category were even open to partnering with same **gender-PCPs** i.e., co-parenting with another woman; or partnering with transgender and non-binary individuals. And some formed or were planning to form **3- or 4- parent families**. In this sense they were willing to subvert the heteronormative assumptions of family structure if they did not serve them. Their acts and ideas resisted heteronormativity by challenging the gender, sexuality, and/or family binaries. They prioritized compatibility in (progressive and egalitarian) values and political ideologies more than anything else.

At least one parent in such families/imagined families belonged to the LGBTQIA+ community. People in the LGBTQIA+ community are drawn to PCP because it offers them pathways to form families. Since the traditional heterosexual family is not an option for them in a way that it is for cishet (cis heterosexual) people, and parenting less accessible especially for *men* of minority sexual orientations, three or four parent families are not uncommon in the LGBTQIA+ community. When there are more than two parents there is usually one romantic coupling among them and a platonic relationship between the parents who are not romantically connected to each other.

For Lisa and her wife Cecile, a lesbian couple living in Montreal, Canada, forming a PCP family with Lisa's gay friend Jeff and his partner Fred increased their hopes of having a child. Lisa will be the birth mother and Lisa, Cecile and Jeff will be equal parents. Fred would be less

involved, “taking more of a stepfather, or maybe close uncle role” due to his pre-existing caregiving commitments to his nephews and parents. Lisa and Cecile initially looked into adoption, but their chances of getting a baby through adoption was slim. Cecile has ovarian cancer which means her health and life is unpredictable. Also, Lisa is a low-income freelance musician. So, both Cecile’s health and Lisa’s low income meant they were less likely to get picked or would have to be on the waiting list for a very long time. So, they decided to have a biological child but also “do that responsibly”.

Also, to have a biological child as a lesbian couple they would need sperm. They preferred partnering up with a male friend who can serve as the sperm provider and father, to using an anonymous sperm donor. The plan of forming a family with three involved parents would not only make having a child more feasible (since it was hard to predict how much energy Cecile would have to care for a young child) but also the child would have more than one healthy parent in case Cecile cannot be a caregiver due to poor health or death.

Because Cecile’s health was unpredictable, Lisa and Cecile wanted to “create a community around us,” creating a thick social support system. Lisa remembered that she had talked about having kids with her friend Jeff when she was younger. More recently, when adoption didn’t seem feasible, she popped the question to Jeff. “When we talked to Jeff about it, it was like, you know, Jeff, and Fred, you guys want to be our, you know, second half and, and really do it in an equal way...And Jeff jumped on board right away.” The four-parent family is now in the process of trying to conceive.

Similarly, Damian, an asexual man in Oakland, California, preferred partnering up with a couple so that the child would have more parents. “I’ve formed kind of close, emotionally intimate relationships with couples. And I found that to be a really good experience, and had

always thought, for a while, that that was the ideal way that I wanted to raise kids was in one of those relationships”. Damian and his co-parents, a heterosexual couple, have a 4-year-old daughter. He feels the 3:1 parent: child ratio makes parenting more enjoyable, and they didn’t have to compromise much on their respective careers since each of them are only responsible for one-third of childcare responsibilities. Talking about childcare during infancy, he said “We were more rested than otherwise parents would be, which was really amazing”.

People in this category also had a more agentic response to their injuries. For them, PCP was an improvised/modern/upgraded version of the traditional family. It allowed them to retain some elements of the traditional family they liked (for e.g., forming a family with a biogenetically connected child, with at least one mother and one father) and reject certain other aspects of the traditional family that they didn’t identify with (like traditional gendered parenting roles). For them, PCP was progressive and liberating. They felt they could benefit from the possibilities PCP offered them that a traditional family would not provide them. They perceived the family they are creating as optimal for raising kids.

A big part of their rejection of the traditional family was the rejection of gendered parenting roles and embracing arrangements where men and women were equally involved in childcare. By enabling family formation outside of a romantic relationship and increasing the pool of potential co-parents to have a child with, PCP offered them the opportunity to connect with like-minded people and establish equal parenting arrangements in terms of division of responsibilities, rights, and time with the child, but also create/design a family on their own terms that facilitates gender egalitarian partnerships. The women wanted gender egalitarian co-parenting relationships, unlike the more traditional and unequal parenting relationships of their parents. The men wanted to be involved fathers rather than secondary parents. As a result, they

aspired to form *equal* parenting relationships where the child's time will be split equally between the parents (In the next chapter, I discuss how those aspirations of gender egalitarianism were not realized in the two-parent families).

Another way in which PCP was an agentic choice was the child-free time that the men and women would get in these arrangements that attracted them to it. Since separate residence is the norm in PCP families especially after the child's initial months/years, a 50:50 split in time means the child stays only half the time with each parent including the mother, forcing a more gender equal division of unpaid work than in coresiding families. For women in PCP arrangements, unlike in traditional coresiding families, this means that they will have some child-free time allowing them to focus on their careers and other aspects of their lives. This was one of the reasons Elizabeth found PCP appealing. "As the child gets a bit older the child is going to live half [the time] with each household...It sounds very selfish, and it's not, I would have done it on my own. But definitely one of the advantages of co-parenting is that, you know, there will come a time when you'll have half of the week, childfree, to do what you need to do in terms of running my business and that kind of thing, and potentially finding the right [romantic] relationship and that kind of stuff...and you know maintaining interests, like creative practice, or reading or, you know, that kind of thing ultimately. I think there's definitely pluses to having just a bit of childfree time guaranteed every week."

Elizabeth recognizes that she would not have had the child-free time half the week if she had had a child in a heterosexual relationship because it would have been coresiding one. "I'll be able to protect, you know, just potentially have a bit more freedom to work, and maintain some aspects of my life that might be really difficult to maintain in a normal, if I was doing [this] on

my own or even in a couple. My brother and his partner, you know, my brother talks about how everything completely stops, you know, for the first little while at least, when you've got kids.”

PCP was also agentic in how it opened up opportunities for single, gender progressive, gay/asexual men to be **involved** fathers. Traditional family, as mentioned earlier, was less accessible to them but also, they didn’t identify with it. As Eli says, “the traditional model seems very foreign because it kind of requires an asymmetry that's at odds with the very premise of our co-parenting partnership.” When talking about invisible labor that typically falls on women in a traditional heterosexual family, Eli feels his relationship with Tanya, his female co-parent, is “exemplary of having degendered that stuff.” He says that unlike traditional families, in this PCP arrangement that he has created with Tanya, he views himself this way: “I am a single dad half the time and I try and be independently parenting, like I'm trying to provide as full as I can the parental role, living up to it fully. Of course, there is another best friend there that's doing the same thing. But if we both do that, then Eliot's needs are met, a sense of balance occurs. There's surplus parental love and strategy and care going on. And that's the approach.”

The men in this group wanted a 50:50 split even though the separate residence meant they would have to take care of the child independently for half the time. They preferred separate residences so they could have romantic partnerships and live their lives independently rather than with their female co-parent. As men who wanted to be involved fathers, they took pride in their ability to care for a young child independently in their homes. Women in this group therefore used PCP to form gender egalitarian parenting relationships and men used it to be involved fathers. By rejecting traditional gendered parenting roles and embracing arrangements where men and women would be equally involved in childcare, they tried to subvert the norms, ideals

and practices of the patriarchal heterosexual nuclear family where mothers are seen as the primary caregiver.

Not everyone in this category wanted biological children though most did. Two women, Ella and Zara, preferred adoption and so they were going to adopt in a PCP context. Two other women, who wanted to have a biological child, were okay with the father of their child not being biogenetically connected with the child. These women separated biological from social fathering by proceeding with conception using donor sperm as they did not want to wait too long to find the right PCP. While trying to conceive they continued their search for a male co-parent/social father for their child. However, based on the strong desire for biological offspring among the men registered on platonic co-parenting websites and on support groups on social media, it seems like the chances of these women finding men who are willing to platonically co-parent children that are not biologically theirs is very slim.

This group also tended to have wide social networks (which might be correlated with having higher social capital, higher incomes) filled with people who were more likely to themselves be or know someone else who is amenable to PCP practices. So, they were able to leverage their personal social network to find someone who would be a good fit for them. Not everyone knew people in their social circle they could partner with, so some did search for PCPs online. But all eight **current** co-parents (those who had successfully formed PCP families) in the sample partnered with someone they already knew. None of these eight current co-parents had to search for a co-parent online as they knew someone in their social circles who was a good fit, and they paired up with them and successfully formed PCP families thus fulfilling their desire to have kids. For instance, Tanya and Eli who are both in their mid-40s have known each other since they were 12 years old and have been close friends for almost 30 years. They have a 7-

year-old son together and their relationship is going strong. The fact that all current co-parents in the sample partnered with someone they already knew could mean that having significant social capital increases the chances of being successful. Everyone in this sample was white except one asexual woman.

PCP therefore allowed these people to subvert hegemonic family norms by forming multi-parent families across sexual orientations, forming partnerships with non-binary and trans-people; and forming or at least attempting to form equal parenting partnerships where men and women can be equally involved in childcare. They prioritized compatibility in values over conforming to heteronormative family ideals and thus subverted them.

Reproducing hegemonic heteronormative ideals of family and parenting

On the other hand, some turned to PCP to replicate the heterosexual family as closely as possible. For them, PCP was a way to create the much-desired traditional family along with its gendered norms and roles. They perceived the traditional family to be ideal and mostly unproblematic. When the actual traditional family became inaccessible for different reasons, they were willing to take the non-traditional path of PCP to create a family which aligns with their values, and their desires for the traditional family, including mimicking the husband-wife structure of two parents: one mother and one father. They believed in gendered parenting roles, including the idea that the birth mother should be the child's primary caregiver at least when the child is young.

In the family they were trying to create, the mother and father may not have a sexual relationship or live in the same house, but they want (to conform to) other aspects of the heterosexual traditional family. They uphold or reproduce the hegemonic heteronormative ideal mainly by a) forming a PCP family that has **two different-gendered** parents, one man and one

woman, so the child can have exactly one mother and one father b) looking for **cis-gendered, heterosexual** (cishet) and “opposite” gender co-parents. c) having **biological** offspring, one where both the mother **and** the father are biologically connected to the child (for some of the men in this category the desire to “spread their seed” was their main motivation to become fathers) d) dividing childcare responsibilities in such a way that the mother is the **primary caregiver**, and therefore the child will live with the mother while the father visits the child.

Whereas many who viewed platonic co-parenthood as a way to subvert hegemonic family ideals were open to co-parents whose sexual orientations differed from their own, those who turned to PCP to recreate “idealized” families were not. Araka, a cishet woman, had never considered a female co-parent or a gay male co-parent. She couldn’t imagine forming a PCP family with a female co-parent because she wanted the ‘mom-dad-biological child’ family. She chuckled when I asked if she was open to co-parenting with a gay man. She responded after realizing it was a valid question. She said she wants a heterosexual man because “I am heterosexual”. Since she was not a lesbian, it didn’t make sense for her to co-parent with a woman or a gay man. Though her relationship with her male co-parent was going to be platonic, heterosexual orientation mattered to her.

Similarly, Madison who was also trying to recreate the “ideal” family said she preferred a male co-parent because she would like her kids “to have a mother and a father [so the child can] get both perspectives.” She says it’s hard to explain why she wants a mom-dad family, but that it was a personal choice. “I think as a concept, I don’t think a child needs a mother or a father. I think they need strong role models in their life, just in general. But when it comes to me and my situation and what I would like, I don’t think I would prefer having a co-parent of the same sex. And I can’t really articulate why”. She points out that her preference for a male co-parent is

influenced by social norms. “I think it's more of societal roles and you know what people would think, that kind of thing. I'm guessing. I don't know.” Madison is currently trying to conceive with Patrick, her male cishet co-parent.

The cishet people who were looking for opposite sex cishet PCPs, like Araka and Madison, were open to the PCP relationship becoming romantic later if it happened organically. In case their PCP family were to transform into a traditional heterosexual family, they said they would like that since they would then get their Plan A family.

Unlike the subverters, who were looking for gender egalitarian partnerships, these aspiring PCPs sought traditional gendered parenting roles where the mother would be the primary parent when it came to caregiving. The women cited beliefs that “children need a mom and dad,” even if male co-parents did not take on many caregiving responsibilities or even financial responsibilities. They viewed PCP families as better than single-parent households since they offered children a relationship with fathers. For this reason, they viewed single motherhood through the use of anonymous donor sperm as sub-optimal. They wanted their child to have a biological mother and biological father, even if they didn't live together.

For Sandra, a 35-year-old straight African American woman in the US, her primary motivation in looking for a PCP is to make sure her future child would know who the father is and have some kind of relationship with him. She is a single mom of a teenage daughter. She has been the primary caregiver for her daughter as her ex-husband didn't take on many responsibilities. She is not concerned about the responsibilities of being the primary parent as she already has the experience and knows exactly what it takes and has her parents to help her. In fact, she does not want an equal relationship. She wants to have 100% autonomy regarding parenting decisions. But she wants a male ‘co-parent’ who would be the father/sperm provider

because she doesn't want her child to grow up not knowing who the father is. She is willing to take up 100% of the responsibilities, if necessary, though she would like and appreciate some *financial* help. Her description of the arrangement she had in mind suggested she would practice maternal gatekeeping. She doesn't trust any potential male co-parent with a young child. She doesn't want the father to take on any childcare responsibilities (changing diapers etc.) during infancy and toddlerhood, at least not without supervision, as she fears they may not know how to care for a child that young. She would like the father to visit "to build a relationship with the child" but she would need to be in the room during those father-child interactions until the child is old enough to talk.

I'm really nervous, when it comes to the idea [of equal custody] ... when my child is an infant, I'm not gonna just be like, okay, hey, you can take them for a week, and I'm gonna take them for a week, and all this other stuff, like, I'm not trying to do all of that, to be honest... I just need an understanding that I am mom, you know, you are dad, we can have this, and I want (the child) to know who you are. But I mean, I'm not gonna just want my infant just going off with whoever, you know, wherever, like, it's just... I can't... especially before they can talk. You know, I'm very protective in that way. And even my now ex-husband at the time didn't understand. I was like, why should my child be away from me for long periods of time, as an infant, I'm supposed to be making sure they're safe, they're good, because one wrong move with the infant is a big deal, you shake them and that's it... it can cause, like permanent brain damage. What happens if you drop them like, things that I can't, you know, do anything about. So, I just need somebody that just understands that too. I'm not trying to hog. But I mean, we don't need any permanent damage... you know, just one wrong move, or just thinking it's fine for you to leave them with your brother or somebody else. I am just not having it".

Sandra wants to take on 100% of the responsibilities (without saying no to financial help) in return for 100% of parenting autonomy - a fair trade off between rights and responsibilities. But she wants the sperm provider/father in the picture because she deems the existence of a father crucial to the child. For her, it's important that a child has a father, even if the only point is so that the child knows who the father is and can access the father whenever needed. For aspiring PCPs like Sandra, co-parenting with a woman (let's say, a close female friend or sister) or even a

gay man had never crossed their mind (until I asked about it) because that would not help replicate the heteronormative mom-dad ideal that they want to replicate.

Scholars conceptualize parental involvement among fathers as encompassing three components: parental interaction, availability, and responsibility (Pleck 2010). The **aspiring** fathers in the sample were more interested in interaction and accessibility rather than responsibility. And mothers like Sandra seemed to view the father's role as little beyond that of a symbolic presence, a father figure, rather than a father. There are many men on co-parenting sites who want exactly the kind of role Sandra imagines for the father of her next child. The motivations of people interested in such PCP relationships, which I call the 90:10 arrangements, are clearly very different from the motivations of the subverters who seek a more gender egalitarian 50:50 model.

The reproducers also included straight men already in traditional heterosexual nuclear families who came to PCP to have more kids outside their family. Bandele and Imran are both straight and married with kids. Both have wives who do not want more kids. But their desire for more *biological* kids, even if their involvement was going to be minimal, brought them into the PCP world. The main push factor for them therefore was simply the fact that they wished to have **more** biological offspring, but no other means to make it happen.

Bandele, a 40-year-old straight Nigerian immigrant in the US and lives with his wife and two kids aged 10 and 5. Bandele wants more kids, but his wife doesn't. So, they came to an agreement that he could have more kids outside the marriage as long as she didn't have to care for them. Bandele is not interested in adoption and has therefore never considered it. Bandele has been on platonic co-parenting sites looking for a woman with whom he can have another child. He says his wife is okay with him having a child with another woman because platonic co-

parenting “is not too different from polygyny” that is practiced in Nigerian culture. When I pressed and asked if his wife was **really** okay with the plan, he said she was, as long as he “didn’t marry [the co-parent] ... which is anyway illegal in the US”.

Bandeled recently ran into an “old fling” on a business trip. She has one child and mentioned to him that she was looking for a sperm donor to have a second child. He shared with her his wish to have more kids. They are considering teaming up and having a child together. Banded says both he and this potential co-parent are open to both artificial insemination and natural intercourse as a method of conception. When I asked what his wife thought about them possibly conceiving through natural intercourse, he said, “her preference is for artificial insemination. She kind of said that if it goes another way, she doesn’t want to know about it”.

Banded says he plans to be an involved father but when I asked if they plan to split expenses equally, he said it was not necessary, and that he was planning to contribute to educational expenses when the child was older. When I pressed him about expenses during pregnancy, birth, infancy, toddlerhood, he said that his potential co-parent was independent and did not need financial help. For Banded, the practice of platonic co-parenting allows him to retain certain traditional Nigerian cultural norms like having multiple biological kids with more than one woman, while renegotiating polygyny norms to fit into US culture and laws of monogamy. He says he is not interested in a romantic relationship with his co-parent, but the fact that he is open to conceiving through natural intercourse blurs the line between platonic and sexual.

Imran’s story is similar. He is 42, married with kids and lives in Ontario, Canada. He and his wife are Indian immigrants who moved to Canada from Hyderabad about seven years ago. His desire to have more *biological* kids led him to volunteer as a sperm donor. After a year of

being a donor with at least two successful pregnancies that he knows of, Imran recently decided he wants to be in touch with his future (donor) children in some way, a wish that is not fulfilled by being a strict donor. He says most of the women who have approached him for sperm donation don't want any contact after the donation. However, he wishes to see, know and visit his future (donor) children regularly. When I asked if he would take on any responsibilities for those children, he said he can't offer financial support or take on any childcare responsibilities because of his existing commitments to his family. If the future (donor) child is located near him, he would like to spend time with the child regularly. He says he plans to help the single mom to whatever extent he can by babysitting, playing with the child, taking the child out etc. He calls it "limited co-parenting" though a term like 'elevated donor' seems more appropriate as he will not be taking on any responsibilities and will not have any rights or decision-making authority.

