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Parenthood and the gender division of labour across the income distribution: the relative importance of relative earnings

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Abstract

This study employs a gendered relative resource approach to examine whether the importance of relative resources varies by couples' household income in shaping changes in the gender division of labour after first birth. Scholarship has long argued that the gender division of labour within different-sex couples is influenced by partners' relative resources. However, couples face class-based constraints that may alter the relevance of relative resources in shaping changes in gender divisions of labour following the transition to parenthood. This study compares couples' paid work and housework before and up to four years after first birth, using 28 waves of the British Household Panel Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (N = 1,606 couples). I find that the effect of relative resources on changes in couple's paid work and housework behaviour after first birth varies substantially by household income. Among higher-income couples, women's paid work and housework time changes less among those with high relative earnings and more among those with low relative earnings, while men's time allocation varies little after first birth. In contrast, among low-income couples, women's paid work time and share decreases most after first among female breadwinners while their male partners' paid work time increases substantially. These findings reflect the greater constraints that low-income parents face in reconciling work and family and highlight the need for greater attention to class interactions in the process of gender specialization in both research and work-family policy.

Introduction

Scholarship has long argued that partners' relative resources (in terms of earnings, education or occupational prestige) are key determinants of the gender division of labour within different-sex couples. Either due to differential bargaining power resulting from unequal command of resources (e.g. England and Kilbourne, 1990; Lundberg and Pollak, 1996) or a couple's desire to maximize household utility (e.g. Becker, 1981), partners with greater relative resources are theorized to specialize in market work while those with fewer resources specialize in unpaid work. Implicitly, relative resources are assumed to affect the division of labour in gender-neutral and universal ways. However, empirical research shows that women continue to perform the majority of unpaid labour within households even when they outearn their male partners (Bittman *et al.*, 2003; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015), indicating that although relative resources may moderate patterns of gender specialization, gender remains a powerful organizing force shaping men and women's roles within the household. At the same time, research on work-family dynamics across socio-economic classes in the United Kingdom and the United States suggests there may be reason to question whether relative resources matter equally across households of varying socio-economic circumstances (Warren, 2003, 2015; Usdansky, 2011). However, this potential heterogeneity has not been systematically explored. In this study, I examine whether the moderating effect of relative earnings on the gender division of household labour varies across the income distribution in Great Britain.

In liberal welfare states characterized by high levels of economic inequality and limited social support, couples face class-specific conditions that can constrain or promote gender-egalitarian divisions of household labour (Crompton and Lyonette, 2010; Usdansky, 2011; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). For instance,

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although the need for two incomes may promote more equal divisions of paid labour among low-income couples, the quality and relative inflexibility of many low-paid jobs, poorer access to work-family policies and fewer resources with which to outsource unpaid work place substantial constraints on low-income couples' decisions about paid and unpaid work and how it is divided within the household (Presser, 2003; Shows and Gerstel, 2009; Crompton and Lyonette, 2010; Warren, Pascall and Fox, 2010; Damaske, 2011; Chung and van der Horst, 2018). At the same time, although the 'ideal worker' norms and workplace cultures of overwork that are characteristic of professional and managerial jobs may hinder gender equal divisions of labour among higher-income couples (Maume, 2006; Cha, 2010), these households have greater access to institutional and private resources to reconcile paid and unpaid work responsibilities (Crompton and Lyonette, 2010). These class-based constraints may alter the role of relative resources in shaping gender divisions of labour within couples. Among low-income couples, for instance, constraints may effectively "discount" (Blumberg and Coleman, 1989; Fuwa, 2004) the bargaining power that individuals are theorized to derive from their relative resources.

In this study, I examine whether the importance of relative resources in shaping the gender division of labour varies across the household income distribution in Great Britain, focusing on the transition to parenthood—a life stage during which gender specialization intensifies and solidifies among different-sex couples (e.g. Fox, Pascall and Warren, 2009; Craig and Mullan, 2011; Schober, 2013). Using 28 waves of longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (N = 1,606 couples), I examine how wives' pre-birth relative earnings affects household divisions of paid work and housework up to four years after first birth and how these effects vary by class, measured using household income, during this important transition.

I find that the moderating effect of relative resources on changes in the gender division of labour after first birth depends in part on couples' overall household resources. In general, wives' relative earnings moderate changes in wives' paid work and housework behaviour among couples at the middle and upper end of the household income distribution in ways consistent with a gendered relative resource perspective—although these moderating effects are relatively minor. However, the effects of relative earnings run counter to relative resource expectations among low-income couples, where gender normative specialization increases most after first birth among couples where wives were the primary earner prior to pregnancy. The results of this study indicate that the drivers of gender specialization are not as universal as they are often assumed to be and highlight the importance of understanding how long-hypothesized mechanisms of specialization interact with other couple-level characteristics in influencing the division of paid and unpaid work.

Background

Relative resource and gender theories of household specialization

A variety of long-standing theories have argued that partners' relative resources (in terms of earnings, education, or occupational prestige) are key determinants of the gender division of labour within different-sex couples. One line of thinking suggests that relative resources are indicative of partners' comparative advantages in paid and unpaid work, with partners specializing according to these comparative advantages to maximize the couple's joint welfare (Becker, 1981). Alternatively, relative resources may connote bargaining power within a relationship (e.g. England and Kilbourne, 1990; Lundberg and Pollak, 1996). Because housework is considered undesirable but necessary (Blood and Wolf, 1960), partners with greater relative resources—typically men—are able to bargain out of these tasks. Applied to the transition to parenthood, which necessitates greater household unpaid work and accentuates tradeoffs between paid and unpaid work, relative resource theories suggest increased specialization within couples following the transition to parenthood. Because relative resource theories are inherently gender-neutral, this approach predicts that, regardless of gender, partners with greater relative resources will specialize in market work while partners with lower resources will specialize in unpaid work.

Feminist scholars have long critiqued relative resource explanations of the gender division of labour, arguing that gender roles within a household are an important way that individuals "do" gender to meet societal norms and expectations rather than the results of a power negotiation between partners or a simple tradeoff based on utility maximization (e.g. West and Zimmerman, 1987; Marx Ferree, 1990; Greenstein, 2000). From this perspective, parenthood is theorized to increase household specialization in a gendered rather than gender-neutral way due to the starkly gendered nature of prevailing norms and expectations surrounding motherhood and fatherhood. And, indeed, empirical evidence widely acknowledges that the transition to parenthood increases gender specialization within different-sex couples (e.g. Fox, Pascall and Warren, 2009; Craig and Mullan, 2011; Schober, 2013).

Although relative resource and "doing gender" approaches are often treated as competing explanations

of the gender division of labour, empirical evidence suggests that these forces are interactive rather than mutually exclusive (e.g. Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). Scholarship spanning a variety of country contexts indicates that relative resources operate in a gendered rather than gender-neutral way in shaping the gender division of labour following first birth (Sanchez and Thomson, 1997; Kanji, 2011; Herrarte, Moral-Carcedo and Saez, 2012; Kühhirt, 2012; Begall and Grunow, 2015; Wood, Kil and Marynissen, 2018). Women's greater relative resources reduce the magnitude of gender role-conforming specialization after first birth, but they do not eliminate gendered specialization altogether (e.g. Sanchez and Thomson, 1997; Kanji, 2011; Kühhirt, 2012; Wood *et al.*, 2018). For example, analyzing dual earner couples' employment patterns over the transition to parenthood in Belgium, Wood and colleagues (2018) found that women's greater pre-pregnancy relative earnings were related to more egalitarian divisions of paid work following first birth but that substantial gender specialization remained. In this way, partners' relative resources may moderate the specializing effects of parenthood on the household division of paid and unpaid work, but gender and gender normative expectations remain an important organizing force shaping divisions of household labour.

