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Lone parents and blended families: Advocating flexible working to support families in transition

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Introduction

In this chapter, we examine how flexible working policies might be an important source of organisational support for families in transition. We give an overview of what we already know about families in transition and flexible working, the gendered nature of access to flexible working and reasons why it is important to consider the impact of flexible working policies on such complex non-traditional families. Furthermore, this chapter will explore limitations in our knowledge and suggest a future research agenda laying out why flexible working policies need to be even more flexible than they currently are so as to fit with the transitory nature of today's families and the increasing need for flexibility that results from this.

In recent decades we have observed an increasing heterogeneity in family types (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). Families tend to be less static than in the past with a rising number of lone parent-families, many of whom eventually repartner and transition to blended families in which at least one partner has a child from a previous relationship (Letablier and Wall, 2018, Ganong and Coleman, 2018). To visualise this trend, the United Kingdom reports a higher than average proportion of lone parents of around 21 per cent compared to the EU average of 15 per cent (EUROSTAT, 2017) and by 2011, nearly 1 in 10 dependent children in the UK lived in a stepfamily (Office for National Statistics, 2014). However, this diversity of family types is not represented in work-family research and policy, which are still treating more traditional family types (i.e. heterosexual married parents with resident children) as their main point of reference (Gatrell et al., 2013).

The implications of this oversight become apparent when turning towards recent statistics; Lone parent-families with dependent children make up 21 per cent of families with dependent children in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2017). The latest official statistics regarding the number of blended families in the UK are from 2011, claiming that 11 per cent of couple families with dependent children

in England and Wales were blended families. In 85 per cent of those families the woman brought children from a previous relationship into the blended family, in 11 per cent it was the man, and in 4 per cent both partners had children from a previous relationship (Office for National Statistics, 2014). However, this statistic does not take into account a range of other family arrangements such as blended families in which not all partners and their respective children live together. Despite this lack of more recent and complete statistics for blended families, it can be deduced that they make up a significant number of families with dependent children in the UK today (Gatrell et al., 2015). When adding the number of lone parent families to the number of blended families, it becomes apparent that at least around one-third of families with dependent children in the UK do not fit with the dominant picture of family as two married parents living together with birth children.

As such, the boundaries of who and what constitute as family have become increasingly blurred as the patterns of family formation and dissolution become more dynamic and, according to some authors, transitional, a concept Beck-Gernsheim (2002) coins the 'post-familial family'. In such transitional families, family roles may be especially complex and demanding. Also, these roles can be subject to sudden major changes. For example, both lone parents and blended families might have to navigate highly volatile relationships with ex-partners, which impact custody arrangements and can mean that the level of parenting responsibility can vary significantly on a daily basis (Ganong and Coleman, 2017). This can have a significant impact on the work domain and might lead to different experiences of work-family conflict for those types of families. Flexible working arrangements might prove a key source of organisational support for blended and lone parent families to reduce their work-family conflict and support them in managing their numerous, often complex, work-family arrangements. However, flexible working arrangements often assume that people utilising such policies are married heterosexual couples living with birth children, referred to often as 'nuclear' families (Bernardes, 1999). Traditionally, it has further been assumed that for parents in those 'nuclear' families, mothers will act as primary caregivers and fathers as main breadwinners (Gatrell, 2005), which for so many parents is not the case; In 19% of UK families with heterosexual parents, mothers are main income earners (Ford and Collinson, 2011). The potential of flexible working for families who do not fit with often out-dated

assumptions about family composition has rarely been explored in the management literatures (see Ladge et al., 2015).

Family transitions and complex family arrangements

Lone parents in the workplace

A recent report by Gingerbread (a charity supporting lone parents) using the Labour Force Survey and Understanding Society datasets estimates that lone parent-families make up around 1 in 4 families with children in the UK and have done so for the past two decades (Rabindrakumar, 2018). However, the term 'lone' or 'single' parent hides a diverse array of family types, such as single mothers and fathers with resident children, single mothers and fathers whose children are not resident with them, mothers and fathers who are single parents by choice, and parents whose spouse has passed away or whose co-parent is not in the picture. So far, few studies make distinctions between different types of lone parents and tend to work with a narrow definition of the term, mostly restricting their samples to parents with resident children who do not live with a partner (e.g. Reimann et al., 2019). As policy echoes research, public policy defines lone parents as single adults who live with a dependent child (Rabindrakumar, 2018). However, making distinctions between different groups of lone parents both in research, and policy based on the outcomes of such research, is of vital importance. Different types of lone parents might experience considerably diverging degrees of family commitments depending on whether they have a co-parent, what their relationship with their co-parent is like, and how much childcare responsibilities they experience on a daily basis (Ganong and Coleman, 2017, Bakker and Karsten, 2013).