Imran says his wife doesn't mind his pursuits of being a donor or looking for a "co-parenting" arrangement. When I asked if his wife would accompany him when he visits his future (donor) children, he retorted, "It is my personal choice. It has got nothing to do with her. Why will she be involved in that?" He found my question absurd. I got the impression his wife had little say in the matter, especially after he mentioned in passing that his wife only wanted one child. They have three kids.

As immigrants to North America from the Global South, it's possible that the specific kinds of patriarchy in the societies Bandele and Imran come from, and the gendered power imbalances inherent in marriages from those cultures allow these men to pursue their desires of "spreading their seed" outside of marriage without the fear of such pursuits threatening their marriages.

These attempts by men to create the traditional through non-traditional means is most common among straight men, but not limited to them. Jacob, a 54-year-old African American asexual man who by his own description has “very traditional family values”, is trying to create a ‘male-breadwinner female homemaker’ family via platonic co-parenting. He seeks to create a traditional family minus the sex and coresidence (he prefers being neighbors with his future female co-parent). As someone who identifies “right of center”, Jacob stands out among the asexual participants in the study who are left leaning and have progressive values. Jacob is a retired diplomat and financially well off and is offering to take on complete financial responsibility for the child and the co-parent. He can therefore afford to be a little pickier than the lower income men on the co-parenting sites. He would like a woman with limited education “ideally high school diploma” because he doesn’t want a “careerist”.

He prefers finding a woman and settling down in a more traditional society like the "Caucasus, Ukraine, Armenia or Azerbaijan” because he doesn’t “like the way the Western nations and Western culture is evolving or changing”. He feels he is more attractive as a co-parent prospect in such countries for two reasons: “because I’m a Westerner and American, which carries a little bit of extra status in some of these places. But also, because I have even greater financial wherewithal in these places than I do in the United States. So, I am more of a catch in those places”.

While discussing childcare responsibilities Jacob was very clear about the gender division of labor. He doesn’t see himself changing diapers, cooking for the child or even making grocery lists. “The woman would make the [grocery] list and my job would be to buy the groceries or arrange to have it delivered,” he emphasizes. As for diapers, he said, “I should learn how to do it. I don’t think I would want to do it. But if, you know, I have to (then) I have to.

Like, if she's out doing something, and the baby needs a diaper change, I shouldn't keep the baby in a dirty diaper. I need to change it. It's not something I would go like, "Oh, this is so great".

No, but I will have to learn how to do it...yeah"

Jacob's vision for his PCP family seems to be based on the rigid gendered roles of the white middle-class families of the 1950's in the US. He sums up the gender division of labor he has in mind for his future family by comparing the father/himself to the CEO and the mother/female co-parent to the COO of an organization:

The woman is the captain of the house, and, in my view, the father is the captain of the family. Now that sounds very sexist, I understand, that's just how I was raised. But day to day, the captain of the house runs everything. It's like the COO versus the CEO. The COO runs the organization, hires and fires and puts out all the, you know, makes all the hard decisions day to day. The CEO is out shaking hands, you know, connecting with other organizations having press conferences, you know. It's the COO that is really in charge of the damn organization, even though he's below in rank of the CEO.... The mother is in charge of the household... making the list... that's what we need and blah, blah. When a big decision needs to be made, you know, especially like big financial decisions and things like that the father gets the final say. I guess the veto as well...certain things that he might not agree with... but day to day 90%, 95% of the decisions are made by the woman.

All participants but one among the reproducers were people of color. All of them were aspiring co-parents. Except Bandele, none of them had people in their social circles to co-parent with. So, they had to search for PCPs online. People in this group seemed to have less agency in the sense that the PCP family they were trying to form was not their first preference. They are taking what they can get even if it is sub-optimal.

Conclusion

Men and women come to PCP with hopes of redressing their intersectional injuries because PCP offers them a pathway to fulfill their desires to be parents. As we saw above, there is significant variation in the motivations of people who are drawn to PCP which then determines the kinds of families that are formed. There were two broad categories of platonic co-parents:

those who turn to PCP practices in order to subvert hegemonic, heteronormative ideals of family and parenting; and those who turn to PCP in an attempt to reproduce these ideals. The subverters often used PCP to form multi-parent families (two or more), partner up across sexual orientations, and/or across gender identities including with non-binary and trans-people. People in this category **aspired** to form gender egalitarian and equal partnerships where parenting roles are degendered and parenting responsibilities are shared equally (In the next chapter, I look at how these aspirations didn't quite materialize in the way they intended once they had children).

On the other hand, those who turned to PCP to replicate the heterosexual family as closely as possible were motivated by different priorities. For them, PCP was a way to create the much-desired traditional family along with its gendered norms and roles. When the actual traditional family became inaccessible for different reasons, they were willing to take the non-traditional path of PCP to create a family which aligns with their values, and their desires for the traditional family. They believed in gendered parenting roles, including the idea that the birth mother should be the child's primary caregiver at least when the child was young. These partnerships were far from equal, with the mothers being the primary parent and the father's role being closer to a sperm donor's—a father figure as opposed to an involved father. The father's role was limited and restricted with approximately a 90:10 split in responsibility, rights and time with the child between the mothers and fathers.

Chapter 4: Egalitarian Intent vs. Unequal Realities

“I’m the pilot. He’s the co-pilot...Gavin’s an amazing co-pilot, and he’ll go anywhere I drive us with the kids. [But] it’s just exhausting... Sometimes I’m like, can you just take the wheel... I want to be the co-pilot [at least sometimes]”

—Sasha, mother of 14-year-old twins, talking about doing almost all the managerial work involved in the care of their disabled son.

All eight current co-parents in the study were subverters: those who turned to PCP practices in order to subvert hegemonic, heteronormative ideals of family and parenting. They came to platonic co-parenting with a vision of egalitarianism. They wanted an arrangement where both/all parents are equally involved in the child’s life. In fact, while working out the terms of their arrangement before conceiving the child, they made a clear distinction between theirs and a very common arrangement in the LGBTQIA+ community in which the birth mother would be the primary parent with full custody and the gay biological father would be a sperm donor with no involvement; an uncle figure that visits regularly; or an uncle figure who visits regularly and contributes some money. Robert refers to the latter as “an uncle with a checkbook” when describing a role he was sure he did not want. He wanted to be an equal parent who was as involved as the mother.

Nancy and Philip “killed” the agreement that a family lawyer drafted for them because it sounded like a sperm donor agreement and stated that Nancy would be the sole parent and Philip would have rights to visit on certain days. “It was not at all what I wanted,” says Nancy, who then started drafting one on her own with Philip’s input. Philip stressed, “It is an *equal*

arrangement...and this was one of the things that was important to me,” while talking about the complicated legal process they had to follow to include his name on their daughter’s birth certificate.

All the eight current co-parents (five families) in the study intended, at the time of planning to have a child, to have an egalitarian parenting arrangement in which parenting responsibilities would be shared equally. All of them rejected traditional gendered parenting roles. This included the men in these families, who as gay/asexual men did not really identify with the gendered norms of the heterosexual family. In fact, many of the men and women still think of their relationship as being an equal one, even if it isn’t. This is especially true for the two-parent families who talk about their relationship as being “50:50” by which they mean all aspects of parenting, including rights, responsibilities, and time with the child are shared equally.

However, a closer look at the current realities shows that their parenting lives after having a child didn’t turn out to be as egalitarian as they intended nor is it as egalitarian as they still perceive their relationship to be. For a variety of reasons, the women took on or had to take on more parenting responsibilities, especially during infancy. When these women shared a residence with their male co-parents, it included housework responsibilities as well. For some of them, having a child hurt their careers, long term career prospects and income significantly, while their male co-parents’ careers and incomes were unaffected by parenthood. In this chapter, I describe this shift from egalitarian intentions to unequal realities by focusing on two key dimensions: 1) the egalitarian parenting agreements drawn up before the child was conceived; and 2) the disruptions to the intended agreements after the child was born. I will be focusing on how the division of (unpaid) childcare responsibilities between the parents played out. Custodial

rights over the child and decision-making rights continue to be equally shared as they intended them to be.

Part 1. Agreements establishing an equal partnership

Intentions for an egalitarian partnership and other agreements between the co-parents are typically documented even before the child is conceived, which speaks to the extensive planning and intentionality that goes into having a child in PCP families. These documents, commonly referred to as ‘co-parenting agreements’, are meant to serve as a guide for the PCPs as they raise their children together. They are not legally binding. However, if the PCPs were to go to court over custody disputes, the judge could take these documents into consideration as they establish the intentions of the parents at the time of deciding to have a child together. These agreements vary in length and the topics covered; but at a minimum, they contain the decisions they have arrived at regarding:

1. parental rights (custodial rights as well as decision making authority)
2. parental responsibilities (childcare labor as well as financial obligations to child)
3. how the child’s time will be split between the parents (which is both a right as well as a responsibility).

Let’s take a look at a few co-parenting agreements. Damian’s agreement with his co-parents, Abigail and Zachary, is a six-page document that begins with a statement establishing the equal nature of the parenting relationship. “It is the intention of the three of us (Zachary, Abigail, and Damian) to serve as equal partners in raising a child... It is the goal of all three parents to strive for equality in parental rights and responsibilities, financial contribution, decision making power, and legal status.”

The decision to be equal parents was made over a period of many months. Damian had always been very keen on having a child but didn't want to be a single father. As an asexual man, he had to come up with creative ways to start a family. So, he teamed up with his close friend, Abigail and her husband Zachary, and decided to have and raise a child together. Damian wanted to be as involved as possible in the child's life and was willing to relocate from New York city to San Francisco to make it happen but wasn't sure to what extent Abigail and Zachary wanted him to be involved. During discussions about his roles and responsibilities, he posed the following question: "if there's a spectrum, and on one end of the spectrum, the baby cries and I give the baby back. On the other end of the spectrum, I'm like changing diapers at three in the morning, and I'm as close to an equal co-parent as we can get. Where on the spectrum, are you interested?" He was hoping it would be the latter. After a few months of discussions, the couple realized they wanted the same thing. They planned a three-way split (33:33:33) in rights and responsibilities and invited Damian to move in with them to start a family together. Over the next two years they worked on figuring out what the three-way split would mean "in terms of the labor; in terms of how we divide time; What does that mean financially? What does that mean in terms of decision making?" The co-parenting agreement was one of the products of the two-year long discussions.

As they planned to live together, they were not just going to share parenting responsibilities but also housework. As someone who had experience living with friends, Damian had developed many skills needed to live with others, especially non-family members. He values intentionality, extensive planning and a high level of communication in order to avoid conflicts. He brought these values and skills into his relationship with his co-parents. In their discussions and documentations, they went into great detail on how housework and childcare

will be divided. For instance, what does it mean to do a task; how will it be tracked; how to compensate for tasks that one cannot do; how responsibility can be rotated; and how to deal with some particularly burdensome tasks (like breastfeeding) that cannot be rotated, and how to avoid conflict over responsibilities. They also took into consideration the fact that some responsibilities, like watching a baby, is more fulfilling than chores like cleaning a bathroom, and they wanted these less fulfilling and more fulfilling tasks to also be divided as equally as possible. Here's an excerpt from their agreement:

It is our intention to strive for an equal division of parental and household responsibilities. These responsibilities will be tracked in a way that is readily visible and discussed during weekly family meetings. When possible, we will reach an explicit agreement about the meaning of these responsibilities (e.g., a definition of what it means to clean the bathroom). We recognize that some responsibilities may be imbalanced for a time (e.g., while the baby is nursing, Abigail will have a significant responsibility that Zachary and Damian will not, or should one of us be seriously ill). When this is the case, we will seek to compensate by shifting other responsibilities (e.g., shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc.). When possible, we will seek to rotate responsibilities rather than maintaining separate domains. We also recognize that spending time with our child is both a responsibility and a parental right and will strive to find a division of responsibility which allows all three of us equal opportunity to develop a parental relationship.

If there is one responsibility that all families are explicit about sharing equally, it is the financial obligations. Agreements often specify which expenses will be shared and how. The 'Finances' section of Damian's agreement reads: "We have a shared intention of living together, and of equally sharing regular expenses for family meals, shared domestic goods, and day-to-day child-related expenses (diapers, etc.) These funds will be paid for from a shared account which will be contributed to equally by the three of us at the end of every month".

Similarly, Nancy and Philip's 12-page agreement establishes, in no uncertain terms, that theirs would be an equal parenting relationship in every way "to clearly express the parties' intention that Philip and Nancy be recognized as equal parents of the child". Philip and Nancy

spent about six months working on their agreement. Nancy is a commercial lawyer, and she took the lead in drafting the agreement. It therefore reads like a legal contract. It says: “(a) The Parties will have equal shared parental responsibility for the Child” and “unless otherwise agreed, all costs associated with Assisted Conception, pregnancy and the Child will be shared equally between the Parties.” Nancy and Philip were housemates for a year before they conceived Charlie. They were already used to sharing housework responsibilities and household expenses equally as housemates, so when they decided to have a child together it was assumed that such equal sharing would just continue, with childcare added to their responsibilities.

In the Elizabeth-Robert♥Blake family too, they were very serious about their intentions for an egalitarian arrangement though in their case their three-way split is 50:50(25+25) in which the Elizabeth, is 50% of the unit and the gay married couple she co-parents with is *together* the other 50% for all purposes. Their agreement reads: “We intend for all three parties to be considered as having full parental rights, responsibilities, duties, and authorities regarding the child...It is our intention jointly to share raising our child, including but not limited to providing shelter, food, clothing, and education and making medical decisions”. As with the other men, it was important for Robert and Blake that the child spend equal time at their home. The agreement adds: “We intend the child to live 50% of the time with Elizabeth Marshall at her residence, and 50% with Blake Reading and Robert Hurley at their residence”. The fact that Robert and Blake want the child to live with them 50% of the time implies their willingness and intention to share the caregiving responsibilities that come with it, and not just the rights.

Although Damian, Philip, Robert and the other male PCPs—all of them of minority sexual orientations—have progressive views on gender roles in the family, their commitment to equal sharing of responsibilities is not necessarily driven by feminist values of gender equality in

unpaid domestic responsibilities, but rather their strong desire to be fully involved fathers. A key part of being fully involved fathers for them is having equal legal rights to the child and an equal say in decision making authority. As rights and responsibilities go together, they signed up (or had to sign up) for the entire package.

Part 2: Derailing of intended egalitarian arrangements

In the two-parent families, the realities of the division of labor once they had a child turned out to be a lot less gender egalitarian than they had intended. Despite their generally progressive beliefs about gender roles, the pull of traditional gender norms was quite strong for both men and women. And despite the extensive planning that went into having children together, there were certain things related to gender division of labor that they probably did not or could not have adequately planned for.

Their intention to carry out egalitarian co-parenting was complicated by various factors, not necessarily unique to platonic co-parenting. These include a) women's significantly longer break from work compared to their male co-parent's which led to the women becoming the main caregivers during infancy; b) the weight of the cognitive labor involved in parenting which these first-time parents did not adequately plan for or take into consideration during negotiations; c) living together under one roof which led to recreating the gender roles of heterosexual nuclear families including an unequal division of unpaid domestic labor, and d) relocation of one parent to the other parent's city to start a family which impacted careers, incomes and finances and which in turn affected the division of labor.

In the following section, I take a close look at how these different factors impacted the equal partnership plans of the two-parent families. I will then discuss the three-parent families who were not impacted by the above factors in the same way as two-parent families. Because the

ages of the children in these families range from six weeks to 14 years at the time of the interview, the parents were at different stages in their parenting journey. For instance, while Sasha's reflections drew on her co-parenting life of 14 long years and her current experiences as a parent of teenagers, Robert shared his experiences of being a parent of an infant, in the midst of diapers, baby bottles, 'new baby' excitement and the works, and his relatively short co-parenting experience. The interviews therefore captured different points in the parenting journey and PCP experiences of different durations.

a) Mothers' relatively longer break from work

During infancy women in two-parent PCP families took on a disproportionately higher amount of childcare and housework responsibilities than their male co-parents. This unequal division was unplanned and mostly a result of women's significantly longer breaks from work. The fathers returned to work soon after their *paid* leave ended (which ranged from two weeks to six weeks) while the (birth) mothers took a much longer break from work beyond the paid leave, if any, available to them (approximately a year). Given these nuclear-like family arrangements, and the enormous amount of work that goes into caring for an infant, at least one parent taking a long break from work was probably necessary. However, the fact that in all cases women's break from work was much longer than their respective male co-parents speaks to the pull of traditional gender norms about infancy i.e., ideas that the baby needs the mother more or that the mother needs to be with the baby more.

Recovering from birth and breastfeeding responsibilities meant that women needed more time off than men, but biology (alone?) didn't account for the approximately one-year difference in the length of break between the mothers and fathers. The **difference** cannot be explained by parental leave policies either. While men's break from work was determined by the parental

leave policies of the country they lived in and/or the employers they worked for, women's break was not really determined by the paid leave available to them. The women also extended their stay-at-home phase longer than they had originally planned (It is important to note that these families were able to have at least one parent take a long break because they could financially afford it. All five families were middle class. Therefore, the women and men could afford to take the time they wanted independent of the *paid* leave available to them)

Nancy and Tanya shared similar reasons for extending their break: they were not emotionally ready to be separated from their little ones. However, extended maternity leave is usually connected to perceived and/or actual division of labor. The fact that their male co-parents returned to work so early (Philip over 2-6 weeks and Eli at six weeks) meant that the women were left with the lion's share of childcare responsibilities. They had only two choices. Either they stay home or send their baby to daycare, something they didn't feel ready for till the child was about one. Sasha, meanwhile, didn't even have the choice of sending both twins to daycare since one of them was severely disabled and had special needs. Her co-parent Gavin "had to" return to work in two weeks as he owned and managed two restaurants.

Women took much longer breaks mainly because they prioritized childcare, unlike the men who prioritized their careers and income. It's important to note that the male PCPs were able to become parents without their careers/income taking a hit *because* they had female co-parents who took on the primary responsibility for the child during infancy. To put it another way, if the men had not had co-parents who prioritized childcare over careers/income during infancy, they could not have returned to work as early as they did.

Staying home for much longer than the fathers during infancy meant that the mothers took the lead on infant care and housework for approximately a year starting from when their co-

parents returned to work till they themselves returned to work. During that period when the mothers were home and the fathers had returned to full time work, the (intended) equal division of labor was and could be practiced only when the fathers were not doing paid work like in the evenings and weekends. Though the fathers were fully involved in childcare during those hours and did not restrict themselves to certain tasks/domains of childcare, they were able to do childcare only when they were not doing paid work. On the other hand, in the absence of being engaged in paid work, women had more time and energy for childcare and housework and were the sole caregivers when the male co-parents were at work.