Still, some scholarship has questioned whether relative resources play any significant role at all in shaping changes in the gender division of labour following first birth (e.g. Schober, 2013; Argyrous *et al.*, 2017). Instead, these studies highlight the importance of other mechanisms of specialization such as partners' gender ideology and women's absolute earnings, which are theorized to increase women's ability to purchase substitutes for their domestic labour (Gupta, 2007; Killewald and Gough, 2010).

Gendered relative resources across the income distribution

Evidence from the United Kingdom and the United States on class-specific work-family challenges suggest that the gendered effects of relative resources on changes in husbands' and wives' paid work and housework following first birth may also vary across the household income distribution. Although social class is a multifaceted construct relating to individuals' economic, social, and cultural resources, I focus on the role of income, which is an important factor motivating decisions regarding labour supply and which can be directly leveraged to outsource unpaid work.

The United Kingdom is a market-oriented liberal welfare state that provides limited social supports to facilitate a dual-earner, dual-carer division of labour within couples (see, e.g. Korpi, Ferrarini and Englund, 2013). It is also characterized by high levels of economic inequality (e.g. OECD, 2022). In this context, couples face classed barriers and facilitators to paid and unpaid work that affect how that work is shared within couples (e.g. Warren, 2003; Usdansky, 2011; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). These factors, outlined in Table 1, may constrain or promote gender egalitarian divisions of paid and unpaid work after first birth and may affect how gender and relative resources interact to shape the division of household labour following the transition to parenthood.

Economic theory suggests that different push and pull factors drive employment among women in low- and high-income households. Women in low-income households may be more likely to maintain employment because their families need the income whereas women with high earnings potential (who tend to be partnered with high-earning spouses (e.g. Schwartz, 2010)) may be more likely to continue working because the opportunity cost associated with staying at home is high (e.g. England, Gornick and Shafer, 2012). These factors may alter the moderating effect of relative resources on the gender division of household labour after first birth. In low-income households, income need may mean that women (and men) are more likely to maintain employment following first birth regardless of each partners' relative earnings. In contrast in higher-income households where couples can "afford" to specialize, relative resources may have a greater moderating effect on specialization

Table 1. Class-specific factors promoting and constraining gender egalitarian divisions of labor

	Low-income households	High-income households
Equality-promoting	• Need for two incomes • Shift work	• High opportunity cost of staying home • Greater access to work-family policies • Greater resources to outsource childcare and domestic labor
Equality-constraining	• Quality and inflexibility of low-paid jobs • Limited access to work-family policies • Limited resources to outsource childcare or domestic labor	• Less need for two incomes • Ideal worker norms and workplace cultures of overwork

following first birth, resulting in greater variability in wives' paid work patterns following parenthood.

The nature, schedule and flexibility of one's job also pose class-specific work-family challenges that may affect gender divisions of labour following first birth. Lower-paid workers are more likely to work shifts with a fixed start and end time and work non-standard or unpredictable hours and are less likely to have control over their schedules or have the ability to change their work hours to accommodate family responsibilities (; Presser, 2003; Shows & Gerstel, 2009; Warren, 2015; Harknett, Schneider and Luhr, 2020). Low-paid jobs are also less likely to offer conditions and opportunities that promote employment continuity, such as opportunities for advancement, employer recognition and social status (Damaske, 2011). Thus, although the need for two incomes suggests that lower-income couples are more likely to engage in paid work equally, the quality and inflexible characteristics of many lower paid jobs may pose barriers to dividing paid work equally within couples following first birth. These constraints may diminish the role of relative resources in moderating the gendering effects of parenthood and low-income couples may be more likely to specialize along gender traditional lines following first birth regardless of pre-pregnancy relative earnings. Still, some evidence suggests shift work may actually facilitate egalitarian divisions of unpaid work as partners can alternate paid and unpaid work shifts (Presser, 2003; Warren, 2003).

High-income workers face different challenges in balancing paid and unpaid work. High-income workers (especially those in professional and managerial occupations) are particularly likely face persistent "ideal worker" norms in the workplace that reward those who demonstrate their dedication through long work hours and accessibility outside of standard working hours (Chung and van der Horst, 2020). This culture of overwork among high-earning workers systematically disadvantages women employees, who are also expected to take primary responsibility for unpaid work within different-sex couples (Maume, 2006; Cha, 2010). Therefore, although the opportunity costs of staying home are high among high-income workers, workplace expectations of long hours combined with normative expectations of mothers as primary caregivers discourage women's employment following first birth and may increase within-couple specialization.

Work-family policies may counteract some of the work-family conflicts high- and low-income workers face, but the effects of particular policies—and workers' access to them—are classed (Evertsson *et al.*, 2009; Warren *et al.*, 2010; Korpi *et al.*, 2013). Although high-income women are more likely to face workplace cultures of overwork, they are also more likely to have access to work-family policies that promote their employment continuity—particularly in liberal welfare state regimes like the United Kingdom that lack strong state policies promoting a dual-earner, dual-carer model (e.g. Korpi *et al.*, 2013).

Paid maternity and paternity leave in the United Kingdom reflect normative assumptions of mothers as primary caregivers with 39 weeks of leave available to mothers (plus an additional 13 weeks unpaid) and 2 weeks available to fathers. While paid maternity leave facilitates employment continuity after first birth (e.g. Gornick and Meyers, 2009), when coupled with minimal paternity leave it may also encourage gender traditional divisions of labour by creating gendered care-related skill imbalances within couples (see e.g. Tanaka and Waldfogel, 2007). Eligibility for paid maternity and paternity leave in the United Kingdom is contingent upon "employee" status (excluding contractors and the self-employed), history of service with the same employer and meeting an earnings threshold. As a result, 16% of new mothers and 27% of new fathers are not eligible for these policies, with those with lower education and those in routine or intermediate occupations less likely to be eligible than more privileged groups (O'Brien *et al.*, 2017). With less access to paid maternity leave, lower-income mothers may be more likely to leave the labour force altogether upon the birth of a child. Furthermore, high-income mothers and fathers alike are more likely to have access to more generously compensated company-specific paid leave policies to support mothers' employment and fathers' involvement in unpaid work (Chanfreau *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, while the imbalance of paid maternity and paternity leave available in the United Kingdom may encourage gender traditional divisions of labour among different-sex couples across the income distribution, effects on household specialization may be most stark among low-income households.

Access to other work-family policies like flexible work are also classed. Flexible working arrangements (in terms of time and location) have been shown to help mothers maintain their paid work hours by providing greater freedom in how mothers reconcile paid and unpaid work (Chung and van der Horst, 2018). Although all parents were granted the statutory right to request flexible working arrangements in 2003, these requests are most likely to be granted to salaried employees, those with university degrees and those in professional occupations (O'Brien *et al.*, 2017; Chung and van der Horst, 2018). With less access to flexible work arrangements, lower-income mothers may face greater difficulty reconciling paid and unpaid work following first birth than high-income women and

may be more likely to reduce their paid work hours as a result.

Finally, high-income couples also have greater capacity to purchase substitutes for their own domestic labour, which may reduce women's unpaid work time and promote women's employment continuity after first birth. Maternal employment is positively associated with the availability and affordability of childcare, especially for very young children (Boeckmann, Misra and Budig, 2015). This is particularly important in countries with high costs and few public subsidies for childcare like the United Kingdom where the cost of childcare may push lower-paid mothers out of the labour force. Beyond childcare, in a high inequality context like the United Kingdom, high-income couples may achieve more gender egalitarian divisions of unpaid work by outsourcing housework (Heisig, 2011). Household expenditure on domestic outsourcing is negatively associated with women's housework time (Killewald, 2011; Sullivan and Gershuny, 2013)—although Killewald (2011) notes that the association is weaker than one might expect. Therefore, in theory, with greater ability to outsource, it may be easier to achieve a gender-equitable division of unpaid work within high-income couples. However, research shows that outsourcing has little effect on the gender division of housework within couples because it reduces men's housework time as well as women's (Gonalons-Pons, 2015; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015).