Childcare responsibilities are an especially vital issue to consider when it comes to lone parenthood given that there is evidence that lone parents tend to experience more childcare-related obstacles than coupled parents (Moilanen et al., 2016, Rabindrakumar, 2018). Nursery and school pick-up and drop-off times are often highly restricted, leading to challenges for all working parents to manage pick-ups and drop-offs. However, while coupled parents can shift parenting responsibilities between each other to manage childcare arrangements, this strategy is often inaccessible for lone parents (Rabindrakumar, 2018) as they might not have a co-parent or their co-parent is not available to offer childcare support.

Hence, it is suggested that lone parents may often not be able to synchronise their work schedules with a partner as coupled parents tend to do, to manage daily childcare (Moilanen et al., 2016).

Furthermore, results from Germany demonstrate that lone parents experience more family-to-work conflict but not more work-to-family conflict than other parents (Reimann et al., 2019), contrasting results from the UK which find that lone mothers experience more work-to-family conflict than other parents (Minnotte, 2012, Moilanen et al., 2019). Regarding their finding that lone parents experience more family-to-work conflict, Reimann et al. (2019) suggest that might be due to lone parents having to rely on formal childcare in absence of a co-parent. Those childcare facilities are often subject to strict drop off and pick up times and also require parents to pick fixed days of care that usually cannot be altered on a week-to-week basis (Bernardi and Mortelmans, 2018) as might be needed by lone parents whose residency arrangements differ from week to week. This exacerbates the time pressures that lone parents experience in the family domain which then in turn impacts the work domain.

In one of the few studies differentiating between different types of lone parents, Bakker and Karsten (2013) find that Dutch lone mothers who live with their children full-time experience more difficulties in managing their work and childcare demands than lone mothers whose children live with them part-time do on a daily basis. The authors explain these differences between the two groups by arguing that lone mothers whose children live with them full-time tend to work fewer hours, are not as highly educated and have fewer resources than lone parents who have a co-parent to share care responsibilities with. Hence, research has shown that when lone parents' children reside with them full-time, they are more constrained in how they combine work, childcare and other life domains than parents who have a co-parent with whom their children stay part of the time (Bakker and Karsten, 2013). The implications of such childcare related obstacles can be far-reaching. For example, in the absence of a partner lone mothers are forced to turn to more precarious forms of childcare which are less reliable and flexible, making the arrangement of short-notice childcare a challenging endeavour (Moilanen et al., 2016). This leads to lone parents having lower incomes than coupled parents as they either have to reduce their work hours to handle their childcare demands or seek more flexible and at the same time more expensive forms of childcare (Rabindrakumar, 2018).

This also shows how lone parenthood can have a significant impact on the work domain. Although lone parenthood is often a temporary state in the life course of many people, it can permanently alter lone parents' career trajectories (Bernardi et al., 2018). Extant research has made evident some of the distinct challenges that lone parent-families face in the labour market. While the number of lone parents in the UK labour market is at a record high and 68 per cent of lone parents are engaged in paid work, they tend to have to deal with more precarious employment and are more likely to work in low-paid employment than other parents (Rabindrakumar, 2018). Similarly, results from Germany indicate that lone parents are more often employed on fixed-term contracts (Reimann et al., 2019). This high level of precariousness lone parents have to face when navigating employment might be one reason why studies comparing lone and coupled parents conclude that lone parents experience higher work-to-family conflict than coupled parents. Studies by Moilanen et al. (2019) and Minnotte (2012) exemplify this by demonstrating how lone mothers in the UK experience more work-to-family conflict than their coupled counterparts, i.e. they feel that their work role interferes with their desired family role more than coupled mothers do. Moilanen et al. (2019) speculate that this might be due to aforementioned obstacles surrounding childcare arrangements. However, there is a lack of in-depth research explaining why this is the case in terms of the daily experiences and challenges of working lone parents.