In the Nancy-Philip family, though their pre-conception agreement and intention was that “they will have equal shared parental responsibility for the child,” (excerpt from their co-parenting agreement) in reality, the fact that Nancy took a year-long maternity leave and Philip only for a couple of weeks meant that a 50:50 split in responsibilities during infancy was not possible. Nancy was eligible for four months of paid leave, but she had decided to take a total of nine months off, which she then extended to 12 months. Once Philip returned to work at two weeks, she cared for the baby solo during the day on weekdays and took on most of the cognitive load of infant care, by taking the lead on all that needed to be done, and sometimes delegated tasks to him. “There [were] medical appointments every so often for the mom and the baby...I basically just took charge of scheduling and attending those appointments, and that included vaccinations. Philip was invited to join those, but rarely ever did. And I think, once or twice, I said, ‘can you take Charlie for her vaccinations on this day?’ Or, you know, ‘can you arrange it?’ and he would, but most of that was my job. And I was happy to do that, because at least I knew it would be done if I did it.” She said she did not mind taking the lead on everything because she was on leave.

She bought all of the child's clothes, toys and other baby gear. "I would buy them, organize them by size, you know, label them for daycare. All that stuff I did myself, he didn't do any of that. And now that we're living separately, he buys her heaps of clothes and toys. But definitely when we were living together, I took that on as my role. I also took on the role of researching, you know, bassinets and cots and equipment. And because I had friends who had children, I often was borrowing things from them, swings and toys and things like that, and then returning to them, highchairs and the like. He doesn't have friends with kids... he doesn't have that network. And I don't think he would, I think he would just go and buy [new stuff] you know, car seats as well. So, and installing car seats. I did that. We had to change the cot set at one point and I think he installed it, and I fixed it up (laughs)...there was stuff that he did, but it certainly was, it was probably more at my insistence or instigation".

Nancy also took the lead on researching things like safe practices around swaddling, what foods to give the baby and what not to. "When she was a baby, and we had to, you know, avoid giving her certain foods until certain times. I was in charge of that and say, you know, we can't give her peanut butter yet, or we need to cut up grapes like this, apparently, because otherwise they can choke...and how to eat and when to, *all* (emphasis hers) the research about, you know, when to stop swaddling and all that stuff... Because he didn't really look into any of that...".

Philip acknowledges that the childcare wasn't equally split during infancy since he was working full time and Nancy wasn't. "Our intention was, and it felt like we were sort of doing 50:50. I did at some point go back to work... So, during that time, you know, really during the day, Nancy would have been on her own with Charlie... in that time, obviously, she would have the greater responsibility... She was, absolutely, during the day, primarily responsible for

Charlie, give or take, you know, she might want to go and exercise for an hour, but then in the evenings we would both step in to do more”.

Nancy however doesn't feel resentful about her greater responsibilities during infancy. She doesn't see it as a burden and tends to focus on the joys of caring for her daughter. This is probably due to the low level of work-family conflict she experienced which could be a result of multiple factors: being affluent, having savings and financial security, a high paying career as a commercial attorney, and living in a country (Australia) where she was able to get paid parental leave, publicly subsidized daycare, and opportunities for part time work even for high status careers like law.

On the other hand, Tanya, whose longer break from work also led to an unequal division of childcare, experienced the first year very differently. After Eli returned to work at six weeks and until she started to work when the child was 14 months old, she was the primary caregiver for her son. Eli would do as much as childcare as he could when he was home but because he worked full time and she didn't, and she was dependent on his income, their respective contributions led to (gender) role specializations and their family started resembling the male-breadwinner female homemaker marriage. Over the months, she began to struggle with the fact that she had become financially dependent on Eli, didn't have a job and that she had moved to a city that didn't offer her good job opportunities for her line of work.

The exhaustion and sleep deprivation that came with caring for an infant also started getting to her. Because Eli had to go to work, she made sure he got a full night's sleep which meant she was the one waking up at night to feed the child. “I was like up with the baby at night. And I just said like, ‘Well, you're the only one that's working. So, I mean, you should just sleep’... And it just kind of led to these path dependencies where like, I'm doing more of the

childcare. I feel like, it's like where I'm adding value, you know, but it just means that I'm better at childcare, so I do more of it. And he's better at the like, traditional, like, bring-home-the-bacon stuff. And so, we just started to get resentful of each other because of that". As is common in garden variety heterosexual relationships, Tanya felt her contributions were not adequately appreciated. "I don't think he fully realized how much work parenting is because I just did *so* (emphasis hers) much of it".

Tanya says she had never imagined she would be in a homemaker role even briefly. But because she was unemployed and focused all her time and energy on childcare and the house, and Eli was working full time and supporting them financially, she began prioritizing his career, and the arrangement continued for longer than she originally intended it to. Their relationship started to become strained at around the 8th month mark when "the honeymoon stage [of having a baby]" had worn off. Tanya says she was surprised at how much "gender roles played their parts, even though we were doing such a non-traditional thing". When she finally returned to work at 14 months, childcare and housework were split more evenly.

While the physical aspect of childcare got divided more equally once the women returned to work, the greater cognitive load these women took on during infancy remained their responsibility till they moved to separate residences and for Sasha it lasted even beyond that.

Note on parental leave policy

While parental leave policies did not quite account for the *difference* in the stay-at-home duration between women and their male co-parents, it's important to note the significant impact of country-specific parental leave policies on the gender division of labor and/or careers of the parents especially during infancy. Nancy in Australia and Tanya in the US both stayed home for about a year. Both had male co-parenting partners who stayed home for only about six

weeks. But Nancy's career was not impacted in the way Tanya's was. Nancy could take four months paid leave and she took another eight months of unpaid leave. She would have been eligible for benefits even if she were unemployed since Australia has federally mandated maternity benefits. She was also able to return to work more gradually by first working part-time (4 days a week) despite being in a high-status career like law. During the five-hour interview with Nancy, issues of work-life balance or motherhood impacting her career or income never came up.

On the other hand, Tanya's career and income was affected significantly by having a child. For one, she was not eligible for any parental allowance as an unemployed person because the US does not provide any such maternity allowance for unemployed mothers. Not having any income meant she had to be financially dependent on Eli which shaped their division of labor. While there were multiple factors that contributed to the derailment of their intentions for an egalitarian division of domestic labor, parental leave policies in the US including the length of Eli's short paid leave of six weeks (short compared to other countries in the Global North) contributed to it.

The Elizabeth-Robert♥Blake's family living in the UK is an example of how generous and flexible paid leave policies even if only attached to employment can help not just the employees but also their co-parents who don't have any leave. The two fathers here, Robert and Blake, each have six months of paid parental leave offered by their employers, which they plan to use in such a way that both fathers are off work for the first three months, one of them for the next three months, and the other the following three months. So at least one of the fathers is off work for the first nine months of the baby's life. Such paid leave is not applicable to Elizabeth, a self-employed freelance photographer. It's possible Elizabeth qualified for the maternity

allowance of up to 39 weeks that self-employed birth mothers are eligible for in the UK.

Despite the allowance, she wished to get back to work as soon as she could so that her photography business is not affected too much. Because the fathers had such generous leave, they were able to take on a lot of the childcare which reduced Elizabeth's load, helping her get back to work sooner than if her co-parents didn't have that kind of leave. Robert and Gavin's extended leave of six months each helped them bond with the baby for longer than the US fathers whose (employer provided) paid leave was much shorter. Eli, who worked for one of the top corporate employers in the US, got only six weeks. Research shows that extended time off provides the space necessary for fathers to develop the parenting skills and sense of responsibility that then allows them to be active co-parents rather than helpers to their female partners which creates the opportunity for the development of a more gender-equitable division of labor (Rehel 2014).

For PCPs in the US, the lack of adequate parental leave in addition to lack of universal healthcare and publicly funded childcare added to parents' stress even for these middle-class families. Families in the US couldn't afford to have both parents stay home even for a few months due to inadequate parental leave. US fathers' shorter leaves, and therefore lower ability to take on childcare responsibilities (coupled with unwillingness to let their career and income take a hit) contributed to the mothers' needs to take long breaks from work (at the cost of their incomes and careers), thus contributing to gender inequality in division of labor in these middle-class families at least during infancy.

b) The weight of cognitive labor

While the disparities in the division of *physical* labor between mothers and fathers was mostly limited to infancy and therefore temporary, women's higher load of cognitive labor of

both childcare and housework which started at birth lasted much longer, often until they moved out to separate residences and for some the higher cognitive load in childcare continued even after.

Cognitive labor, also called the ‘mental load’, is known to be a gendered phenomenon—women do more of it than men in families. Thinking about the long and short-term needs of a household is often invisible to both the person carrying the mental load and the family. In her study of cognitive labor in 35 US couples, Daminger (2019) found that it entails 1) anticipating needs, 2) identifying options for filling them, 3) making decisions, and 4) monitoring progress. Women in her study did more cognitive labor overall and more of the anticipation and monitoring work in particular. She also found that male and female participation in decision-making, arguably the cognitive labor component most closely linked to power and influence, is roughly equal. Similarly, Raley, Bianchi and Wang (2012) draw attention to such work by categorizing parenting work into three types: physical care activities; recreational activities and managerial activities. They define managerial activities as involving “general parental responsibilities such as arranging childcare services, picking up/dropping off children, and supervising and monitoring children” (2012). When I use the term cognitive labor or cognitive load in this dissertation, I am referring to both Daminger’s conception as well as what Raley et al. refer to as managerial activities. But I focus on cognitive or managerial tasks that **do not** require the child’s presence.

The division of cognitive labor was rarely part of PCPs’ discussions and negotiations about sharing parental responsibilities before they had the child. Those discussions and the resulting co-parenting agreements focus on sharing the child’s time equally which takes into consideration mostly only the **physical** aspects of childcare labor or housework. Their focus on

the child's time being split equally came from a place of wanting to be equally involved in parenting and staking an equal claim over the child. This was especially true for the men. Due to their focus on parental rights and time **with** the child, the huge amount of parenting work that can be done in the child's **absence**, i.e., the cognitive load of parenting (like making a doctor's appointment, procuring the right baby gear in a timely manner, applying for the birth certificate) was mostly overlooked. The fact that such labor was not taken into consideration during the negotiation stage when these then-future parents who didn't have the lived experience of parenting drew up agreements, also speaks to the invisible nature of the cognitive load of parenting. In fact, it was so invisible even to the women that they spoke about their relationship being egalitarian based on the fact that time with the child is divided equally. But men's and women's responses to specific questions about who does what revealed that women took on the lion's share of the cognitive load at least while they lived with their male co-parents.

One of the reasons women's greater cognitive load which began during infancy remained with the mothers beyond infancy was due to inertia. It became more efficient for the same person to be in charge of the same tasks, something that's not unique to PCP families. For instance, Sasha, who has been managing her disabled son's care 100% for 14 years, wishes Gavin could take the lead at least in some areas of Luke's care. "Gavin's an amazing co-pilot, and he'll go anywhere I drive us with the kids. [But] It's just exhausting...There are sometimes I'm like, can you just take the wheel, and just, I want to be the co-pilot." But she also knows that it's a bit too late, and not as easy or efficient because there is so much information about Luke's medical history in her head, so she is in the best position to manage his care.

"It's also gotten to this point now, where I have all of the information...there's so many different layers of [Luke's] health stuff. And certain things affect other things... I can name

almost any doctor he's ever seen. And again, I created that myself, and I know that. But at this point, of course, Gavin could take him to any single doctor, but he's not gonna, he doesn't have the same information that I have." In addition, efforts to get Gavin to take the lead in at least some areas of Luke's care, has not been successful. So, she has given up on trying to change things. He compensates by paying more than half of the childcare expenses, roughly 70%. And she has learnt to see that as being a fair arrangement even though what she really wants is to share the mental load with him so she can get some breaks from her exhausting daily life. The sharing of the cognitive load of parenting is a lot more unequal in Sasha-Gavin's case than the other current co-parents, probably due to the enormous work involved in caring for a disabled child.

Interestingly, based on the three 2-parent families, it looks like the asymmetry in the division of cognitive labor between the parents increases with the workload. It is most unequally divided in the Sasha-Gavin family where there are twins, with one disabled, followed by Nancy-Philip where the child is a toddler, followed by Eli-Tanya where the child is seven years old. While there may be other reasons contributing to such a split, the fact that an increased workload leads to increased disparity rather than a more equal split may mean that cognitive labor remains very gendered even in PCP families. The cognitive labor disparity in PCP families also speaks to the stickiness of gender norms even in families that are intentionally created to be gender egalitarian. Based on the gender division of parenting labor among PCP families, it looks like the stickiest norm is the cognitive aspects of parenting (least equally shared by the men) and the least sticky is the physical aspects (most equally shared by men).

The unequal division of cognitive labor of parenting was closely tied to coresidence. When PCPs moved out to separate residences, it led to a course correction as men had to then

care for the child independently in their own home for half the time/week. More on this in the next section on coresidence.

c) Coresidence

For the different-gendered two-parent PCP families (i.e., mom-dad families), living under one roof led to recreating the gender roles of heterosexual nuclear families including an unequal division of unpaid domestic labor as well as the same traditional gender dynamics: that of stay-at-home women deferring their careers to enable the career of breadwinning men, at least during the first year. Even though the PCPs were not in a romantic relationship, living together veered too close to the (heterosexual) cohabitation model leading them to slip into gendered roles and patterns of heterosexual nuclear families.

Cohabitation led PCPs to recreate a common thread in heterosexual nuclear family debates, namely, that women "overwork," micromanage men and "care more," while men perceive women to self-exploit by being too nit-picky regarding housework/childcare. Women's stereotypically higher standards of housework and childcare which leads to doing tasks themselves rather than delegate, and men's frustrations with being micromanaged, affected PCPs as well.

The three two-parent PCP families started off living together for practical reasons. Sharing a living space was initially useful to make infant care manageable, but over a period of time, after the honeymoon phase of having a baby ended, the stress and difficulties of being a parent got to them. There were tensions and resentments over gendered patterns of household management and division of childcare. In the Tanya-Eli family, for instance, the shared kitchen was a source of stress especially because Tanya, as the stay-at-home mom for a year used it more

and got used to doing things her way. “What kitchen norms are that work for Tanya, [and those] that worked for me, those were often points of contention,” shared Eli.

Another source of stress in the Tanya-Eli family was the difference in their leisure time, also called the ‘leisure gap,’ commonly found in heterosexual families. Eli had started dating when the child was eight months old, while dating was the furthest on the mind for Tanya who was still pumping and struggling with sleep deprivation. Tanya shared a then-stressful but now-funny story of what she did when Eli brought a date home. “I was like, upstairs, pumping breast milk...[Pumping] as you may know, is just like, awful! And then I could hear them downstairs, like, you know, essentially having sex. And it just pissed me off. Because, ...here, he is just like going about his life, like, nothing's happened. And I'm just like, you know, I still don't have a job. You know, like, I haven't slept... in eight months. And I was just like, I was so mad I actually took the Diaper Genie and like, because one of his jobs was to empty that and it needed to be emptied, and he hadn't done it. So, I was so terrible. I took it and I stuck it outside of his room. So, when he and the date were leaving, they're like the Diaper Genie [is right there]. You know, anyway, it was hard to, you know, like that, that dating part and just like how we were in different places [then]”.

Coresidence also impeded PCP's ability to build separate romantic relationships, something that bothered men more than women. After a few months of living together, one of Eli's frustrations was that his relationship with Tanya was becoming too similar to a heterosexual marriage. As a gay man, he didn't want that. “For me personally, it was just kind of like, ‘this is *too* [emphasis his] close, like, this isn't a marriage, this feels like a marriage. And I need, I can't have that”. Similarly, Philip also craved independence, wanted to build social connections in the new city separate from Nancy's family and friends, and hoped to find a romantic partner.

Coresiding with a woman in a nuclear family-like arrangement was not helping with that. Gavin who had rented out his house and moved into Sasha's house when the twins were born, was also missing the freedom of living in his own home. Living together in a two-bedroom apartment along with two twins while also dealing with Luke's care had taken a huge toll on their relationship.

To alleviate such tensions and be more independent, all three PCP pairs moved out into separate residences with the child then moving back and forth between the two residences. Tanya and Eli moved out to adjacent townhomes when their child was 3.5 years old. Gavin moved out of Sasha's house when the twins were three years old. Nancy and Philip moved to separate homes when their daughter was 13 months old.

Though the separation of living spaces was not necessarily driven by resentments over division of labor, the separation led to a course correction from the slippage into gendered unequal division of labor to a large extent, because the men had to then care for the child independently when the child was living with them, which was approximately half the time. Women, who until then were running the show, in a managerial kind of role around childcare and housework (for example, anticipating needs for clothes, food and toys, researching them and procuring the right items) had to let go of their leadership role in childcare when they moved to separate residences. Often it meant they had to let go of their higher standards about childcare (for instance, which "eco-friendly laundry detergent" should be used to wash the child's clothes, as in Tanya's case) at least when the child was not with them. Parenting related disagreements were alleviated because some of them became less visible. Similarly, differences in housework standards and even leisure were no longer visible, and there was not much opportunity for what men perceived as micromanaging. Even the physical labor (cooking for the child, organizing the

child's wardrobe) got split in a strict way, unlike the looser arrangements they had when they lived together which allowed for some separate domains. When PCPs moved to separate residences, they lost economies of scale: now there must be two dinners made, two child's bedrooms maintained, but because they are all middle to upper middle-class, it was not such a big concern and they achieved greater degendering in their parenting roles.

In Nancy-Philip's family, separate homes meant that Nancy cut down on the work she would do. When they lived together Nancy took the lead on things like installing car seats, researching food, procuring used items from friends etc. But once they moved out, Philip had to be independent at least when it came to the things he needed for the child in his house. "He took more responsibility for all those things when he had his own place, and he made his own decisions about what highchair to get, what car seat to get, got his boyfriend to help childproof the house, you know, put furniture up against the wall, etc. Whereas, *I* (emphasis hers) had done all of that previously."

Even for Sasha-Gavin, where the division of labor is the least egalitarian, moving to separate residences meant the disagreements and tensions that come with living together, including division of labor, were alleviated. "When he was living here, sure. I'd get annoyed like, why am I the one washing out all the bottles all the time? Can you wash out the bottles? Or, you know, there was more day-to-day life stuff. but now...we don't see each other every day. Sometimes I don't see Gavin all week until Saturday when we do the drop off". She says moving out to separate residences has definitely been good for her relationship with Gavin. While the physical labor, including the physical care of the disabled child, has been split almost equally since they moved out to separate residences, the cognitive load of managing Luke's medical care remains fully on Sasha.

Interestingly, in all three families, it was the fathers that pushed for moving into separate residences, which then ended up contributing to a more equal division of labor. Despite the benefits of separate residence, the mothers initially resisted the move because it would mean that their little ones would be spending nights away from them half the week. But they eventually began to appreciate the child-free time and other benefits of living separately including the fewer disagreements.

When they moved to separate residences, both Eli and Philip seemed to happily take on the necessary responsibilities that came with caring for their young child independently. They took parenting seriously and liked being independent. They cared about being fully involved parents and saw themselves as equal parents, no less of a parent than the mothers. They wanted their co-parents and the world to treat them as such. In that sense they asserted their equal rights to the child by insisting that the child live in their house as much as in the mother's house post-separation. So whatever responsibilities came along with having the child live with them half time was part of the package. Also since the child was a bit older by then, the most laborious and time-consuming phase of parenting was mostly behind them by that point.