This study

Recognizing the classed barriers and facilitators to gender egalitarian divisions of labour among different-sex couples in high inequality liberal welfare state contexts, I examine whether the association between relative resources and changes in the gender division of labour after first birth varies across the household income distribution in Great Britain. Specifically, I examine two central hypotheses:

H1: The substantial constraints that low-income couples face in decisions about the division of paid work and housework reduce the moderating effect of relative resources on changes in the gender division of labour following first birth. Gender specialization of paid and unpaid work within low-income couples increases after first birth regardless of partners' relative resources, resulting in greater uniformity in divisions of labour among low-income couples.

H2: With greater access to public and private resources to overcome class-specific work-family constraints, changes in the gender division of labour after first birth among higher-income couples are moderated by partners' relative resources, resulting in greater variability in how paid work and housework are divided following first birth.

In addition to examining potential heterogeneity in the importance of relative resources in shaping changes in the gender division of labour after first birth, I also address several limitations of prior empirical research on gender specialization during the transition to parenthood. First, prior research has largely focused on average changes in paid and unpaid work behaviour after first birth among *individuals* (exceptions include: Sanchez and Thomson, 1997; Wood *et al.*, 2018). However, understanding changes in the gender division of labour also requires analysis of changes among *couples*. In this study, I examine both absolute changes and within-couple relative changes in paid and unpaid work time to capture how relative resources affect both individual and couple behaviour following parenthood. Second, while most prior studies have tended to focus on either paid work or unpaid work outcomes, precluding consideration of whether the mechanisms of specialization differ across paid and unpaid work, I examine the division of paid and unpaid work in tandem. Finally, a number of studies have focused exclusively on divisions of labour among dual-earner couples where both partners are in full-time employment (Yavorsky, Kamp Dush and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Wood *et al.*, 2018). However, for some families the transition to parenthood may necessitate the transition to employment for one or both partners. By analyzing single-earner couples as well as dual-earner couples, I am able to examine changes in the gender division of labour among partners who may, for example, have particularly low intra-couple economic bargaining power.

Data and sample

Data were drawn from a harmonized version of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and its successor study, the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS). BHPS and UKHLS are nationally representative longitudinal household surveys collecting information from all household members on topics including work, education, income, social attitudes and, importantly for this study, weekly time spent on paid work and housework. I include waves 1–18 of BHPS, spanning from 1991 to 2008, and waves 1–10 of UKHLS, spanning 2009–2020.

My sample consists of 1,937 different-sex couples in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) who became parents between the ages of 20 and 45 and for whom data are available for both partners at least one wave before and one wave after the birth of their first

child. The selection of couples who became parents was based on having no biological or adopted children living in the household before the birth. I include both married and cohabitating couples (although partners are referred to as "husbands" and "wives" for simplicity). As Northern Ireland was not included in BHPS until 2001, it is excluded from the analysis for consistency. I limited my sample to couples whose weekly time spent on paid work and housework were available for both partners in each wave, excluding 71 couples missing paid work information and 552 couples missing housework information (which was not collected in some waves of data). Finally, I further restricted my sample to couples where income, employment and education data were available for both partners in each wave, rendering an analytic sample of 1,606 couples (3,212 individuals) for paid work and 1,255 (2,510 individuals) for housework. On an average, couples were observed in 4.1 waves during my period of analysis, with a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 6 waves.

Measures

I analyzed six dependent variables reflecting women and men's absolute time allocations to paid work and housework as well as their relative allocations within couples.

- *Wives' and husbands' weekly hours of paid work* was derived from survey questions regarding respondents' typical weekly hours of paid work at their main job, any second jobs, overtime and self-employment. Weekly paid work time was top coded at 80 hours per week, affecting approximately 1% of observations;
- *Wives' share of couple paid work* was created by dividing wives' weekly hours of paid work time by the sum of both partners weekly paid work time;
- *Wives' and husbands' weekly hours of housework* was derived from a survey question asking respondents' typical weekly hours allocated to housework (specified in the questionnaire as activities such as cooking, cleaning and laundry). As with paid work, weekly housework time was top coded at 80 hours per week, affecting less than 0.1% of observations;
- *Wives' share of couple housework* was created by dividing wives' weekly hours of housework by the sum of both partners' weekly housework time.

The main independent variables in this analysis include post first birth, share of pre-parenthood couple earnings and household income tertile. Post first birth is a binary measure indicating whether the observation occurred before first birth (which includes observations more than 9 months and less than 2 years prior to first birth) or after (including observations up to 4 years after first birth). Observations within one year following first birth were excluded to avoid capturing atypical paid work and housework hours during periods of maternity leave. However additional analysis retaining these observations show substantively similar results to those presented here and are available upon request.

Share of pre-pregnancy couple earnings measures partners' relative earnings prior to pregnancy and was derived from respondents' gross monthly labour earnings the month prior to interview (including earnings from usual pay, second jobs, and self-employment), expressed in 2020 GBP. Pre-pregnancy relative earnings is a categorical variable distinguishing between couples where the husband earned 60% or more of couple earnings pre-pregnancy (referred to throughout as "male breadwinner couples"), where both partners earned between 40 and 60 per cent of couple income ("dual-earner couples") and where the wife earned 60 per cent or more of couple income or more ("female breadwinner couples"). Alternative breadwinner thresholds as well as a continuous measure of relative earnings were also tested and are discussed further in "Robustness Analyses."

Finally, household income tertile measures couples' financial position relative to other households prior to pregnancy and was derived from a measure of gross monthly income from all household members from all income sources (including earnings, social benefits, investments, and private benefits), expressed in 2020 GBP. Household income tertiles were calculated within the analytic sample of couples transitioning to parenthood and tertiles are referred to "low-," "middle-" and "high-" income couples throughout the text for simplicity.

Models controlled for age (centred at the sample mean, 33), whether any subsequent births occurred since the transition to parenthood, changes in gross monthly household income since pre-pregnancy and couples' Government Office Region of residence. I also controlled for a series of pre-pregnancy characteristics including respondents' own absolute gross monthly labour earnings and their own earnings squared, educational attainment (measured as a binary indicator equal to one for those with a university degree or higher), whether the respondent was employed the week prior to interview, and their occupational class (measured as a binary indicator equal to one for those currently or most recently employed in a professional occupation in the year prior to pregnancy and zero otherwise). Models also controlled for partners age (centred at the mean), and partners' pre-pregnancy employment status, education and occupational class.[1]

Table 2. Mean division and hours of paid work and housework before and after first birth by household income

	Low income		Middle income		High income	
	Pre-pregnancy	After first birth	Pre-pregnancy	After first birth	Pre-pregnancy	After first birth
Wives' share of couple paid work	41.6	28.7+	45.5	33.2+*	46.4	33.5+*
Wives' weekly hours of paid work	30.8 (16.6)	19.4 (16.2)+	38.1 (12.3)*	23.5 (15.9)+*	41.4 (13.1)*	25.4 (17.0)+*
Husbands' weekly hours of paid work	41.5 (16.6)	43.6 (15.0)+	44.7 (11.5)*	43.3 (13.3)+	46.6 (12.3)*	44.4 (12.7)+
Wives' share of couple housework	65.1	74.2+	61.8	71.5+	61.0	70.0+*
Wives' weekly hours of housework	9.9 (6.2)	17.3 (10.7)+	8.7 (5.0)*	15.2 (9.4)+*	8.4 (5.2)*	14.3 (9.5)+*
Husbands' weekly hours of housework	5.1 (4.0)	5.4 (4.9)	5.4 (4.0)	5.5 (4.7)	5.2 (3.6)	5.5 (4.3)

Note: N = 1,606 couples for paid work hours and share and 1,255 couples for housework hours and share. + indicates that after-first-birth values differ from pre-pregnancy at $p < 0.05$; * indicates values differ from those among low-income couples at $p < 0.05$.