Blended families in the workplace

Lone parenthood is often a transitory state that lasts an average of 5 years for lone parents in the UK (Rabindrakumar, 2018). When a lone parent repartners, a blended family is created (Letablier and Wall, 2018). However, despite the relatively large number of blended families, they are often considered an apparently undesirable family arrangement, while the nuclear family continues to represent the dominant cultural norm of an ideal family unit (Blyaert et al., 2016, Dupuis, 2010). This might be one reason why similarly to the concept of lone parenthood, the 'blended family' remains a mystery in work-family research. Also known as stepfamilies or patchwork families in the literature, definitions regarding the nature of this family type vary due to its complexity. The most encompassing definition construes a blended family as a type of family in which at least one partner in a cohabiting or married couple has a child from a previous relationship (Ganong and Coleman, 2018). However, blended

families are highly heterogeneous and an almost infinite variation of family structures exists within the given definition. For example, one or both partners in the couple may have children from a previous relationship, who may or may not live with them. They can also be of the opposite or the same sex. Moreover, either partner may be divorced, never married or widowed before entering the current relationship. Furthermore, they may or may not have children together. Due to this complexity blended families are notoriously difficult to study, offering another explanation as to why they remain understudied (Weaver et al., 2001). We are not even sure about numbers and formations of blended families within the United Kingdom. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) stepfamilies have declined by 14% between 2001 and 2011. However, we do not have any official statistics post-2011 to see the development up to the present day and the ONS provides only speculation as to why the numbers decline, one of which suggestions is that couples might not formally live together.

As a consequence of this significant gap in the work-family literature, little is known about the distinct challenges that blended families might encounter in forming and maintaining the family unit, which may differ significantly from those faced by nuclear families, and the impact this might have on the work domain. These difficulties include the relationship with co-parents and partners from previous relationships, consolidating different parenting approaches with new partners, and building relationships with stepchildren (Kumar, 2017)

The transition to becoming a family can be an especially challenging time for couples in blended families. While the traditional transition to parenthood in which a man and a woman become first-time parents has been extensively studied, evidencing this as a challenging time in which new identities are emerging and existing identities are shifting (e.g. Greenberg et al., 2016, Singley and Hynes, 2005), we know very little about the impact of non-traditional transitions to parenthood on parents' work-life experiences and identities.

We know that one of the challenges blended families experience when forming are related to bringing together a number of unrelated adults and children such as step-children, stepparents and step-siblings into the newly formed family. Where couples in first-order relationships (i.e. couple relationships before either partner has children) form their relationship prior to becoming parents, couples in stepfamilies

have to navigate their new relationship with each other in addition to developing step-relationships with children and even ex-partners (Cartwright and Gibson, 2013).

Blended family systems are far more complex and diverse than nuclear family systems and the multiplicity of roles each family member can hold and lack of clarity of said roles result in distinct challenges. This is exacerbated by the fact that most blended family systems transcend the boundaries of a single household as co-parents, partners and dependent biological and stepchildren children can be located in multiple households (Braithwaite et al., 2003). Here, a major distinction between two types of blended families systems becomes clear, those formed post-bereavement and those formed post-divorce or separation (Gold, 2010). Blended families formed post-divorce or separation have replaced bereavement as the leading precursor to contemporary blended families and where blended families that formed post-bereavement often mimic the nuclear family system by substituting deceased biological parents, post-divorce blended families instead add parental figures (Coleman et al., 2000).

In addition to the difficulties in bringing together a number of unrelated adults and children to form a new family unit and handling ex-partners while doing so, negative connotations of blended families and lack of social support amongst other factors make blended families more fragile, unstable, and vulnerable to dissolution (Coleman et al., 2000, Kumar, 2017).

All these challenges blended families encounter may have a significant impact on the work domain, and flexible working arrangements could prove a major source of organisational support for blended families in the workplace.

However, before turning to the connection between families in transition and flexible working, we feel that that it is paramount to first discuss gender relations. Flexible working arrangements are highly gendered and as a consequence have distinct drawbacks for both fathers and mothers using them or seeking to use them. In the following section, we show the consequences of this and argue that these drawbacks might be exacerbated for lone parents, repartnered parents and stepparents due to the complex nature of their family arrangements that does not fit within the gendered nature of flexible working arrangements.