Nancy feels that Philip is very protective of his time with their child. "He really guards his time with Charlie more than I guard my time with her. I think this is sort of him working out his own relationship as a dad with her...I don't want to intrude and I'm respectful that it's really his time with her". She also reminds herself: "[Charlie] doesn't really need me. It's me that needs her." Though she misses Charlie when it's Philip's days, she does appreciate the child-free time to focus on herself and her work.

It looks like both Eli and Philip, as fathers, and particularly as gay fathers, have to assert themselves to be taken seriously as an equal parent in a world where they are more of an

exception than a norm. They actively oppose any normative rhetoric they encounter that suggests that the mothers are more important in a child's life or that mothers are the primary parent. For Eli, saying 'no' to Tanya's proposal that their child sleep next door in her house on a daily basis was probably his way of asserting his equal stake as a parent. He allowed a few months of transition time for Tanya and the child to adjust to the change after which he enforced a strict 50:50 split in the number of nights the child spends in his house and hers.

Though the men's push for separate residences and their fierce guarding of their (pre-established 50%) time with the child may have been motivated primarily by the above concerns, these two factors contributed to a more egalitarian division of parental labor between the mothers and fathers. The men spoke about rejecting gendered parenting roles, patriarchal norms and practices. It's possible they could put that in practice better when they lived on their own.

Based on the experience of platonic co-parents with coresiding and separate residing, it appears that coresidence could be a major contributing factor to gender inequality in household division of labor (and conflict between men and women over the division of labor) in any kind of family. The current co-parents I interviewed all held gender egalitarian views and yet they too slipped into stereotypical gender roles, something that was corrected when they started living separately.

Clearly, separate residences helped platonic co-parents move closer to achieving a gender egalitarian relationship. I argue that separate residences can help couples including heterosexual couples achieve gender egalitarianism, and separate residences could be part of the solution to reduce gender inequality in the family and in society (for those who can financially afford it, at least). There is a small body of literature on Living Apart Together by choice (LAT-by-choice) couples and gender inequalities. A study of LAT-by-choice couples in Canada found that women

in particular valued living apart because it allows them to avoid gendered imbalances in household tasks and responsibilities and maintain control over financial and household decisions (Funk and Kobayashi 2016). Another study on LAT found that for older women in Australia who choose LAT, “the LAT experience allowed autonomy, decreased the possibility of conflict, encouraged satisfaction with the relationship, reduced the burden of care-giving and opened spaces for freedom - in short it was relationship form conducive to happiness.” (Upton-Davis 2015). For the women interviewed, LAT was a political act that subverts and transforms the gendered norms of cohabitation.

A study of ‘weekend couples’ in Korea found that maintaining separate residences may balance time use patterns between two partners and therefore have implications for subjective wellbeing (Lee 2020). I could not find any literature on (non-divorced / separated) heterosexual couples with **young children** living apart together. But media articles suggest that married (child-free) couples living apart together is on the rise in the US and Britain. However, as Funk and Kobayashi (2016) argue, although living apart is potentially a manageable solution for women at a personal level, it remains an individual solution that detracts attention from broader issues of gender inequalities in cohabiting relationships.

d) Relocation

Another factor that threw a spanner in the works of the intended egalitarian arrangement of the two-parent families was the practical necessity to relocate to start a family. For PCPs that didn’t live in the same city, the question of who will relocate and the impact it had on incomes, careers and finances shaped the intended division of labor in gendered ways.

Tanya moved from New Jersey to Seattle where Eli lived and worked. Philip moved from Sydney to Melbourne since Nancy wanted to raise their child near her family. The way things

played out for Tanya when she relocated was very different from the way it did for Philip when he did. Both made the sacrifice of leaving the city they preferred living in and moving to their PCP's city in order to have a child. However, the impact it had on the gender division of childcare labor and careers when Tanya, a woman/mother moved and when Philip, a man/father moved couldn't be more different. In their new city, Tanya prioritized infant care; Philip prioritized his career.

Tanya's relocation was one of the main reasons she took on greater childcare and housework responsibilities during infancy because she relocated without a job in hand; and her decision to relocate was based on Eli supporting her financially until she was ready to start working post birth. So, the unemployment and financial dependence lent itself to taking on greater domestic responsibilities than Eli. On the other hand, Philip's relocation did not lead to greater childcare responsibilities for him. His relocation was not tied to his employment as he worked from home. It helped that his career prospects, as a marketing executive, was not tied to a specific geographic location, the way Tanya's policy career was. He took two weeks of paid leave that he was eligible for and returned to work. When he was laid off soon after, he didn't use his unemployed time on childcare, nor did he decide to be financially dependent on Nancy in return for taking on greater childcare responsibilities the way Tanya did. He spent most of that time looking for jobs and was back to working full time by the six-week mark. Tanya was financially dependent on Eli because she was unemployed. Philip remained financially independent by prioritizing his career, even when and especially when he was unemployed during infancy.

Biology does explain the different outcomes of Tanya's and Philip's relocation. Birth parents need more time away from work even if they choose not to breastfeed for long or at all.

They need time to recover physically from pregnancy and birthing, a process that can take an enormous toll physically, mentally and emotionally. Men don't. However, there is also the role of societal norms that is more accepting of women being financially dependent on men and not so much the other way round; and more accepting of women taking a long break from work to have a child than men. As PCPs live their family lives under the same societal pressures and expectations regarding gender norms as everyone else, the role of social norms in influencing their decisions and choices cannot be ignored.

These norms influence decisions of parents in PCP families despite the absence of marriage or even a romantic relationship. Though Tanya struggled with being financially dependent on Eli, it **may** have been easier for Tanya, a woman, to be dependent on her male co-parent, than it would have been for Philip, a man, to be financially dependent on his female co-parent. However, it did put her at a huge disadvantage in terms of long-term costs (income, career prospects and savings), something that continues to bother her.

Tanya's story replicates the patriarchal household dynamic, which often contributes to the gender wage gap, e.g., the expectation that lower-earning parents (usually women) give up their career/ relocate in order to establish a household. Interestingly in the cases of both Nancy-Philip and Tanya-Eli, it was the lower-earning co-parent who relocated to the city of the higher-earning co-parent, but the impacts on their careers and finances was very different. While Tanya seems happy with her life situation overall, she struggles with the fact that she doesn't have the career she thought she would have before she became a parent, and the financial security that would have come with it. Her career is stunted by the fact that Seattle doesn't have the same job opportunities as DC. And now that she has lived in Seattle for seven years and lives next door to her son's dad—a dream residential arrangement for most platonic co-parents—it doesn't make

sense for her to leave Seattle and her co-parenting arrangement with Eli at least until her child turns 18.

Tanya and Eli's story is also a case of how structural constraints as well as individual decisions made within those constraints, led to gender inequalitarian arrangements despite both Tanya's and Eli's progressive and feminist views on family and gender roles. Tanya's decisions, first of all, to have a baby, and then to relocate to make it manageable, and prioritize caring for her baby during infancy (an important phase in the baby's and her life) has disrupted her career with long term negative impacts on her income, career prospects and savings. Her story is not unique at all, especially in the US, where family friendly policies are sorely lacking. "Tanya shared the frustration of having limited choices. "I've been making choices in a system that sucks, you know, like the fact that we don't have, like, kind of universal childcare, universal health care, like it's limited my choices. So, there's a structure here that dictates how I'm going to choose. So, you kind of have to, like, consider all of it, and it's just really complicated". Many women's careers are impacted when they become parents in a way that men's are not. However, when women are married and relocate or do more unpaid childcare and housework than their husbands, they enjoy protections that come with marriage contracts, like entitlements to husband's earnings and retirement to make up for her lost earnings and social security contributions during her working years. And in this sense, the costs to women of relocating at the cost of their careers and taking on a disproportionate amount of unpaid work at home is higher in non-traditional non-marital relationships like Tanya's and Sasha's, than it would be in heterosexual marriages. Even unmarried romantic relationships seem to be more socially/culturally amenable to merging of finances than platonic relationships or friendships are.

Tanya's heteronormative justifications/reasoning for why she relocated and gave up her dream career in the process (and with it some substantial lifetime earnings) to have a child speaks to the pull of traditional gender roles, but also the significant impact of family-unfriendly, sexist and patriarchal structures in the US like policies surrounding parental leave, childcare, health insurance, workplaces incompatible with having children and work-family conflict which then shape decisions about having and raising children and how to make all of it work.

Three-parent families, a very different animal

The three-parent families in the study did not fall into the same patriarchal heteronormative traps as the two parent families. Unlike the different gendered two-parent ('mom-dad') families, which in their gender composition and number of parents resembled a heterosexual nuclear family especially when they coresided, and which in turn may have contributed to slippage into the gendered patterns and roles of heterosexual nuclear families, the three parent ('mom-dad-dad') families did not face the same issues even when they coresided.

The division of labor after they had a child did not deviate much from the intended egalitarian plans. This was probably because a 'mom-dad-dad' PCP family is too structurally different from a heterosexual model in the context of intrahousehold dynamics and how the world sees them. It probably also helped that the labor was spread over three parents rather than two which made it more manageable. And, if we conceptualize gender division of labor as the labor performed by men vs women in a household, there were two men to carry the male load in these families which contributed to reduced workload for the woman. Of course, the fact that the men in these three-parent families had progressive values about gender roles and saw themselves as fully involved fathers helped, but the men in the two parent families also held those values and saw themselves as fully involved fathers.

Both the three-parent families among the current co-parents had two fathers and one mother. In both families, the three parents comprised one married couple and a friend of the couple. For convenience, I will refer to the friend as the ‘third parent’ even though they are fully involved parents. Damian is the third parent co-parenting with a married heterosexual couple in the Damian-Abigail♥Zachary family (♥=romantic coupling) in Oakland, California. They have a 4-year-old daughter. Elizabeth is the third parent (and birth mother) co-parenting with a married gay couple in the Elizabeth-Robert♥Blake family in London. They have a six-week-old son.

Let’s take a closer look at the arrangements in these two families. Damian and his co-parents, Abigail and Zachary, live together and all three are equally involved in the child’s life. They share equal (legal and decision making) rights, (financial and labor) responsibilities and time with the child. In other words, it’s a 33:33:33 arrangement or 33W:33M:33M (M=man, W=woman) arrangement. Since they wanted to be equal parents, coresidence was an integral part of their plan. Unlike the two parent families, in Damian’s family, coresidence proved to be very beneficial for the mother, Abigail, from conception till the present, including pregnancy, birth and postpartum period, since she had the support of two coresiding men.

From the moment their daughter was born at the hospital, they started a childcare routine that they continued through infancy. The two men would split the night equally. “For half the night, when Trish would cry, I would get up and get the baby and take her to Abigail. And then she tried to feed and then when she was done, I would swaddle her and kind of bounce her until she wanted to go back to sleep and then put her back down. And then through the other half of the night Zachary would do that”. When Zachary and Damian would split the night, each father would sleep on the couch in the living room for half the night, and in Abigail’s room for the other half. “Zachary would sleep in bed with Abigail, I would sleep on the floor...The idea was

[Abigail] never had to get out of bed. We would get up, we would change her diaper, we would do whatever we needed to do so Abigail could get as much sleep as possible. And then each of us could get a half night of sleep”. He said they were more rested than otherwise parents would be which was “really amazing”.

The fathers compensated for Abigail’s breastfeeding responsibilities by taking on a greater share of other work. “When Abigail was breastfeeding... a really important part of parenting that Zachary and I couldn't do... we would try to make it up...when we could bottle feed we bottle feed, we changed way more of the diapers than she did to try to account for that”. Even when it came to cognitive labor, the area where women are typically overburdened, Abigail’s load is not necessarily higher than her co-parents. According to Damian, he and Abigail take on slightly more of the cognitive load than Zachary. So, while her cognitive load is more than her husband’s, it’s not higher than her platonic co-parent’s. Their weekly family meetings help distribute the cognitive labor more equally because such work is acknowledged and assigned during the meetings, and it's divided up based on “domains/interest/availability rather than gender”. As an example, when it was time to get their daughter vaccinated for COVID, they discussed it in the meeting and it was decided that Zachary, who as a scientist was already following COVID news closely, “would lead the research on like, what is the state of the vaccine for kids under five? Like, what do we know about any complications with it? He was the one who was just like tracking that and sending articles. Once it passed, we all got excited. Abigail booked the appointment and then I took [Trish] to the appointment”.

While coresidence reduced the gender egalitarianism in mom-dad families, it increased gender egalitarianism in Damian’s family. The parent-child ratio of 3:1 made the load more manageable for all three parents including Abigail. She was responsible for only about one-third

of everything—physical, cognitive and financial responsibilities. Another way in which Abigail’s arrangement is more beneficial for her is that Abigail can live in the same house as her child all the time and still have only 33% responsibility. Women including Tanya, Nancy and Elizabeth seem to struggle emotionally with being separated from the child half the time.

In the Elizabeth-Robert♥Blake family, the other 3-parent family in the study, the residential arrangements, the split in responsibilities, and the structure is a bit different from Damian’s family. Elizabeth lives in her house. Robert and Blake, a married gay couple, live in their house a 20-minute walk away from Elizabeth. Their friendship is not as close as some of the other co-parents, so they did not and do not have plans of coresiding. Elizabeth is 50% of the unit for all purposes including rights (legal and decision making), responsibilities (labor and financial) and time with the child. Robert and Blake together make the other half of the unit. So, the split is more like 50 (Elizabeth):50(Robert+Blake) or 50:25:25 or 50W:25M:25M. Unlike in the Damian-Abigail♥Zachary family, where Abigail was part of the romantic coupling and therefore benefited from being in a romantic/intimate relationship with one of her male co-parents and in a platonic relationship with the other male co-parent, Elizabeth is the third parent co-parenting with a married couple, which meant she had to be more independent during pregnancy and the postpartum period, and she will have more childcare responsibilities than Abigail because she lives alone and will have the child for 50% of the time.

The plan is that the baby would live with Elizabeth full time for the first year due to her outsized duties in breastfeeding. During the initial months after birth there would be some kind of a partial coresidence: Robert and Blake will take turns to stay in Elizabeth’s house 24 hours a day to care for the baby, help with some housework and support Elizabeth given her greater responsibility due to breastfeeding. Elizabeth said: “In the first three months, I think their role

will be kind of everything else, you know, doing everything else to bond, you know, while I'm breastfeeding. Like, they'll be doing a lot of bathing and nappy changing and tummy time and those kinds of things." And that's what they have been doing. Robert and Blake take turns and sometimes overlap a bit. So, sometimes they are both there at Elizabeth's. "But usually, one of us stays the night and we sort of do a few nights in a row and then the other one" Gradually over the period of one year the daily time they spend at Elizabeth's would be cut down to give Elizabeth more privacy and space, but the co-parents would visit the baby at least for a few hours a day.

At the time of Robert's interview, the baby was six weeks old, and this is what their days looked like. "We're doing a lot of looking after the baby so [Elizabeth] can sleep, you know. To begin with in the night, less so in the night now...Blake or I look after the baby between...like nine or 10 and midnight...and then again, between about 7am and 10am. Maybe a bit longer... And we do shopping, and we change his nappy a lot and all that sort of stuff...trying to keep her flat, clean... I'm still doing a lot of cooking for her." And during the day they all take turns. "We're all there probably and we're taking turns [with] the baby depending on whether maybe Elizabeth wants to have a bath or go for a walk together".

With this high level of support for nine months (when at least one of the fathers will be on leave) Elizabeth is hoping she will be able to get back to work soon, starting with a few hours a day and then increasing gradually. The cognitive load seems to be more or less equally split. For instance, Elizabeth takes the lead on procuring baby stuff, and delegates to the men. Robert was in-charge of the birth certificate and the legal work involved in doing the stepparent adoption so that he has the same rights and duties and responsibilities as Elizabeth and Blake who are on the birth certificate as biological parents. Once the baby is weaned around the one-

year mark, the baby would spend equal time in each house. There would be a brief transition period where Elizabeth would stay in the couple's house to help the baby transition.

Because Elizabeth is 50% of the unit, and she wants the baby in her house at least half the time, her responsibilities are higher than each of the two fathers, about twice theirs. But within the limits of their contract, the men have been providing her with a high level of support. And their reality at least at the six-week mark (at the time of Robert's interview) wasn't different from the 50:25:25 intentions they set before conception. Based on the Damian and Elizabeth's families, it looks like three parent families are more gender egalitarian and more beneficial for the mother when it is 33:33:33, and the mother is in a coresiding romantic relationship (as opposed to being the third parent) as is the case with the Damian-Abigail♥Zachary family.

Chapter 5: Moral Boundaries and Asymmetrical Co-parenting

“We didn't want to be transactional, you know, we want this to be like a family.”

– Tanya

PCP families inhabit a non-normative middle space between traditional families and surrogacies. Given that PCP partners are not romantic partners and at the same time engage in the intimate act of intentionally having a child together and raising that child together, their co-parenting relationship mixes intimacy and transaction in ways that are odd and uneasy for them. Some PCP partners have a history of friendship before they decide to have a child together. Others don't. Many search for co-parents online, in which case the potential co-parents get to know each other with the specific intention of having kids together. In most cases, they have differing sexual orientations which rule out the possibility of their relationship developing into a romantic one at a later point. Also, though they tend to be single at the time of forming PCP relationships, many find romantic partners for themselves later when the child is a bit older, and the most laborious phase of parenting is behind them. For all these reasons, the relationship between the co-parenting partners is one of friendship at best and lacks the kind of intimacy that typically exists between husbands and wives, girlfriends and boyfriends, same-gender couples, or even non-romantic intimate family relationships such as mother-adult daughter or siblings.

The absence of the conventional form of romantic or familial intimacy also means that they don't share resources as most romantic couples do. When these parenting partners decide to have a child together, their finances are not merged in any form. When they have significant differences in income and/or wealth, the differences remain even after they have a child together.

For example, Elizabeth and her co-parents, Robert and Blake (a gay married couple) cannot live as neighbors or even in the same neighborhood because Elizabeth cannot afford a house in Robert and Blake's wealthy neighborhood, and the men are unlikely to want to downsize to become Elizabeth's neighbor. And yet, because they have a child together, they see themselves as a family, a family of three parents intimately tied together in the realm of parenting. They share intimate moments on a daily basis, similar to more traditional couples. Elizabeth nurses their six-week-old baby in the presence of the fathers; the fathers watch the baby in one room while Elizabeth sleeps in the next; they alter their childcare schedules to accommodate each other's unforeseen needs.