Finally, models included a series of binary variables for survey year to control for unobserved temporal trends.

Analytic approach

I used random effect panel regression analysis[2] to explore how gender divisions of household labour vary by pre-pregnancy relative earnings and household income, using data from one wave before the transition to parenthood and at least one wave (and up to four waves) after for each individual in my sample. Although data was available for paid work time in every wave, data on housework was only available in waves 2–20, 22, 24, 26 and 28. Analysis of housework is limited to those waves, and sample sizes are therefore smaller for these analyses than for analyses of paid work. Regressions are unweighted and standard errors are clustered at the primary sampling unit level to account for the multistage sampling design.

My analysis consists of two main specifications for each dependent variable:

Model 1 is the baseline model, assessing the extent that relative earnings moderate changes in men's and women's paid and housework time as well as how that time is divided within couples over the transition to parenthood. It includes all variables described above as well as an interaction term between post first birth and pre-parenthood share of couple earnings.

Model 2 adds a three-way interaction term between post first birth, pre-parenthood share of couple earnings and pre-parenthood household income tertile to Model 1. The addition of this interaction allows me to test H1 and H2 and assess whether the moderating effect of relative earnings on specialization following the transition to parenthood differs across the household income distribution.

Results

Descriptive results

Table 2 shows men's and women's average weekly time allocations to paid work and housework and the division of paid work and housework before and up to four years following first birth, disaggregated by household income tertile. Results show increased specialization within couples across all household income groups following first birth. Wives' share of couple paid work time decreases substantially following first birth and wives' share of housework increases. For paid work, this pattern is driven largely by large decreases in wive's hours of paid work after first birth (between 11.4 and 16.0 hours per week across income groups). Husband's hours of paid work also change following parenthood, although to a lesser extent than for wives and the direction of this change varies by household income. Paid work time among husbands in low-income households increases by around 2 h following first birth while it decreases by a similar amount among middle income and high-income husbands. Notably, although wives' hours of paid work are positively associated with household income both before and after first birth, statistically significant differences in wives' share of total couple paid work by household income only emerge after parenthood,

driven by particularly large specializing effects of parenthood among low-income couples.

Increased specialization in the division of housework after first birth is primarily driven by large increases in wives' housework time, with the largest increases observed among low-income wives (7.4 hours per week, compared with 6.5 and 5.9 hours among middle- and high-income women). Consistent with prior research (e.g. Heisig 2011), women's hours of housework time are negatively associated with household income both before and after first birth. However, as with paid work, differences in wives' share of couple housework by household income only emerge after first birth. Husbands' housework does not change meaningfully following first birth and does not vary statistically significantly by household income before or after first birth.

Table 3 shows pre-pregnancy descriptive statistics for husbands and wives in my sample, disaggregated by household income tertiles. Across household income groups, husbands are older, more likely to be employed and earn more, on average, than wives. In middle- and high-income couples, wives are more likely than husbands to hold a college degree. Across income groups, a similar proportion of couples (40.2–42.2 per cent) are male breadwinner couples in which husbands' earnings constitute 60 per cent or more of total couple earnings. However, female breadwinner couples, where wives earn 60 per cent or more of total couple earnings, are most common among low-income couples, accounting for around 20.4 per cent of couples in that income group compared with 12.8 per cent and 10.5 per cent among middle- and high-income couples, respectively.

Model 1 results: changes in the division of labour after first birth by relative resources

To aid interpretation, regression results are presented as changes in predicted outcomes after first birth and graphically as predicted outcomes over time. Full regression results are available in Appendix 1 Table 1. As shown in Table 4, the results from Model 1 for paid work outcomes indicate that, contrary to gendered relative resource expectations, shares of paid work decrease most among female breadwinners and least among women in male breadwinner couples. Among female breadwinner couples, wives' share of couple paid work time decreases 17 percentage points after first birth compared with 11 and 10 percentage points among women in dual-earner and male breadwinner couples, respectively. This pattern can be observed visually in Figure 1 (left panel) where declines in wives' predicted share of couple paid work are steepest among female breadwinner couples and shallowest among male breadwinner couples.

Greater specialization in paid work among female breadwinner couples after first birth is driven by a combination of changes in both men's and women's paid work time. After first birth, wives in female breadwinner couples reduce their paid work time by 12.9 hours per week and their husbands increase their paid work time by 4.0 hours. Wives in male breadwinner couples reduce their paid work hours slightly

Table 3. Pre-pregnancy descriptive statistics

	Low income		Middle income		High income	
	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands
Age—years	27.3 (4.9)	29.9 (5.2)+	29.3 (4.3)*	31.3 (4.6)+*	30.9 (3.9)+	33.0 (4.4)+*
College degree—%	21.3	18.1	39.8*	33.9+*	65.8+	58.6+*
Employed—%	84.1	92.2+	96.4*	98.9+*	95.8+	98.9+*
Professional occupational class—%	28.7	25.9	50.4*	51.9*	79.4+	73.7*
Monthly labour income—2020 GBP	1134.4 (739.4)	1499.7 (801.9)+	1980.0 (815.4)*	2514.6 (800.0)+*	3097.9 (1584.8)+	4311.8 (2170.0)+*
Monthly household income—2020 GBP		2793.6 (799.3)		4736.4 (534.6)*		8257.3 (2826.3)*
Couple type (relative earnings)—%						
Male breadwinner		42.2		40.2		40.3
Dual earner		37.4		46.9*		49.3*
Female breadwinner		20.4		12.8*		10.5*
N waves observed		4.1 (1.1)		4.2 (1.1)		4.0 (1.1)
N	540	540	522	522	544	544

Note: Male breadwinner couple: wife earns ≤40% couple earnings; Dual-earner couple: wife earns 40–60 per cent couple earnings; Female breadwinner couple: wife earns ≥60%. + indicates that values differ by gender at $p < 0.05$; * indicates values differ from those among low-income couples at $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Model 1 results: difference in predicted paid work outcomes from pre-pregnancy to after first birth by relative earnings

	Wives' share of paid work	Wives' hours of paid work	Husbands' hours of paid work
Male breadwinner	−0.10+	−11.16+	−0.38
Dual earner	−0.11+	−13.97+*	−0.73
Female breadwinner	−0.17+*	−12.90+	4.00+*

Note: N = 1,606; + indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from zero at $p < 0.05$; * indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from those for male breadwinner couples at $p < 0.05$. Full regression results are available in Appendix 1.