Gender and the state of flexible working arrangements

In the context of this chapter we define flexible working as organisational policies and practices that are designed to offer workers greater control over when, where, how long and how much they engage in work-related activities (Hill et al., 2008). Flexible working arrangements (FWA) have been linked to employee satisfaction (Wheatley, 2017), employee engagement (Richman et al., 2008), and overall organisational performance (Beauregard and Henry, 2009), highlighting how FWA might offer advantages for both, employers and employees.

However, studies investigating the effectiveness and impact of flexible working arrangements on a variety of domains are usually constructed based on gendered assumptions, presuming an intact nuclear family with a male primary breadwinner and a female primary caregiver. Here, we can establish a direct link between the prevalence of the nuclear family in work-family research, and how organisational policy and practice is directly shaped by this focus. Organisational policies and practices in the Global North are the product of assumptions based on ideal worker norms (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). The ‘ideal worker’ is characterised by masculine working standards (and the implied notion that men are not usually closely involved in child care). Workers conforming to ideal and masculine worker norms participate in full-time paid employment, are expected to be deeply committed to their work and to be relatively free of non-work commitments such as family demands (Williams, 2000). However, family-friendly working policies, as which flexible working can be classified, are usually studied using samples that constitute supposedly ‘ideal work-life balancer’ norms. Ideal work-life balancers are those who are targeted by the policies and typically consist of heterosexual coupled, white, middle-class mothers of young children working in white-collar jobs (Özbilgin et al., 2011). The ideal worker norm for men coupled with the ideal work-life balancer norm for women remains gendered - still implying a family arrangement in which a heterosexual couple (even if they had not intended this prior to the birth of their first child) ‘fall back into gender’ (Miller, 2011), distributing paid and unpaid work between them in a neo-traditional way: i.e. the man has capacity to invest more time and commitment in his job than his female partner, because she takes on the majority of family-related tasks. As the number of women in the workforce has risen exponentially in the second half of the 20th century and a great deal of research

has focused on gender equality and work-family conflict in nuclear families, with flexible working policies gradually introduced, often with the explicit aim to support mothers in the workplace (Gatrell et al., 2013, Lewis and Humbert, 2010). However, this focus has also had negative implications for gender equality as it reinforces gendered norms of work and parenting and hence upholds the status quo in which women are expected to be the main caregiver and men the main breadwinners. Organizational presumptions that mothers are usually secondary earners tend to support gendered line-manager views that that work-life balance policies are aimed mainly at women and are less relevant for men (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016, see also Tracy and Rivera, 2010, Lewis and Cooper, 2005). Mothers may thus be regarded by line managers as having particular entitlements to access flexible working schemes (even if managers are not especially enthusiastic about facilitating such access, Gatrell et al., 2014). Whatever the nature of their role, women who take up family friendly policies (especially if working part-time) may be disadvantaged at work as a result of working fractionally or flexibly. Mothers are often assumed to be less work-orientated than fathers and may find themselves excluded from job enhancing opportunities (the 'mommy track'), regardless of their personal ambitions (Blair-Loy, 2003, Smithson and Stokoe, 2005).

Employed fathers, by contrast, might experience significant benefits as regards workplace prospects due to (often unsubstantiated and potentially incorrect) assumptions they are unencumbered with childcare responsibilities, at least compared with mothers. Regardless of status however (i.e. whether lone or partnered), fathers may experience difficulties in accessing flexible and work-life policies. This is because, while such policies may appear on paper to embrace 'parental' needs, employers' assumptions about mothers being the primary users of work-family initiatives mean in practice that line-managers might treat fathers as less entitled than mothers to utilize offers of flexibility at work (Burnett et al., 2010, Tracy and Rivera, 2010). Flexibility may be thus, in theory, gender neutral and designed to support employed 'parents'. In practice, however, supervisor attitudes towards paternal entitlements remain often suffused with gendered visions of maternal responsibility for domestic care agendas (Burnett et al., 2010; Tracy & Rivera, 2010), meaning that fathers may find it harder than mothers to access such entitlements.