PCP families are similar in some ways to, and very different in other ways from, the more traditional family. As they pull apart institutions—of romantic love, biological parenting, nuclear/coresiding families—that historically have been intertwined, some norms are reimagined and renegotiated, while others remain unchallenged (for instance, wanting and having biological children, creating the 'mom-dad' configuration despite the absence of a heterosexual relationship). This selective reimagining, an outcome of their specific needs and desires, involves drawing some boundaries in the relationship, specifically symbolic boundaries that separate aspects of the family that are going to be in the transactional realm and those that will be more 'family-like' and therefore in the intimate realm.

Symbolic Boundaries and Boundary Work

Sociologists define symbolic boundaries as the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others. Symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont and Molnár 2002:168). These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions

(taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes (Lamont, Pendergrass and Pachucki 2015). Marking and maintaining those boundaries is boundary work.

Members of the PCP community draw boundaries to separate aspects of the family that are deemed transactional from those that are intimate i.e., a sacred realm free of any monetary or non-monetary exchanges like trade-offs. They police their actions in order to distance PCP from surrogacy and other overly transactional forms, and also to distance it from traditional families and other overly intimate relationships. This boundary marking is necessitated by the fact that PCPs inhabit a non-normative space, somewhere between the world of traditional familial relationships and a transactional relationship such as surrogacy that requires legal contracts. Where and how these boundaries are drawn vary based on the closeness of the friendship between the co-parenting partners. Moreover, there is not always agreement on where that boundary lies even between the partners. For example, Robert was very keen on witnessing the birth of their child, but Elizabeth felt their “level of intimacy is not childbirth-room-intimate” and politely turned down his request to be in the room. In Tanya-Eli’s relationship, Tanya had a slight preference for conceiving through natural intercourse (sex) even though Eli was gay. But Eli did not want that because he felt it was not being true to the nature of their family. “It didn’t feel appropriate, didn’t feel authentic to who I am, or how the family ought to start”. They ended up conceiving through artificial insemination.

There are however some commonalities in boundary making that most PCPs practice, and many of them have gendered impacts. For instance, when it comes to money matters, financial contributions of parenting partners toward childcare expenses are handled in a transactional way. The expenses are split evenly to make the arrangement symmetrical and fair, with the understanding that fulfilling this financial obligation is important and closely tied to the

rights over the child. At the same time, they practice certain norms of the traditional family that create asymmetry in their respective contributions and sacrifices: PCPs relocate to their co-parent's city to start a family, or the woman carries the child for the partnership without expecting anything in return, both normative practices in marriages and romantic relationships. Despite not sharing assets or merging finances, PCPs have left such acts in the intimate realm without attempting to address them in a way that compensates the co-parent who bears the opportunity costs of relocation or carrying a child. Such asymmetric sacrifices made by one parent are not subjected to negotiation or factored into trade-offs the way many other decisions (including splitting childcare expenses) are.

They use a language of altruism (i.e., not expecting anything in return) to naturalize arrangements that they leave unequal in order to preserve boundaries between their (PCP) family and overly transactional arrangements like surrogacy. I use the term 'altruism' the way it is used in the context of surrogacy. In 'altruistic surrogacy' the surrogate declines compensation for carrying the child, whereas in commercial or compensated surrogacy, she expects to be compensated.

This language of altruism veers toward the language used to justify traditional, heterosexual unequal gender relations. They justify asymmetric sacrifices by pointing out that they are "family" and that their relationship is "non-transactional." For instance, Tanya justified her carrying the child for the partnership without expecting anything in return by saying, "We didn't want to be transactional, you know, we want this to be like a family." Similarly, Philip explained why his sacrifice of relocation to Nancy's city and Nancy carrying a child for them should not be seen as a tradeoff. "I don't think we've come at this too transactionally". The co-

parents who turn to PCP to reproduced hegemonic heteronormative gender norms as well as those who see themselves as subverting them, subscribe equally to this language of altruism.

Their tendency to keep certain contributions and sacrifices by the parents in the sacred/intimate realm is likely driven by their desire to be seen as a legitimate or real family, one where members relocate or carry a child without expecting any direct compensation for doing so. Or it could be because such sacrifices are naturalized. For example, being a stay-at-home mom is naturalized, as is being a distant, breadwinning dad. Either way, these sacrifices and contributions that they keep in the sacred/intimate realm are very gendered because they are related to either biology or patriarchal structures. It's the woman who bears the costs of childbearing; the person who relocates tends to be the lower earner, often women; and women tend to take a longer break from work once the child is born to recover from birthing, to breastfeed and/or because they take on or have more infant care responsibilities than the father. By keeping such acts completely uncompensated in a relationship that is otherwise a lot more transactional than a heterosexual relationship, platonic co-parents are selectively adopting specific norms of the heterosexual family without challenging them. Framing such transactions (childbearing, breastfeeding, who relocates, moms taking a longer break from work than fathers) as intimate ends up creating material inequalities between the male and female co-parents, since they disadvantage women more than men. These relative disadvantages (relative to men) that women in PCP relationships face are greater than they would have faced in legal marriages, where women's disproportionately higher contribution, for instance, to unpaid domestic work is indirectly compensated by the legal expectation of shared finances and assets. Also, in legal marriage, the non-working parent is entitled to half of the working parent's retirement income. This protects women who take more time off from work during parenthood.

The expectation of gender equality that PCPs have does not play out in practice because both men and women construct emotional boundaries in which the moral universe is divided into those activities that can be made transactional and those that are intimate. In this chapter, I discuss the different forms of this gendered boundary work that PCPs engage in. By gendered boundary work, I mean the common distinctions PCPs make between aspects of their family that fall in the transactional realm and those that fall in the intimate/sacred realm free of monetary or other exchanges, which invariably result in gender unequal outcomes like the ones mentioned above.

Part 1 - Childbearing vs childrearing

The greatest asymmetry in the parents' respective contributions in a PCP relationship is caused by the very act of childbearing. While the division of **child rearing** responsibilities and expenses are carefully negotiated between the parents in great detail and documented in contracts, **childbearing** is taken for granted as the birth mother's responsibility and excluded from negotiations (as is the case in traditional families). Secondly, while childcare labor is deemed commodifiable (by use of paid childcare, and even compensated for within some families), childbearing is not even considered labor, nor are the costs and risks to income, career, and health that the birth mother incurs taken into consideration during negotiations about money, rights or for trade-offs. Clearly, they are distinguishing their arrangement as separate from (and more sacred and intimate than) the adjacent framework of surrogacy. Women in PCP arrangements are expected to give the "gift" of childbearing to the partnership without expecting anything in return, and women do so because their alternative, single motherhood, is less preferable to PCP.

When PCPs have a child, they distinguish between the responsibilities (labor and money)

that go into **caring** for the child which, in a 50:50 arrangement will be borne by the mother *and* father equally, and the responsibilities (including labor, costs and risks) of **carrying** the child which will be borne by the mother alone in all PCP arrangements, 50:50 or 90:10. This distinction is based in biology: pregnancy, birthing and nursing can only be performed by the mother, unlike the care of a baby once it leaves her body. Labor that is biological in basis is naturalized as maternal privilege rather than as something that carries a high cost for the woman in terms of time and impact on career, finances, and savings.

These differing attitudes towards childbearing vs childrearing may be similar to those in the traditional family. However, PCPs' selective imitation of the traditional family by keeping childbearing in the intimate realm in a relationship that is a lot more transactional than the traditional family, make the relative contributions and sacrifices of men and women in the PCP family very asymmetrical.

In addition to this high-level boundary work to separate childbearing and childcare, there is a lower-level boundary work in the area of childbearing to keep it in the intimate realm. PCPs make a clear distinction between **expenses** involved in childbearing and **payment** for childbearing, i.e., expenses related to pregnancy, birthing and nursing vs. payment to the woman for pregnancy, birthing and nursing. Expenses related to IVF, hospital bills, doula fees, lactation consultants or even prenatal vitamins are viewed as appropriate for cost-sharing in the 50:50 families and often split equally in the spirit of egalitarianism, while the latter is not even discussed probably because a one-way payment to the female co-parent would imply a purely transactional arrangement similar to surrogacy.

Expense is okay: cost sharing as an egalitarian practice

Unlike the 90:10 families where women bear almost all the childbearing expenses, PCPs

who form a 50:50 or equal co-parenting relationship share expenses involved in conception, pregnancy, birthing and post-natal care (in addition to childcare expenses). The splitting of **expenses** related to childbearing are negotiated, documented in the co-parenting agreements, and dealt with in a business-like manner. For instance, in Nancy and Philip's agreement (which was drafted by Nancy and approved by Philip), under financial responsibilities, they say, "Unless otherwise agreed, all costs associated with **assisted conception, pregnancy** and the child will be shared equally between the Parties," and they proceed to give examples of expenses that will be shared equally. This includes: "i. Assisted Conception costs such as counseling, pathology, inseminations, sperm storage and IVF cycles; ii. pregnancy-related expenses such as consultations, ultrasounds, pharmaceuticals, hospital and specialist fees and prenatal classes; iii. postnatal care required by Nancy including psychological care."

Note the fact that Philip is obligated to pay his share of prenatal and postnatal expenses that are incurred in the pursuit of having a child, but not compensate Nancy in any way **for** carrying the child. This distinction is basically one of **expenses** related to childbearing vs **payment** for childbearing. It's taken for granted that the (intimate) act of childbearing is her responsibility and she would not expect anything in return despite the fact that she alone is bearing the costs and risks to her career, income, savings, and health that come with carrying the child for the family. A lactation consultant's fees would be shared because it was an expense which was "part and parcel of the process of having a baby" (Philip), but any one-way payment/compensation to Nancy for carrying the child or breastfeeding wasn't necessary or even appropriate.

Similarly, the expenses of the IVF treatment in the Elizabeth-Robert♥Blake family were split equally between Elizabeth and Robert-Blake. Their co-parenting agreement makes this

clear. “The total combined maximum expenditure of £40000, with all clinical and legal expenses, since the time the parties agreed to have a child together [will be] shared 50% by Elizabeth and 50% by Robert and Blake.” Elizabeth didn’t incur any other expenses during pregnancy and childbirth probably due to the publicly funded universal healthcare system in the U.K. (Side note: The family felt it necessary that Elizabeth pay 50% of the £40000 IVF expense even though her income as a freelance photographer and wealth is significantly lower than Robert’s and Blake’s non-combined income and wealth. Robert and Blake **together** paid only 50% because the rights, responsibilities and time with the child in their family is split by household, rather than individuals, 50 Elizabeth: 50 Robert+Blake. This is another example of the transactional rigidity of splitting expenses that doesn’t take income or wealth of the parents into consideration).

In some cases, the male co-parent went further to cover the expenses. In the case of Eli and Tanya, who have been friends for 30 years, Eli gave Tanya \$200 towards her rent every month during the pregnancy so that she could live in an apartment “that was better for my being pregnant...closer to the university campus” (Tanya). She was doing her post-doctoral fellowship at a university during her pregnancy and therefore lived on a relatively low income compared to Eli who was a high-earning employee at a tech company. The \$200 in extra rent money that Eli sent Tanya during her pregnancy was acceptable to both Tanya and Eli because it went towards housing that “was more conducive for pregnancy” i.e., expenses related to pregnancy. Much like middle class American wives’ allowances in the late 19th and early 20th century that were paid by the husband and earmarked for household expenses (Zelizer 1989) the **use** of that \$200 was restricted to her rent during pregnancy. Zelizer argues that culture and social structure mark the quality of domestic money and other such “special monies” by institutionalizing controls,

restrictions, and distinctions in the sources, uses, modes of allocation and even the quantity of money.

It is important to note that neither Tanya nor Eli would have been okay with Tanya spending that \$200 to buy a present for her niece or to pay for a dinner with her date because then the \$200 would come too uncomfortably close to a payment from Eli to Tanya **for** carrying the child—in other words, to the realm of surrogacy. In fact, when I asked Eli if Tanya needed any financial help during pregnancy, Eli said, “I believe I did provide some cleverly proposed financial help that was specific to having a child together. I don't remember if this was about copays, or if this was about, you know, food, or, I don't remember what it was. But I know there was”. He didn't remember the details of the exact amount or what the money went towards, but the fact that it was “cleverly proposed financial help” suggests there was discomfort involved for both about Eli just giving her the money without earmarking it for a pregnancy related need.

However, the asymmetry in the costs of childbearing for the birth mother vs. the father is not lost on the women. While they don't feel comfortable or empowered to negotiate a more equitable arrangement, some women do talk jokingly about compensation for childbearing. For instance, Nancy jokingly asked Philip for a “push present” sometime after she gave birth, but Philip laughed it off since they are not romantic partners. Philip explained to me what a push present was. He said he was told that “the significant other buys the wife or significant other a present, an expensive present, like a diamond ring, or whatever...for all the pain of the birth”. He says he didn't know if it's really a thing people do or “if Nancy was just playing jokes on me.”

When I asked, on a serious note, if he felt the need to actually give her a push present, he said he did not. “I didn't feel it was like my place to give [her] a push present. I think her mom bought her some jewelry or something.” He added: “I think that we are showing each other love

and affection and giving gifts in other ways, right?” The language of the ‘push present’, a one-way gift, does imply compensation and gratitude, but it does so in the realm of the romantic. Therefore, it looks like birth mothers don’t feel entitled to even this “gift” form of compensation for childbearing within a PCP relationship. As we see above, while a rent subsidy was appropriate because it is “not transactional”, a push present is not appropriate because it is “too intimate.” PCPs are therefore navigating a middle ground between intimacy and transaction.

Payment is not okay: How PCPs justified non-compensation

While childbearing *expenses* were shared equally in the 50:50 PCP families, a payment or compensation for childbearing was dismissed as not necessary or relevant. Their main justification: they were “like a family”, and their relationship was “not transactional that way”. When I asked Philip if he and Nancy ever spoke about him compensating her in any way for carrying the child for them, he was visibly uncomfortable with the question. He needed more time to think, became less articulate, talked more slowly, and mixed up expenses with compensation. The awkwardness of the moment was evident. “Yeah, some of it was part of the conversation. The things that were part of the conversation [were] any medical bills attached to the birth. For example, we did some breastfeeding counseling coz Nancy was having issues with breastfeeding and things like this, which, you know, there’s a whole counseling around this. For me, that was not anticipated but actually sort of just part and parcel of the process of having a baby... just basically... bundling everything together and saying, we’ll just split everything.”

When he realized he had not really responded to my question, he added, “There was never a discussion, or a requirement for me to pay, you know, for that period [when she was pregnant]. So, would I *have*? (emphasis his) I’m not sure, but, you know, she had...she was on maternity leave... you know...(pause) I don’t know, I could see how in similar situations, it

would potentially be required, but I think in our circumstances it wouldn't have been necessary”.

Philip probably felt that that Nancy didn't really need the money because she was a high earning attorney and had four months of paid maternity leave, as opposed to a low-income woman who may have needed financial support during pregnancy (though Nancy had four months of paid leave, she took a full year's break from work after birth and was the primary caregiver during that time). He also clarified that their approach to their family was not transactional. “I don't think it's about getting everything to equal out. You know, there's going to be differences. I'm probably more a believer in swings and roundabouts. Neither of us is that poor that we're going to be having too many conflicts around money, or the obligation of paying each other for things. But if it comes up, you know, we'll have to deal with it. But I don't think that will be too much of an issue.” For Philip, therefore, any one-way payment from the male co-parent to the birth mother would have been necessary/conceivable only to *help* the birth mother who may have had a practical *need* for financial support, rather than something a birth mother would be *entitled* to, independent of her financial situation, since she was carrying the child for the partnership, something that came with costs and risks to careers, income, savings, and health to her, and none to the father.

Women seemed to be more aware of the asymmetry between their contributions and the men's, but still didn't feel entitled to ask for compensation. In the Sasha-Gavin family, Sasha is very aware of the imbalance in hers and Gavin's contributions to and gains from the PCP relationship. Sasha jokes about how Gavin got the “better end of the deal” at least financially speaking, by pointing to their alternatives in fulfilling their respective desires for a (biological) child if they had not decided to form a PCP family with each other. “I knew that it would be really expensive for him to do it without me. We used to joke about that. I'm like, honestly, it

won't be that expensive for me to get some sperm. But for you to get a surrogate, I'm like, dude, you definitely got the better end of the deal. Financially, for sure.” She laughs as she speaks about how she saved him a lot of money because of their arrangement. But she and Gavin never took that fact into consideration while negotiating finances, probably because exchanging payment for childbearing gets too uncomfortably close to surrogacy, and her relationship with Gavin, she insists, is one of family and friendship.

Childbearing was not accounted for in their negotiations about money, despite the fact—something they were all aware of—that the only other way these gay/asexual men (and even many of the straight men looking for a female co-parent) could have a biological child was by paying for surrogacy.

Tanya had similar justifications for non-compensation as Philip and Sasha. She explained that their relationship is not “as transactional” by pointing out that she and Eli were close friends, that they share a bond that other co-parents who have known each other for a shorter time might not. “My situation is a little different ... because like this is someone I've known for over thirty years, you know, like, we're friends, like, it's not as transactional. And we actually said that in our co-parenting agreement...one of the things we said was, we didn't want to be transactional, you know, like, we want this to be like a family. Our friendship comes first in all of this. It is the foundation for it all.”

She added that “you also don't necessarily want to put a price tag on something (like childbearing)” revealing her discomfort with putting a monetary value on creating human life, the primary reason surrogacy is so controversial. The discomfort is not surprising given the general societal aversion to mixing intimacy and money, especially when the intimacy is biological in basis. The mother-child or mother-fetus bond is seen as a sacred space, and

bringing money into it can be seen as contaminating the sanctity of that relationship.

Tanya, who described herself as feminist, is very aware of the negative impact of childbearing on her career prospects, income, and savings, while there was no such impact on Eli, her male co-parent. But she had more justifications for why a compensation was not appropriate, or at least why it was not the answer for the negative impact of childbearing on her career. When I asked Tanya if Eli or she felt he needed to compensate her financially or otherwise for carrying the child for them, she didn't dismiss it, but pointed out, in Eli's defense, that he had always been generous with money. She also attributed the negative impact on her career and finances to biology as well as her own choices.

“Yeah, I mean, I guess in some ways [I may need to be compensated], but I really do feel like the trade off, I mean, he has paid a lot financially to have the kid. When I was doing my postdoc, he even gave me like a couple hundred dollars towards my rent every month so that I could live in an apartment that was better for my being pregnant...he's just always been supportive from the very outset”. She was referring to Eli supporting her financially for the first year after their child's birth as Tanya had turned down a job offer in DC and moved to his city, Seattle, towards the end of the pregnancy without a job in hand to start a family.

“And, you know, there's like a part of me that also thinks too, having gone through it all now, you can't—and this is true I think for like traditional heterosexual married couples [as well]—because of the biology, in some ways, you really can't have it completely equitable. Because just the nature of the situation. So, like, yes, the woman's going to do more physically. And you have to figure out a way to account for that, and then even the stuff that's like, you know, I could have chosen to not breastfeed, and then maybe [it] would have been a little bit more equitable”. Besides her choice to breastfeed, she also pointed to other choices she made

that impacted her financial situation – her choice to relocate to have a child, which was shaped by her relatively lower earning potential compared to his, which was due to *her choice* of career path.