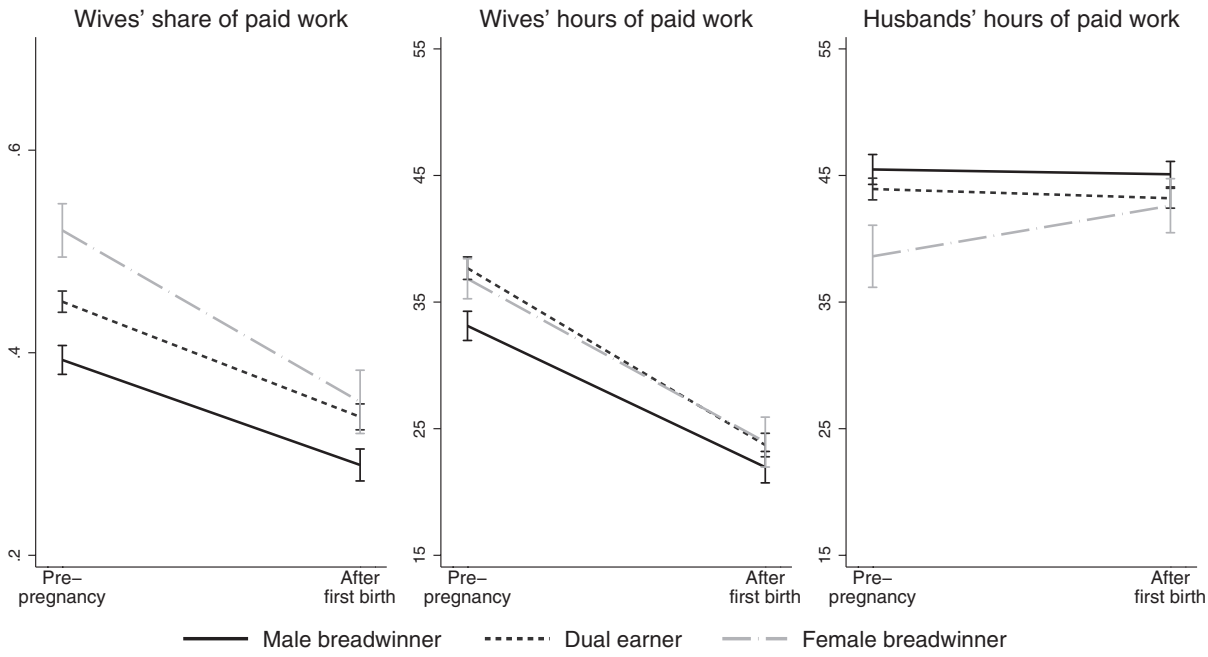

Figure 1. Model 1 Results: predicted share and weekly hours of paid work over the transition to parenthood by relative earnings

less than breadwinning wives (11.2 hours) and wives in dual-earner couples reduce their paid work time most (14.0 hours) after first birth, suggesting a non-linear relationship between relative earnings and changes in wives' paid work. Meanwhile, husbands' paid work time among dual-earner and male breadwinner couples remain stable following the transition to parenthood.

Model 1 results for wives' share of housework, shown in Table 5, show little variation by relative earnings, with wives' share of housework increasing by 7 percentage points after first birth among male breadwinner couples and 8 percentage points among dual earner and female breadwinner couples. However, the results for women's housework time are largely consistent with gendered relative resource expectations. Housework time among wives in male breadwinner couples increases the most after first birth—5.9 hours per week compared with 4.6 and 3.3 hours among wives in dual-earner and female breadwinner couples, respectively. Shown visually in the centre panel of Figure 2, the steepest increase in housework hours after first birth can be seen among wives in male breadwinner couples while the shallowest increase is observed among breadwinning wives. In contrast, men's housework time does not change appreciably after first birth, regardless of relative earnings.

Taken together, Model 1 results show mixed findings regarding how relative earnings affects the gender division of labour following first birth and highlight the importance of examining both paid and unpaid work outcomes as well as the importance of examining absolute and relative time allocations. Although partners' pre-pregnancy relative earnings moderate changes in wives' housework time after first birth, this is not the

Table 5. Model 1 results: difference in predicted housework outcomes from pre-pregnancy to after first birth by relative earnings

	Wives' share of housework	Wives' hours of housework	Husbands' hours of housework
Male breadwinner	0.07+	5.86+	0.24
Dual earner	0.08+	4.63+*	0.13
Female breadwinner	0.08+	3.29+*	–0.57*

Note: N = 1,255; + indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from zero at $p < 0.05$; * indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from those for male breadwinner couples at $p < 0.05$. Full regression results are available in Appendix 1.

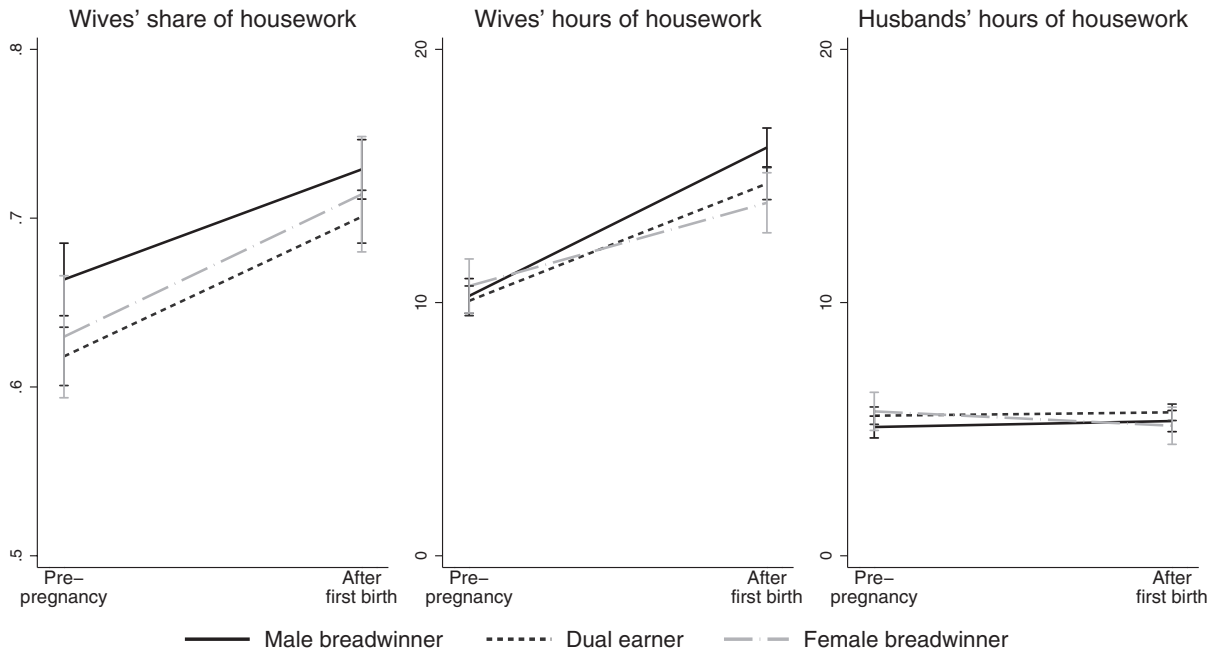

Figure 2. Model 1 Results: predicted share and weekly hours of housework over the transition to parenthood by relative earnings

case for wives' paid work time, men's paid work or housework time nor how paid work and housework time was divided within couples. In fact, paid work results often contradict gendered relative resource expectations, with larger changes observed among wives with greater relative earnings pre-pregnancy. This results in greater similarity in paid work behaviour within genders following first birth, despite differences in relative earnings, and greater time on and responsibility for housework among wives across the relative earnings distribution.

Model 2 results: heterogeneity by household income

The results from Model 2, which includes a triple interaction term between post first birth, pre-pregnancy share of earnings and pre-pregnancy household income, demonstrate that the relationship between relative income and changes in paid work and housework outcomes varies substantially by household income. In fact, they suggest that the counter-relative resource patterns observed in Model 1 are driven primarily by patterns among low-income couples.