What Gatrell and Cooper (2016) term the 'Parsonian' image of heterosexual couple parenting (drawing upon the work of 1950s sociologist Talcott Parsons, in which fathers are positioned as lead income earners, and mothers as principal child carers, see also Gatrell, 2005), continues to influence the gendered approach to flexible working within many organizations. As Gatrell and Cooper (2016) observe, the 'Parsonian' family image may be increasingly irrelevant to men and women who are not parenting within intact heterosexual relationships but are single, divorced, living in blended families or in single sex relationships and/or seeking to allocate responsibilities for paid work and domestic care according to criteria other than gendered lines. It may be equally irrelevant to couples parenting within intact relationships where the division of labour is fluid and may not emerge along gendered lines, despite continued social pressures on couples to fall back into gendered roles (Miller, 2011).

Yet still, the Parsonian image of supposedly work-oriented fathers and child-oriented mothers remains deeply ingrained within organizational cultures. Flexible working policies and entitlements to access these thus continue, often, to be constructed around out-dated and gendered notions of family stability and heterosexual two-parent families, which does not reflect the experience of the 21st century workforce in the Western world (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016).

In conclusion, current FWA are geared towards heterosexual coupled mothers of young children in first order relationships, while other groups such as fathers suffer from restricted access to flexible working. Due to aforementioned ideal worker norms, work organisations may be either unconscious of men needing access to flexible working or reject outright the notion of men striving to be equal parents, requiring organisational support to achieve their desired work-family balance (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016). Due to these gendered organisational norms and expectations, FWA is stigmatised in that men are more likely to feel as though they are disadvantaged by colleagues' flexible working, most of whom are mothers (Humberd et al., 2015, Gatrell et al., 2014). Women, on the other hand, are more likely to feel that their flexible working leads to negative career outcomes (Chung and Van Der Horst, 2018).

Families in transition and flexible working

Lone mothers and fathers, blended families in which one or both partners have children from prior relationships, amongst other non-traditional family forms such as same-sex parents, have been mostly

omitted from flexible working studies and hence policy. While there is a growing awareness that many family forms do not fit into the nuclear family model (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006) the lack of knowledge on how diverse family forms manage their work and family responsibilities remains a critical gap in work-family research (Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 2002, Casper et al., 2007), and can be linked to a lack in policies to support families who function differently. FWA might be a key source of organisational support for non-traditional family types such as lone parent-led families and blended families to enable them to successfully manage their work and family commitments, the nature of which might be very different from intact nuclear families.

It has been noted that non-traditional families may face unique work-family pressures while at the same time having less access to support (Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 2002). One issue that might cause work-family conflict for both lone parents and parents in blended families is that they are likely to experience more intensive and complex family demands than traditional families. Due to the nature of their parenting situation, lone parents usually experience heavier parenting responsibilities than coupled parents when they have to manage both work and family demands on their own (Reimann et al., 2019). While parents in blended families might be able to rely on their new partner to support them with childcare arrangements, research has shown that not all stepparents are necessarily highly involved in the upbringing of their stepchildren and often take on a more auxiliary role while the birth parent takes on the role as primary parent (Cartwright, 2010). While stepparents are often found to assist in activities such as transporting the children to and from school, their engagement in other, more intimate parenting activities such as providing discipline are often limited (ibid). Hence, repartnered parents cannot automatically rely on their new partner to become an equal co-parent to their children and are likely to experience heavier parenting duties than do coupled parents in first order unions. On the other side of the equation, stepparents might struggle with their newfound parenting responsibilities, especially if they do not have children themselves. Research has found that stepparents, and especially stepmothers, experience more parenting-related stress than biological parents (Shapiro, 2014). Major obstacles that stepparents encounter and that might lead to increased stress levels are often related to the co-parenting

relationship between their partner and their ex-partner (Cartwright and Gibson, 2013) and unrealistic expectations regarding by all the parenting role of the new stepparent (Cartwright, 2010).

Moreover, co-parenting relationships are a common challenge for both lone parents and blended families and can result in conflicts related to residency arrangements and lead to a lack of stability in childcare responsibilities (Ganong and Coleman, 2017). Research has shown how both lone parents and parents in blended families often have to navigate volatile relationship with their ex-partners which can lead to serious obstacles in co-parenting with them. When a lone parent repartners, co-parenting relationships have been observed to deteriorate, which can lead to increased stress and conflict for all family members (Cartwright and Gibson, 2013).