Tanya's justifications for non-compensation for carrying the child also comes from the fact that she too benefited from the arrangement. "I'm benefiting too, like, I get to be a mother. Even though I had to carry the child, like, it wasn't, I mean, he made it possible by being the father, so I'm also benefiting because I wanted a child, it's not like I did it as a favor for him and he's the only parent, you know, I mean, I get the benefit, too. So, like, if you're thinking about what each one of us gets out of it, we are both getting a family out of it... It's hard to disaggregate all of it, I think, because the woman wants one too, you know. I know, a lot of women who get to like... late 30s, I know a lot of women who are like, 'I must, I'm desperate, like, I really want to have a baby' and they're not going to be able to do it without, you know, having a male parent to do it with."

Tanya believes that the negative impact on her career was worth the intrinsic privilege of being a mother by comparing herself to other women who haven't been as lucky in becoming a parent. But she doesn't feel the need to share the costs of having a child with her male co-parent equitably. Despite being one of the subverters her justifications about childbearing veers towards language used to justify traditional, heterosexual unequal gender relations. It is not too different from the practice of women in unequal marriages comparing their situation with other married women rather than with their husband's because gender rather than partner is considered the appropriate referent (Thompson, 1991).

Women like Tanya who come to PCP may hesitate to negotiate a more equitable sharing of the costs of childbearing because their only other alternative, single parenting, would have put

a greater strain on their incomes and careers and they would be stretched thinner in terms of time and energy. So, they see PCP as a win-win. This mutual benefit, where women can avoid single motherhood, and men get access to biological reproduction (and can avoid single fatherhood), explains why women seek PCP arrangements, despite the asymmetry in sacrifices and contributions.

In addition, they don't expect to be compensated for carrying the child because by carrying the child for the partnership, she is also (or primarily) fulfilling her own deep desire to have a child. Their desire to have a child is so strong that they see their male co-parent as helping **them** fulfill their big dream of having a child, rather than the other way round. So, both the mother and father may view this arrangement as a win-win, even if the men benefit a lot more from the arrangement.

Commodifying childcare is okay, childbearing is not

While childbearing was placed in the sacred/intimate realm where the mother should not expect anything in return, caring for the child once out of the mother's body was not treated the same way. Fathers and mothers expected rights (custodial and decisions making rights) and time with the child in exchange for taking on childcare responsibilities including financial responsibilities. Rights and financial responsibilities were closely tied in PCP families, more so in traditional families. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Elizabeth had to pay 50% of the £40000 IVF expenditure despite the huge wealth disparity between her and her co-parents because her rights are tied to financial responsibilities. In this sense, childcare was more instrumental/transactional, while childbearing was expected to be sacred/intimate.

While there was a lot of resistance to putting a price tag on childbearing, childrearing was open to commodification. Some women with feminist views and a gender egalitarian vision for

their family pushed for compensation for the parent who stays home with the child during the initial years. They felt that the unpaid work of childcare should be seen as labor and compensated. And the ‘price tag’ for childcare is the market rate of paid childcare. Ashley, a university professor in the UK, who like all the women in the study did not expect any compensation for carrying a child, negotiated a deal with her future gay co-parent in which the parent who did more paid work and less childcare would compensate the parent who did more childcare and therefore less paid work. “After the year [of maternity leave], if I go back on part time, let's say I work four days a week, he would then have to compensate me for that one day of income that I'm losing...He wouldn't be able to pay me as much as I normally earned. But it would be like, whatever we would normally pay to daycare, he would pay to me. Or vice versa: If he starts to work only three days a week, and I go back five days a week, then I would compensate him somewhat for his loss of income.”

Her co-parent felt such an arrangement was awkward, but she convinced him that it was fair. “I think at first, he was a little bit like, oh, but isn't that a bit weird and transactional, that one parent is paying the other parent to look after your own child. And I explained my feminist reasonings for it. And I was like, it's work and it's loss of income. And it's the only fair way. I think he then was like, okay, yeah.” She called their arrangement “egalitarian, even if it's not equal”. Similarly, Tanya was okay with being financially supported by Eli during the first year after birth when she was the primary caregiver. She saw childcare as unpaid labor and justified her living off of Eli by doing most of the childcare, an indirect way of being compensated for her childcare labor.

The resistance to compensating childbearing but not childrearing speaks to a perceived tension between the intimacy of labor that is biological in basis and labor that isn't and therefore

more open to transaction. Somehow, it's okay to pay a co-parent for childcare, but not okay to pay a co-parent for pregnancy or breastfeeding. And if some money is exchanged, it is not compensation for actually carrying the child but rather couched in more neutral terms—like an extra \$200 in rent money for a place that is appropriate for a pregnant woman, as in Eli and Tanya's situation.

It is probably easier for PCPs to make childcare transactional, because it has already been commodified in recent history, with nannies, daycares and schools. In present day societies, childcare is bought and sold in the market more freely and performed by people other than the parents. Paid childbearing, on the other hand, remains controversial because of the social taboo of making childbearing transactional, whether it is commercial surrogacy or when one is carrying their one child, as is the case in PCP families or any other kind of family. So, when PCPs talk about being equal parents, and splitting and sharing everything 50:50, they mean everything other than the invaluable work of creating the child they so desperately want and the accompanying losses, opportunity costs, sacrifices, risks, and difficulties the birth mother would endure.

Part 2 - Caring for child vs caring for each other

Because of the platonic nature of the parent-parent relationship in PCP families, PCPs draw symbolic boundaries between caring for the child and caring for each other within the family. There seems to be an implicit understanding that meeting the needs of the child is the *raison d'être* of a PCP family, whereas **being there for each other** is not part of the job description of the parents, since the latter falls in the realm of romantic partnerships which theirs is not. Therefore, the PCP family, by design, will meet the emotional needs of the child but not those of the parents. The same family functions as both an intimate space and a transactional

space depending on who the recipient of the care is. For the child, the family is an intimate space where they are entitled to receive emotional support. For the parents, emotional support must be sought elsewhere (in the arms of romantic partners, perhaps!). Some PCPs who are in romantic relationships (Tanya, Gavin, Philip, Robert-Blake) receive emotional support from their romantic partners, while those who are single (Nancy, Sasha, Eli, Elizabeth) must go to friends or family to meet those needs.

The parent-child relationship in the PCP family is seen as intimate, while the parent-parent relationship is friendly but not intimate. This distinction makes the PCP relationship and thereby the PCP family more transactional than families based on romantic relationships. The boundary work of selective caring by drawing a distinction between caring for child vs coparent has gendered outcomes, at least in the early years of the family due to the needs for support around pregnancy, birthing, and postpartum care that the birth mother requires but the father does not. The care work of supporting the birth mother has emotional, physical, and cognitive aspects. However, the most unmet need during this phase for the women I interviewed was emotional support.

Despite the fact that the need for this care work arises from the act of carrying the child for the partnership, the platonic nature of the relationship combined with the body-focused nature of pregnancy, birthing and postpartum care creates a shared understanding (shared by the mother and the father) that it is not the male co-parent's place to provide such support. There was nothing in the co-parenting agreements about care for the pregnant and postpartum body and mind (except splitting expenses), as neither childbearing **nor** the care required by the birth mother was considered labor that needed to be negotiated. The fact that these women don't receive adequate support for childbearing within the family in addition to the absence of

compensation for childbearing, make the relative contributions/burdens of men and women even more lopsided.

Because the birth mothers also feel that it is not the father's responsibility to support them, they have low expectations of such support from the fathers. They expressed the idea that 1) the father's primary responsibility is to care for the child, not the mother and 2) the parent is entitled to emotional support only from a romantic partner, not from a PCP. The women felt the need to be independent (the way they would be if they were single moms) with some help from family and friends to the extent that it was available to them. They did **hope** for more support from their male co-parents but didn't necessarily expect it. As Nancy puts it, she "hoped, but didn't expect" more emotional support than Philip gave her. Either way, the boundary work PCPs engage in to keep emotional support for parents in the realm of the romantic meant that women in PCP families don't feel entitled to support around pregnancy, birth, and postpartum care from their coparents, something they would have felt entitled to in a romantic relationship, normatively speaking.

The idea that the parent needs to find emotional support elsewhere is not restricted to women's needs. Men do not feel entitled to emotional support from their female co-parent either. However, since women's needs were greater due to needs surrounding childbearing, the inadequate support within the PCP family impacted women a lot more. The following sections look at how care for the birth mother or the lack of it was experienced and justified in the context of 1) pregnancy, 2) birthing and 3) postpartum life, followed by 4) the case of a specific kind of three-parent PCP family where the support the birth mother received was exceptionally high.

Pregnancy: Birth mother should be independent

Women's experience of pregnancies in a PCP relationship, even in the 50:50

arrangements, were not too different from how they would have experienced it if they had chosen to be single mothers-by-choice. The male co-parent's contribution to supporting the pregnant co-parent was minimal, and women's expectations were low. Women made distinctions between tasks that the co-parent would do for **her** vs for their future **baby**. For instance, they expected the male co-parent to attend the routine medical appointments and sonograms, read books on parenting, assemble the crib, or make sure the car seats were ready. They felt these were fair expectations from the father of the child.

But the women didn't have any expectations that the male co-parent would support them or take care of them during pregnancy. They didn't expect the co-parents to support them by, for instance, cooking meals, driving her to exercise classes, helping with household chores like laundry or cleaning, reading books on pregnancy and birth, or providing emotional support. When they did receive such support occasionally, they were seen as acts of generosity, "help", something he didn't have to do, or a "nice to have". They happily accepted the "help" and appreciated it, but they didn't see these as support they were entitled to. For instance, during Elizabeth's first trimester which she described as being "really awful" due to nausea and fatigue, Robert and Blake would cook food for her and it to her house. Elizabeth accepted the support and was very grateful. "[It] was really amazing."

Since women thought of childbearing as their own responsibility, any side effects, difficulties, and discomforts that came with the pregnant body and mind (morning sickness, mood swings, etc.) or even the risks and costs to health or income (a miscarriage, time off work, impact on career) was their burden to bear, and theirs alone. This was probably because it was a physical/bodily/biological experience, the burden of which they felt entitled to share with the father of the child, only if the father was a romantic partner. It's worth noting that while the

pregnant woman's bodily needs for a back rub, snuggles or a perineal massage were things she could expect only from a romantic partner, she didn't feel entitled to less intimate forms of help either, like help with housework or cooking because of ideas that it was outside his area of responsibilities to support her during pregnancy.

Why were their expectations so low? Women's expectations and their bargaining power to demand more support during pregnancy was probably diminished by their alternatives to this arrangement, single motherhood, and their desperation to have a child. While they may have received more support from a romantic partner, that was not an option they had. For all the women I interviewed, current and aspiring, the only real alternative to platonic co-parenting was to take the solo route and become a single mom. So whatever support or benefit they would get from a co-parent during pregnancy and beyond, beat having no co-parent at all. PCP was a much better option for them than single motherhood.

It's important to note, however, that the limits to the pregnancy support provided by the male co-parents in 50:50 arrangements did not necessarily have to do with a lack of willingness on the men's part to provide support. There were also practical aspects like distance between residences, or women preferring help from others like family or friends. Despite their low expectations, it's possible women would have received more support if they lived with their co-parent during pregnancy. For instance, Tanya was living in New Jersey (East coast) for almost the entire pregnancy, while her co-parent lived in Seattle (West coast). Tanya said her pregnancy was difficult, but because they lived far away from each other she could not receive the support she "could have used". Eli visited her about four times during the pregnancy for all the main appointments including the ultrasound appointment, but she was basically on her own for most of the pregnancy.

“I had morning sickness.... into, like, you know, 20 something weeks, so almost like half, or a little more than half [of the pregnancy]. And it just made it so hard to work and my co-parent was across the country... [he] was great, he would come, you know, like, for all my doctor’s appointments, but he couldn’t be there [beyond that] because of his work...It was a little miserable. I felt really lonely.” Given their friendship, it’s possible she would have received more support and empathy if they had lived together, and Eli had witnessed the daily difficulties of pregnancy. She says he didn’t really **get** (emphasis hers) the difficulties of being pregnant. “This is something that’s kind of heteronormative too, but you know, I would call [Eli] and complain that I was, like, sick all the time. And he’d be like, ‘Oh, that’s a good sign. Right? Like, that’s great’. I was like, “yeah, but F*** you, you’re not the one that has to deal with all of this. It’s pretty miserable”. She laughs as she narrates the conversation but emphasizes that the struggle was real.

Birthing: Male co-parent is not the primary support person

For women in PCP relationships the main support person during birth was not the male co-parent. It was usually the mother or a female friend. Given the high need for emotional and physical support during childbirth, women wanted those closest to them by their side. The male co-parent’s role at birth depended on how close they were to the birth mother. Philip was in the room when Nancy gave birth though her main support person was her mother. Eli was in the room when Tanya gave birth, but her main support person was her close (female) friend.

Women’s boundary work of placing the father-child relationship in the intimate realm and the mother-father relationship in the not-so-intimate (or transactional) realm is best captured by negotiations around Elizabeth’s birthing. One of her male co-parents, Robert, wanted to be in the room, so he can witness the birth of their son. But Elizabeth was not comfortable with

anybody other than her mom and medical staff in the room while she gave birth, an intensely personal moment for her. Weighing her needs for privacy against Robert's desire to witness the birth was a source of stress for Elizabeth. She didn't want to disappoint Robert. She also wanted Robert and Blake to have access to the baby soon after the birth so they could bond with the baby and do the baby-fathers skin-to-skin contact. She eventually prioritized her need for privacy and decided to say no to Robert. Robert and Blake waited in the corridor until the baby was out and then were able to hold the newborn a few minutes after the birth.

Postpartum care: Not the male co-parent's job

In the relatively transactional space of the PCP family formed for the singular purpose of having and raising a child, whose job is it to care for the postpartum body and mind as the mother heals and recovers from childbirth? Is the male co-parent's responsibilities limited to caring for the baby, or does it extend to caring for the mother who carried and birthed the child for the partnership? Should he care for her to the extent he would for a friend or a spouse? If he is entitled to the child, is he also obligated to help the mother recover from postpartum depression? In the absence of pre-existing norms, there are many such gray areas for PCP families to navigate.

Because PCPs lean towards the understanding that care for the postpartum body and mind falls in the intimate or romantic realm (and that the mother-father relationship in a PCP family isn't an intimate one) there was a huge unmet need for emotional support during the postpartum period when the involvement of mothers, friends and other support persons who helped during birthing had receded to the background. Though there was some shared understanding between the co-parents about the father's role during this phase, there were also some differences in expectations that led to tensions. While the first few months after birth can

be stressful for any new parents, the absence of social norms in PCP families added a layer of complication.

Women struggled emotionally and it strained the mother-father relationship especially in two-parent coresiding families like Nancy-Philip's and Eli-Tanya's, probably because it was too similar to the nuclear family where parents typically have a more intimate relationship. Nancy felt her needs for emotional support during the postpartum period were not adequately met by Pete. "After I had Charlie, I was probably quite reliant, or I felt quite reliant on [Philip] for emotional support, which he couldn't give me. It was a very difficult and stressful period for me. And I did not feel supported by Philip at all".

When they faced challenges around breastfeeding, Philip and Nancy felt differently about whether to persist or give up when initial attempts to breastfeed weren't successful. Nancy wanted to keep trying and get help so that she could bond with the baby via breastfeeding. She needed support in those efforts, but Philip felt it was not worth the stress and wanted to switch to formula. "That was probably our first real sticking point, because I didn't feel supported in my attempts to really breastfeed because *I* felt that we needed to get the baby on the breast as much as possible, whereas *he* would just get the bottle of formula and put it in her mouth. I found that really difficult and he wasn't supportive. He wasn't necessarily anti [-breastfeeding] or anything like that. But he wasn't supportive."

She decided to get help on her own, bought some breastfeeding aids, paid for the lactation consultant on her own, and would attempt to breastfeed using those aids only when Philip wasn't around. "I would only try this alternative way of breastfeeding when I was alone in the house and he was at work, because I couldn't have him around [while] doing it". For Philip, who felt his primary obligation was to care for the baby, supporting Nancy's need to bond with

the baby via breastfeeding was not his top priority.

Though Nancy was upset about the lack of support, she also believed that he didn't owe her any such support and that his main obligations are to the child and not to her. "I realized soon after that, that he's not actually my [romantic] partner. And he's not meeting my emotional needs. And that's okay. Because this whole thing isn't about meeting *my* (emphasis hers) emotional needs. It's about having a kid with someone and raising that kid in a particular sort of environment".

She also believes that switching to formula could be Philip's way of being an independent father rather than work together as a family where mothers and fathers have slightly different roles at least during infancy. "Philip could decide, you know, he could just go to the formula and make his own formula and decide when she was going to have it rather than having to rely on me, I suppose. So, in a way it suited him because it meant that he could be as involved as me". Philip was drawing boundaries of his own by making it clear that his primary duty was being a father, and that theirs wasn't a traditional family.

To summarize, unlike in romantic relationships, women in PCP families don't feel entitled to counting on their platonic co-parents for emotional support or physical support that is intimate (like a back rub) or non-intimate (like cooking) during pregnancy and the postpartum period, in the way that they could have if they were having a baby with a romantic partner.

The exceptional three-parent family

In sharp contrast to the above two-parent (mom-dad) families, and the three-parent mom-dad-dad family in which the birth mother was not part of the romantic dyad, the three-parent family in which the birth mother was part of the romantic dyad was very supportive in caring for the birth mother through pregnancy, birthing and the post-partum period. In the families

mentioned earlier where the mothers were single, their experiences of childbearing were only slightly better than if they were single moms and nowhere close to what romantic relationships normatively would have provided. In contrast, in the Damian-Abigail-Zachary family, where the birth mother, Abigail was married to Zachary, and was (along with Zachary) in a platonic co-parenting relationship with Damian, the support she received was exceptionally high, perhaps much higher than if she had had the child with just her husband in a heterosexual nuclear family way.

During pregnancy, birthing and the postpartum period, Damian, the third parent, took on the role of supporting Abigail in non-intimate roles (cooking, cleaning, and other housework), thus freeing up time and energy for Zachary to care for his wife in a more intimate way.

During pregnancy...we got to navigate what does it mean for me to be her co-parent, and Zachary to be her husband. And so, I think it meant that when it came to offering her physical support like being affectionate, cuddling her, that was Zachary. And part of my job was to help them have the time to do that. So, if I was taking housework or cleaning or other things so that they could have time together as a couple, that was important. When it came to helping to keep her physically comfortable, you know, like she's pregnant, so she needs snacks all the time. So [I made] sure we have snacks and water all the time, making sure we have a thing for her to sit on, if we're going [somewhere] where we have to stand...one of those little collapsible stool chair things because it's uncomfortable to stand for a long time. Like helping, being there for her, processing the pregnancy and hormones and everything, helping to make sure that, like she gets time with her friends, that's a big part of what she needs to be balanced. Like, all of that was on both of us”.