Model 2 results for paid work outcomes are presented as changes in predicted outcomes after first birth in Table 6 and graphically as predicted outcomes in Figure 3. Full regression results are available in Appendix 1 Table 2. Shown in the left column of Table 6 and the left panel of Figure 4, changes in shares of couple paid work time among middle- and high-income couples largely follow gendered relative resource expectations in terms of the direction of association. Consistent with H2, wives' share of paid

Table 6. Model 2 results: difference in predicted paid work outcomes from pre-pregnancy to after first birth by relative earnings and household income

		Wives' share of paid work	Wives' hours of paid work	Husbands' hours of paid work
Low income	Male breadwinner	−0.06+	−6.63+	−0.88
	Dual earner	−0.14+*	−15.37+*	−0.99
	Female breadwinner	−0.28+*	−15.62+*	11.37+*
Middle income	Male breadwinner	−0.13+	−13.42+	−0.58
	Dual earner	−0.11+	−13.99+	−0.91
	Female breadwinner	−0.08+	−10.74+	−1.69
High income	Male breadwinner	−0.13+	−13.74+	0.23
	Dual earner	−0.10+	−12.89+	−0.44
	Female breadwinner	−0.06+*	−10.11+	−3.47

Note: N = 1,606; + indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from zero at $p < 0.05$; * indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from those for male breadwinner couples at $p < 0.05$. Full regression results are available in Appendix 1.

work decreases more after first birth the lower their pre-pregnancy relative earnings. However, as indicated in Table 6 these differences by relative earnings are not consistently statistically significant. By contrast, in line with H1, the opposite pattern is observed among low-income couples. In the bottom income tertile, share of couple paid work time among female breadwinners decreases by 28 percentage points after first birth compared with 14 percentage points among women in dual-earner couples and just 6 percentage points among women in male breadwinner couples.

Contrary to previous research that has suggested that couples' paid and unpaid work responses to parenthood are driven primarily by changes in women's behaviour, with husbands' behaviour relatively fixed (e.g. Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016), results indicate that the dramatic shift in the division of paid work time observed among low-income couples is driven by changes in both men's and women's paid work hours. Notably, female breadwinners in low-income couples reduce their paid work hours by 15.6 hours per week after first birth (compared with 15.4 hours and 6.6 hours among women in dual-earner and male breadwinner couples) and men in low-income female breadwinner couples increase their paid work time by 11.4 hours per week (compared with decreases of 1.0 and 0.9 hours among men in dual-earner and male breadwinner couples).

These results constitute a stark reversal of pre-pregnancy divisions of paid work among female breadwinner couples at the bottom of the household income distribution. They also indicate that the convergence in paid work time by relative earnings (and the division thereof within couples) after first birth observed in Model 1 is driven by low-income couples. Shown graphically in Figure 3 (top panel), although women and men's paid work time and share varied substantially by their relative earnings prior to pregnancy among low-income couples, this variation is almost eliminated following first birth. In contrast, higher up in the income distribution, variation in women's paid work time and share by relative earnings increased or remained stable following first birth.

Model 2 results for housework are shown in Table 7 and Figure 4. Like the results for paid work and consistent with expectations in H1, I find that among low-income couples, changes in women's share of couple housework time contradict gendered relative resource expectations. Among female breadwinner couples, wives' share of couple housework time increases 12 percentage points following first birth compared with 8 percentage points in dual-earner couples and 5 percentage points in male breadwinner couples. However, in contrast with H2, changes in wives' share of housework do not vary statistically significantly by relative earnings among middle- or high-income couples.

In general, increases in women's hours of housework after first birth among low-, middle- and high-income couples reflect gendered relative resource expectations in terms of the relative magnitude of changes by relative earnings. Wives in dual earner and female breadwinner couples increase their housework time less than wives in male breadwinner couples; however, only differences between female breadwinner and male breadwinner wives in middle- and high-income couples are statistically significant. Among middle-income couples, female breadwinning wives increase their housework time 3.4 hours after first birth compared with 6.0 hours among male breadwinner wives. Notably, housework time among high-income female breadwinner wives

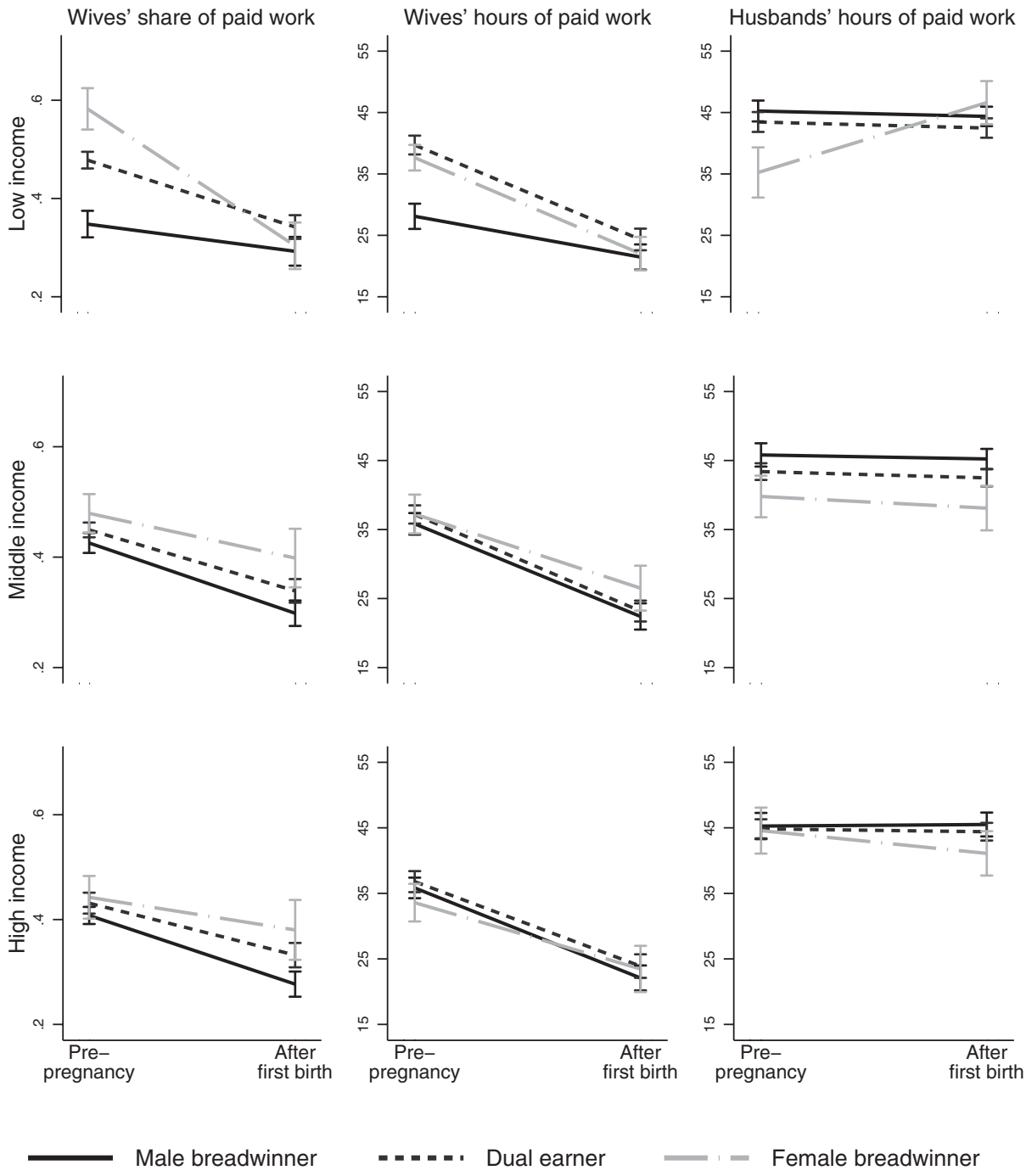

Figure 3. Model 2 Results: predicted share and weekly hours of paid work over the transition to parenthood by relative earnings and household income

does not increase statistically significantly at all following first birth while high-income male breadwinner wives increase their housework time by 5.6 hours per week. Men's housework time remains largely unchanged following first birth, regardless of relative earnings or household income. However, husbands in low-income, female breadwinner couples reduced their housework time by 1.2 hours after first birth.