In connection to this, residency arrangements can be quite unstable as a result of ongoing custody battles (Cartwright and Gibson, 2013). Depending on how co-parents share physical residency of their children, childcare responsibilities for parents in blended families and lone parent-families might diverge significantly. For example, co-parents might agree for their children to live with either parent 50 per cent of the time in which case childcare responsibilities will often be different from week to week. As a 7 day week cannot be fairly divided between co-parents, novel residency arrangements are implemented by courts in which children might stay with one parent for 4 days and then with the other parent for 4 days, or alternatively one week with one and the next week with the other parent (McIntosh and Chisholm, 2008). Thus, it is difficult for both lone parents and parents in blended families to predict their childcare commitments and adapt their work schedules accordingly. Hence, flexible working arrangements designed for nuclear families are not likely to meet the needs of lone parents and blended families when considering their unique family practices (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016).

One FWA that might be particularly useful to support lone parents and blended families in navigating both their heavier family demands and workloads is work schedule flexibility. Work schedule flexibility, defined as a tool which offers employees control over their work hours within certain parameters (Jung Jang et al., 2012), might be a major tool to allow parents to meet strict nursery and school pick-up and drop-off times, which is especially important for lone parents who often cannot rely on a co-parent for childcare (Reimann et al., 2019) but might also be relevant for blended families in which partners do

not live in the same household or in which stepparents take on a more auxiliary role and the main share of parenting responsibility falls on the birth parent (Cartwright, 2010).

This is supported by findings from previous research which has demonstrated that work schedule flexibility can help reduce stress and negative work-family spill over for lone parents and those with a higher family workload (Jung Jang et al., 2012), including parents in blended families as established earlier. Hence, for employees with heavier family demands, schedule flexibility may be an easily implemented and economical organisational work-family initiative to support such employees in managing their work and family responsibilities (Jung Jang et al., 2012).

The 'dark side' of flexible working

However, work organisations need to be careful implementing flexible working arrangements as research has shown the existence of a 'dark side' of flexible working. In some cases, flexible working can lead to overtime and increased work hours, and as such increased instead of decreased work-family conflict (Chung and Van Der Horst, 2018). For example, Reimann et al. (2019) find that when lone parents utilise remote working or flexitime working it does not necessarily lead to enhanced benefits in comparison to other parents. Instead, remote working is found to increase WFC for both lone and coupled parents (Abendroth and Reimann, 2018).

Controls need to be in place ensuring that employees utilising flexible working policies such as flexitime and remote working are safeguarded against such averse outcomes. Especially lone parents belong to a vulnerable group for which flexible working has the potential to create more pressure. Chung and Van Der Horst (2018) demonstrate that if schedule control as a means of flexible working is implemented by organisations to increase employee performance, it leads to more unpaid overtime for men. As 75% of lone fathers are estimated to be in full-time employment (Bernardi et al., 2018), they might be adversely affected, especially considering how they remain an invisible group in organisations (Gatrell et al., 2014). Hence, while work schedule flexibility might be a key resource for lone parents to negotiate timing conflicts between work and childcare, lone fathers are at risk to work more unpaid overtime using flexitime.

Lone fathers and flexible working

Studies on lone parenthood in the context of paid work tend to focus on lone mothers. Scholars justify this decision by arguing that first, lone parents are mainly women. Moreover, it is argued that for men relationship status seems to have less of an impact on the work domain as can be seen in the fact that lone fathers tend to exhibit more stable work patterns and are objectively more successful than lone mothers (Bernardi et al., 2018). This is supported by findings from a quantitative study of work-to-family conflict among lone and coupled parents by Minnotte (2012) who finds that lone fathers report less work-to-family conflict than lone mothers, coupled mothers, or coupled fathers. The author suggests that this might be because lone fathers have more resources available to them than lone mothers, which enables them to navigate work and family demands more successfully. However, even if this is the case, it does not explain why lone fathers experience less work-to-family conflict than coupled parents who have a partner they can share family responsibilities with.