It's important to note that for women in such 'partial PCP' families, their alternative was not single motherhood, and so their expectations from both their romantic partners and the platonic parenting partner are probably much higher. Abigail and Zachary chose to have a child in this unconventional 3-parent family (where all three are equal parents in a 33:33:33 relationship) so they can have more hands on deck for themselves and the child, moving slightly closer to a community model from the nuclear model. The boundaries they drew were more

straightforward than in the other families. As Abigail and Zachary were romantic partners, Zachary was Abigail's primary source of emotional support through pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period. Damian supported the couple as a friend and as one of the three parents of the child. Whatever boundaries they needed to negotiate was mostly around Damian's role in the family as a friend of the couple while also being an equal parent of the child.

The asymmetry between the contributions and sacrifices between the genders was a lot less and seemed more balanced in this family. Though Abigail was not compensated for childbearing, she had two men to support her through all her needs. Though Elizabeth also had two male co-parents, the fact that she was not close to either beyond a friendly relationship meant that the most support she felt comfortable receiving was meals and check-ins about her pregnancy. So, the structure of the PCP family matters—the number of parents and whether the birth mother is romantically linked with one of the parents makes a big difference to the support she feels entitled to receive in a PCP family. And her alternatives to PCP clearly impact her expectations.

Part 3: Relocation

Another boundary marking that PCPs engage in which leads to gendered material inequalities between co-parents is around relocation. When potential PCPs live in different cities, having a child together necessitates that one of them relocate, especially if both/all parents want to be equally involved in the child's life. So, it's not uncommon for PCPs to relocate to their co-parent's city to start a family, the way people do in romantic partnerships for jobs, education or other purposes including having kids. However, unlike in romantic partnerships where the personal losses to career, income and/or social connections incurred by the relocating partner is somewhat alleviated by norms around coresidence, shared assets/finances and other

dependencies, here, the coparent that moves is expected to independently bear the losses incurred by their relocation even though both, but especially the person who didn't have to move, benefitted from the move. Reason: They are not a couple.

Just like in heterosexual families, here too, it's usually the lower earner that ends up moving as it makes more practical sense—a double whammy, since the *lower* earner ends up bearing the *high* costs of relocation. The lower earner is also usually, though not always, women (who are already bearing the costs of childbearing single handedly).

Since location is often tied to careers, income, friends, family, social networks, and individual preferences, the one who moves is typically at a disadvantage even in the context of a romantic relationship because of what they have to give up. In PCP families, the person who moves is at a significantly greater disadvantage because they can't rely on their co-parent the same way one can rely on a romantic partner who has gained from the move. The norm of separate residences means they will have to pay for their housing in the new city in addition to single-handedly bearing the negative impact of the move on their finances, careers and incomes, while also paying their share of childcare expenses, considered a strict obligation. They also have to find friends and other social connections in the new city more independently than typical in romantic relationships.

In PCP families, as with childbearing, relocation is framed as a sacrifice that a parent makes out of love for the (future) child and the family. This framing places relocation in the intimate realm and prevents them from equitably sharing the burden of relocation—one that enabled both to fulfill their dreams of having a child together—by compensating the co-parent that moves.

In the Tanya-Eli family the decision about who would relocate was determined by their respective careers, incomes, and the timing of the pregnancy. Eli had an established and high earning career at Amazon in Seattle whereas Tanya had just completed her yearlong post-doctoral fellowship which overlapped with the pregnancy. She was offered an early career fellowship at the State department in DC, the ticket to her dream career at the department. But the timing wasn't great as she would have had to start the job when the baby was about two months old, and that felt overwhelming for her. The "crazy hours" she would have had to put in soon after she had a child seemed "logically exciting but emotionally exhausting." Eli was not willing to move to DC as his job tied him to Seattle. He offered to fly to DC once a month if she chose to take up the job in DC. But that plan was far from ideal since that was not the kind of arrangement they had envisioned. Tanya would have then been the only primary parent and Eli would just visit a lot. Both Tanya and Eli wanted an equal parenting relationship in which both parents were equally involved in the child's life. That required living together or next to each other.

Tanya points out that their respective financial situations was a big part of their decision to start the family in Seattle. "He just makes so much more money than I do. And so, we ultimately decided that it was just, you know, wiser" to relocate to Seattle. It was a difficult decision for her since she had to turn down her fellowship offer, and she knew Seattle was not the best place for her future career. But it was a sacrifice she had to make to have a child with her best friend. The pros outweighed the cons at that point in her life.

In a much earlier version of Tanya's plan, she wanted to get a job, work for some time and then get pregnant, so she would be eligible for maternity leave. But when she turned 36, she felt an urgency and didn't want to delay having a child any further. Also, the plan to start her

post-PhD career **after** having a baby also meant that she wouldn't have to rush back to work soon after giving birth. So, she moved to Seattle "without a job in hand".

They negotiated an arrangement where Eli would financially support her until she was ready to get back to work after giving birth. It should be noted that such financial support to the relocating co-parent is unusual. They came up with this arrangement because they've been close friends for 30 years and therefore closer than most PCPs would be. Since she was going to live with him at least initially, her living expenses would be low. She negotiated with him a fixed amount of \$2000 that he would give her every month, with which she would pay for her personal expenses **as well as** her share of childcare expenses. "I asked him, listen, I don't want to just have to ask permission each time I need to, like buy a pair of shoes or something. So, if you could give me like a monthly stipend, you know, like just a monthly payment. And then it's, like, up to me how I spend my money. I didn't want to be asking him for every little thing that I needed money for. So that was our arrangement". Tanya started paid work when the child was 14 months old, but due to limited opportunities in Seattle for her area of work, her career is somewhat compromised. She doesn't earn much but was able to stick to her area of research by starting a consulting firm.

While she makes enough for living expenses and lives comfortably, she grieves the loss of the post-PhD career she thought she would have before she had a child, and worries about housing insecurity, retirement income, and savings. They now live in two adjacent townhomes and Eli owns both the houses. "It's a little bit of a sensitive point for me...I really want to own a house... my one fear is like, being homeless someday, you know, like, because I made this choice, you know, I moved across the country to a place that's really expensive, right? I don't have a regular job... it's just not the same kind of stability in my life, career wise, I don't have a

regular salary.... And so, I feel like my life, career wise, has been a little bit cobbled together. And I just worry about that, like, you know, is it gonna be the case that when our son turns 18, [Eli is] like, 'Okay, we're done, you know, like, you're on your own, I'm going to sell the house, you know, like, good luck'. I don't think that's going to be the case. But that's like my kind of worst-case scenario that I think about”.

But she also believes that if she hadn't relocated, she wouldn't have become a parent. “I'm glad I'm a mom. You know, like, if I hadn't done this, who knows? Like, what have you, like, I could have gone to work at the State Department, made a lot of money, owned my house, but never had a kid”. In certain ways, their family is not different from a traditional heterosexual family. As a family, they prioritized the man's career. The woman, the lower earner and with relatively lower earning potential, relocates to support the man's career. The woman, having given birth, takes a longer break from work and does most of the unpaid domestic work during this time, thus enabling the man's career. The man returns to work soon after his paternity leave ends, and both his career and income are unaffected by fatherhood. **However**, because Tanya and Eli are in a platonic relationship and therefore unmarried, she doesn't benefit from his assets or retirement savings, the way wives would in similar circumstances which would have compensated somewhat for the losses to career and income incurred from their relocation and the longer break from work after childbirth.

Tanya is aware that her financial situation would have been very different if she were married to the father of her child. “If I had been married, then, you know, like, you just kind of assume some of these things” She was referring to the idea that it's okay to live off the husband's earnings when one is doing most of the unpaid childcare work. “It's just really different when you're doing this with a friend, you know, like, which friend gives you a stipend to...it's just, it's

uncharted territory,” she added, while talking about how awkward it was for them to negotiate the \$2000 ‘stipend’.

During their original negotiation before they became parents, the only financial agreement they made around the relocation was that he will support her financially till she returns to work. But neither found the need for any compensation beyond that. Since the relocation is framed as a **sacrifice** that she volunteered to make to have a child, monetizing it would have been inappropriate. Negotiating an equitable sharing (via compensation) would have made the relocation transactional rather than an act of love/sacrifice that a parent makes for the future child, since the only goal of the relocation was to have a baby. In Tanya-Eli’s case, due to their 30-year friendship, she benefitted from some “help” from her “generous” co-parent in the form of living expenses for a year (“he is very good with money and generous”). Framing the stipend as “help” and justifying it because she “didn’t have a job in hand” implies they don’t see even the year-long financial support as entitlement or a compensation, despite the fact that he benefited greatly from her relocating to his city.

Now that it’s been eight years since their original negotiations about money matters, and the negative impact of the relocation on her finances has become more real over this period, Tanya is considering having a talk with Eli hoping she can negotiate something more equitable. “One of the things that I probably will do, ahead of this conversation I want to have with Eli, is a very cold calculation of what I lost in terms of my earning potential by doing this, you know, like, if I had taken the job at the State Department, you know—I roughly know what I would have made, I mean, it’s pretty easy to actually figure out because you know, they have the levels—between then and now, this is how much I would have made, probably saved up, you know, minus, like, the contributions he made and stuff like that”. Clearly, she hasn’t been able to

get herself to have this talk with him until now, since it is deeply, and understandably, uncomfortable for her. It's possible the interview for this study strengthened her resolve to do so.

Part 4: Birth mothers' longer break from work

Child-birthing women "choosing" to take more time off from work than their male coparents is usually narrated and framed as an intimate decision or sacrifice, but just like relocation it creates deep financial inequalities and vulnerabilities for women, who do not have legal rights to the retirement income of their PCPs later in life. Because the birth mother's time off work is framed as a choice and as something deeply intimate (mothers needing to bond with their newborns) the unequal impacts on the PCPs—who benefits, who loses and how—are easily overlooked.

While women's significantly longer breaks from work are framed and narrated as a choice, even by the women themselves, their stories reveal the reality of the circumstances under which these decisions were made, and they are not different from those in traditional heterosexual families. First, they *needed* longer breaks to recover physically and mentally from the toll of pregnancy and childbirth, unlike their male co-parents who didn't need such recovery time. Secondly, women's decisions to take long breaks was also a result of the fact that their male co-parents returned to work as soon as their paid leave ended leaving the mothers with little choice and an infant(s) to care for. In this sense, women's break from work is connected to perceived and/or actual division of infant care labor. Thirdly, because the women were the primary caregivers for the child and homemakers during their stay-at-home period, the male co-parents benefited from the women's unpaid childcare and housework as they were able to protect their careers and incomes from taking a hit. All these factors were mostly overlooked while the women narrate their reasons for taking a longer time off than their male co-parents. They are also

overlooked in negotiations about money because infant care is placed in the sacred realm of the intimate mother-baby bond which cannot not be monetized (even Ashley, who was the only one who felt childcare should be compensated by the co-parent, spoke about compensation when the child is a little older, after her one-year maternity leave).

Nancy, who had four months of paid leave, explains why she extended her maternity leave to 12 months: “I was really enjoying that time with Charlie and also finding it quite difficult, you know, the whole co-parenting thing...what gave me comfort was to spend time with her”. Natalie needed a longer break than her male co-parent because she gave birth and her needs for emotional support after birth were not met. Philip had two weeks of paid leave which he took, and then spent a few weeks looking for a job and then was back to full time work by the six-week mark. Since then, until she returned to part-time work (4 days a week) when the child turned one, which is almost 11 months, Nancy was a full-time stay-at-home mom and primary caregiver, enabling Philip to return to work when he did. Financially, Philip didn’t lose any earnings. Nancy had to live off her savings for eight months once her paid leave ended.

Similarly, Tanya frames her extended break from work as a personal choice (“I could have chosen to not breastfeed”) and an intimate one (“I’m so glad I got to spend a year home with my kid). The main reason she extended her break from the original six months to 14 months was because she didn’t feel comfortable sending a six-month-old to daycare and had some separation anxiety around it. Tanya explained:

I thought I would be over with all this stay-at-home mom stuff by the time the kid was six months. And then, you know, like, we got there [and] I was like, ‘No, I don’t wanna leave my baby with anybody’...By the time he was about a year, I was like, ‘Okay, now, I’m ready’... When he was younger, I felt like he was just so vulnerable. And I wouldn’t have necessarily been able to tell if there was something wrong. By the time he got to, like a year, he like started walking, he could say a couple words, like, he just felt like, a little stronger to me. And I felt like I would be able to tell if there was something wrong with his childcare better, if that makes any sense.

Not wanting to leave the child with a stranger, the reason she extended her leave, would not have been an issue if she had a stay-at-home co-parent at that point. In other words, she could have returned to work at six months if she had the option of leaving the baby with her co-parent. That wasn't an option since Eli had returned to work after his six weeks of paid parental leave (and the family depended on his income). And as with Philip, Eli too benefitted from Tanya's 14-month stay-at-home period as she took on most of the unpaid childcare and housework responsibilities during this time. His career and income were unaffected by fatherhood. For Eli, fatherhood did lead to spending more money as he was the breadwinner for a year, but as Tanya points out he "has more money; it's less of a hardship for him to pay more, because he has more". Tanya lost more than a year's worth of income due to her extended break from work, on top of her career prospects being severely compromised by relocation, losses she bears alone though Eli benefitted from both the relocation and her extended break from work.

In the Sasha-Gavin family too, Gavin, a restaurateur, "had to" return to work in two weeks leaving Sasha alone with twin newborns, one of them severely disabled. As a self-employed interior designer, her business suffered greatly as she could barely work for the first year. Over the subsequent years, she worked "as much as I could, as much business as I had" as she was and continues to be the primary caregiver of the disabled twin. As Gavin earns more than her and she does more childcare than him, he took on more financial responsibility over the years by paying for about 70% of childcare expenses. But because they are in a platonic relationship and unmarried, she has no legal right to his assets or retirement income.

Conclusion

Framing transactions such as childbearing, breastfeeding, who relocates and moms taking a longer break from work as intimate ends up creating material inequalities between the male and

female co-parents, since they disadvantage women more than men. PCPs have left such acts in the intimate realm by not compensating the co-parent who has to bear those costs in a relationship that is otherwise highly transactional in some ways. They use the language of altruism to naturalize arrangements that they leave unequal in order to preserve boundaries between PCP and adjacent social structures, and in order to be seen as “real” families. The outcome of this gendered boundary work seems to contribute more to gender inequality than the unequal division of labor (discussed in Chapter 4).

The resistance to compensation within the family or mixing money with intimacy mainly comes from the idea that money can corrupt intimate relationships like the mother-child relationship. But would it? According to Zelizer, mixing money with intimacy doesn’t necessarily hurt relationships. In fact, it can potentially enhance a relationship. In an interview about her book ‘Purchase of Intimacy,’ Zelizer argues that in the context of mixing money with intimacy, people usually get the causal connections wrong (2007). People assume that when money enters an intimate relationship, as a consequence “values and intimacy fly away.” She explains that it doesn’t always work that way and “once we get those wrong assumptions out of the way we can start asking the interesting questions which are: well, when is it corrupting? let’s fix it, or when is it enhanced?” She uses examples of parents helping children pay for college or giving money for their first house or mortgage and points out that those kinds of economic arrangements or so-called “intrusions” actually enhance relationships, not damage them. Worrying about the intrusion of money in relationships, she says, blinds us to the actual economic exchanges that are already going on in any relationship. “We are uncomfortable with money and yet the transaction is going on”. She points out that the question should not be about whether money corrupts intimacy, but about what kinds of mixtures (of intimacy and money) are

occurring and working towards the right kinds of mixtures, ones that can be enhancing rather than exploitative. So, compensation for childbearing or relocation or childcare within a PCP family need not necessarily corrupt the mother-child bond or even the friendship between the co-parents. It can make these relationships more equal and therefore enhance them.

Chapter 6: Discussion

I investigated practices of platonic co-parenting by focusing on the motivations for people to choose the PCP path to parenting; how these parents navigated gendered patriarchal norms in the process of becoming PCPs including division of labor; and for some families, the long-term and material outcomes of negotiations over co-parenting. The aim was to find out why, in the most deliberately utopian of communities, are efforts to reimagine the family failing to address gender inequalities deeply embedded in the traditional family structure.

Summary of key findings:

Motivations: People drawn to PCP are those who face barriers to parenthood and are exploring ways to make their parenting dreams come true. Their barriers vary based on their gender, sexual orientation, relationship status and the resources available to them. For men, the barriers are mainly tied to biology. Men of minority sexual orientations are particularly drawn to PCP since heteronormative structures exclude them from parenthood. Another barrier to parenthood for men is the patriarchal expectation to be breadwinners which disadvantages men with low income and education. Women, on the other hand come to PCP because they have difficulty finding suitable romantic partners with whom to have a child. Even though they may have the biological tools to have a child on their own, they find single parenting far from ideal for a variety of reasons. Secondly, women do a disproportionate amount of unpaid housework and childcare in heterosexual families, something that many straight women drawn to PCP families were attempting to subvert.

Men and women come to PCP with hopes of redressing these barriers because PCP offers them a pathway to fulfill their desires to be parents. It increases their chances, or at least their hopes, in two main ways. First, it expands the pool of **potential** co-parents to include those who

they are not or will not be romantically attracted to, including those whose sexual orientation are different from theirs. This may include friends, friends of friends, acquaintances, relatives, people registered on co-parenting sites, and those on social media support groups focused on PCPs. Second, the search for a PCP is seen as more efficient than searching for a romantic partner (to have a child with), given that they know that 1) people in the PCP market definitely want to have a child and are ready to become parents (unlike new romantic relationships which may take longer to get to the place of wanting to have kids together, if at all); 2) they could focus on looking for someone who would be a good parent, which often boils down to values and stability, whereas there would be other boxes to check in the romantic partner search including sexual attraction. In this sense, PCP offers a more realistic alternative to romantic partnership for those who are ready to have kids and have a very strong desire to do so.

Secondly, there is significant variation in the motivations of people who are drawn to PCP which then determines the kinds of families that are formed. There were two broad categories of platonic co-parents: those who turn to PCP practices in order to subvert hegemonic, heteronormative ideals of family and parenting; and those who turn to PCP in an attempt to reproduce these ideals. The subverters often used PCP to form multi-parent families (two or more parents), partner up across sexual orientations, and/or across gender identities including with non-binary and trans-people. People in this category **aspired** to form gender egalitarian and equal partnerships where parenting roles are degendered and parenting responsibilities are shared equally. They prioritized compatibility in values over conforming to heteronormative family ideals and thus subverted them.