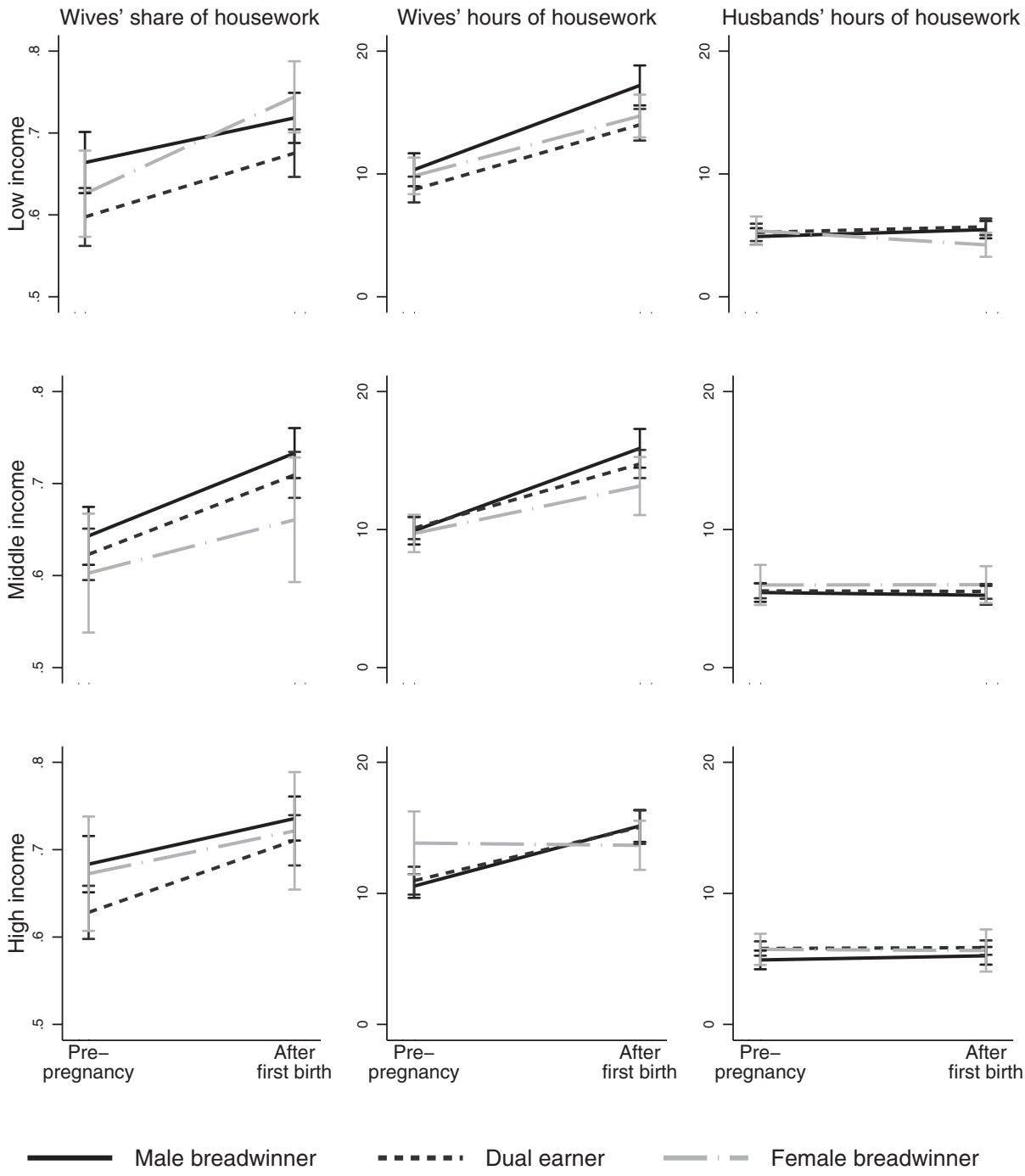

Figure 4. Model 2 Results: predicted share and weekly hours of housework over the transition to parenthood by relative earnings and household income

Robustness analysis

I conducted five supplementary analyses to test the robustness of my results. First, I tested whether results vary by year since first birth (ranging from one year pre-pregnancy up to four years after first birth). Results are presented in Appendix 2 and show remarkable consistency across post-first birth years, indicating that new gender divisions of labour forged following the

Table 7. Model 2 results: difference in predicted housework outcomes from pre-pregnancy to after first birth by relative earnings and household income

		Wives' share of housework	Wives' hours of housework	Husbands' hours of housework
Low income	Male breadwinner	0.05+	6.86+	0.56
	Dual earner	0.08+	5.27+	0.46
	Female breadwinner	0.12+*	4.88+	−1.15+*
Middle income	Male breadwinner	0.09+	5.97+	−0.20
	Dual earner	0.09+	4.64+	−0.04
	Female breadwinner	0.06+	3.43+*	0.02
High income	Male breadwinner	0.05+	4.59+	0.31
	Dual earner	0.08+	4.08+	0.07
	Female breadwinner	0.05	−0.17*	−0.09

Note: N = 1,255; + indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from zero at $p < 0.05$; * indicates that predicted changes from pre-pregnancy values differ from those for male breadwinner couples at $p < 0.05$. Full regression results are available in Appendix 1.

birth of a child—and heterogeneity therein—have lasting consequences within couples.

Second, I tested models replacing pre-pregnancy relative earnings with pre-pregnancy relative hourly wages (calculated by dividing reported monthly labour earnings by reported typical weekly paid work hours multiplied by 4.33). Hourly wages could not be calculated for a small number of respondents who reported labour earnings in the month prior to interview but reported no hours of paid work due to employment changes. These respondents and their partners (11 couples for paid work outcomes; 20 couples for housework outcomes) were excluded from this analysis. Presented in Appendix 3, results from this analysis are consistent with my main results.

Third, I tested the sensitivity of my results to several alternative definitions of pre-pregnancy relative earnings. In my main analysis the threshold for male (and female) breadwinner couples was 60% of couple earnings, with dual-earner couples defined as those in which each partner earned 40 –60 per cent of couple earnings. In this analysis I tested two alternative breadwinner thresholds. First, I tested a lower breadwinner threshold of 55 per cent , with dual-earner couples defined as those in which each partner earned between 45 and 55 per cent of couple earnings. Next, I tested a higher breadwinner threshold of 65%, with couples earning between 35 and 65 per cent of couple earnings defined as dual-earner couples. Finally, I tested models using a continuous rather than categorical measure of relative earnings. The results from all three alternative analyses, presented in Appendix 4, show similar patterns to my main specifications in both magnitude and statistical significance.

Fourth, I repeated my analysis, substituting measures of pre-pregnancy relative earnings, pre-pregnancy household income and pre-pregnancy individual earnings with measures averaged over two pre-pregnancy waves. Because partners' incomes may fluctuate over time (e.g. Winslow-Bowe, 2006), averaging measures across two waves may more accurately capture longer-term patterns. Requiring two pre-pregnancy waves reduced my sample size to 1,133 and 993 couples for paid work and housework models, respectively. A comparison of relative earnings groups measured in one wave vs. averaged over two pre-pregnancy waves shows a high degree of consistency among male breadwinner and dual earner couples and more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of couples categorized as female breadwinner using a single pre-pregnancy observation remained in this group after averaging earnings over two years (Appendix 5 Table 1).

The results for this robustness analysis are presented in Appendix 5 Tables 2–5 and shown graphically in Appendix 5 Figures 1–2 (the results from my main specifications on this limited analytic sample are available for comparison in Appendix 5 Tables 6–9 and Figures 3–4). These results show similar patterns to those found in my main specifications.