Current estimates suggest that 90 per cent of lone parents in the UK are women (Gingerbread, 2019) and it has been suggested that the current focus of flexible working policies on supporting lone mothers promotes the marginalisation (instead of mainstreaming) of policies to support parents in balancing work and family commitments (Lewis, 2001). It has been suggested however, that statistics might underestimate the numbers of men who are lone fathers some of the time, for example when children are classified as 'officially' resident with mothers but with fathers providing care (and therefore acting as lone parents) where required (Gatrell et al., 2015) Lone fathers might be under even more pressure than lone mothers given their restricted access to flexible working policies which are based on assumptions that those utilising them will be working mothers. Lone mothers can hence access flexible working relatively easily whereas lone fathers might feel discouraged from using such policies (Gatrell et al., 2014). This might exacerbate work-family conflict for lone fathers as organisational norms and policies continue to assume that fathers can rely on mothers to take on the main share of parenting work, which is not the case for lone fathers.

Hence, due to the gendered nature of flexible working arrangements, lone fathers, among other groups, experience a perceived restricted access to flexible working arrangements.

Conclusion and future research directions

In this chapter we argue that research and policy need to recognise and address shifts in attitudes and behaviours rather than assuming social stability (Wood et al., 2018). As the diversity of family in the UK increases, we need to recognise this diversity and give special consideration to the transitory nature of many family types such as lone parenthood. If it ever existed, the idealized 'Parsonian' image of the nuclear family and the gendered division of labour is no longer appropriate for today. As David Morgan (2011) suggests, such notions of nuclear families are out-dated. Research and policy need to take into consideration present fluidities in family formation and maintenance: what Morgan terms 'family practices'. The limited body of research on families in transition demonstrates that current flexible working policies do not meet the needs of these groups, as they were designed based on research drawing on samples representing traditional notions of family. Indeed they do not necessarily meet even the needs of parent couples where adult relationships may be intact, but divisions of labour in relation to paid work and domestic care agendas may not align with Parsonian ideals. Hence, for new policies that can effectively support non-traditional family types to be designed, research needs to be undertaken first to establish the needs of these diverse groups and make policy recommendations to meet those needs.

Also, distinctions need to be made between different types of lone-parent led and blended families as their needs might differ vastly (Bakker and Karsten, 2013). These distinctions should not only be based on gender but also other socio-demographic factors. One of the most important but so far overlooked factors might be residential status and co-parental relationships. It is only logical that work-family experiences, and needs, of lone parents who have to navigate a complex relationship with their former spouse and who might encounter child residency conflicts differ significantly from that of single parents by choice or lone parents whose spouse has passed away. Similarly, future research needs to carefully detangle relationships in blended family systems as experiences of families in which only one partner or both partner have children from a previous relationship or where not all family members live in the same household, might differ vastly.

While this chapter only deals with non-traditional family types that are a result of relationship transitions, i.e. becoming a lone parent, and repartnering and parenting with a new partner, an abundance of other non-traditional family types require further consideration discussed. Among them, parents who identify as members of the LGBTQ community are in urgent need of scholarly attention. To design flexible working policies that address the needs of individuals that have so far been overlooked, studies should take an intersectional approach which takes into consideration non-traditional forms of family and recognises the diversity of current workforces (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

Practical recommendations

Perhaps the key problem facing policy makers is the paucity of extant research on diverse blended families, meaning there is limited evidence base upon which to craft appropriate policy decisions. We lack, for example, understanding of how step-parents manage their responsibilities towards work and family. We have limited information regarding how new, blended families relate to each other within households, and how previous partners interact - as well as how child care is shared between parents and step-parents. We lack sufficient statistical understanding of what is occurring within non-traditional families in the Global North, and this poses problems from the highest levels in government through to local and organizational level.

The ultimate priority must be to commission new research which embraces these non-stable family forms which characterise the 21st Century, so that family policy may reflect what is happening in practice now, rather than what occurred in the past.

Once such research has established the needs of different types of lone parents and members of blended families, specific policy recommendations can be made. For now, we can only deduce from the body of research on lone parenthood and blended families that their family workload is likely heavier and more complex than that of members of intact nuclear families. Workplaces need to recognise this complexity and offer more flexible approaches to FWA that do not assume that the employee utilising them has got another parent at home who is available for short-notice childcare arrangements. Workplaces need to recognise that families are not stable entities and that the requirements for flexible

working arrangements may change over time, both on a day-to-day basis and more long-term when it comes to relationship transitions and more complex family arrangements.

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