On the other hand, those who turned to PCP to replicate the heterosexual family as closely as possible were motivated by different priorities. For them, PCP was a way to create the

much-desired traditional family along with its gendered norms and roles. When the actual traditional family became inaccessible for different reasons, they were willing to take the non-traditional path of PCP to create a family which aligns with their values, and their desires for the traditional family, including mimicking the husband-wife structure of two parents, one mother and one father. For them, the traditional family was the ideal and mostly unproblematic. They believed in gendered parenting roles, including the idea that the birth mother should be the child's primary caregiver at least when the child was young. These partnerships were far from equal, with the mothers being the primary parent and the father's role being closer to a sperm donor's—a father figure as opposed to an involved father. The father's role was limited and restricted with approximately a 90:10 split in responsibility, rights, and time with the child between the mothers and fathers.

Division of Labor: In my analysis of the division of labor among the subverters, all of whom had gender egalitarian intentions, I found a difference between two-parent (mom-dad) families and three-parent (mom-dad-dad) families. In the two-parent families, the realities of the division of labor once they had a child turned out to be a lot less gender egalitarian than they had intended. Despite their generally progressive beliefs about gender roles, the pull of traditional gender norms was quite strong for both men and women. Their intention to carry out egalitarian co-parenting was complicated by various factors, not necessarily unique to platonic co-parenting. These include a) women's significantly longer break from work compared to their male co-parent's which led to the women becoming the main caregivers during infancy; b) the weight of the cognitive labor involved in parenting which these first-time parents did not adequately plan for or take into consideration during negotiations; c) living together under one roof which led to recreating the gender roles of heterosexual nuclear families including an unequal division of

unpaid domestic labor (this was largely undone once they moved out to separate residences) and d) relocation of one parent to the other parent's city to start a family which impacted careers, incomes and finances and which in turn affected the division of labor.

The three-parent families did not fall into the same patriarchal heteronormative traps as the two-parent families. Unlike the two-parent families, which in their gender composition and number of parents resembled a heterosexual nuclear family especially when they coresided, and which in turn may have contributed to slippage into the gendered patterns and roles of heterosexual nuclear families, the three-parent families did not face the same issues even when they coresided. The division of labor after they had a child did not deviate much from the intended egalitarian plans. This was probably because a 'mom-dad-dad' PCP family is too structurally different from a heterosexual model in the context of intrahousehold dynamics and how the world sees them. It probably also helped that the labor was spread over three parents rather than two which made it more manageable. And, if we conceptualize gender division of labor as the labor performed by men vs. women in a household, there were two men to carry the male load in these families which contributed to reduced workload for the woman. I also found that among three-parent families, it is more gender egalitarian and more beneficial for the mother when the mother is in a coresiding, romantic relationship with one of the other parents as opposed to being single.

Intimacy vs. Transaction: I found that PCPs engage in gendered boundary work to separate aspects of their family that fall in the transactional realm and those that fall in the intimate/sacred realm free of monetary or other exchanges, which invariably result in gender unequal outcomes. Because PCPs inhabit a non-normative middle space between 'real' families and surrogacies, they police their actions in order to distance PCP from surrogacy and other

overly transactional forms, and also to distance PCP from traditional families and other overly intimate relationships. Framing transactions such as childbearing, breastfeeding, who relocates and moms taking a longer break from work than fathers as intimate ends up creating material inequalities between the male and female co-parents, since they disadvantage women more than men. These relative disadvantages (relative to men) that women in PCP relationships face are greater than they would have in legal marriages, where women's disproportionately higher contribution, for instance, to unpaid domestic work or childbearing is compensated by the legal expectation of shared finances including entitlement to a share of the working parent's retirement income. Women in PCPs don't enjoy such protections.

PCPs have left such acts in the intimate realm by not compensating the co-parent who has to bear those costs in a relationship that is otherwise highly transactional in some ways. Such asymmetric sacrifices made by one parent are **not** subjected to negotiation or factored into trade-offs the way many other decisions (including splitting childcare expenses) are. They use the language of altruism to naturalize arrangements that they leave unequal in order to preserve boundaries between PCP and adjacent social structures, and in order to be seen as 'real' families. This language of altruism veers toward the language used to justify traditional, heterosexual unequal gender relations. The outcome of this gendered boundary work seems to contribute more to gender inequality than the unequal division of labor mentioned above.

Going back to the vignette that this dissertation began with, we see why Tanya feels uncomfortable negotiating compensation from her significantly wealthier co-parent for the cost to her of having *their* child. It would be putting a price tag on the intimate sacrifices mothers make for their children every day. It would make the sacred mother-child relationship and their family too transactional, and too uncomfortably close to surrogacy. But the cost of leaving

childbearing, relocation, long breaks from work etc. in the intimate realm (just like they are in a traditional family), while also not receiving the benefits women would in a traditional family, created material inequality between Tanya and Eli. It negatively impacted her career, savings, retirement income and long term financial and housing security. There are, of course, a whole lot of structural factors, including patriarchal policies, that impacted the choices she had to make, which should not be overlooked, but this study is focused on inequalities created at the family level.

Unpacking the findings

My findings on motivations of PCPs are consistent with existing papers on PCP. They are similar to the findings in the study by Bower-Brown et al. (2024) of cis het PCPs even though the majority of their participants were based in the UK, and mine in the US. The tension between the ideas of ‘Reproducing the traditional family’ and ‘Modernizing the traditional family’ that their respondents experienced was similar to the motivations of my sample. The traditional parenthood ideologies and gendered parenting patterns that they found pervasive was true in my sample as well to varying degrees, especially among the ‘reproducers’ of heteronormative ideals.

My findings on motivations are also very consistent with Jadvá et al. (2015) which captured the motivations of PCPs of different sexual orientations in an online survey (majority located in the UK), suggesting that there is not much difference between the motivations of PCPs in the US and UK. My findings were also consistent with the studies on PCP in Israel and Belgium, especially the primacy given by PCPs to biological descent (Erera and Segal-Engelchin 2014, Herbrand 2018). Almost everyone in my sample wanted biological kids, one of the reasons they were drawn to PCP. My main contribution, however, is in showing **how and why** PCP families who intend to form gender egalitarian partnerships, fail to realize it, something that’s not

within the scope of previous research (which mostly focuses on motivations).

In the following section I discuss the implications of my findings for the gender division of labor literature, the money-morals literature and the marriage/two-parent debate in the US (i.e., the relationship between family structure and children's wellbeing).

Gender division of labor and gender egalitarianism in families

Extensive research on housework and childcare have found that among heterosexual couples women continue to do significantly more unpaid domestic work than their male partners. The disparity is higher for parents than non-parents. Scholarship on egalitarian heterosexual families suggest that egalitarian families are rare and more of an ideal type than a real family practice. In other words, most families that claim to be egalitarian are not. The explanations given by authors for why women do an inequitable share of household labor include a combination of structural conditions as well as theoretical explanations about gender itself (for example, Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998, West and Zimmerman 1987).

Similarly, studies of same gender relationships also suggest that they are not egalitarian which is puzzling. Why does inequality exist even in households headed by two men or two women? Even other non-traditional families are characterized by some level of inegalitarianism. None of these studies on division of labor in families, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual, consider the role of intimacy and expectations of altruism that go with it, in producing inequality. Historically, radical feminists have argued that marriage, family, and reproduction are bad for women, and that marriage and family are patriarchal institutions that benefit men more than women. However, they were mostly commenting on cishet/traditional marriages.

I argue that intimacy (and the altruism that goes with it) is one of the main contributors of inequality in families, any kind of family, even families that don't have men in them. The role of

intimacy in producing inequality in families is not very visible (and its effect hard to isolate) in most family-types, because the romantic/sexual relationship is the cornerstone of most family types (except single parent families). This includes arranged marriage families that are not necessarily an outcome of a romantic partnership. Without the romantic/sexual relationship, most families would not have been formed. When the romantic/sexual aspect of the relationship ends, the family, or at least the coresidence, typically cease to exist. Studying PCP families, a unique family-type where the romantic/sexual partnership, a foundational aspect of most families, is absent, sheds more light on the **altruism** that typically accompanies families based on romantic partnerships. Because PCPs are relatively more transactional than most family types (for instance, they have co-parenting agreements; financial obligations to child are rigid; financial contributions are linked with rights over the child; neither parent feels entitled to emotional support from the other parent), but at the same time mimic the traditional family by keeping certain acts in the intimate realm, the role of intimacy in producing inequality stands out and is easy to see. In fact, the transactional aspects of these families are what make the intimate aspects of the family stand out more thus drawing attention to the boundary work PCPs engage in to separate acts that will remain in the intimate realm and those that will not.

Though I do not study gay, lesbian and other non-traditional families that are based on romantic love, I study the role of intimacy in producing inequality in PCP families. One way to interpret my findings is that they can be generalized to explain why gay and lesbian and other non-traditional families also have an unequal division of labor that leads to inequality.

Secondly, I argue that coresidence, which often accompanies intimacy, is a major contributor to unequal division of family work, especially in heterosexual families. Research on LAT-by-choice couples and divorced/post-separation couples already points to this. In my study

of two-parent PCP families, women reported a significant drop in the amount of housework and childcare they did, especially the mental load of parenting, after they moved out to separate residences. It is telling that when men and women coreside, even if they are not in a romantic relationship with each other and even if they hold gender egalitarian values and ideas, they slip into gendered roles of heterosexual relationships. So, maybe, LAT is the way to go for couples who seek egalitarian partnerships and can afford it.

Money-morals literature

By applying theories about ‘connected lives’, and ‘boundary work’ to a new area and showing how gendered boundary work in PCP families creates gender inequality, this dissertation contributes to the growing body of work that use the intimacy-transaction tensions to understand how inequalities are produced.

Family Structure and Child Wellbeing

Though I do not study child wellbeing, the study of PCP families overall (this and other studies) contributes to the marriage debate in the U.S. Advocates for the two-parent married family (which is declining among lower class and Black families) argue that it offers a host of benefits for children, while critics of marriage promotion point out that inequality in children’s outcomes is caused not by family structure but by other factors like economic inequalities and racism in US society, and that the benefits of marriage/two parents, both economically and in other indicators of children’s wellbeing, are greater for White children than for Black.

However, both camps would agree that two parents are better than one for children if the two parents get along well and are good parents that provide and care for the child. While single motherhood can be as good an option as any other family type in a world where social structures and public policies support families of all kinds, that’s not the case in the U.S. Grossly

inadequate state support, patriarchal, sexist, and family-unfriendly policies, combined with social expectations of intensive mothering, make life incredibly hard for single mothers and their children. Most single mothers in the country are economically and/or racially marginalized.

Platonic coparenting, while it may not be as gender egalitarian as some intend it to be, is a great alternative to single motherhood. In fact, that's the reason feminist women like Tanya chose PCP. The alternative for all the women in my study including Tanya was not marriage, it was single motherhood, something they wanted to avoid at all costs. One of the best features of PCP families is the parent-child ratio. It allows for not just two, but three, four or more parents for one child. In fact, the two three-parent families in my study were able to achieve the gender egalitarian arrangement that they intended.

Some people are of course more likely to be able to attract good parenting partners than others, since the PCP market values certain characteristics more than others. The good news for most women is that the most valued characteristic in the PCP world is having a uterus, and therefore women are valued more than men in the PCP market. It can also help men avoid single fatherhood, or at least help certain men who want to be fathers realize their wishes in a world where their chances of having a child are otherwise very slim. Men of minority sexual orientations and Black men are valued more than they would be in the dating market, because many women, for certain reasons (some problematic, some not) seek PCP partnerships with non-straight men and/or Black men.

Most people who want to have children limit their options by wanting to do so in a romantic partnership. By separating romantic partners from co-parents, they can increase the probability of providing their child with more than one parent, more resources, and more stability. These are the main reasons women are attracted to PCP. By enabling family formation

outside romantic relationships, PCP increases the pool of prospective parenting partners for people searching for another adult to share parenting responsibilities with. Increasing our collective knowledge about PCP families via academic research and media coverage that caters to the public can provide viable alternatives for women and men who believe their only option is single parenting, and potentially improve child wellbeing in the most marginalized communities.

Limitations and directions for future studies

This dissertation is focused on the relationship between platonic co-parents. As mentioned above the outcomes of children in PCP families is outside the scope of this dissertation. Studying the outcomes of children in such families is important in order to learn if these families provide the much-desired stability for children, an important reason people go the PCP way. Child wellbeing is a topic that parents, policy makers, academics, and society as a whole are greatly invested in, interested in and is passionately debated. Since PCP is a rather new phenomenon it is currently hard to find adult children who were raised in PCP families. A longitudinal study that follows the children to adulthood, similar to the Up series in the UK, would be very useful.

Secondly, most of my sample is highly educated, white, middle class and located in North America. My recruitment method, positionality, location, and snowball sampling tactics would have shaped the samples I ended up with. My sample also reflects the demographic that is reported in media reports and that is on social media. It's possible that all kinds of PCPs are not reflected by my sample. For instance, there could be working class families that might have platonic child-rearing arrangements, but don't identify explicitly with the PCP community. My study does not address them. This dissertation is focused on the part of the PCP community that self-identifies as such, and this community tends to be mostly highly educated, white and middle

class.

Experiences of the PCPs and aspiring PCPs would vary with intersecting identities of gender, sexual orientation, age, (romantic) relationship status, class, race/ethnicity, nationality, and the country they are living in. Given that this is a new area of research and not much is known about this family form including what demographic groups are most drawn to it, I did not impose any demographic or social limitations on the sample. But this also meant that there wasn't enough racial diversity or variation in class to do an analysis based on race or class. Such analyses would provide us with a fuller picture of this growing phenomenon. It's possible that the division of labor between the co-parents as well as the gendered boundary work that PCPs engage in will vary with race and class.

It would also be useful to do an international comparison of the PCP phenomenon, especially of the prevalence and motivations, to see if there is a correlation between family-friendly policies (generous paid leave, publicly funded childcare, universal health insurance etc.), LGBTQIA+ friendly policies and the rise of this family type. It's possible that PCP is popular in the U.S. due to absence of adequate state support to have kids. The PCP phenomenon (like many other non-traditional family forms) seems to be uniquely Western and linked with liberalization of attitudes about marriage and gender roles in the West captured by the second demographic transition. However, PCP is becoming increasingly popular in Israel, which is at least culturally not Western. It would be interesting to know how and why PCP families emerge in non-Western societies. Other suggestions for future research include the study of 4- and 5-parent PCP families; comparison of the gender division of labor in PCP families formed by heterosexual men vs men with minority sexual orientations; and study of PCP relationships between ciswomen and transmen. I plan to do a follow up study with my sample in five years to see how the current co-

parents are faring and how many of the aspiring co-parents were successful in forming PCP families.

Conclusion

Families are a space where members don't expect to be compensated (financially or otherwise) for intimate acts like pregnancy, birthing, breastfeeding or reading bedtime stories in a way that one would if they were providing similar services in the market. In fact, one of the criticisms of the Wages for Housework campaign was the concern that "providing wages would commodify intimate human relationships of love and care and would subsume them into capitalist relations."⁴ Also, why the rare instance of a career-oriented woman asking her husband to pay for carrying their child went viral on social media and sparked a controversial debate⁵. They demonstrate the social taboo of monetizing housework or childbearing especially when one is cleaning one's own house or carrying one's own child.

But it is such altruistic (i.e., non-compensated) acts, which disadvantages women significantly more than men, that create inequalitarian families. In other words, I argue that the expectation of altruism (including by the person doing the altruistic act) is the problem! Since women's role in parenting constrains their ability to pursue careers and compete for demanding jobs it contributes to gender inequality in both the private and public spheres. Families and intimacy go together even in families that's missing a romantic relationship, as in PCP families, in their desire to make their family as real as possible. And where there is intimacy, whether it is in the mother-father relationship or mother-child relationship, expectations of altruism exist,

⁴ Wikipedia entry on Wages for Housework: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wages_for_housework

⁵ Here is one of the media articles that was written after the husband's post on Reddit went viral: "Woman requests her husband pays her \$50000 to compensate for lost salary after childbirth: Iconic and revolutionary" <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/pregnancy-compensation-mother-pay-gap-b2031258.html>

leading to inequality even in the most egalitarian-intending families.

So, does that mean egalitarian families are not possible, and they will remain “more of an ideal type than a real family practice”? Change is definitely needed at the structural level (at the level of state policies and the workplace). The profound role of structural constraints in producing gender inequality within the family cannot be underestimated, especially in heterosexual families or families that bring men and women together like Tanya-Eli’s. But alongside structural changes, there is change that needs to happen at the level of family and relationships. Compensation would need to be normalized in all family types for parenting relationships to be equitable. The burden of sacrifices and unpaid work of all kinds including childbearing, as intimate as they may be, need to be shared equitably by parents. And the only way it can be shared equitably is by one parent compensating the other for asymmetric contributions, whether it’s linked to biology (pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding) or not (relocation, greater contribution toward childcare and housework including the often ignored cognitive and emotional labor). This is the only way to complete the unfinished gender revolution.

Bringing money into intimate relationships does not necessarily corrupt intimate human relationships of love and care. As Zelizer argues, all relationships mix money and intimacy. In an interview (2007) about her book ‘Purchase of Intimacy,’ Zelizer explains: “I wouldn’t worry *whether* (emphasis hers) money is intruding in a relationship...which is the standard trope of social thinkers, forever. I would be worrying about what kinds of mixtures are occurring...which kinds of mixtures are unfair, exploitative and those we don’t want...My argument is once you stop worrying so much about mixing intimacy with economic activity we can work towards right mixes” including economic arrangements that are “enhancing relationships not damaging them.”

Secondly, it is very common in sociological research to use gender division of labor

(alone) as a measure of gender egalitarianism in families. This is common in literature that compares the extent of gender egalitarianism in different kinds of families. My study of platonic co-parents shows that altruism around childbearing (including pregnancy, birthing, post-partum recovery) and relocation contributed to inequality much more than the unequal division of labor. The latter was mostly contained to the first year after birth or until they moved out to separate residences. Another problem with using division of labor alone as a measure of gender egalitarianism between parents is that the studies then only focus on what happens after the birth of the child and exclude acts that happen prior to the birth including the losses/costs incurred from pregnancy and relocation, if applicable. I also recommend that intimate acts of pregnancy, birthing and breastfeeding be considered labor in studies of division of labor, since they are difficult, time consuming and invaluable labor and yet this contribution by women remains invisible.

Appendix: Recruitment Flyer



Are you a coparent or wish to be one?

If you have, or wish to have, a child in a platonic coparenting relationship, I invite you to participate in my study



Taking part in this study involves a virtual interview of 60-90 minutes on Zoom and completing a short questionnaire.

You could be located anywhere in the world.
You will receive a gift card worth **\$40** (USD) as compensation for your time.

If you are interested, or would like to learn more, please contact:
Shilpa Reddy at shilpa@umd.edu

*Note: You should be at least 18 years of age to participate.

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