Finally, I tested whether my main results were driven by single earner couples (either by choice or by temporary unemployment) by re-running my main specifications limiting my sample to couples where both partners were working for pay prior to pregnancy (1,426 couples for paid work and 1,237 couples for housework). Results (shown in Appendix 6) for both paid work and housework outcomes are substantively consistent with those from in my main specifications. However, excluding single-earner couples results in stronger relative resource gradients in changes in women's share and hours of paid work after first birth among middle- and high-income couples and almost no relative earnings gradient among low-income couples. This suggests

that my main results are partly driven by transitions to employment following first birth, particularly among low-income couples. Still, the results of this analysis support my hypotheses that the moderating effect of relative resources on the gender division of labour after first birth differs by household income.

Discussion

Most prior research on the gender division of household labour among heterosexual couples has sought to identify general, robust mechanisms explaining specialization. In this study, I examined whether the moderating effect of relative resources on changes in the gender division of labour after first birth varies across the household income distribution using 28 waves of data from the British Household Panel Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study. The results show substantial heterogeneity in the relevance of relative resources in shaping specialization of paid work and housework after first birth.

Reflecting prior research findings (e.g. Sanchez and Thomson, 1997; Kanji, 2011; Kühhirt, 2012; Wood *et al.*, 2018), my results indicate that relative earnings moderate the gendering effects of parenthood on wives' paid and unpaid work behaviour among middle- and high-income couples. However, this moderating role is relatively minor. Wives with high relative earnings tended to reduce their share and hours of paid work less than wives with low relative earnings after first birth. Similarly, the largest increases in housework time occurred among wives with low relative earnings and the smallest occurred among female breadwinners. However, these differences by relative resources tended to be small in magnitude and were not consistently statistically significant across outcomes, possibly due to the small sample size available. Additionally, changes in paid work and housework among dual-earner wives at times did not fit neatly between that of male breadwinner and female breadwinner couples, further complicating relative resource expectations. Changes in men's paid work and housework time after first birth varied little by relative earnings, indicating that any moderating effect of relative resources—however minor—is likely to operate through wives' paid and unpaid work behaviour rather than husbands'.

At the bottom of the household income distribution relative resources do not appear to play the moderating role suggested by gendered relative resource perspectives and, in fact, parenthood appears to negate the effect of pre-pregnancy relative earnings on the division of paid work and housework behaviour after first birth. Among low-income couples, wives' hours and share of couple paid work decreased more after first birth among women with greater relative earnings than among those with lower relative earnings, resulting in little variation by relative earnings in the years following first birth. At the same time, paid work time among husbands in female breadwinner couples increased substantially after first birth, adding nuance to prior studies that have found little variation men's paid work behaviour over the transition to parenthood (Sanchez and Thomson, 1997; Kühhirt, 2012; Schober, 2013; Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016). While this was true among most husbands in this study, the transition to parenthood appears to motivate greater time allocations to paid work among men in low-income female breadwinner couples. For housework, too, I found that increases in women's share of couple housework at the bottom of the household income distribution were largest among female breadwinner couples, driven partly by decreases men's housework time after first birth among husbands in female breadwinner couples.

These findings are robust to a variety of alternative specifications and reflect prior research on the classed barriers and facilitators to gender equality within the home. While couples at either end of the household income distribution face conditions that could promote or constrain gender equality in the division of labour, low-income couples face barriers that are likely to substantially limit their options regarding how to divide paid and unpaid work after the birth of a child. These barriers—such as schedule inflexibility and unpredictability of many low-paid jobs (e.g. Presser, 2003; Shows and Gerstel, 2009; Harknett, Schneider and Luhr, 2020), limited access to work-family policies (e.g. Evertsson *et al.*, 2009; Korpi *et al.*, 2013) and limited capacity to outsource childcare and domestic responsibilities (e.g. Killewald, 2011; Sullivan and Gershuny, 2013)—may effectively "discount" the bargaining power that women derive from their relative earnings, resulting in greater uniformity in divisions of paid and unpaid work regardless of relative earnings (Blumberg and Coleman, 1989; Fuwa, 2004). Alternatively, the relatively low quality of many low-paid jobs (e.g. Damaske, 2011; Warren and Lyonette, 2018) combined with prevailing gender norms may mean that low-income wives are less likely to draw on their relative resources to bargain out of unpaid work.

Couples with greater household incomes also face barriers to gender egalitarian divisions of labour including workplace cultures of overwork and ideal worker norms (e.g. Maume, 2006; Cha, 2010). However, these couples benefit from substantially greater access to institutional and private resources to overcome these barriers, resulting in the greater (albeit still modest) variation in paid work and housework

responses to parenthood by relative earnings observed among middle- and high-income couples in this study.

Alternatively, these results could reflect class differences in gender role attitudes. It is possible that the transition to parenthood may activate or make more relevant existing gender-traditional values among low-income couples, even among those with gender nontraditional arrangements prior to first pregnancy. However, previous research shows that there are substantial class differences in the extent to which couples' divisions of labour align with their gender role attitudes, with "lived" gender egalitarianism exceeding "spoken" egalitarianism among couples with lower incomes or lower-skilled occupations (Usdansky, 2011). Furthermore, prior research indicates that the relationship between gender role attitudes and paid work and housework behaviour is reciprocal: individuals both alter their behaviour to fit their gender role attitudes and update their gender role attitudes to match their behaviour (Schober and Scott, 2012; Carlson and Lynch, 2013). Data limitations and small sample sizes precluded further analysis of *why* the effects of relative resources on changes in the division of household labour after first birth varies across the household income distribution; however, testing the mechanisms driving this heterogeneity is an important area for future research.

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, this analysis relies on stylized self-reports of time allocation, which are known to suffer from measurement error (Kan, 2008). However, in the absence of large-scale, nationally representative panel time diary studies, this study provides insight into changes in gender divisions of labour over time that cannot be captured with existing time diary data. Second, the data collected on unpaid work time in BHPS and UKHLS is limited, covering female-typed routine housework tasks at the exclusion of other types of housework and childcare. Future research is needed to understand how relative resources and household income relate to divisions of nonroutine housework and childcare in the transition to parenthood. Finally, the period of analysis in this study (1991–2020) spans a period of substantial change in British work-family policy. This includes expansions of paid statutory maternity leave, the introduction of two weeks of statutory paternity leave, transferrable maternity leave, the right to request flexible working and the introduction and expansion of partially subsidized childcare. Samples sizes precluded analysis of whether and how the mechanisms of specialization change in response to these policy interventions; however, this is an important question for future study.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insight into the factors driving increased gender specialization in the transition to parenthood, demonstrating that the importance of relative resources in explaining changes in the gender division of labour varies substantially by household income in Great Britain. The results of this study highlight that, in the context of a liberal welfare state with limited social supports and high levels of economic inequality, the class-specific constraints that low-income parents face have important consequences for gender equality in the household division of labour. Future cross-national research examining whether and how the role of household income varies across inequality, welfare state and work-family contexts could provide important insight into the mechanisms driving these results.

Overall, this study underscores the need for greater attention to heterogeneity in both theoretical and empirical consideration of the factors driving specialization. While this study focuses on the role of household income, further research on other potential sources of heterogeneity, such as race and ethnicity, would help provide a more nuanced perspective regarding when and for whom classically hypothesized drivers of specialization, such as relative resources, apply.

Notes

1 Due to sample size limitations, models do not control for race/ethnicity. However, models controlling for whether wives and husbands identify as White show similar results in magnitude and statistical significance and are available upon request.

2 Because two key independent variables of interest in this analysis are time-invariant (pre-pregnancy relative earnings and pre-pregnancy household income), I used random effect rather than fixed effect models. However, fixed effect models produce results for interaction terms that are similar in magnitude and statistical significance and are available upon request.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *ESR* online.

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